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# Social Justice in Multicultural Settings

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# **An army of teachers: a pedagogical approach to fight against the mafia's culture.<sup>1</sup>** Faustino Rizzo

## **Abstract**

During the last ten years, a series of new measures adopted by the Italian Juvenile Justice have raised awareness of care and protection issues of children involved in mafia's contexts. As a matter of fact, special measures have been introduced to guarantee children's rights and provide them with a future free from mafia's culture.

Several studies have explored the mafia's phenomenon from different perspectives, but they were mainly oriented to reveal aspects regarding criminal activity and legal issues. Instead, this research focuses on the involvement of minors in mafia's contexts from a social, cultural and educational point of view. A quotation by the Italian writer Gesualdo Bufalino provoked discussion of this issue: "primary teachers are our secret weapon, the ones who will succeed, if they succeed, in curing moral illiteracy (...) from which the mafia draws its sap". The aim of this study is to show the pivotal role played by teachers in the fight against the mafia and the culture that is established in places where the mafia is dominant, presenting the political and pedagogical experience that characterizes the Reggio Emilia Approach.

KW: Children rights; Bufalino; Reggio Emilia Approach; REA; mafia; crime organization; school; teacher.

## **Introduction**

Gesualdo Bufalino, an Italian teacher and writer of the late 20th century, states that in territories where mafia culture is widespread teachers and schools are the most effective antidote to fight mafia and educate about the values of democracy and social justice. In this paper mafia will be analyzed not only as one of the largest criminal organizations engaged in many kinds of criminal activities of transnational nature, as most of the research did before. This phenomenon will be studied from its cultural and social roots, from its policy and ideology that are the fundament of crime itself. According to the anti-mafia legislation introduced in Italy in 1982 with art. 416 bis of the Criminal Code<sup>2</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup> Published in: Court et al. (Edited by), 2023, Social Justice in Multicultural Setting, Cambridge Scholars Publishing. ISBN: 1-5275-1269-X.

<sup>2</sup> In 1982, following the murder by the Sicilian mafia of Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa and Pio La Torre, one a military officer, the other a politician committed to the fight against the mafia, the crime of mafia association was introduced into the criminal code, which was followed by other legislative initiatives in the following decades.

an association is of the mafia type when those who are part of it use the intimidating force of the associative bond and the condition of subjugation and omertà deriving from it to commit crimes, to acquire directly or indirectly the management or control of economic activities, of concessions, authorizations, contracts and public services or in order to obtain unjust profits or advantages for oneself or others, or in order to prevent or obstruct the freedom to vote or to procure votes for oneself or others during electoral consultations.

The law emphasizes the associative value of the criminal organization and its ability to contaminate the democratic system, for example by conditioning the outcome of elections.

The mafia phenomenon is characterized by implicit or explicit adherence to a system of values, a culture, a way of thinking and acting. Organized crime, historically rooted in southern Italy, is still deep-seated in Sicily, Campania, Calabria and Apulia, with ramifications in other regions of central and northern Italy and abroad with the four traditional mafia-type structures: Cosa Nostra, 'ndrangheta, Camorra, Apulian organized crime<sup>3</sup>.

The mafias derive their strength from the control of the territories in which they are present, replacing the institutions where these are weak or absent, taking total control of the area.

«The most painful of plagues, the gangrene that afflicts us, the mafia»<sup>4</sup>, as Gesualdo Bufalino defined this phenomenon during an interview in 1995. A painful disease that causes the putrefaction of body parts, the loss of flesh and organs. Bufalino lived most of his life in Sicily, in Comiso, where he was born. He spent most of his life teaching until, at the age of 61, he published his first novel, which won great acclaim and with which he began fifteen years of intense activity as a writer.

In those years, a real mafia war ravaged the Sicilian population. A war fought by the mafia clans in the streets of Palermo, first among themselves for the control of criminal activities, and then against the opposing state. This group killed their criminal rivals and brazenly murdered policemen, magistrates, and public officials, as well as citizens who found themselves in ambushes and shootings. A climate of war in which the silence of the people and the institutions prevailed. A silence due to fear or connivance with the organized crime. Among citizens, politicians and judges, many have denied the existence of the mafia, until 1992, when the assassination of the judges Falcone and Borsellino created such a scandal that rallied ordinary and law-abiding people and merged into a formidable front of opposition to the mafia in Sicily. Demonstrations, rallies and other public events

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<sup>3</sup> Padovani, Marcelle, *Mafia, mafias*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Elkan, Alain and Sgarbi, Elisabetta (edited by), Gesualdo Bufalino con Piero Chiambretti, in «Panta: quadrimestrale 1997», n. 15, Milano: Bompiani, 1997, pp. 106.

throughout Italy started from Palermo. Anti-mafia social movements developed, with new laws to oppose organized crime. The wall of silence was breaking down, and many felt the need to react, to side with the institutions.

In this scenario, Bufalino saw the core of the question in 'rampant ignorance' and 'moral illiteracy' and pointed to primary school teachers as the antidote to cure and defeat the unstoppable virus of the mafia.

*I believe that law enforcement, judges, and defectors can help win many battles, but not the war. To win the war, I suggest a long-term cure, which is the intervention of primary teachers. I believe that primary teachers are our secret weapon, the ones who will succeed, if they succeed, in curing moral illiteracy (...) from which the mafia draws its sap. (...) Equally important would be to take away the mafia's stolen assets, that is, to make an economic desert around them, flush them out, and put them in prison. But, as you see, the mafia always recovers, always reborn, because its roots are there, in the slums, in misery, in ignorance.*

Elkan, Alain and Sgarbi, Elisabetta (edited by),  
Gesualdo Bufalino con Piero Chiambretti, in «Panta: quadrimestrale 1997», n. 15,  
Bompiani Milano, 1997, pp. 106-107.

## **Beyond crime**

Bufalino goes beyond the common representation of the mafia as a criminal organization and recognizes the social factors behind this phenomenon. As a matter of fact, to describe the cure for mafia it is worth it to first trace back the cultural origins and social causes for crime. At the center of it there are children, parents, neighborhoods, towns far from the institutions, culturally separated from the rest of the world, subjugated, directly or indirectly, by a system that conveys a set of values, beliefs, and customs typical of the area dominated by the mafia. From here it comes the 'mafia feeling'<sup>5</sup>.

In this context, children, young people, and all those who were born into 'worlds' controlled by mafia domain appear to be subdued to a «typically pedagogy of mafia that, by appealing to a false communitarian mystique, creates bonds of dependency and loyalty from which it is very difficult to break free»<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Di Maria, Franco and Lavanco Gioacchino, *One step away from hell. Mafia feeling and criminal obedience*, Florence: Giunti, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Francesco, *Encyclical letter Fratelli tutti: on fraternity and social friendshuip*, 2020, 28.

Through the daily routine, the mafia is restated consciously or unconsciously thanks to the constant repetition of a consolidated model. It is precisely in everyday life that the paradox of normality is generated: what is to be considered as an exceptional display of cruelty and ferocity ends up to being classified as almost 'normal'<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, every day, everyone adds a brick to that wall that separates the mafia from the democratic life. Children are the first victims of this phenomenon. They are the first targets of organized crime because, as we shall see, they are a resource. At the same time, young generations themselves have a fascination for the mafia because it appears powerful and able to open opportunities. On one hand, children are attractive targets for the mafia, which often swindles them because of their vulnerability and exploits them, as children are less likely to be punished if caught. This is particularly true if the children are too young to understand the gravity of their actions. It is important to remember that these children are victims. They have often been raised in a culture of violence and crime and they may not know any other way of life.

On the other hand, the mafia exerts a strong attraction on children and young people due to the easier access to material benefits, but also to the possibility of identifying with a group and building ties. Children are impressionable and easily influenced, they are often from disadvantaged backgrounds and therefore more vulnerable to coercion.

In fact, the sense of belonging to the group, which provides them with protection, identity, and security, is a strong incentive for the child to serve the criminal organization.

According to the literature, we can distinguish three ways in which children are involved in organized crime. The first group is made up of children born in mafia families. From the very beginning these children are exposed to the underworld model and are entrusted with the responsibility for the survival of the organization itself<sup>8</sup>.

The second group consists of children who form close relationships with organized crime groups, sharing their goals. Even if they are not part of a mafia family. They are provided with protection and a sense of community. These children are used to transport drugs and weapons, and to commit other crimes.

The third and last group includes those children who operate around crime in full compliance with the rules imposed by the underworld family, even if they do not belong to the family and do not identify themselves with it<sup>9</sup>.

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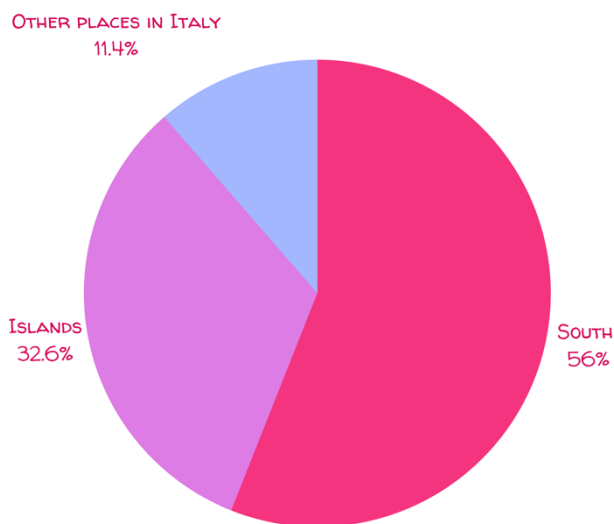
<sup>7</sup> Siebert, Renate, *Resoconti dal mondo accanto: quotidianità e criminalità*, in M. Schermi (edited by), *Crescere alle mafie: per una decostruzione della pedagogia mafiosa*, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2010, p. 20 ss.

<sup>8</sup> van Dijk; Kleemans; Eichelshaim, *Children of Organized Crime Offenders: Like Father, Like Child? An Explorative and Qualitative Study Into Mechanisms of Intergenerational (Dis)Continuity in Organized Crime Families*, in «European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research» 2019; Vol. 25, No. 4. pp. 345–363.

<sup>9</sup> Saviano, Roberto, *La paranza dei bambini*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 2016.

The ISTAT<sup>10</sup> data allow to measure the extent of mafia's phenomenon among children in Italy during the last five years. The chart shows that the number of minors suspected and registered by the police forces to have committed crime related to mafia's organizations (c.p. 416 bis) are 316. Among these, 88.6% live or have been arrested in southern Italy or on the Islands.

Tab. 1: Reports of persons suspected by the police forces to have committed crime of mafia criminal association, <a href="#">reports of minors</a> .					
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
South (Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria)	39	52	17	32	37
Islands (Sicilia, Sardegna)	14	37	35	11	6
Total in Italy	53	95	69	52	47



These figures confirm the strong presence of organized crime in the territories where it was born and the influence it exerts on the new generations. These data represent a strong alarm when read in the light of the data provided by the latest Eurostat report on school dropouts. This phenomenon still stands at 13.8% in 2020, with a higher concentration

<sup>10</sup> Istat or ISTAT is the National Statistical Institute, an Italian public research institute responsible for general censuses of population, services and industry, agriculture, sample surveys of households and general economic surveys at national level. The data represented here come from the operational activity of the Police Forces and do not follow the subsequent judicial process of the reported facts.

It should be noted that the number of reports referring to persons suspected to have committed crime does not exactly coincide with the real number of persons reported. The same offender is in fact counted every time he was reported in the reference year, for each crime committed.

The sum of the crimes by province could not coincide with the total of the region, and that of the regions with the total Italy, because of the missed precise statement, for some crimes, of the place where they have been committed (or of the region of the committed crime but not of the province).

recorded in southern Italy and especially in the Islands (0.96% as far as middle school is concerned, 4.4% as far as high school is concerned).

Bufalino puts the role of schools and teachers at the center of the political and pedagogical debate about the fight against the mafias. This question is important to promote the best interest and care of the children. It also concerns every citizen determined to defend democracy.

The total, harsh, and fatal education spread by mafia's clans is countered by the resilient presence of teachers, schools, and educational agencies. «Transforming subjects into citizens is a miracle that only schools can perform. (...) Man cannot be free if he is not guaranteed sufficient education to become self-aware, to raise his head from the earth and to glimpse, in a thread of light that descends from above in his darkness, higher goals than the daily and bestial one of satiating the urges of hunger»<sup>11</sup>.

In a world where the heterodirected education prevails and limits the space of subjectivity, the school is a place where mafia's and institutions' worlds can meet, it's a place of openness and discovery of one's own individuality and autonomy. Its mission is not just conveying notions, but also promoting children's abilities and defending their rights. The school is the place where change can start.

### **A pedagogical approach to fight against the mafia's culture.**

Taken for granted that the child is a subject of rights, and that teaching is not only about transferring knowledge<sup>12</sup>, we can now understand the role of teachers in the fight against mafias. By accompanying children's cognitive and social growth, teachers can interrupt the transmission of mafia's values and culture and become 'resilience guardians'. By promoting the values of democracy, teachers play a key role in the search for a sense of common living, that represents the antidote to cure mafias.

The construction of a strong and living democracy through the school is the political-educational challenge that Bufalino launched and on which we intend to reflect. Our starting point is a political and pedagogical experience: the one proposed in Italy in the city of Reggio Emilia, from which the Reggio Emilia Approach was named after. «An open school, in relation to the community and the realities of the territory, the heart of the civil community»<sup>13</sup>. Reggio Emilia is a city in northern Italy where education has become the center and connecting point of the entire community, giving rise to a new 'approach', a new way of being a school. The goal of the project is to become a school where

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<sup>11</sup> Calamandrei, Piero, *Per la scuola*, Palermo: Sellerio, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogia da autonomia: saberes necessários à prática educativa*, São Paulo: Editoria Paz e Terra S/A, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> FRC, Quality Education, a global challenge, 2022, p 5.



students and families are involved in an exchange, interaction and connection that generates a continuous dialogue between the citizens of a community<sup>14</sup>.

This kind of learning and teaching experience contrasts with the pedagogy of mafia, in which the values of participation and community are geared towards building bonds of dependence and loyalty. In Reggio Emilia, children, families, and teachers are part of a process of co-construction that generates and nurtures feelings and culture of solidarity, responsibility, and inclusion, bringing to change and new cultures.

*Listening plays an important part in achieving an aim that has always characterized our experience in Reggio: the search for meaning. We understand school (which, for us, is the early childhood center) as a place that plays an active role in the search for meaning – the meaning of the children and adults as well as their shared meanings. One the first question we ask ourselves as educators is: “How can we help children find meaning in what they do, what they encounter, what they experience? And how can we do this for ourselves? In search for meaning, we must ask: “why?” “how?” and “what?”. These are the key questions that children constantly “ask, both in and out of school.*

Giudici, Claudia; Rinaldi, Carla; Krechevsky, Mara, *Making learning visible: children as individual and group learners*, Reggio Emilia: Reggio Children, 2011, p. 79.

The political and pedagogical experience of Reggio Emilia Approach can help us to think about the value of the teacher's role in the fight against mafia. An experience of participation, of constant and continuous search for meaning that differs from other schools in some essential characteristics. Inspired by REA, we can ask what the role of teachers is, why *and how they can be* the solution to organized crime, and what makes them effective.

The daily relationship is the key element from which teachers and children can start to build together new horizons of meaning, oriented to the discovery of oneself and of the world.

Carla Rinaldi, pedagogue and President of the Reggio Children Foundation, places listening at the core of the educational process. For Rinaldi listening means, by the part of the teacher, being open to the complex, conflictual, and unpredictable nature of human learning wherever it takes place, both inside and outside the institutional contexts directly involved in education and training.

Thanks to a metaphor used by Loris Malaguzzi (pedagogue and fundamental inspirer of the pedagogy and experience of the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia) in describing the great and fundamental

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<sup>14</sup> Rinaldi, Carla, *In dialogue with Reggio Emilia: listening, researching and learning*, NY: Routledge, 2006.

role of the teachers, we can count on primary teachers as an Ariadne's thread that will lead us out of the labyrinth, out of every cultural world built by the mafia.

*'Ariadne's Thread' is a metaphor for the great and fundamental role played by the teacher-by teachers in general and by the teachers in Reggio in particular; a metaphor for the teacher's task of giving orientation, meaning and value to the experience of schools and children (a way out of the 'labyrinth'). Teachers are seen as those who hold the thread, who construct and constitute the interweaving and connections, the web of relationships, to transform them into significant experiences of interaction and communication.*

Rinaldi, Carla, *In dialogue with Reggio Emilia: listening, researching and learning*,  
NY: Routledge, 2006, 41.

As Malaguzzi suggests, the Reggio Emilia pedagogical proposal is developed around a bond, a relationship. A bond that is not only between the child and the teacher, but with the parents as well. These three subjects are inseparable and integrated. Consequently, the participation of the parent is an indispensable condition for REA, in which this system of relationships and intertwining is a key element.

What is provided by Reggio Emilia approach is an educational experience characterized by the continuous search for the involvement of students and teachers so that the learning process becomes meaningful for them. The documentation methodology developed is an integral part of the procedures aimed at fostering learning and modifying the learning-teaching relationship. Through documentation, learning processes can be appropriately remembered, reviewed, analyzed, and reconstructed a posteriori.

In this conceptual approach and didactic practice, the documents (the documented traces) are used after the process is complete, not during it. There is no meaningful or constructive intervention in the learning path or within the learning process that is created by these documents (or the reflections and interpretations they elicit from teachers and children) that gives meaning or direction to the learning. The documents (video and audio recordings, written notes) are collected, sometimes catalogued, and brought back to reread, check, and reconstruct the experience. Everything that took place is reconstructed, interpreted, and reinterpreted by means of the documents which testify to the most important moments of a path that was predefined by the teacher: the path that made it possible for the objectives of the experience to be achieved. The search for meaning in life and the self in life starts with the child and is desired by the child. That is why we speak about a competent and strong child,

who has the right to hope and to be valued, not of a predefined child seen as fragile, needy, incapable. Ours is a different way of thinking and approaching the child, whom we see as an active subject with us to explore, to try day by day to understand something, to find a meaning, a piece of life.

It is here then that we find the ingredient for the antidote suitable for curing 'the most painful of plagues, the gangrene that afflicts us, the mafia' in the daily listening to the child and their parents. In the construction of a relationship, of a community attentive and capable of caring for the needs of each one, of searching daily for the meaning of things. By asking every day why, how, what, we welcome the complexity, the conflict and the unpredictable nature of the human being as something that is always new and always open to change, to the newness that everyone brings and that cures the gangrene of the mafia.

Loris Malaguzzi, architect of the pedagogical and philosophical thinking that permeates the Reggio experience, once said that we need a teacher who is sometimes the director, sometimes the set designer, sometimes the curtain and the backdrop, and sometimes the prompter. A teacher who is both sweet and stern, who is the electrician, who dispenses the paints and who is even the audience—the audience who watches, sometimes claps, sometimes remains silent, full of emotion, who sometimes judges with skepticism, and at other times applauds with enthusiasm.

Rinaldi, Carla, *In dialogue with Reggio Emilia: listening, researching and learning*,  
NY: Routledge, 2006, 56.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has described the aspects and characteristics through which it is possible to recognize in the mafia not only a criminal phenomenon, but also and above all a cultural world where children are at risk. The data presented here underline the urgent need for a special focus on southern Italy where there is the highest concentration of children accused of mafia offences. We have seen that although the interests and business of the mafias have developed transnationally, they have not relinquished control of their territories of origin. Moreover, the fact that school dropout rates are higher in the south of the country, supports the thesis that places the responsibility for forming citizens and fighting the mafias on schools and teachers.

Oriented by Gesualdo Bufalino's famous quotation, this study intends to take its place in the pedagogical reflection that, inspired by Reggio Emilia Approach, wants to develop quality of education for all children in search of the antidote to cure "the most painful of plagues, the mafia". The pedagogical and philosophical thinking that permeates the Reggio experience suggests a teacher's

style that we summarized as the metaphor used by Malaguzzi of the 'Ariadne's Thread'. In an educational context in which children are recognized as bearers of rights and parents are called upon to participate in the daily search for meaning in existence, a community in which everyone can experience care and democracy is generated. REA's vision of the school as the heart of the civil community meets Bufalino's words by offering the antidote to cure the gangrene that afflicts the world and break down those walls that the mafia builds every day.

Additional data collection would help to determine how the teacher model proposed by the Reggio Emilia political, pedagogical, and philosophical approach contributed to the formation of a strong democracy resistant to the mafias. These findings suggest the following direction for future research in pedagogical tools to take care of children afflicted by mafia presence in their village and family as a concrete commitment to the construction of social justice through the protection of children's rights.

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