

CHAPTER 10

ANTI-MAFIA, UNSCRIPTED

On Discourse, Moral Borders and the Public Space

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INTRODUCTION

Let us, as a mental exercise, consider the role of the anti-mafia in Italy as Lakin to that of a sculptor, carving the shape of the mafia out of the thin air of social interaction. The mafia's 'being', its ontology, is the outcome of the anti-mafia's discursive constructs, which take legal form ('mafia') drawing from sociological realities (exchange, violence, control and so on – see Ben-Yehoyada 2018). To locate how this takes place, we need to inquire about the nature and formation of a public space in which such discourse develops (Carrithers 2005) – a dynamic area where consensus on content ('mafia is bad') lags behind conflict on shape (the normative acts that identify how 'mafia' 'is bad'). The space of the anti-mafia has been institutional and discursive for decades – but of late (Rakopoulos 2017a) it also includes material aspects, most obviously in the form of a micro-economy of anti-mafia cooperatives.

Here, I will show how it can become a game of uncomfortable developments, almost of smoke and mirrors. This condition reflects the constitution of the modern Sicilian public space, its local *territorio*, where forces identified with often obscure actors like the mafia dominate, to think with one Sicilian author we will meet below (Sciascia and Padovani 1979). What seem like contradictions in this territory might well just be the unscripted events that expectedly spring up in an otherwise often rigid, definitely normative and in some occasions 'scripted' scenario of anti-mafia discourse: one that attempts to separate the moral universes of mafia and (the right version of) anti-mafia.

The anti-mafia public space is mainly formed around mafia-related events, especially those of a spectacular nature, like the assassinations of famous people – ‘excellent cadavers’ (see Stille 1995). The factuality of that part of the public space is undisputed, as people do not contest, for instance, that the assassination of Paolo Borsellino and his *scorta* took place.¹ Beyond agreeing on the mere fact, though, ‘the anti-mafia’ (a collective set of institutions and educational actors that give shape and – negative – visibility to the mafia) is an internally conflicted area in which multiple interpretations and even bitter contestation dominate.

The ways that people and institutions with an anti-mafia standing choose to recall mafia violence can thus be heated and even potentially eerie, while anti-mafia narratives and their ensuing historicities (Stewart 2016) can be contradictory and even antithetical to each other. This circumstance introduces a play of differentiation: in the institutional anti-mafia, some people identify with this or that narrative, while, importantly, the representations of narratives can lead to unintended micro-events in accounting for historical mafia violence (say, the Borsellino assassination). At the same time, the sphere in which the mafia is identified as a historical or synchronic actor works very differently among the ‘institutional’ anti-mafia versus the ‘practical’ one, the hands-on material experience that reshapes areas of the economy away from mafia influence (such as co-ops working on confiscated land; see Rakopoulos 2017b, 2020a). The urban, civil society anti-mafia (Schneider and Schneider 1997, 2003), despite a number of jobs associated with it, is still different from the anti-mafia that relates to forces of production. This material, second sphere of public discourse on the mafia opens a second field of knowledge around it: gossip and rumours, as well as the discontent that this informal discourse can cause.

With this twofold scheme in mind, I present stories coming from both the Sicilian capital Palermo and from rural – but adjacent to Palermo – western Sicily. Describing the vibrancy of these two spheres serves two goals. Firstly, I wish to show the power of specific types of discourse to muddle, not just clarify, the agents and actors in the field between mafia and anti-mafia. Secondly, I also want to account for the normativities of the public space in Italy, a public space that is underpinned by a strong historicity of moral discourse and ‘moral distinctiveness’ (Valentini 1987; Moss 2000). Rhetoric, ritual expression, rumour and gossip in public spaces can help us understand moralized discourse’s limits (understood both as borders and limitations). This reflects back to thinking critically with Italian intellectuals like Leonardo Sciascia, who, despite their own limitations, both inspired and critiqued ‘the anti-mafia’ through defining ‘the mafia’ – sculpting it out of thin air (Lupo 2007).

My overall aim is to discuss the Italian public sphere as a political formation where talk and silence criss-cross each other; where the normativities of talk affect the talking or non-talking subjects; and where, in effect, the very idea of what is (the) public becomes a matter of public contestation. The public sphere is not a unified dominant ethical or normative space. Words and different rhythms of uttering and sharing or networking can contribute to 'the creation of various publics and the (im)possibility of a shared public urban space' (ibid.: 147). In this way, paying attention to a particularly Italian antithesis (mafia/anti-mafia) and specifically to the polemical public sphere of 'the anti-mafia' (Schneider and Schneider 2006) allows us to delve into the contradictions, micro-normativities and internal conflicts that emerge in the process of separating the virtuous from the non-virtuous.

A RITUAL IN PALERMO

It is a scorching day in the Palermitan July of 2017. I am pursuing new ethnographic research in the Sicilian capital, accompanied by a political scientist friend, also interested in the island's public space. In the evening, we are planning to attend two complementary and contradictory events that commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of 17 July 1992, the so-called *strage di Via D'Amelio* (the Via D'Amelio massacre) in the heart of the historical centre. We are all enthusiastic about the possibilities of the evening: My political scientist research companion, myself the social anthropologist and the couple who are hosting us, two young professionals who live in central Palermo. Our friends, Nadia (38) and Michele (44), are newlyweds who have been leading middle-class lives in the city for a few years now. I first met them while doing fieldwork in the Palermitan agrarian hinterland, a few years back, where Nadia was navigating mafia–anti-mafia dipoles while working with an 'anti-mafia' cooperative (Rakopoulos 2018).

We are particularly interested in one event, called 'Bonds of Memory: Rights and Hospitality in Lands of the Mafia', which is scheduled for 19.00 in Casa Professa, a Jesuit church in Sicilian baroque style that also hosts the city's public library. We also hope that we shall still find time to attend the other event, a seemingly competing occasion, as it is on a very similar theme and is located less than 300 metres away, in the building of the Law Faculty, in the vicinities of the magnificent Santa Maria dell'Amaraglio church. The two events are separated by the semantics of the architectural richness of Palermo: on the one hand, the Church of the Gesù (Church of Jesus) is a building of great historical importance, a magnificent palace with an inner open space of ongoing use value for the public life of Palermo. Casa Professa, the secular area hosted in the premises, is a glorious late medieval building, with



Figure 10.1. Casa Professa, Palermo. © Theodoros Rakopoulos.

an internal patio, of the hybrid Arabo-Norman style. On the other hand, the Law Faculty is, in typical Western European style, a building separate from the University of Palermo campus, and located in the heart of the city. The choice of the locations for the events is characteristic of their importance for public debate in Sicily – they are both central, historical landmarks. They are unmissable, magnificently occupying urban space, which accentuates the gravity of the events they will host.

As we enter Casa Professa we encounter several policemen and guards standing across the corridor leading to the courtyard where the main event is held. The beautiful hall leads to the patio, and there we see about a hundred seats – all taken, occupied almost entirely by people over 50. The seats are facing a small stage, arranged for the occasion. A number of younger people are scattered around the patio, standing. It is an arrangement arguably symbolic of both respect for older generations *and* of Italian gerontocracy: the older already sat, the younger respectfully leaving the seats for the more senior (or just too late to find a chair). On stage are some of the most recognizable figures of the ‘institutional anti-mafia’: Rita Borsellino, Gian Carlo Caselli and Leoluca Orlando among them. Borsellino, who is now holding the mic, is giving a passionate speech about her brother, Paolo, assassinated exactly twenty-five years ago. Rita has been a candidate for the presidency

of the Sicilian region and an MP in the Sicilian parliament, and is a classic figure of the Italian Centre-Left.² Caselli has been a major magistrate; during the years that he was State's Attorney, Cosa Nostra suffered some major arrests (see Caselli and Ingroia 2013). Orlando, then Palermo's mayor, originally a Christian Democrat (and thus allied with the – often mafia-friendly – Sicilian Centre-Right), has been a central anti-mafia voice in mainstream politics since the late 1980s (see Orlando 2001). For at least the last twenty years he has been a symbol of the Centre-Left as well.

Illustrious guests, all above 70 years of age, are seated in the front row, and eventually gather on stage, with the mic passing from one to the other in a free flow. These recognizable public figures engage in a dialogue about remembering Borsellino, and the current challenges of 'the anti-mafia project'. In this, they are accompanied by other, less recognizable but equally political figures, including Vittorio Teresi, magistrate, and Maurizio Landini, General Secretary of the famous FIOM, the historically most militant, but also embourgeoisied, mass trade union in Italy. The discussion goes on for two hours. The age of the participants as well as their long, rich record of accomplishment in anti-mafia engagement allows for a fervent, although at times aloof and moralistic discussion.

Slowly and respectfully, like the other spectators, we roam around the large patio as we follow the event, admiring the space, but also taken aback by the gimmicks of the occasion. At the gates, as well as around the site, there are life-sized pin-up models of people assassinated by the mafia: excellent cadavers (Stille 1995). In an aura combining illustrious survivors and illustrious fallen, an almost necrophilic yet vibrant atmosphere emanates. The installation is adorned with the figures of Borsellino and his *scorta*, who stand in solemn silence as spectators, witnesses to words spoken about them twenty-five years after their passing. Rita Borsellino, who looks aged and exhausted, poignantly says at some point: 'we are watched by those who left us.'

When the discussion finishes, it is time for a play written precisely for this occasion. Young actors take their places on stage. What follows for the next forty minutes is a passionate and exuberant performance. It is not always easy to follow, but the plot is about Sicily's purity being violated by mafia violence.

The play culminates with immense movement on stage, with the young actors gesticulating in a fierce and violent manner, while the protagonist, a beautiful young woman symbolizing a resistant Sicily, screams against her potential violators. Eventually, everyone on stage starts screaming loudly, at the top of their voices, in what looks like a Grotowski-inspired crescendo. The accompanying music has generally been eclectic but is by now hysterical: after a long passage through various works of Wim Mertens, with his



Figure 10.2. Paolo Borsellino and his *scorta*, figures. © Theodoros Rakopoulos.

atmospheric minimalism, the crescendo scene is orchestrated according to the famous theme by Clint Mansell and the Kronos Quartet in the original soundtrack of *Requiem for a Dream*. The aim, as an actor told me afterwards, was to fine-tune the dream of a Sicily with no mafia to that of the tragedy described in the film by Daren Aronofsky – drug-dependency, death and hopeful human salvation. The conjuring of themes of drug addiction, personal collapse and, eventually, death was seen as fitting to play with, especially in the light of Cosa Nostra’s own heroin trafficking.

By now, four minutes into the screaming, the audience looks stunned, in the tradition of Artaudian theatre of cruelty. While the audience was visibly taken with the culmination of the screaming event, one interesting if uninvited incident took place that reshuffled the severity and solemnity of this enduring moment.

The unexpected, trickster invitee came in the shape of a dog. Palermo is filled with packs of alley dogs, stray animals that live off rubbish in the waste-laden streets of working-class neighbourhoods in downtown corners. The dog, a lone adult male animal of huge proportions and greyish pelt, was resting by some members of the audience throughout the event. Eventually, it became visibly agitated by the increasing noise and started attracting sidelong looks and passing glances from audience members, and, after a few minutes, performers on stage as well. The security guards were puzzled, but did not do anything, in order to make sure that the event was not disrupted and the solemn atmosphere jeopardized. But the dog was getting more and more pissed off.

The animal raised itself as the music and screaming noises intensified, and started barking, quietly at the beginning. As if to attract more attention, the dog walked further towards the actors and eventually literally took centre stage, facing the audience, as it joined the chorus of screaming performers with its barking. The manic dance that was taking place invited further movement, so the dog started following the dancers on stage and moving around with them. The performers, initially visibly shocked, started to warm up to the unexpected visitor once they noticed that the huge canine was actually harmless. They made sure, as the dance was evolving further, that the dog's pacing, running and barking on stage was included in the overexcited movement taking place, as the symbolism of a violent Sicily needing to shake off violence was coming to a peak. The dog was not aggressive in any way, but the intensity of both its own barking and the passionate exchange that was taking place on stage were increasing in an aggravated manner.

People started smirking and even laughing in the audience. While the illustrious guests remained silent throughout the barking and then the dog-on-stage moments, they joined the audience in laughter after a while. Rita Borsellino, in particular, was originally stunned by the event, but became visibly more sympathetic to the way it was being treated.

My research companion and I were actively taking note of everything taking place, while our hosts were laughing loudly. At the end, with the actors and performers bowing, the dog took centre stage among them, and the audience applauded fervently. The solemn sense of the play was now lost in translation, and people joined their hands in clapping the absurd turn of events, as much as the effort of the performers. When the performers left, after the third round of applause, the dog established itself alone at the centre of the stage (and of attention). The audience then got up from their seats and gave the animal a standing ovation, with a sentiment, by then unequivocal and shared by arguably everyone, of celebration, irony and vitality.

The eerie event provokes what the uncanny, according to Freud, can often inspire: at once a sense of shared discomfort and a sensation of the absurd, even the ridiculous side of the violence of history (Stewart 2017). I will return to approaching the odd phenomenology of violence in its narration of mafia history in a little while, but first I would like to present a glimpse from the other, neighbouring anti-mafia event of the evening.

OTHER WOR(L)DS IN THE PUBLIC SPACE

One block away, there was another happening, where siblings of the arguably three most celebrated anti-mafia heroes of recent times were the main



Figure 10.3. Poster, downtown Palermo. © Theodoros Rakopoulos.

speakers. These were the sister of magistrate Giovanni Falcone and the brother of magistrate Paolo Borsellino, the assassinated Dioscuri of the historical Sicilian prosecution system, as well as the brother of Giuseppe Impastato, the assassinated political activist from Cinisi, a mafia stronghold close to Palermo. Interestingly, in the course of the event Borsellino's brother mentioned his befuddlement over why Rita (his and Paolo's sister) would join 'the others'.

This event was more militant in essence, as witnessed in its title: 'In What State is the Mafia?', a play on words equally effective and disturbing in Italian or English. Despite its militancy, though, in some ways this was a more intellectual event, as evidenced by its guests: Saverio Lodato is a figure of national importance in all issues related to mafia and anti-mafia, a journalist whose books are cited by scholars working on these issues (including the undersigned) (see Lodato 2001, 2006). The director of Antimafia Duemila Giorgio Bongiovanni was also present, and so was Antonio Ingroia, the author and former investigative magistrate for Palermo, a public intellectual who – especially in earlier years – represented what in Italy is often seen as a 'red gown'.³ Also present were Nino Di Matteo, substitute national procurator for anti-mafia affairs,⁴ and two jurists active in the anti-mafia of southern Italy: Giuseppe Lombardo, adjunct procurator for the mafia-ridden Reggio Calabria, as well as Gianfranco Donadio, another magistrate with a long anti-mafia CV, mainly working in Basilicata. The regional president, Governor of Sicily Rosario Crocetta, also passed by – and it is important to point out that

Crocetta was the first – and possibly the only thus far – governor who has been consistently and insistently anti-mafia.

Unlike those present at the other event, this one was peopled by intellectual activists, many of whom might accept the idea of a conspiracy between state and mafia. Specifically, in the public discussions and books that some of these intellectuals and public orators have produced, as well as in this event, a case is often made that there has been a *trattativa tra stato e mafia*: a ‘treaty’ between state and mafia. Most crucially, Salvatore Borsellino was also present and was very dramatic in his delivery. The founder of the movement ‘Agende Rosse’ and Paolo Borsellino’s brother, Salvatore made a dramatic plea to the authorities to stop dealing with mafia.

The intellectual and public stature of the figures discussed, as well as of the anti-mafia as a project at large, is not without contestation within Sicily itself. Of course, much of this contestation comes from right-wing politicians, often colluding with mafia (such as Totò Cuffaro, the region’s governor while I did eighteen months of fieldwork there, in 2008–9). Cuffaro famously, for example, debated and clashed with Giovanni Falcone, Borsellino’s friend and colleague, on TV. Eventually, Cuffaro, as well as the Centre-Right governor that followed him, Raffaele Lombardo, also a doctor, were condemned to prison for collusion with the mafia (although later acquitted), and so was Marcello Dell’Utri, the all-powerful Centre-Right MP from Palermo, cofounder of Forza Italia and friend of ex-prime minister Silvio Berlusconi.

However, some contesting of this public intellectual work comes from the Left, too. My friends and informants in the squat-based collective *onda anomala* (‘anomalous wave’) in Palermo vehemently oppose any institutional anti-mafia events. These informants, young (median age 28–30), underemployed and often from working-class backgrounds, are politically inspired by the long Italian tradition of *autonomia* and, through a squat in downtown Palermo, are doing what they call ‘real work in the neighbourhood’. In their squat, they offer a series of social and solidarity economy services to poor locals and immigrants, reclaiming public urban space. They consider the events described above incredibly and annoyingly bourgeois, and part of a self-celebratory series of rituals that reproduces a certain Palermitan milieu, the class-based *Palermo per bene*. This ‘part’ of the city consists of ‘the same people that pat themselves on the back’, as Mimmo, a leading figure in *onda anomala*, told me. On another occasion, he commented that ‘if this is the anti-mafia, better stand with the mafia than with the anti-mafia’.

This discontent with the anti-mafia has a long, left-wing intellectual history as well. Leonardo Sciascia, the aforementioned internationally acclaimed author (and humble schoolteacher from the outback town of Racalmuto), is a case in point. He had a huge impact on the Italian public sphere with his expressed suspicion of the anti-mafia social milieu, which he saw through

an acute analytical lens: that of *professionalism*. In the claimed expertise gradually built into ‘doing anti-mafia’, he saw a growing professionalization and condemned the process of bureaucratization that accompanied it, some years after the escalation of mafia violence and anti-mafia backlash (Sciascia 1987).⁵ Soon after the publication of his article ‘The Professionals of the Anti-Mafia’, Sciascia passed away, leaving a misunderstanding hanging, especially in the light of his previously held and expressed views on Sicily being condemned to endemic corruption – views expressed in the metaphor of the geographical ‘rise of the palm tree’ (Blim 1998) that bordered on essentialism (Rosengarten 1998). Sicily and its civil society and modern public space, in his view, are engulfed by the corrosive encroachment of the rising palm tree line that moves from Africa into Europe (Camilleri and Lodato 2002) – a poignant, prophetic metaphor of climate change with orientalist undertones. Such essentialisms in representing Sicily were not rare among some of the most prominent anti-mafia activists, including magistrate Falcone himself (Falcone 1993).

Sciascia the intellectual was at the forefront of the anti-mafia struggle for decades and contributed a conceptual shape that influenced how we all see the mafia (especially through the novel *The Day of the Owl*). At the same time, he unwittingly coined a term now often used by corrupt conservative politicians – including Cuffaro: ‘*i professionisti dell’antimafia*’. Life trajectories like Sciascia’s suggest how the anti-mafia discursive terrain is itself laden with normative contradictions (Schneider and Schneider 1998). This is more evident in the island’s hinterland, an area that Sciascia knew all too well.

While the institutional anti-mafia and the scripted social life it suggests develop within clear-cut boundaries of talk in Palermo’s public debates, in the hills of Spicco Vallata, on which we will focus in the coming section, the flow of ‘anti-mafia’ information kept a low profile. My comparative ethnographic attention shifts just 32 kilometres away from Palermo, and into the rural areas of western Sicily, while maintaining an interest in excavating the normative mishaps of an anti-mafia public space that cannot stay scripted at all times.

IN THE VALLEY: SIGNALLING AND METATALK

Spicco Vallata is a viticulture-based valley where four cooperatives cultivate land that the state confiscated from mafiosi. These four ‘anti-mafia’ cooperatives eventually sparked a constellation of similar initiatives across southern Italy, which ranks first among the major material wins of the contemporary anti-mafia movement over the mafia (Santino 2000, 2022). The main offices and now headquarters of this Italian phenomenon are in the village of San

Giovanni, where I did fieldwork in 2008 and 2009 and have paid visits since. The village was part of eight villages united in assigning confiscated land to agrarian cooperatives.

Among anti-mafia cooperatives' members, many, especially the co-op managers, as well as Spicco Vallata politicians involved in the anti-mafia project, frequently used the term 'mafia' alongside idioms of insidious growth and contamination. They characterized flows and networks deploying interests of people thought to belong to mafia clans as 'mafia diffusion'. Public officials, such as judges or mayors of local villages, shared a charged lexicon that compared mafia to disease and indeed to cancer. Reale's mayor talked to me of the 'need to isolate the contaminated cells in our society'. The mayor of Fonte, another involved village, characterized influences of the San Giovanni mafia clans in his community as a 'metastasis' (invoking the spread of cancer cells to other parts of the body), a term also used by sociologists in Italy (Sciarrone 2009). Another local mayor named Malva, despite his friendship with a young mafioso I name Baffi (Rakopoulos 2015), told me in an interview that the '[mafia] lump had to be removed from the body of our community'.

In the midst of all this, there were the anti-mafia cooperative members, especially the office-based administrators, whose middle-class and Palermitan background differentiated them from the local coop workers. They also employed metaphors of diffusion spreading throughout the community's body to conceptualize mafiosi as contaminators of social networks and the public sphere. Any nexus with mafia links was seen as morally challenging and permanently risky until 'the lump is removed', as Gianpiero underlined to me. Gianpiero, a Borsellino administrator and the head of the NGO Libera Palermo, reflected the association's views. Pamphlets of anti-mafia civil society associations spoke of the perils of mafias as 'the disease of the South' (Libera 2009; Addiopizzo 2009). Libera construed this paradigm in terms of mafia as a nucleus that conveyed its corrupting influence to the political and economic order – to the public space of Sicilian and Italian society. Nico, a member of the Borsellino cooperative, compared the members' anxiety about becoming exposed to 'contamination' with the fear of clean water becoming polluted: a social network was like a river with a dead body lying in its stream; when the clean waters passed over it, the stream became polluted from that point onwards. In that way, anti-mafia cooperative administrators saw the public space as 'impure' when a mafioso occupied a broker position in it. The contamination imagery was constantly evoked in documents and informal discourses among the cooperatives' administration, local policy actors such as mayors, and civil society agents such as Libera activists. Some of this discourse incorporates the flow of gossip and informal information gathered in bars as public spaces in the valley of the Palermo hinterland.

Contamination calls for containment, an idea that underpinned the administrators' tendency to form 'moral borders' while underlining the 'cleanliness' of the cooperatives with their strictly demarcated moral universe. These borders extended to kinship (see Rakopoulos 2017b), friendship (2018), discourse (2019) and, of course, land (2020a). Overall, these moral borders were an attempt to create a scripted version of everyday life. Through gossip, the anti-mafia experts – administrators of co-ops and Libera agents – knew, or claimed they knew, what was said and who said it. In this way they were trying to form discursive moral borders around the cooperatives. This form of gossip in San Giovanni was constructed as what I call 'metatalk' (Rakopoulos 2019), because to track gossip was to talk about talking. A person was 'clean' not only when they were not a mafioso or a mafioso's relative, but when it was proved that they did not speak with mafiosi or relatives of mafiosi, as this could be contaminating for the cooperatives.

Palermitan anti-mafia co-op administrators performed this by tracing information, consulting the Prefecture and the police, but also by following informal means of gathering information. The police provided an outline of a person's relationships with the authorities, as documented in their official archives. On top of this, the co-op administrators paid attention to random local gossip, especially the 'whispering' (*sussuri*) that took place in bars.

This tacit flow of discourse was actually very powerful. The state's gossip-tracking could lead to a situation called 'signalling' (*segnalazione*), a sort of documentation confirming a person's contacts with mafiosi. A law enforcement entity (the Carabinieri or the police) wrote down the person's name as a 'mafia contact' and informed the cooperatives that the person was to be avoided. As demands for labour intensified with the development of the cooperatives, this situation dramatically influenced the anti-mafia cooperatives' recruitment, as the cooperatives could not hire 'signalled' people. What is more, they would have to fire people who were signalled.

Once, Piero, entering a bar in San Cipiriddu for his morning espresso, saw the local Carabinieri marshal having a coffee with young Aiola, the first cousin of a San Giovanni mafia clan leader. Piero ignored this and had a brief trivial chat with both men. The next day, he had the police at his door: he was advised not to approach that person again, as he was a mafioso. The police officers told him that they were obliged to communicate this information to the president of the cooperative and that after that 'it was the cooperative's own issue' to decide on Piero's future. When Piero went to the police department, he complained that he had approached Aiola only because the marshal was there, and that the marshal introduced him to Aiola. The police replied that they often spent time with known mafiosi and 'it was not his business imitating that conduct'.

The case of Pino, another co-op member, is similar to Piero's: he underwent a *segnalazione* as he 'contacted' his village's mafia boss. Informants confirmed, however, that what the police meant by 'contact' was that he had simply stopped to say hello when he and local mafioso Netti met on the street. In a small village like San Cipiriddu it was difficult to avoid meeting anyone, and Pino's private engineering office was on the main road, some 30 metres from the stairs to the main church and to local bar Circolo, Netti's hangout. In fact, Pino introduced Netti to me, as we met him by chance at Circolo one day.⁶

The above events took place in 2009. Things were even more difficult with the passing of years. In 2016 and 2017, on visits to San Giovanni, I found out about how the signalling situation came to a standstill in defining the public space and its rigid borders for the anti-mafia cooperatives. Two people, founding members of the Borsellino anti-mafia cooperative, were fired in early 2016 because of the gossip around them regarding meeting a mafioso.

Pasquale and Peppe were fired for having attended a mafioso's celebration in the village. Pasquale, 42, married a woman who was the cousin of the nephew of Balduccio Di Maggio, a San Giovanni mafioso central to Sicilian history (see Rakopoulos 2020b). Pasquale was thus deemed *mezzo imparentato* (almost kin⁷) to the mafioso. Di Maggio had served many years in prison since the late 1990s for belonging to a mafia organization and for having assassinated three people. At some point, after many years in *carcere duro* (hard prison regime) under the fierce 41bis article of the Italian Criminal Code, he was allowed one exit from jail for three days. As is custom in San Giovanni (but also in some Palermo areas), the neighbourhood around his house celebrated the event. Local kids detonated dozens of firecrackers that evening, while the family engaged in what is known locally as 'open house': people are allowed and indeed encouraged to come to salute their imprisoned compatriot (the 'hosted of the state', as he is ironically called locally) and pay their due respects to him. Not doing this when one is in the mafioso's circle is considered an act of dishonour, and one that could have repercussions of all sorts, from social isolation to actual threats.

Pasquale's hands were tied. He felt he had to visit his imprisoned kin; out of honesty and courtesy to his co-op, he announced his intention to the administrative council of the co-op, when gossip reached them. The leadership told him that his position in the co-op would be imperilled after this. He went to the ritual event nonetheless; the next day, when asked by the co-op administrators, he admitted his attendance. He was fired two days later. Totò, a close informant and a friend of Pasquale, was critical of Pasquale's layoff: 'we all know each other here, what do you do, not say hi?' In his opinion, Pasquale should not have told the co-ops of his contact.

In the case of 45-year-old *Pepe*, the situation was less incidental, as he kept a loose friendship with a minor *Corleone mafioso*. The *Brancusi brothers*, *Pepe* and *Mimmo*, were the powerhouse of the *Borsellino co-op*, controlling the admin council alongside its president, *Mario*. They eventually split, as *Pepe* was fired for maintaining his old friendship with the *mafioso*. The information reached the co-ops through the magistrate.

Soon after, the co-ops' statute was updated in order to tackle future cases like this. Article 10 of the *statuto*, which was introduced in 2011, stipulates clearly that members have to have a *condotta personale* that is in line with the professed ideas and principles of the co-ops. The wording of the statute was strengthened. The public space was tightened for the co-op members and for anti-mafiosi in general. 'The world is shrinking', as *Totò* eloquently put it to me.

THE LOCUS OF THE SEMI-PUBLIC SPHERE

Schneider and Schneider's (1976) classic monograph proposed that 'control over networks' is the source of the mafia's brokerage power. In a more recent book, they identified (hierarchical) 'reputational networks' as an important means of social cohesion in Sicily, which impacts on production and reproduction patterns, building people's and families' 'respectability' (*Schneider and Schneider* 1996: 195–96).

In my twofold ethnographic focus here, while in the civil society anti-mafia of the urban middle classes we encounter an open (and openly polemic) field of debate and contestation that can also assume performative forms, the situation is different in the rural anti-mafia of hinterland Sicily. The flows of discourse and reputation there are an expression of the internal differentiation of anti-mafia cooperatives into middle-class managers and local workers, and they carry a normativity that can lead to deleterious effects.

Utilizing reputational networks, administrators of anti-mafia cooperatives render gossip a resource, appropriating it from the local context, to use against mafia. This resource is also a source of threat, to be used to promote a certain understanding of what is 'proper anti-mafia'. Gossip does not produce local everyday politics this way (à la *Besnier* 2009), but tangibly solidifies abstract normative categories. Such networks in rural Sicily mediate categories of cleanliness in a context of anti-mafia linked to other resources (land and labour) available through the cooperatives. Focusing on the flows of discourse and the modes of communication helps them to construct the binary mafia versus anti-mafia and their conceptual separation in daily discourse.

As noted above, cooperative members instrumentalized information gathered through gossip as often as state actors did, although with more effective penetration and better knowledge of the *territorio*, the public space containing local networks of kinship, friendship and other alignments. The gossipy character of such communication was often seen as a way to ‘know a territory’ and infiltrate those spheres of information considered too intimate for the state to reach. The discourse of ‘cleanliness’ creates a difference from state actors, demarcating the social ambience of the anti-mafia cooperatives. Whereas gossip and rumours blurred the boundaries within which the people of the cooperatives were meant to act, they were also used to register people on one or the other ‘side’.

Gossip in Spicco Vallata meant both to tell stories (gossip with a narrative, e.g. Pasquale’s story of attending an event) and to talk about talking (gossip about who talks with whom, e.g. recording Peppe’s hello to the mafioso). The anti-mafia cooperatives’ administrators mainly utilized this latter form in order to identify who was a mafia proximate – who was, in effect, ‘contaminated’ by ‘mafia’ (see also Rakopoulos 2018, 2019). Gossip thus helps to set the limits of the law’s applicability in that it conveys *meta-information*. In that respect, when a person was established to have contacts with (i.e. speak to, share words with) someone recognized as a mafioso in legal terms, that person would be excluded from the cooperatives. Using gossip to strategize the next moves of the anti-mafia meant identifying people’s location in specific flows of information in their villages. These flows corresponded to networks of acquaintances, affiliations and sympathies.

Gossip consequently entailed controlling channels of cleanliness, as mafia contamination transmits through words, through sharing information and talking with people perceived as contaminated. There was more interest in speech about speech, in knowing who spoke to whom, than in what they said (cf. Ben-Yehoyada, this volume). In that way, words are not dangerous because of their content, but because of their mere existence, addressing someone considered potentially contaminating (Favret-Saada 1980). The use of indirect communication, rumours, whispers, gestures – in short, of platforms evoking and conveying informal information in the form of gossip – was fundamentally important for the cooperatives’ ethical position. Reproducing a clear distinction between ‘the mafia’ and ‘the anti-mafia’, administrators employed gossip to distinguish sharply two ‘moral universes’ of mafia and anti-mafia. This has had impacts on the work relations of the cooperatives, as workers’ everyday lives developed beyond the iron cage that these moral universes constructed – and thus went against the scripted morals of anti-mafia normativity.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: OF TALK, TERRITORY AND OTHER PUBLIC SPACE MATERIAL

The anti-mafia discourse is centred on the idea of knowledge, with all its historical connotations.⁸ It is a terrain in which talking, saying things in an articulated or suggestive fashion, or talking about talking – what I call *metatalk* – creates reality. This reality is in itself, if not opaque, sometimes confused – in ways that sometimes resemble the power of the word in witchcraft (Favret-Saada 1980). It can also emerge as a discursive reality with a flair of humour or unexpected flaw. But overall, it is a terrain where knowledge bears responsibility – and a range of normative orders that often contradict each other.

The gradual move from a rural to an urban, civil-society anti-mafia (Schneider and Schneider 1997) is now giving way to a dynamic, symbiotic relation of anti-mafia milieus in city and village. This public space cannot be fully integrated, and is internally diversified in each of these locations. When accounting for the public space as a domain of and for anthropological knowledge, we should be wary of weaving such sociological realities together and should not stress an empirically doubtful coherence. This volume on Italian social life partly investigates the imaginings of such a public space, with its internal tensions and cultural richness. In this section, said social life, with its ensuing public spaces, becomes a domain that aims to make of the mafia an object of inquiry (Ben-Yehoyada, this volume) – a sphere that sheds light on an impervious phenomenon, that is, however, itself part of Italian public life, with its afforded historical silences (Schneider and Schneider, this volume).

To that avail, the emic idea of the ‘territory’ (*il territorio*, the Italian emic metaphor for social complexity) is central, indeed constitutional, for public and semi-public definitions of mafia and anti-mafia alike. Almost all of the contributors to the public events discussed in my Palermitan ethnographic vignettes dedicated time and interest to the idea of the ‘territory’. During the events described, they pointed out that the staging of these happenings in downtown Palermo was an attempt to reclaim territory for their own: to claim back the city from the mafia. Similarly, the anti-mafia activists of the Spicco Vallata cooperatives also aim to break down the codes of a territory in which they partake but which they also often deem dangerous. In fact, the dangers they engage with are also outcomes of the very anti-mafia normativity they pursue and facilitate in that territory.

When investigating the *territorio* it is important to pay attention to ‘metatalk’: essentially a *talk about talking*, a kind of talk about *who is talking with whom* and about its ensuing normative effects. Controlling the reputational networks (Schneider and Schneider 1996) of the discursive threads that compose the public sphere is central in precisely shaping that territory.

The anti-mafia both carves the mafia into shape and shapes the territory in morally charged universes through talk. The anti-mafia talks (or claims to be talking) when the mafia keeps silent, often by silencing others (see Schneider and Schneider, this volume). We need to be attentive to such speech or lack thereof, as well as the grey zones it shapes (Pine 2012).

Equally important is to pay attention to the micro-events of discourse gone in different directions than intended, as ‘a rhetorical perspective requires the ethnographer to attend not just to the structures of culture, but also to the flow of events’ (Carrithers 2005: 582), which shapes the public sphere in Sicily and Italy (Alajmo 2005). It takes place in the shape subjects give it, and here is its sociological premise: presenting the self as narrator (and vector) of facts in the social field does not come without strategies and failures (Goffman 1956).

Reading between the lines of writing, or observing the ways that oral communication is perceived, can of course reveal as much about the mafia as the very content of that discourse. The often clumsy normativity of anti-mafia discourse has power: it ‘reconstructs’ the mafia out of social contact and conduct (as in San Giovanni), and through managing sociohistorical memory (as in Palermo). To underline the incongruities in the formation of the public space where anti-mafia talk is regimented is not to criticize ‘the anti-mafia’ as a sociological reality, à la Sciascia. Rather, it serves as a reality check to remind us of how the constitutive force of discourse can lead to odd results: an official anti-mafia event gone skewed can lead to a dog as the evening’s protagonist; talking to the ‘wrong people’ can lead to losing one’s job. The force of discourse in the frail anti-mafia public space can lead to an innocuous, if uncanny performance, or to layoffs. Maybe the real fault lines within the anti-mafia originate from outside the communicative dimension of that public sphere – in that there might be people accused of being *professionisti* (whose work is associated with institutions) and people who work manually on assets that the state appropriated back from the mafia.

At any rate, if we take our informants seriously, including encountering humour and irony in the public space (Carrithers 2012), such as applauding a dog on stage, and if we think across matters like the mafia and anti-mafia as domains of metaphor (Sciascia and Padovani 1979), we need to see mafia and anti-mafia beyond ontologies. I began this chapter with the working hypothesis that the cultural work of the anti-mafia is to sculpt the existence of the mafia in the territory into a public shape. That work is contextual at all times, and thus open, delicate and contradictory, because it is rooted in a *territory*, which it often attempts to carve into moral universes of good and bad, characterized by scripted discourses and clear-cut borders. The public space (essentially, what *territorio* is) is open at all times to turns of events (an anti-mafia performance going uncannily awry) or to ongoing

social relations that go against the grain (as in the cases of anti-mafia co-op workers getting fired). Affording an ontological category to the social life of anti-mafia as a field always and at all times against and beyond ‘mafia’ would mean taking its discourse on cleanliness and purity at face value. While it is totally understandable that its scripted discourse needs to stand against and beyond mafia at all times, it is also ethnographically expected that on many occasions the script does not work – and that there might be repercussions.

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NOTES

1. It is beyond any doubt that Paolo Borsellino is a major figure in very recent Italian history. It was his work, as well as his life and times, but perhaps mainly his death that inscribed his name in the annals of Italian public life. On 17 July 1992, only one hundred days after his friend and colleague Giovanni Falcone was himself assassinated in Capaci, Borsellino was blown up together with four men of his security (*scorta*).
2. This is despite the fact that both her and her brother were devoted Catholics who at times felt close to a very conservative Right. Borsellino in his youth felt close to the neofascist MSI (Movimento Sociale Italiano).
3. The red gowns or *le tute rosse* are a synecdoche for left-wing magistrates that fight mafia and corruption (as well as Berlusconi’s ‘shadow’ and the legacy the politician has left).
4. Di Matteo took over the so-called *trattativa* team after Ingroia left.
5. For example, the assassination of major magistrate Rocco Chinnici.
6. One cannot help but make associations with the theme of the film *I Cento Passi* here.
7. While this term literally means ‘half-kin’, the translation reflects the interlocutor’s intent to refer to a tacit kin relation rather than a specific one.
8. For instance, ‘I know’ (*Io so*; see Ingroia et al. 2012), the title of an Ingroia book, echoes Pier Paolo Pasolini.

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