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The Sicilian Mafia: transformation to a global evil

Deborah Puccio-Den

The purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which social perceptions of the Mafia have shifted over time. Initially considered as a Sicilian way of being, as an attitude, the Sicilian Mafia was subsequently viewed as a universal, global, and even religious form of Evil, to be fought in a war in which texts and images were weapons and judicial institutions constituted the battlefield. I will also explore how local powers institutionalised an “anti-Mafia religion”, using as a case-study the Festival of Santa Rosalia in Palermo. In this context, I will discuss the emergence of a new, anti-Mafia iconography and the use of a specific literary genre, that of political hagiography.

KEYWORDS: Mafia, Sicily, politics, catholicism, Justice.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER IS TO EXPLORE THE WAYS IN WHICH SOCIAL perceptions of the Mafia have shifted over time. These changes occurred first in Sicily, then in Italy from the beginning of the nineteen-eighties to the end of the nineties. Thus the Mafia, initially considered as a Sicilian way of being, as an attitude, was subsequently viewed as a universal, global, and even religious form of Evil, to be fought in a war in which texts and images were weapons and judicial institutions constituted the battlefield.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first section will examine the ways in which judicial institutions gradually became the driving force of this change in perception, and how, in the early eighties, the judges of the “anti-Mafia pool”, such as Giovanni Falcone, started to develop a new theoretical model of explanation for the Mafia.

The second section will explore the social consequences arising from the acknowledgement that the Mafia was a secret association with criminal goals; the reaction of the citizens to what they now perceived as a threat; the rise of moral consciousness; the transformation of justice into a quasi-religious ideal; and the characterisation as “martyrs” of the magistrates who lost their lives in

the fight against the Mafia. In particular, I will focus on the development of specific forms of devotion, such as the spontaneous pilgrimages and shrines that emerged after the death of the “martyred” judges. I will also explore how local powers institutionalised an “anti-Mafia religion”, using as a case-study the Festival of Santa Rosalia in Palermo. In this context, I will discuss the emergence of a new, anti-Mafia iconography and the use of a specific literary genre – that of political hagiography. I will focus on the role such texts and images played in promoting these new forms of worship, including the canonisation of the “martyrs of Justice and Law” currently in progress in the Vatican.

1. GIOVANNI FALCONE’S NEW THEORETICAL MODEL

When Judge Giovanni Falcone started his career at the end of the sixties, the Mafia was, so to speak, non-existent (Falcone 1997 [1993]: 104). In other words, the tragic and violent events that marked Sicily at the time were attributed to rival gangs without any connection between them (Mosca 2002 [1949]: 4). The commonly held view was that the Mafia, rather than being a criminal sect or an association with a strict code of conduct, was a Sicilian way of being, feeling or behaving, an attitude, not an organisation (Pitré 2002 [reissue]: 12). For until the beginning of the seventies, the journalists, magistrates or policemen who dared to speak of the Mafia as a criminal association, were systematically reduced to silence, murdered, discredited or sent into exile (Lodato 1996). As Giovanni Falcone wrote: “In the spirit of the time, I sensed an institutional culture that denied the existence of the Mafia” (Falcone 1997: 39).

The situation changed when, at the end of the seventies, prosecutors at the Palermo court appointed Judge Falcone to investigate the Spatola case related to the fraudulent activities between the United States and Sicily. It was at that point that Falcone, unable to find direct evidence or witnesses ready to break the Sicilian law of silence, invented what is now known as the financial investigation. By using bank receipts, plane tickets, pictures and digital prints he unearthed a dense network of conspiratorial ties and an intense traffic in drugs between the Spatola and Inzerillo families in Palermo and the Gambino family in New York. In this manner, Falcone established the worldwide character of the Mafia, as well as the seriousness of this phenomenon (Puccio-Den 2001: 19). For, as the Sicilian intellectual Leonardo Sciascia remarked, “drugs was not ‘one homicide’, but a vast and continuous network of homicides; a multinational company of crime, similar to terrorism” (Sciascia 2002 [1989]: 48).

The Spatola case, which ended with the arrest of some fifty people and the murder of Prosecutor Gaetano Costa – who initiated the case – produced a sense of the unitary character of the Mafia. This was soon confirmed from

the inside by the testimony of Tommaso Buscetta, the first Sicilian mafioso to become an informant (Arlacchi 1992; 1994).

After Buscetta's confessions, Falcone's investigation of the Mafia radically changed, revealing the imperceptible ties uniting the different criminal events in Sicily, all of which were controlled if not executed, by the Mafia, called *Cosa Nostra* by its members. As the investigation progressed, a network arose, a structure took shape, and the "unitary character of *Cosa Nostra*" emerged, according to what came to be called the "Buscetta theorem" (Puccio-Den 2001).

The new vision of a unitary and pyramidal Mafia, administered by a commission and controlled by a head, was ratified by establishing a new judicial category: "the crime of association with the Mafia", stipulated in the 1982 Rognoni-La Torre Act. Under this Act, which caused the death of its promulgator, Pio La Torre, Giovanni Falcone and his colleague Paolo Borsellino organised the "Maxi Trial". The verdict, which was reached in 1987, confirmed the Buscetta theorem.

But the confessions of the "penitents" also revealed another truth, adding a moral dimension to the phenomenon. For the Mafia also involved the torture of victims, the dissolving of corpses in acid, and the assassination of children. The descriptions of assassinations and violence by the "men of honour" were transmitted on TV day and night and reported in detail by five hundred journalists. The Sicilians who had not seen or had refused to see the horrors of the Mafia, were now confronted each day with this reality. They started to feel directly concerned by this "civil war" (Blok 2000: 88),¹ especially as the attacks against judges and policemen also hit body guards, civilians, and national heritage's sites. The methods used by the Mafia, now qualified as "terrorist", broke the silent consensus surrounding the organisation, leading to alarm and protest. Civil society reacted and publicly protested against the Mafia for the first time (Schneider and Schneider 2003), and dared at last to write the word *MAFIA*, in black and white.

2. THE PALERMO SPRING

During the second half of the eighties, the action of the anti-Mafia pool gained the support of Palermo's new mayor, Leoluca Orlando. A Christian Democrat, he launched a vast campaign of moral reform and unveiled the ties between his own political party and the Mafia. In 1989 Orlando pioneered a radically new departure in Italian politics, that of integrating representatives of the Communist Party into his council. Indeed, the collapse of the Berlin Wall opened up new avenues for communication between Catholics and Communists, who

1 This expression is also used by the Palermitans.

were consequently able to unite their forces in the name of a common cause: the fight for Justice.

This new political era in Sicily, which became known as the “Palermo Spring”, entailed an ideology and global project of transforming civil society, symbolised by the renewal of spring. The aim was to reform Sicily’s economy and regenerate its political system by subjecting them to close judicial examination. In this context, the City of Palermo, as the first victim of the Mafia, took civil action in the Maxi-Trial. But the “Palermo Spring” would end in bloodshed, as the anti-Mafia judges, policemen and politicians were murdered one after the other. The Sicilians’ new optimism and confidence collapsed even further with the assassination of Judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in 1992, within two months of each other, in attacks of unprecedented violence.

But the anti-Mafia movement continued. Immediately after these tragic events the magnolia tree located in front of Judge Falcone’s private house became a shrine (Puccio-Den 2008a). Citizens started to carry letters to the foot of what became known as the “Falcone Tree”, pledging to the murdered Judge that they would pursue his fight. “One can rip out a flower, but not the Spring”, said one of these letters (Amurri 1992: 46). The Falcone Tree became the new symbol of the revived spring.

In 1993, in the wave of emotion following the death of the two anti-Mafia judges, Leoluca Orlando was re-elected mayor of Palermo, which led to a new political era, the so-called “Palermo Renaissance” (Puccio-Den 2003). This appellation refers not only to Orlando’s project of civic renewal, but also to his hosting and sponsoring of a circle of artists, intellectuals and writers after the fashion of the Italian Renaissance princes (Fabre and Puccio-Den 2002). In this way, the mayor promoted a new culture of lawfulness, through a variety of cultural programs – including theatre plays, exhibitions and literary festivals – in order to “grow the anti-Mafia culture” (to cite the rhetoric of the time), a culture deeply impregnated with religious language, as we shall see in the following section.

3. ST. ROSALIA: THE SAINT OF THE PLAGUE

One of the most spectacular civic events sponsored by Orlando is perhaps the festival of Saint Rosalia, Palermo’s patron saint. Revived under the guidance of Palermo City Council in 1994, this local festival developed in a prodigious and rapid way, attracting spectators whose number grew from thirty thousand to five hundred thousand, amounting to half of Palermo’s population. How can we explain that large parts of left-wing, atheist, even anti-clerical social groups took part in this deeply religious festival?

To answer this question I would like to show through several images the ways in which the iconography and hagiography of the medieval hermitess

Rosalia have been reinterpreted in light of this new political context. The legend, orchestrated by local authorities, recounts that in 1624, during a violent epidemic of plague in Palermo, St. Rosalia's relics were rediscovered and carried around the city, miraculously halting the plague. As a result, St. Rosalia became the patron saint of Palermo and the saviour of the city. Under Orlando's administration the themes of the curing of the plague and Sicily's liberation from the Mafia became closely intertwined, through repeated suggestions in the media, the mayor's speeches, the cardinal's sermons and the leaflets distributed during the festival. These discourses and texts gave a new meaning to the stage-production of St. Rosalia's legend during the festival.

The image of the saint with a crown of roses (figure 1) had been chosen to illustrate the festival's posters and leaflets. The rhetoric of revival, common to so many political ideologies, led local authorities to underscore one specific iconographic symbol of St. Rosalia. The attribute of this virgin, which is already signified in her name, is constituted by the crown of roses on the saint's head (Malignacci 1991). St. Rosalia is a saint of spring (Pugliatti 1991). As such, St. Rosalia evidently constituted the best guarantee for the promoter of the "Palermo Spring". Indeed, Leoluca Orlando came to identify with St. Rosalia in several ways: firstly, and in the most spectacular way, he appeared on stage, together with the saint covered by roses, during an act of the festival entitled "Redemption". Secondly, and more importantly, the mayor's life itself came to embody the hagiographic model represented by St. Rosalia (Puccio-Den 2007: 112-119). As a result, during the 1990s, biographies of anti-Mafia protagonists, often written posthumously, became a new literary genre (La Licata 2002; Lucentini 2003). These men, mayors or judges withdrew from the rest of the world for safety reasons, had a secluded, austere and solitary existence, and sacrificed their private life in the name of an ideal. In this way, their lives were linked to the path of St. Rosalia, this twelfth-century Norman aristocrat, who renounced the pleasures of the court to devote her life to prayer and contemplation on a secluded mountain overlooking Palermo (Puccio-Den 2007: 119-122).



Figure 1 – The image of the saint with a crown of roses. (Photo: Luciano Puccio and Costantino Mirulla)

St. Rosalia is as a Christ-like figure. The motif of the contemplation of the cross is omnipresent in the iconography of St. Rosalia's cult. In this 18th-century picture (figure 2), the saint holds a mirror reflecting Jesus Christ, who invites her to follow him as a spouse and as a model (Petrarca 1991). Yet in the stage representation, in a scene entitled the “Wedding of St. Rosalia”, the mayor of Palermo was facing the saint, like her mirror's reflection. In this way he identified himself as the Saint Saviour. Indeed, many Sicilians viewed Leoluca Orlando as a “Messiah”, who they expected to free them from the Mafia's hegemony. I suggest that such identification was made possible by the fact that the mayor's biography, as well as that of the sacrificed anti-Mafia magistrates, was compared to the evangelical model of the Passion (of which we can see the very instruments on the same picture; Puccio-Den 2008b: chapter VII).

Another motif common to the anti-Mafia heroes, St. Rosalia and Christ, is the acceptance of death as an ineluctable fate. The courageous Rosalia, who died at the age of thirty, is generally represented on paintings and sculptures smiling and next to a skull. Such an

image corresponds perfectly to the fate of these men who dared to confront the Mafia and thus to face their own death. As stated by Giovanni Falcone in his last interview, “the thought of death is always my companion” (Falcone 1997 [1993]: 15). “Remember that you will die” is the motto and the common fate of the judges who survived – these “walking corpses”, as they characterised themselves (Lucentini 2003: 122) – whose lives inexorably progress towards an inevitable death. Accordingly, the iconography used to represent them, full of melancholy, is in black and white, echoing this *memento mori* motif (Battaglia and Zecchin 1989).



Figure 2 – The motif of the contemplation of the cross is omnipresent in the iconography of St. Rosalia's cult. (Photo: Luciano Puccio and Costantino Mirulla)

4. JUDGES AS MARTYRS

The only photographic image of Judge Roberto Scarpinato we have at our disposal represents this magistrate, who conducted the investigation of the Andreotti case, as a hermit, an ascetic man of Justice, next to lethal weapons, which, simultaneously, isolate and protect him. The picture was taken by photographer Letizia Battaglia, a protagonist of the “Palermo Spring” (see Battaglia 1999: 124-125). In her book entitled *Passion, Justice, and Freedom*, Letizia Battaglia deliberately chose to insert among pictures of the judges’ violent deaths some images representing the Passion of Christ, thereby fixing these tragic representations according to the same stylistic codes (Battaglia 1999).

Falcone’s and Borsellino’s assassinations inaugurated a new era in which the death of the judges at the hands of the Mafia gained an absolute value as sacrifice. Far from weakening the magistrates’ aura, or attesting to their vulnerability as mortals and to their failure to undermine the Mafia, the attack on their bodies transformed them into martyrs. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Pope Jean-Paul the Second, on a visit in Agrigento in 1993, qualified Rosario Livatino, a young judge assassinated by the Mafia, as “a martyr to Justice”. Soon after, Livatino’s beatification trial began, and as testimonies were feverishly gathered and biographies flourished, this magistrate became a Christ-like figure (Puccio-Den 2007: 122-128).

Even when they are not on their way to beatification, the assassinated judges inspire practices that borrow from the religious sphere. As we have seen above, Giovanni Falcone has been, since his death, the object of a civic cult. As such, the gestures performed around the Falcone Tree, such as prayers, offerings, donations of jewels and above all, of letters, clearly derive from Catholic devotional practices (figure 3). On drawings that are still tacked onto the Falcone Tree fourteen years after his death, the judge is represented as an angel. In letters, he is addressed by citizens as if he could hear them “from the heavens”, as if he had already been proclaimed martyr. As one poem puts it, “You are my saint; pray for us” (Amurri 1992: 65). In the others poems, we find a constant reference to the terminology of the “cross”, “faith”, “justice”, “sacrifice” and “martyrdom”. These messages are placed around the Falcone Tree on the twenty-third of May, to mark the anniversary of Falcone’s death, when thousands of young people come to Palermo to participate in a commemorative ceremony, which they themselves call a “pilgrimage”. As Falcone’s biographer writes, “Citizens have learned to view this magnolia with a devotion that is similar to that expressed towards St Rosalia’s sanctuary on Mount Pellegrino” (La Licata 2002: 67).

Beyond these retrospective reconstructions, however, the judges’ perception of their own practices can help us to specify more precisely the ties that link them to the Saint Hermitess. Before his assassination, Rosario Livatino argued



Figure 3 – The Falcone Tree. (Photo: Deborah Puccio-Den)

that in order to judge men, one has to be above civil society and therefore to be outside society (Abate 1997: 61-74). In this context, the anti-Mafia judges' attitude is reminiscent of the posture of St. Rosalia as a hermitess on Mount Pellegrino. Rosalia's experience as a hermitess was the very condition that enabled her to intervene in civic life, transforming her into the "advocate of Palermo". Likewise both Giovanni Falcone and Rosario Livatino have become figures of sacrifice for the city. And in order to achieve their project of salvation, the saint and the judges needed to lead an ascetic life. In other words, their engagement in the world required that they detach themselves from the world and renounce worldly goods. As such, the ascetic and civic dimensions coexist within judicial practice, revealing the intrinsically religious character of justice in the "anti-Mafia religion".

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A Máfia siciliana: a transformação num mal global ♦ Deborah Puccio-Den ♦ École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris ♦ dpuccio@ehess.fr

O objectivo deste artigo é o de explorar os processos através dos quais as percepções sociais sobre a máfia se foram alterando no decurso do tempo. Inicialmente considerada como uma “forma de ser siciliana”, uma atitude, a máfia siciliana foi subsequentemente sendo interpretada como uma expressão universal, global, religiosa do “mal”, a ser combatida numa guerra – onde as armas eram os textos e as imagens e as instituições judiciais o campo de batalha. Abordarei também, através do estudo de caso do Festival de Santa Rosália em Palermo, a forma como os poderes locais institucionalizaram uma “religião antimáfia”. Neste contexto, discutirei a emergência de uma nova iconografia antimáfia e o uso de um género literário específico: a hagiografia política.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: máfia, Sicília, política, catolicismo, justiça.