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**Organized crime and employment relations: a personal story of *'Ndrangheta* control on  
employment relations management practices in Southern Italy**

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**Abstract**

This article sets out the testimony of Paolo, an Italian entrepreneur who worked under the control of an *'Ndrangheta* clan for years, and finally rebelled against that criminal organization. Paolo operated on a crucial front line, as he managed the relations between his company and the dominant criminal organization in his area. This story constitutes a ‘wake-up call’ for more research on the intrusion of organized crime in the labour market. Paolo’s story reveals how strongly organized crime can penetrate decision-making processes and control key people management practices. Such control is decisive not only while under the direct influence of organized crime, but also after rebelling against it. Overall, this article provides insights into how organized crime affects employment relations and it calls for more attention to be paid to this topic in the sociology of work and employment relations.

**Keywords:** entrepreneurship, employment relations, human resource management, mafia, organized crime

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## Introduction

The sociology of work and employment relations has devoted close attention to the contextual factors and external actors that influence employment relations within organizations (Heery and Kelly, 2006). These studies complement a managerialist perspective in the HRM field which focuses on the agency of managers and a market-based perspective which is based on labour demand/supply dynamics that influence employment relations. Studies by sociologists of work and employment relations have shown the roles played by social, cultural, political and institutional factors and a broader set of actors. These latter include state and government agencies; owners and managers; employees and their representative institutions (Cullinane, 2018). New actors have recently emerged, such as employer agencies, workers' agencies, NGOs, social movements, standard setters and international organizations (Cooke and Wood, 2014; Heery and Kelly, 2006).

These studies have mostly overlooked the extensive influence of organized crime. The importance of organized crime in today's economy is huge (Catino, 2019; Sciarrone, 2014), accounting approximately for \$190-250 billion gross a year (Viano, 2018). While studies have shown how criminal organizations affect the economy and functioning of several institutions in their territories (Allum and Siebert, 2003; Paoli, 2014; Radaelli et al., 2019), the literature on their effects on employment relations remains scant. This problem emerges clearly in analysing Paolo's life, a victim of *'Ndrangheta* control. Paolo's story was a sort of 'wake-up call', in as much as the current academic knowledge did not provide powerful theoretical lenses through which to fully understand his case.

In the next sections, the article recounts Paolo's story, showing how organized crime influenced the employment relations in his company. Paolo's story highlights four main themes, which research could further explore to gain better understanding of organized crime's role in shaping employment relations.

First, the *'Ndrangheta* clan altered the ways in which Paolo's company expressed its labour demand. This influence was exerted in three ways. Organized crime forced Paolo's company to express a

'fake' labour demand to hire affiliates and 'friends' of the *'Ndrangheta* clan, despite the fact that, in both quantity and quality, they were not in line with the company's workforce planning. Furthermore, Paolo could not freely access the labour market to obtain his labour. He could not hire certain workers with appropriate skills because of the *'Ndrangheta* clan's opposition. Lastly, the *'Ndrangheta* clan forced Paolo's company not to express its full potential labour demand. The company was compelled to outsource to suppliers activities which would have been undertaken internally. The company was also forced not to bid for certain tenders despite having good chances of winning. As a result, the company could express only a small portion of the labour demand that it could have expressed.

Second, the *'Ndrangheta* clan shaped Paolo's managerial style and decisions. Paolo decided to adopt a centralized management style, avoiding (against his personal values) progressive forms of workforce involvement. Paolo decided to protect his employees from organized crime pressures, since the *'Ndrangheta* oversaw all the company's core decisions. Over time, and after having lost several valuable employees unwilling to work in such conditions, Paolo realized that his effort to keep the employees far from organized crime pressures was useless. Only after he severed his ties with the *'Ndrangheta* clan could Paolo involve his workers in organizational decision-making processes.

Third, Paolo's denunciation of the *'Ndrangheta* clan impacted very negatively on the amount of labour available in the market. Even if the company operated in a region with high unemployment, several employees resigned in fear of reprisals by the *'Ndrangheta*. Paolo lost the majority of his workforce, and struggled to attract new employees, because the influence of the clan extended across the entire region. Organized crime altered labour market dynamics by forcing satisfied workers to resign and unemployed people not to apply. Paolo then started spending more resources to retain his current employees and to attract new ones.

Fourth, organized crime influenced the employee control systems in the organization. Some of the workers still in his company acted as *Ndrangheta* clan 'envoys' and sabotaged the company's operations. They undermined the company from the inside by breaking organizational rules and

practices aimed at preserving high-quality products and services. Those behaviours forced Paolo to implement a wide set of employee control procedures to identify and sanction *'Ndrangheta*-affiliated employees acting as saboteurs.

In summary, Paolo, as an entrepreneur, operated on a crucial front line between his company and organized crime. The latter shaped the employment relations within the organization both directly and indirectly. This influence constitutes an issue that sociology of work and employment relations research has mostly overlooked. Past research has advanced our knowledge on the 'grey areas' of misconduct and problematic institutions; but research on the 'blackest areas' of organized crime has remained largely neglected (cf. Cappellaro et al., 2020). Opening the field of sociology of work and employment relations to research projects focusing on organized crime would allow the research field to explore the role that this – today, global and powerful – actor plays as regulator of employment relations.

### **Context of the story**

The story of Paolo and his company unfolds in a context characterized by a strong presence of the *'Ndrangheta*. *'Ndrangheta* is a form assumed by the mafia, which, in turn, is a form of organized crime. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) defines organized crime groups as persistent criminal enterprises that work to profit from illicit activities that are often in great public demand, e.g., through the corruption of public officials and the use of intimidation, threats, or force (UNODC, 2004). Academic scholars have made various attempts to identify common characteristics of a mafia organized crime group (Albanese, 2015; Catino, 2019; Dalla Chiesa, 2012; Finckenauer, 2005; Hagan, 1983; Maltz, 1985; Sciarrone, 2014; Varese, 2011). It is: (i) a structured group of three or more persons; (ii) the group exists for a period of time; (iii) the group acts in concert to commit at least one serious crime; (iv) it seeks to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material

benefit. Organized crime takes multiple forms, such as *'Ndrangheta*, *Cosa Nostra* and *Camorra* in Italy, the Mexican drug cartels, the Japanese *Yakuza* or the Russian Mafia, to name but a few (Paoli, 2014). The number of transnational organized crime groups has increased over the years, so much so that organized crime is now recognized as a global challenge (Allum and Siebert, 2003).

The *'Ndrangheta*, originally from Calabria, is one of the strongest Italian mafias and one of the strongest transnational criminal forces (Sciarrone, 2014). *'Ndrangheta* clans are organized around biological families, some which have held positions of power in their cities over the past 100 years (Paoli, 2014). *'Ndrangheta* has a strong vocation for expansion, branching out particularly in Northern Italy and in foreign countries, such as Germany, Canada and Australia (Paoli, 2014). The *'Ndrangheta* can also be considered as an anti-state organization which tries to achieve full control over the use of force, e.g., by promoting and selling private protection (Gambetta, 1993).

Paolo's company is situated in an area of Southern Italy where *'Ndrangheta* groups exert an all-pervasive control over local enterprises and political institutions with their traditional 'method' (*'metodo mafioso'*) of corruption, intimidation and illegitimate use of force. The *'Ndrangheta* has established a tendency in the general population not to denounce any mafia activities, for fear of retaliation, but also because of distrust in law-and-order institutions. This rule of silence (known as *omertà*) is a crucial aspect of mafia success.

The authors reconstructed Paolo's story by dividing it into three phases. In the first, preliminary phase, they considered Paolo's biography narrated in a book (in which he described his upbringing, his relationship with the *'Ndrangheta* clan and the aftermath of his denunciation) and the judicial sources (arrest warrant and trial verdict) related to the criminal trial following his denunciation of the clan to the authorities. Then, they focused on two in-depth interviews conducted with Paolo, each lasting 120 minutes (both recorded and transcribed). Finally, the authors developed a first draft of the story which was reviewed and revised directly by Paolo. The current version includes numerous handwritten notes provided by Paolo himself.

## **Paolo's story**

### ***Background***

I am an Italian entrepreneur, born in the South of Italy, specifically in Calabria, a region where for decades the *'Ndrangheta* has closely controlled all local economic activities. This tight control has affected all citizens, which of course includes my family as well. Indeed, in our region, every economic activity, but I would say every money transfer, is under the *'Ndrangheta*'s control. For example, there are pieces of land that one cannot cultivate despite 'legally' owning the land. Given the power of this organization, most people do not even talk about *'Ndrangheta* with each other. Most people would say 'Nothing will ever change'. Even if you want to leave the region, you may need permission from *'Ndrangheta* clans. In brief, nobody can escape this stranglehold. Those who left Calabria to find better conditions, were reached everywhere. When I was young, there was neither media coverage nor social network technologies, so the *'Ndrangheta*'s control of the territory was simply total. Today, media and social media coverage of this phenomenon has increased; moreover, some social movements are trying to fight against the organization. However, still today, *'Ndrangheta* control is super-strong. Entrepreneurs have to pay a fee simply to work here, and the same happens to employees: olive pruners have to pay 5% of their salary to *'Ndrangheta*; construction workers have to give 5 or 10 euros a day.

In such a context, my family suffered a lot from *'Ndrangheta* intimidation. I started helping my father with his work when I was very young. He transmitted several important values to me: in particular, the passion for work done well. I learned how to drive a tractor when I was still a child. This became my strongest passion: I was able to plough the fields, nurture the olive grove and repair road paving. My father also taught me to always tell the truth, no matter how complicated our situation was. Still, I clearly remember the day he had to lie to protect us all. Somebody slapped my father in the face in

front of me and he told me they were police officers. Only years later, I discovered they were mobsters who had come to extort money from him.

My father died when I was 15 and my mother was 37. She had to raise six children on her own and run an entire business full of problems and *'Ndrangheta* intimidations. After my father's death, my mother started receiving intimidatory phone calls. I wondered what these calls were as they became more and more frequent. My mother was desperate. One day, she finally told me that some people were demanding a large sum from her. She told me everything about the extortions suffered by my father. In those conversations I learnt a lot of things. Not only what had actually happened *that* day, but also that extortionists forced him not to buy a new piece of land for the oil mill. I understood why, many years ago, that oil mill had burnt down. It was no accident. Clan affiliates set the oil mill on fire because my father did not fulfil their demands. In short, the control of *'Ndrangheta* had affected my family's entire life. It continued to do so when I created my own company.

### ***My life as an entrepreneur and employer under the control of the 'Ndrangheta***

After my father died, I established my own company in the construction sector. I worked hard to grow my business, to improve my life and that of my employees. Since I was basically born a worker, there was no equipment or task I did not know. For example, seasonally, I worked in the olive groves. This was very hard work. If my shoulders could talk, they would tell you how many tons of olives they brought in. Having experienced the actual work on the ground, having endured its physical fatigue, and having worked for foremen, I realized that I wanted to manage my own company and my own employees. All these work experiences led me to treat my employees the way I wished my masters had treated me. I have always tried to make choices aimed at improving employees' performance and working lives. For example, more than ten years ago, I equipped them with mobile phones. At that time, in Calabria, I was the only entrepreneur in my industry to do so. I have always cared about the lives of my employees. When mobsters took money away from the company, they stole from my workers as well. I was getting more and more angry.



The *'Ndrangheta* had so many demands that influenced my work. *'Ndrangheta* clans forced me to hire their 'own people' in my company. I remember the time I had promised a job to Marco – a very skilled and reliable worker – and I could not keep my promise because the clan forced me to hire one of 'their' (unskilled, of course) guys. When I had to tell Marco, I could not hire him anymore, I felt really awful. At the beginning, I thought that the people I was obliged to hire were at least 'real' workers. Not at all. I still remember the first time I asked one of these people: 'what job would you like to have in the company?'. His father, sitting next to him, laughed and told me: 'we are not used to working. My son's job is just to collect the salary'. I was shocked, but I quickly realized this was actually a lot better than having those people inside the company premises. When these 'workers' entered company premises, they were arrogant and intimidating. Not only would they not work, they also relentlessly mocked my real workers.

Being natives of this region, my workers were all aware of the situation. There was no need to explain what was happening within the company. They did not like the situation; but they could not do anything else but continue with their work. To prevent them from being mocked or intimidated, I did not allow some of the 'workers' imposed by *'Ndrangheta* to come into the workplace. I met them only to hand them their salaries. However, at that time, there was a law allowing house arrest for prison inmates if they got a job. Many workers I was forced to hire were in this situation (they were, indeed, 'real criminals'!). In those cases, they had to be present in person. The best I could do was tell them not to embarrass the other workers. This was useless, however. When some of my 'real workers' felt humiliated, I moved *them* to another site.

The *'Ndrangheta* imposed on me not only who to hire, but also who *not* to hire. I remember a very skilled and experienced digger, who was working for a company under *'Ndrangheta* control. He wanted to resign from that company and start working in mine. I asked him why, and he (super-confidentially) told me: 'I have lost my dignity' – due to the *'Ndrangheta*'s constant oppression. The next day, an *'Ndrangheta* 'ambassador' came to me, and told me: 'that person could die for his decision'. I vouched for him; I told the 'ambassador' that this digger had a family to support - three

children, including a disabled child. It made no difference. The ambassador told me that the digger had to work where the ‘family’ told him. The day after that, this digger went back to work within that family’s company.

It does not stop here. The *‘Ndrangheta* also forced me to buy machines, tools and materials from ‘their’ suppliers. All my workers and I knew that the new tools were rubbish and put all of us in danger. I remember the time we had to use our trucks to carry a load that was a lot heavier than what the clan forced us to declare. My workers and I were compelled to keep quiet, but this was so dangerous for our safety, and it was even more frustrating to me: I had personally taught employees to be scrupulous and honest in their jobs, and here I was unable to walk my own talk. On top of the forced buying of tools, we were forced to buy raw materials from suppliers controlled by the *‘Ndrangheta*. This also created a lot of problems. Indeed, the raw materials we got were very poor, and that entailed two risks. First, a commercial risk: I assured my customers that materials of a certain quality would be used, but I could not do that, which could make some of the buildings erected less reliable over time. Second, a legal risk: I legally certified that the produced building had certain properties because of the quality of the materials used, and in some cases I was simply forced to sign fake certifications. At a certain point, even if production increased, I took raw materials on my own from ‘good’ suppliers, to be added to those provided by ‘suggested’ suppliers. My plan was to make better concrete and to minimize risks. However, the clan discovered I was disobeying (maybe clan affiliates infiltrated among my customers reported my disobedience). So, it caused two fires to my properties.

Furthermore, I could no longer bid for certain public tenders. The *‘Ndrangheta* clans actually forced me to abandon some tenders I had already won. On a regular basis, I received visits from *‘Ndrangheta* mobsters who would tell me which tenders I was allowed to participate in, and which I had to avoid. I sometimes tried to negotiate this with the *‘Ndrangheta*, but that was very hard. I never involved any of my workers in those negotiations – I wanted to be the only person to take such risks. I did not talk with my workers about these kinds of problems. When they legitimately asked me why we were not

bidding for various remunerative tenders, I would say: ‘do your job, not mine’. Again, my approach with them was becoming more and more distant from what it would have been in different circumstances.

After a few years, it became clear that my trying to be the only front line against the *‘Ndrangheta* was ineffective. I became unable to protect my workers from the growing pressures of the *‘Ndrangheta*. I lost one of my best workers and friends, Giacomo. He could not take it anymore. One day he told me: ‘they force us to be what we don’t want to be’. I will never forget when he decided to resign; he had worked for my company since its very first day of operation. I can say we built it up together. He went to Spain to find a new job and suggested I should do the same. When, years later, we decided to expand our operations in Spain, Giacomo tried to work with us. *‘Ndrangheta* discovered it and threatened the members of his family who were still living in Calabria. He told me ‘Paolo, it’s impossible to work with you’. This happened with some other workers, who could no longer tolerate the oppression of the *‘Ndrangheta*.

What makes me very angry is that an entrepreneur, especially in a poor area like Calabria, already has so many problems to deal with. Still, I had to focus on my quarrels with the *‘Ndrangheta*. Believe me, this caused me more concerns than economic problems. Those who live here, and breathe this air, know how things work. A person is not even free to sell or buy anything. *‘Ndrangheta* has the power to select specific people to sell or buy from – of course at their own imposed price.

### ***My life as an entrepreneur and employer after denouncing the ‘Ndrangheta***

I reached a point in my life where I was exhausted: I wanted my life back, together with my dignity; and I wanted to see my company develop as I wished. I wanted to be a free man and a free entrepreneur. So, I went back to my father’s teachings about the importance of working hard and of telling the truth. This was a real turning point in my personal and professional life. I started to record all the meetings in which the extortionists demanded money from me, or forced me to do things, in order to report them to the police. I clearly remember how scared I was of being discovered by them

while recording the conversations. One day the recorder made a loud noise – luckily that mobster mistook the sound for something else. Eventually, I went to the police and denounced the *'Ndrangheta* clan. I was surprised that people very soon knew about my (secret, in theory) report. I reported in the evening, and the arrests were made the night after.

Everyone expected a violent reaction. Quite the contrary. Nobody was in the streets where I live the day after my report. Sadly, the day after my report, there was almost no one at the company either. I expected some of my workers to quit after my denunciation – and yet it still hurts me very much that only 4 people out of 30 came to work. I do not want to judge people who did not come to work, though. Over time, many of them decided to resign because they were scared by *'Ndrangheta* threats. It was a shock when Dario, one of my best workers, resigned. He also wanted to fight against the *'Ndrangheta*; but he told me his wife had been 'advised' to stay away from my company, 'or else'. What upsets me most, to this day, is that I remained almost completely isolated after my complaints. I received neither solidarity nor support from my fellow citizens – not even a phone call or an email, but only a few anonymous letters in which somebody thanked me for my courage. I became an *infame* – a person without any social legitimacy.

After my denunciation, I started to lose my employees and my clients as well. The *'Ndrangheta* managed the local market, trying in all ways to keep me out of it. The *'Ndrangheta* sought to make me die of financial hardship, rather than physically kill me. Nevertheless, there were some entrepreneurs who held out for me. They said that I had always been their friend, someone who was always there to help. It was this group of hardcore supporters that allowed me not to disappear from the market. Fortunately, my company did not disappear, and I like to think that this is because of my determination. My father used to say, 'a good horse will always find a saddle'.

Nevertheless, things remained very complicated for me. The ban on my company caused significant economic problems; so, for years I could not afford to hire new employees as I needed. Furthermore, the relations with my workers became more difficult. This was another means by which the *'Ndrangheta* attacked me. *'Ndrangheta* mobsters would tell them 'if you work there (in my

company), you must pay us'. Another time, in a crowded supermarket, they yelled at one of my employees 'you're still with that *infame!* You'd better go somewhere else'. One day, the mobsters sprinkled the truck with gasoline and then set it on fire, in the presence of the driver. Those threats 'worked', and I lost even more employees. To make things worse, after resigning, some of my employees joined the clan in order to feel more secure and protected.

The clan contacted several employees of mine, lured them with promises of protection and money. They focused on the younger, more fragile ones and on those with financial problems. So, I discovered that some of my own workers were affiliated with the *'Ndrangheta* and were engaging in misconduct 'from within', to discredit me and my company. For example, they repeatedly induced other workers to leave the company, sabotaged the product and treated clients very badly. In addition, they claimed that I took advantage of the fact that I was under escort. Even if it was very far from my intended management style, I had to start checking on employees to identify the saboteurs and punish their behaviour. For example, I installed cameras to monitor the company's premises and because of what I realized when looking at the recorded videos, for the very first time in my life I was forced to fire one of my workers. The 'biggest bomb' came when one of the *'Ndrangheta*-colluding employees informed a company we worked with – GreyValley, which had very strict protocols on suppliers' selection – that my workers had not been paid for more than 8 months. GreyValley told me that, because of their ethical values and suppliers selection procedures, they had to terminate all contracts with me. At first, I could not understand what the problem could be. Then, they told me what had happened. I was able to deny every accusation by showing GreyValley the documents about our money transfers and payroll.

These events made me feel bitter, especially considering my approach with my employees. All workers at that time had company phones which could be used for personal calls; I had financed at zero interest those who needed money, for example for a family wedding or to buy land. Despite the employee-oriented policies I tried to implement, I realized that my company had hosted numerous 'Trojan horses'.

## *Epilogue*

My denunciation led to approximately 50 arrests. A few years have passed, and I still live under protection. Two or three policemen live with me and my family. However, my company and my workers are starting to flourish again. I now do business in Northern Italy and abroad. I am finally able to adopt a much more decentralized, democratic management style; I can trust my current workers to be involved in decision making. When, surrounded by my police escorts, I say that I am now a free man, but people do not believe me. Freedom, I tell them, is not what you do, but how you do it.

Currently, there is still some fear among my workers. However, many things have emerged in these years. Now, it has become less difficult to talk about the *'Ndrangheta* in public. More people have denounced it; more bloggers and media are covering the phenomenon. I would say that a big change has started. I like to think that I have personally contributed to that, as I have made my fight against the *'Ndrangheta* public by telling my story in schools and associations. Recently, I published my story in a book, which received an important anti-mafia award. It was considered a powerful means to educate young people on how to fight organized crime. My company is always open to young people and students who want to hear my story. I talk to them, telling them to always tell the truth, as my father taught me. I was so proud when the son of one of my workers wrote his thesis on my story. That means that his father spoke well of me.

It might be easy to say that now, but these are the results I expected 20 years ago. I knew it would take time. This is the meaning of my choice, which I still think was the right choice. I consider my action as the first brick to build a strong wall around the *'Ndrangheta*. Maybe it will not solve all problems, but I am building that wall with *my* bricks.

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