



## Northern Mafias: the territorial spread of organised crime in Italy

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**Reviewed:** Rocco Sciarrone (ed.), *Mafie del Nord. Strategie criminali e contesti locali*, Rome, Donzelli, 2014.

*The presence of Mafia organisations outside the Mezzogiorno, long downplayed by the Italian public authorities, has become more visible in recent years. A collective work sheds light on the spread of Mafia activity in Italy, and in particular the mechanisms used to infiltrate local economic and political fabrics.*

The presence of Mafia-type organisations in regions other than those where they have been historically rooted since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (western Sicily for Cosa Nostra, southern Calabria for the 'Ndrangheta and the city of Naples for the Camorra) has long been downplayed or even denied outright by the Italian public authorities. Legal investigations since 2010–2011 in particular have, however, revealed the existence of active Mafia groups in regions of central and northern Italy, challenging the commonly held belief that the Mafia is the result of underdevelopment in the south of the country. It is in this topical context that *Mafie del Nord. Strategie criminali e contesti locali*, a work that analyses the processes of expansion of Mafia-based criminality beyond its home territories and the infiltration mechanisms of clans in the local political and economic fabric, has been published.

### How the Mafia expands beyond its traditional territories: a variety of methods

*Mafie del Nord*, the result of a survey conducted over a two-year period by a group of researchers led by sociologist Rocco Sciarrone, is a work of two parts. The first (chapters 1 and 2) establishes the theoretical and epistemological framework of the book. At the heart of this is the idea of calling into question the commonly accepted theory whereby the situations of illegality and practices such as political corruption and violence in the economic domain that can be observed today in the north of Italy have been imported by criminal organisations originating in the south of the country. The second part (chapters 3 to 9) envisages the process of expansion of Mafia groups in seven regions of central and northern Italy: Lazio, Lombardy, Piedmont, Liguria, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany and Veneto. These case studies are constructed on the basis of legal and parliamentary sources, which are complemented by interviews with judges, law enforcement officers and other economic, political and administrative players. They give a detailed view of the interplay between stakeholders, the operation of various networks, and the resources mobilised in territorial expansion processes. They enable us to gain a clearer understanding of the way in which power is structured locally and introduces alternative regulations to those imposed by the state in the political, economic and social domains. All the case studies are developed using the same interpretative framework, which mobilises two types of factors – “contextual factors” and “factors of agency” – resulting in a certain coherence for this monographic ensemble. The “contextual factors” are

determined by the configuration (in institutional, political, economic and social terms) of the territory in question; the “factors of agency” refer to the behaviour of stakeholders, and include both intentional (Mafia groups’ strategies for entering new criminal markets or recycling capital generated by trafficking) and a non-intentional dimensions (effects of anti-Mafia policies; conflicts between rival clans).

This overview of the situation reveals a certain uniformity in the forms of Mafia expansion in areas beyond their historical territories and, consequently, in the forms of territorialisation of this criminal presence in central and northern Italy. Four models are identified by the book’s authors: infiltration (via the local economic fabric, and in particular through the attribution of public contracts); taking root (which reflects a sustainable presence that is stable or in the process of stabilisation); imitation (that is, where criminal groups use the “Mafia brand” to impose their presence in a given local context); and hybridisation (where a criminal group splits away from its original structure and obtains its independence). These situations are often far from definitive, as expansion processes are reversible: they may be interrupted or even change direction completely. The main groups involved in this territorial expansion are the clans of the ’Ndrangheta and the Camorra; the former are particularly present in the north-west of Italy, while the latter are to be found in central and north-eastern regions. Cosa Nostra appears to be somewhat lagging compared to the dynamism of the two other organisations: its members seem to be concerned above all with maintaining their current positions of power and networks in Sicily rather than seeking to expand, in a context of growing legal limitations following its wave of attacks in the 1990s.

## The spread of the Mafia: a territorial approach

The book shies away from a mechanical “attraction/repulsion” analysis focused on the factors that trigger the departure of Mafia groups and their arrival in new territories, instead preferring a model that concentrates on contextual effects by analysing the strategies of criminal stakeholders as a function of the local conditions they encounter. The authors invite us to look beyond an interpretation based on alterity (whereby Mafia organisations are seen as a criminal phenomenon exported from the south of Italy) and contagion (whereby local societies in central and northern Italy are viewed as suffering an outside aggression) by considering the spread of Mafia groups across Italy as a problem posed in territorial terms. From this perspective, a territory, envisaged as a locally situated relational system, is seen as “[...] one of the factors at play in processes of Mafia expansion, the effect of which is to define the system of constraints and opportunities facing criminal elements, while at the same time being under the influence of these same criminal elements” (p. 47).<sup>1</sup>

While the arrival of Mafia organisations in new territories occurs in response to a dynamic process – a departure following a conflict between rival clans, constraints resulting from legal pressure, or a desire to develop new criminal markets – the forms and outcome of this arrival are determined by the political, institutional or economic environment in which the process takes place. This focus on interaction-based approaches means that the problem is not reduced to a strictly criminological interpretation (which tends to consider criminal elements to be outside the bounds of society and, as such, a destabilising factor) and consequently offers a particularly interesting take on the situation, first, in terms of the way institutions operate and are interconnected (formal/informal, licit/illicit, public/private, economic/political), and second, with regard to the circulation of political and economic resources in a context where the legal and the illegal cohabit and structure one another.

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<sup>1</sup> “[...] uno degli attori in campo nei processi di espansione mafiosa, che contribuisce a definire il sistema di vincoli e opportunità con cui gli attori criminali devono confrontarsi e, al contempo, che da questi è influenzato.”

## A “demand for Mafia”

The process of territorial expansion mobilises not just criminal skills (the use of violence) but also resources related to social capital. More specifically, Mafia groups make use of two kinds of links: “strong links” that ensure the members’ loyalty to the organisation and foster a sense of belonging, and “weak links”, which are outward-looking and create connections between clans and non-members. These relational resources ensure the continued existence of criminal organisations and contribute to their reproduction. The authors underline the importance of the existence of a “grey area” in this process of territorial expansion, perceived as “[...] a space that extends between the licit and the illicit, in which mutually advantageous relationships of exchange take form between Mafiosi, business leaders, politicians, members of the liberal professions and civil servants” (p. 41).<sup>2</sup> It is via this “grey area” that Mafiosi manage to gain access to public institutions, the business world and the world of politics. The idea of a “grey area” does not just reflect the infiltration of the Mafia into the legal economy, politics and civil society; it is also symptomatic of a system of collusion and complicity fuelled by repeated interactions and exchanges that are beneficial to all parties involved, not just Mafiosi.

The authors show that Mafia organisations tend to develop in places where illicit practices already exist – in other words, in places where there is a context favourable to their presence that they can exploit and develop. In these central and northern regions of Italy, there exists what could be described as a “demand for Mafia”, that is to say a situation in which Mafia organisations, in their capacity as service providers, are solicited by economic and political players who want (respectively) to conquer new markets by eliminating the competition or ensure electoral success. This reconfiguration of the traditional relationship between the Mafia and business shows, in particular, that Mafiosi are not always in a strictly dominant position; in highlighting this point, the authors underline the true capacity for action and decision-making of these economic and political players, who consequently no longer appear to be merely the victims of a system governed by criminals.

In examining the interconnections between politics, public administration, the business world and Mafia criminality, *Mafie del Nord* offers readers an insight not just into the influence that these criminal organisations exert on local societies and their modes of socio-spatial reproduction, but also into the coalitions of actors involved other than those typically envisaged in the literature on governance and urban economies.

## Further reading

- Gribaudi, G. (ed.). 2009. *Traffici criminali. Camorra, mafie e reti internazionali dell'illegalità*, Turin: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Sciarrone, R. (ed.). 2011. *Alleanze nell'ombra. Mafie ed economie locali in Sicilia e nel Mezzogiorno*, Rome: Donzelli.
- Sciarrone, R. 2009. *Mafie vecchie, mafie nuove*, Roma: Donzelli.

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<sup>2</sup> “[...] uno spazio che si dispiega tra lecito e illecito in cui prendono forma rapporti di scambio reciprocamente vantaggiosi tra mafiosi, imprenditori, politici, liberi professionisti e funzionari pubblici.”

revised and expanded edition). His research currently concerns the informal transactions that can be detected in territorial public action in Italy, and non-economic forms of government privatisation.

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