

Family Crisis among the “Men of Honor”

The very word “mafia” has a threatening, almost magical air, awakening dark imaginings of archaic rituals and bloody acts of violence.

LETIZIA PAOLI, a scientist at the **MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR FOREIGN AND INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL LAW** in Freiburg and a well-known expert on Italian and international organized crime, knows these reactions all too well.

Letizia Paoli is often asked, “Aren’t you afraid?” The 37-year-old Italian shakes her head in reply, smiles and asks what she should be afraid of. Only those who seriously pursue or harm the Mafia can expect trouble – public prosecutors, policemen, politicians and courageous activists, and above all deserters. But not researchers. The Mafia may fear a lawyer’s files, but it is not afraid of books.

As a sociologist and political scientist – she studied both in Florence and at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. – Paoli has been working since 1998 as a member of the department of criminology headed by Hans-Jörg Albrecht. Her Italian doctorate on the regulation of financial markets in Italy and the U.S. was followed up by a dissertation at the renowned European University Institute, where she specialized in

the Italian forms of organized crime. Her efforts were not without success: she first received a two-year Marie Curie postdoctoral grant from the European Union before finally being awarded, in 2001, the C3 post sponsored by Anne-Liese Gielen and her foundation as part of the Max Planck Society program to promote outstanding female scientists.

A MYTH BECOMES A SUBJECT OF RESEARCH

It may come as a surprise, but research on the Mafia has an astonishingly short history. Genuine scientific analysis did not begin until the 1960s, with the commencement of some – at the time – pioneering studies by sociologists, historians and criminologists. According to Letizia Paoli, most of the early researchers reached the conclusion that the Mafia is by no means a

structured, long-lasting criminal organization. “Probably in part an overreaction to the mystery of the Mafia in the public imagination,” says the scientist.

It was precisely this mythologized secrecy that, for a long time, presented researchers with a seemingly impassable difficulty. Because of its very nature as a secret society and the intransigence with which it enforced the duty of silence, little if any internal details of the Mafia, its organizational structures or rituals entered the public domain. As a result, scientists were largely unable to go beyond the realization that the Mafia is an extremely complex phenomenon.

When it came, the change was as abrupt as it was radical. And it was a fortunate accident, says Paoli, that she happened to be in the right place at the right time. Just when the



The Cosa Nostra saw in Giovanni Falcone its most dangerous opponent: They killed the investigator with a car bomb. The explosion on the highway joining downtown Palermo with the city's airport also killed Falcone's wife, Judge Francesca Morvillo and three of his bodyguards.

mafia was entering its deepest crisis and hundreds of so-called pentiti (“repentants,” that is, Mafia defectors) were breaking cover to testify in court, she was working in Rome from 1992 until 1995 as an adviser to the Ministry of the Interior in support of a special unit modeled on the FBI: the *Direzione Investigativa Antimafia*. In this capacity, she compiled the official annual reports on organized crime in Italy for the Minister of the Interior, for ultimate submission to the Italian parliament. Letizia Paoli had direct access to many of the leading Mafia investigators in the country and was one of the first scientists to see with her own eyes hundreds of then-inaccessible interrogation reports, witness statements and case files. An invaluable primary resource which forms the empirical basis for her standard work *Mafia Brotherhoods – Orga-*

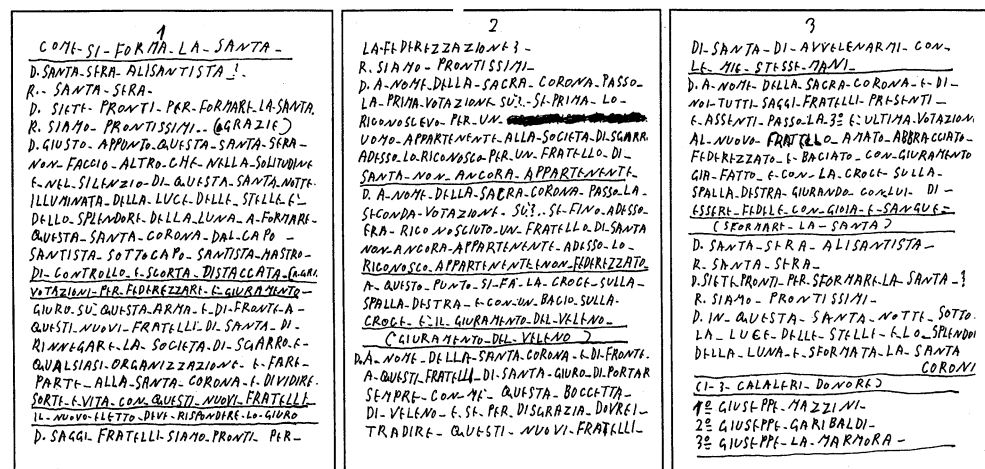
nized Crime, Italian Style, published in 2003 by the Oxford University Press (see box on page 61).

Given the paucity of information sources, it is no longer possible to reliably date the origins of the Mafia. It is part of the very essence of the Mafia that as few clues as possible are left behind – and never in writing. However, according to Letizia Paoli, two facts are certain: One is that the Mafia, or at least its antecedents, have been in existence since the middle of the 19th century. The other is that the striking weakness and the political disinterest of the unified nation-state founded in 1861 helped compound southern Italy's deep-seated skepticism toward the institution of the state and, in so doing, enlarged or even created local power vacuums. The Mafia stepped in to fill the gaps. It gained widespread legitimacy by internalizing

many of the values deeply rooted in the culture of the south and was thus able to carry out, according to Paoli, “central functions of social integration and regulation” in the daily life of the community.

Today, Sicily's Cosa Nostra (“Our Affair”) and the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta (“Society of Men of Honor”) are considered the classic embodiment of the Mafia. However, these two large-scale organizations are de facto Mafia confederations, as they are each composed of more than 90 clans, or “families.” Most, and certainly the most powerful, of the Cosa Nostra clans, which have a total of some 3,200 members, are concentrated in western Sicily. The real power lies in the hands of the Corleonesi, from the eponymous sleepy little inland town.

In an extremely bloody Mafia war in the late 1970s, their boss, Toto Ri-



Formulas from the code of the 'Ndrangheta: The three handwritten pages describe the text for the speech held when a member is promoted to a higher ranking. The text reads awkwardly for a native speaker – it is composed in an uncertain Italian with many grammatical and orthographical mistakes.

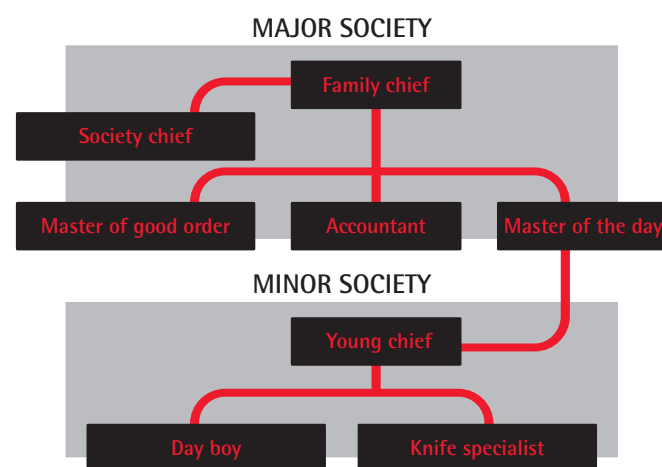
ina, achieved dominance over almost all the other families. After spending 30 years on the run in Palermo, where he had married quite officially and where his children had equally officially been born in the hospital, he was arrested in 1993 outside his home on the basis of testimony given by a pentito. According to unproven statements by witnesses who turned State's evidence, he is said to have met with seven-time Christian Democrat Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti on several occasions and exchanged with him the symbolic Mafia kiss.

THE ARTICHOKE AS A ROLE MODEL

The mainland counterpart to the Cosa Nostra is the 'Ndrangheta, whose homeland is in the southern Calabrian province of Reggio Calabria. Its total of around 4,500 members are grouped into some 90 clans, or cosche, "a Sicilian term for 'artichoke,' which is intended to symbolize their intense cohesion", comments Letizia Paoli. Either through the offices of members who have emigrated or via local representatives, both Mafia associations also maintain connections with northern Italy and the rest of Europe, as well as with Canada, the U.S. and Australia.

According to Paoli, the Mafia has three mainstays. Firstly: Cosa Nostra and 'Ndrangheta are distinguished by their complex organization – long a subject of hot dispute among researchers – and their hierarchical structure. The principal difference between them lies in their approach to recruitment. In the Calabrian Mafia groups, members are recruited based on the criterion of blood relationships – with the result that, even today, their extraordinary cohesion presents a major obstacle to investigation. Proof of this cohesion is the fact that there are relatively few Calabrians who have opted out: at the end of 2002, there were just 157 Calabrian witnesses in the state witness protection program. The Cosa

The 'Ndrangheta has a complex hierarchical structure, vaguely resembling the organizational chart of a large company, but hierarchy positions are usually occupied by blood relations.



Nostra, on the other hand, is not organized on strictly blood family lines, with the consequence that a much larger number of Sicilian Mafia members have defected – at the end of 2001, there were 386 Sicilian pentiti protected by the state. Thanks to their testimonies, since the early 1980s, hundreds of Mafiosi have been brought to trial, including an occasional "boss of bosses."

THERE'S NO TURNING BACK FROM THE MAFIA

In both Mafia associations, these most influential clan chiefs constitute the so-called central commission. "Contrary to the wide-spread image presented by the media, these superordinate bodies of coordination cannot be compared with the executive boards of major legal firms. Their power is intentionally limited. And it would be entirely wrong to see in the Cosa Nostra a centrally managed, internationally active Mafia holding company," says Paoli. The primary function of the commission is to regulate the level of violence employed in internal conflicts and in attacks on state powers, their aim being to prevent the Mafia from attracting excess media attention as a result of the bloodshed, and the attendant increase in government repression.

In addition to their specific organizational structure, the Freiburg-based researcher attributes the continuing steadfast inner unity of the

two Mafia federations primarily to their two other mainstays: rituals and symbols, and common values and standards. Both of these factors add justification to the view that a significant defining feature of the Italian Mafia is that it is by nature a hierarchical secret society and an exclusive brotherhood.

The most important rite for both associations is the induction of a new member. The initiation ceremony is divided into three phases. Letizia Paoli describes it thus: "An existing member first presents to the group a candidate who has previously been checked out over a long period of time. The head of the family then explains the secret rules and laws, and finally the new member swears an oath of allegiance to the entire group." This ritual, which has become known only through witnesses who have turned state's evidence, is depicted on the cover of Paoli's book. The illustration shows a man's hand with which he has previously smeared his blood as a symbol of life onto a picture of the Madonna, which is then burned as he recites the oath of loyalty. Through the ritual, the recruit acquires a new identity – with all the consequences that entails. There's no turning back from the Mafia, for death alone marks an end to membership. Giovanni Falcone, the most influential Mafia investigator, who was murdered in 1992 by the Cosa Nostra with a bomb concealed beneath the highway, once said: "To become a Mafioso is the equivalent of converting to a religion. Just as a priest never ceases to be a priest, so a Mafioso never ceases to be a Mafioso."

As mentioned above, the third mainstay is a rigorously observed code of common values and standards, principal among which are "Onore e Omertà" ("Honor and Silence"). It is honor that is of paramount importance, as reflected in numerous aspects of the self-styled image adopted by the Mafia (Mafiosi define themselves as "men of honor"), but also in the duty to exact

bloody revenge for all insults to their physical integrity, property and female relatives. Paoli describes omertà, the duty to remain silent, as "of absolute necessity for any criminal group, which by definition intends to survive on the wrong side of the law." With the consequence that those sworn to silence reject the government and its institutions, even "if they become the victims of the most serious crimes." For this very reason – to safeguard its own authority – the Mafia is dependent for its very existence on a normative system comprised of numerous unwritten laws, and on their strict enforcement. Without a doubt, the Mafia has for several years now been undergoing its deepest crisis since its repression under Mussolini. This poses some immediate questions for science, not only concerning the reasons for this decline, but also with regard to the possible opportunities still open to the Mafia to consolidate, and with regard to its potential for continued development. The view propagated by some that the Mafia is genuinely defeated is nothing more than the product of imagination and wishful thinking, believes Letizia Paoli.

MORPHINE AND HEROIN FILL THE COFFERS

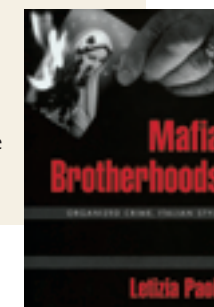
The Mafia's development potential can be judged with accuracy only by looking at its recent past, especially given that its development to date has been anything but linear or even homogeneous. It is the last 30 years that are of decisive importance, or more precisely, the headlong expansion and sustained changes that have taken place since its entry into the international drug trade. With the import of morphine and its processing into heroin at the end of the 1970s "came riches, we all became rich," explained a Mafia defector. "We did alright with cigarettes, but it wasn't a huge source of income. It was drugs that changed the life of the Cosa Nostra, they brought a vast amount of money and, with it, a kind of madness." ▶

PHOTO: MPI FOR FOREIGN AND INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL LAW



THE DRUG MARKET AND CRIMINAL PROSECUTION

Letizia Paoli's book MAFIA BROTHERHOODS – ORGANIZED CRIME, ITALIAN STYLE (289 pages, numerous black and white illustrations, Oxford University Press, 2003) is a standard work on organized crime in Italy. As a scientist, she is also researching two other fields: illegal drugs and international organized crime. In 2000, she presented a comparative study prepared on behalf of the European Union of the drug markets in Frankfurt and Milan; in 2001, she followed this with a first scientific treatise for the UN on the drug market in Russia. Together with American expert Peter Reuter, she is currently developing an economic model to determine the size of the world market for heroin – another pioneering work, as thus far practically all studies have been limited to local markets. With Carsten Schäfer, a colleague in Freiburg, Letizia Paoli is also carrying out a nationwide study of drug consumption and criminal prosecution for the German Ministry of Health. A comprehensive publication prepared by her and her Dutch colleague Cyrille Fijnaut attempts to fill a gap in the research into organized crime: a comparative analysis of the history of this form of crime, its current manifestations and the measures taken at the governmental level to counter it in most Western and Eastern European states, including Russia. In the context of the eastward expansion of the EU, the Dutch government has incorporated this project, in the form a major conference, into the program for its upcoming EU Presidency.



While protection rackets stagnated, the flourishing drug business was accompanied by a boom in the embezzlement of government funds. This was aided by the belief in Rome that a massive industrial and infrastructure-related investment program would reverse the flagrant underdevelopment in the Mezzogiorno. As a result, the Mafia earned immense sums through government building contracts and land speculation – money that it was unable to consume and that therefore flowed back into the legal economy. In short, the Mafia began to change, a process described by Paoli as its “entrepreneurial transformation.”

UNDER COMPETITIVE PRESSURE FROM ALBANIA

Initially, this entrepreneurial transformation appeared to succeed, not least because it was favored by two external factors. On the one hand, illegal drug markets were expanding worldwide, while on the other, one government after another in Rome pumped more and more state funding into the south. Nevertheless, the Mafia slid into its most serious structural crisis to date – for two reasons. Since the early 1990s, the lucrative business of draining the

public purse has largely come to a halt. Following the complete collapse of the old government system, Rome resolved to cap the flow of funds to the south. Italy was on the threshold of national bankruptcy and the misuse of investment funding was all too clear to see.

The second reason is the huge loss of market share in the drug business at both the domestic and the international level. Gone are the days when the Cosa Nostra could satisfy the bulk of America’s demand for heroin. And even the ‘Ndrangheta is no longer in a position to import cocaine into northern Italy by the ton several times each year as it did up to the early 1990s. Other groups now dominate the drug business, among them criminal gangs from Albania; they have literally marginalized the southern Italian Mafia, and not just in the drug markets of Milan.

Besides these economic factors, political and cultural ones need to be taken into proper account to explain the current crisis in Italy’s largest Mafia associations. The Mafia’s financial wealth, increasing economic power and growing political clout led to, not inner stabilization, but the exact opposite – divisive power struggles on an unprecedented scale.

There followed years of bloody Mafia wars during the 1980s that claimed at least 150 lives in Sicily and more than a thousand in Calabria. Prompted by these outbursts of violence, the long respected division of power between State and Mafia finally broke down and accelerated a development that Paoli calls the “process of de-legitimization of Mafia violence.” In the wake of the industrialization and modernization of the south, the Mafia has lost some of its social integrative functions since the 1960s. At the same time, the cultural and normative system of values that had thus far provided the Mafia with a collective identity and justified the exercise of political power has grown steadily weaker. To compound this, under pressure from the media and the politically aware public, the government responded to the excessive spate of murders with intensified reprisals.

The turning point in this long development punctuated by tragic setbacks, believes Paoli, came with the spectacular murder of General Alberto Dalla Chiesa on the street in Palermo on September 2, 1980, three months after he had been sent by Rome to take up the post of senior Mafia investigator. After 15 previous

assassinations of politicians and senior government representatives, this was the definitive declaration of war by the Mafia. Under the pressure of public outrage, the government was finally compelled to pass the long-discussed “La Torre Act,” named after a murdered Sicilian communist leader. For the first time, even membership in the Mafia became a punishable offense, and Mafia property became eligible for confiscation. This led to the so-called “maxi-processo,” the first trial against hundreds of Sicilian Cosa Nostra members, and in the following four years, nearly 15,000 people throughout Italy were accused of belonging to the Mafia.

After suffering fresh setbacks, the anti-Mafia movement gathered new strength in the early 1990s. The shocking 1992 murders of the two key investigators, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, rocked the entire country. Under public pressure, the government responded with its largest campaign to date. Letizia Paoli observes: “In the case of Cosa Nostra, in particular, the success of the courts and a witness protection program triggered a virtual avalanche of pentiti, which multiplied the internal conflicts and breaches in both Mafia federations.” Even high-ranking Mafia bosses such as Giovanni Brusca of the Corleone family turned their back on the Mafia following their arrest and gave evidence to prosecutors and courts.

THE VICIOUS CIRCLE IS REVIVED

Given the sustained investigative pressure and the spectacular successes achieved by the investigators, the drying up of state funds, the marginalization of the Mafia in the drug business, the perversion of the traditional “mafiosità,” including its value system, the creeping loss of prestige and, as a consequence, also of authority and power in society – for Letizia Paoli, it is all too obvious that the Mafia has been substantially

weakened. She speaks of a systemic existential crisis, indeed of the “most serious crisis of the past 50 years.” Nevertheless, as a scientist, she is wary of the dangerous illusion of believing – or even worse, as some politicians do, of propagating the belief – that a phenomenon such as the Mafia, which has existed for more than 150 years and become deeply rooted in the society and culture of the south, could be uprooted and defeated in a matter of a few years. Not as long as it controls “a coveted political commodity” in a notoriously unstable governmental system: votes.

Beyond question, there are signs that Mafia structures are regaining strength within political institutions. In the view of the Max Planck researcher, this trend toward consolidation is evident especially in behavior at the polls. It is a vicious circle: for the sake of their own livelihoods, people add strength to the Mafia by electing Mafia-friendly politicians who today, as in the past, ensure that jobs and positions are allocated to their clientele. More than a few corrupt Christian Democrats and Socialists who were voted out in the anti-Mafia climate of the 1990s are now finding their way back into office – most of them as candidates for the right-wing conservative camp of Silvio Berlusconi’s governing coalition. At the most recent national elections in Sicily, they presented a unified list of candidates under the slogan “Casa della Libertà” (“House of Liberty”) and, significantly, won all of the 60 direct seats on offer.

Paoli sees, and fears, strong arguments that Berlusconi’s policies are favoring the sustained consolidation of the Mafia – more so than any other factor. “It is a subtle process. Take for example the cancellation of 24-hour personal protection for some of the most important and endangered investigators. Or the barely concealed practice of passing advantageous new laws and repealing those that are inconvenient. Without a doubt, many of these measures have



A Mafia boss comes clean: Tommaso Buscetta testifies before a court in the first Palermitan “maxi-trial.”

specifically aided the Mafia. And Berlusconi knows that.” However, as to whether a certain obligation is being fulfilled here, that is a matter that must be left open. What is proven is that, over a long period, Berlusconi quite officially employed a Mafioso in his immediate entourage to manage his horses – pentiti maintain that the man acted as a contact. And more than a few Italians rightly want to know where and how a cruise ship entertainer first managed to find the vast financial resources to power his meteoric rise to become the richest man in the country.

A SPECIAL PRODUCT OF THE REGION

In conclusion, and specifically because of her intimate knowledge of the internal structures, strengths and weaknesses of the Italian Mafia, Letizia Paoli warns against transferring isolated characteristics or findings from Mafia research directly to other forms of organized crime. “Cosa Nostra and ‘Ndrangheta in no way represent a universal model for the diverse players in illegal markets.” Her principal thesis is that they are not the paradigm of organized crime, but rather a special case: the product of certain historical, cultural, social and, not least, political conditions – conditions that do not apply, and cannot be applied, elsewhere.

CHRISTIAN ROST

The Mafia’s two major empires are the Cosa Nostra (“Our Affair”) on Sicily and the ‘Ndrangheta (“Society of Men of Honor”) in southern Calabria. Both comprise more than 90 clans.

