

Mafia and anti-Mafia. Concepts and individuals

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Towards a definition of Mafia

The phenomenon of the Mafia - or Mafias – is a crucial question for democracy, both as an institutional form of civil co-existence, and as an interiorised value capable of synthesising the historical hope related to civil rights and individual freedoms. It is a crucial question because, at this juncture, the Mafia, more than any other economic/political entity, seems capable of corroding from within the democratic fabric of contemporary society in general, and Italian society in particular¹.

This paper refers above all to Sicily. However, this does not mean that the presence of the Mafia is exclusively a Sicilian or a Southern question. Far from it. Rather the fight against Mafia-related crime, a growing civil conscience and, above all, forms of *civil resistance* have so far taken place above all in Sicily. The peoples of Southern Italy have undoubtedly experienced the most brutal and suffocating form of territorial dominion; but the political and economic power of the Mafias, with its vast international ramifications, has long been rooted just as much in the North as in the South of Italy. Just as civil society, due to its intrinsic nature, knows no frontiers and no nationalities, the Mafia, its destroyer and endemic enemy, cannot be reined in within territorial boundaries. Mafia-related organised crime pursues, and at times anticipates, the flows of capital, and the processes of modernisation and democratisation, while the *private* appropriation of *public* resources has always been one of the key means of accumulation on which the Mafia has based its power².

While not wishing to reconstruct the history of the Mafia in detail, it is still important to underline a key aspect of this phenomenon which has existed and grown since the beginning, i.e. since the unification of Italy. This is the Mafia's relationship with the State institutions, and in particular with the state monopoly of violence. The Mafia is neither solely an enemy of the State, nor a criminal force combating State power, nor an organisation seeking to defeat the State in order to seize power. Nor for that matter is it a force that can temporarily make up for the

¹ For an analysis of the links between globalisation and Mafias see Fabio Armao, *Il sistema Mafia. Dall'economia mondo al dominio locale*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2000.

² For an analysis of the trends occurring in various regions of the Mezzogiorno see Renate Siebert (ed.), *Relazioni pericolose. Criminalità e sviluppo nel Mezzogiorno*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2000.

shortcomings or weaknesses of the State. The Mafia is a much more complex phenomenon.

It is a criminal organisation that seeks to have its own power, at times acting from within the institutions, at times combating these institutions. It is an organisation that skilfully switches register between order and disorder, so as to increase its own sphere of dominion. In the words of Salvatore Lupo: "The Mafia is always an apparatus of order, but always presupposes that there is a social and criminal disorder to be organised and to be kept under control, be it Sicily at the time of the Risorgimento or Sicily in the most recent escalation of crime"³.

What looks like a "new Mafia", as opposed to an alleged "old Mafia", in substance, cannot be considered its denaturing, but solely a functional adaptation in order to perform more complex tasks. As far back as in 1965 the judge Terranova, who was subsequently assassinated by the Mafia, wrote: "There is only one Mafia, it is neither old nor young, neither good nor bad, there is the Mafia and it is a criminal organisation"⁴.

Mafia and violence, Mafia and death, Mafia and lack of freedom are one and the same thing. And yet, the Mafia is a criminal organisation which prospers in the spaces of the democratic process. According to Lupo, "the phenomenon of the Mafia is related, albeit in a distorted form, to democratisation"⁵. Mafia and dictatorship are mutually exclusive due to the very fact that they are related: both seek to have complete dominion over the individual, to have exclusive power through the threat of death against individual rights and freedoms. It is the exclusiveness of the desire for power that makes it difficult for both to coexist.

The Mafia is a mortal danger for democracy. Yet it is only through the arms of democracy that the Mafia - or rather the Mafias – can be defeated.

There are many theoretical approaches to understanding the phenomenon of the Mafia ranging from the historical, anthropological and sociological to the economic, political and criminological⁶. We will focus here on some crucial aspects of the phenomenon seen from the viewpoint of the *individual*⁷. By

³ Salvatore Lupo, *Storia della Mafia*, Donzelli, Roma 1993, p. 11.

⁴ Cesare Terranova, Court of Palermo, decision ordering the trial of L. Leggio + 115, 14 August 1965, cit. in Salvatore Lupo, *cit.*, p. 183.

⁵ Salvatore Lupo, *cit.*, p. 122.

⁶ For a critical overview of the key works on the Mafia cf. Umberto Santino, *La Mafia interpretata*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 1995.

⁷ Cf. Renate Siebert, *Soggettività e metodo*, in *Cenerentola non abita più qui. Uno sguardo di donna sulla realtà meridionale*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino 1999. For an analysis of the Mafia in terms of gender see Renate Siebert, *Le donne, la Mafia*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1994. (English translation quoted here: *Secrets of Life and Death. Women and the Mafia*, Verso, London, New York, 1996).

listening to the testimonies of individuals - men and women who represent significantly different experiences – we create images of life in Mafia circles that refer to very specific scenarios of violence. This violence is linked to politics, but also and above all to everyday life as well as personal relationships and feelings. Not all forms of violence are equal. The violence of the Mafia is particularly disturbing.

The distinction between "private" and "public" in the territory hegemonised by the Mafia tends to be cancelled, effaced. Individual and collective rights, typical of the parliamentary democracy which forms the background to these territorial *enclaves*, are suspended. The figure of the "private citizen" – which is emblematic of civil society and civil rights - disappears, or rather, has no room to exist. Where the Mafia rules, there is a fear of leading a private life, of boasting personal spaces that could arouse suspicion. Caution, in the private and personal sphere, advises conformism; fear, in the public sphere, requires that personal rights be waived. Hence those who have the right to vote do not exercise it, or vote against their convictions, and those who have the right to apply for public works contracts withdraw for no apparent reason, or cheat. Hence those who rent out a room gradually forego the rent, those who love and respect their daughters offer no opposition to the advances made by the local mobster. Those who see, didn't see, those who hear, claim that they have always been hard of hearing. Connivance with Mafia terror is wide-ranging; what, however, typifies the surrender of the individual both in a private and public sphere is mortal anxiety, evoked and re-evoked systematically by violent and brutal threats.

By way of background, careful historical analysis has shown the Mafia to be a structural element of Italian political life right from the birth of the Italian State: from the inside, as a force capable of influencing the decisions and strategies of politicians, from the outside as a factor obstructing, suffocating and perverting the democratic life of citizens and the quality of civil society. It is significant that the corrosive capacity of this criminal organisation – which is profoundly anti-democratic and, at the same time, necessarily part of the democratic process – has never been recognised as such by all the political forces. On the contrary. Deluding themselves into believing they could turn the Mafia to their own ends, the political forces have continually modified their strategy, considering the Mafia a minor factor that was outside the dynamics of political struggle. In the words of Paolo Pezzino: "The fight against the Mafia has never seen the different political forces working together to tackle and repress a particularly widespread criminal phenomenon, but has been on the contrary an instrument of political struggle and division. The only ones to come out on top in this no-win game are the Mafia and the local ruling classes that back it. The latter are very skilful in siding now on

one side, now on the other, depending on contingencies and convergences achieved in individual historical contexts..."⁸.

The direct responsibilities of the various political forces, however, vary greatly, ranging from the evident collusion of the Christian Democrats to the non-involvement of the Communist Party. As Di Lello writes: "Years of judicial investigations and thousands of trial records have never linked the Communists in any way with the Mafia either directly or indirectly... (the Communists) did, however, make the historical mistake of not combating constantly and to the hilt the system of power behind it"⁹.

One major consequence of this short-sightedness has been the presence of excessive violence in Italian political life. No other democratic country in the world has seen the assassination of so many magistrates, politicians, representatives of institutions at various levels as Italy.

These considerations, however, should not lead us to believe that the Mafia has affected only the top political echelons. The Mafia has been able to grow and influence parliamentary decisions because it enjoyed a wide-ranging *consensus*. This still to be investigated consensus is contradictory and problematic, and the structures underlying it differ according to the social class, political leanings and existential position of the individuals concerned. The role played by violence, in this context, does not seem secondary. But nor does it appear to be clear-cut. Undoubtedly in many cases, consensus is obtained, if not extorted, through threats. But in other cases the shadow of violence appears to be an element of attraction, promise of revenge, a coalescing force in an anti-state ideology which sees the Mafia as an avenging force of the people that have been exploited and cheated by a rogue State. Mafia violence, in this form, can be traced back to the legendary adventures of the brigandry in the South acting to counter the monopoly violence of the inefficient and usurper state.

The Mafia, death, daily life

An approach to the complex question of the Mafia that questions individuals, that attempts to investigate how, in everyday life, the territorial dominion of the Mafia is organised, seconded, opposed or shared by men and women, may perhaps also gradually provide answers to the crucial question of consensus. The fact that the Mafia is a secret, criminal *monosex male* organisation is of particular importance when starting from a viewpoint of subjectivity, when listening to those who have

⁸ Paolo Pezzino, *Mafia: Industria della violenza*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1995, p. 25.

⁹ Giuseppe Di Lello, *Giudici*, Sellerio, Palermo 1994, p. 150/151.

experienced the Mafia. Only men can become part of the Mafia. A man can be affiliated to the Mafia, while a woman can only belong to it, in so far as she belongs to a Mafia man.

The terrible power of the Mafia organisation lies in the determination of its affiliates. Apart from the craving for wealth – which is undoubtedly an important motive for committing crime – close observation shows that what the Mafia seeks above all is power. The *passion for power* pervades the entire network of relationships, inspiring and influencing the ties between the men and women inside “the separate world” of the Mafia, and serves as a base for the reproduction of a way of being, of thinking and considering oneself a mafioso¹⁰.

The Mafia claim and its challenge not only to the State, but also to the Church, can be summarised as the acquisition for itself of absolute power, of life and death. In point of fact the death penalty is in place in the territories hegemonised by the Mafia. Violent death is the element that profoundly characterises this world. Every act, every thought - every fantasy – is determined by the incipient presence of death. The infection of death, of others, but often also of themselves, cannot be stopped by anyone - man, woman or child¹¹. Murder is a strategic means of conquering and dominating the territory. "Far from being solely or above all the fruit of a bloody and uncontrolled instinct or of a marginal subculture, Mafia murder is mainly pre-meditated murder, it is inspired by a strategic logic"¹².

As already mentioned, Mafia violence is particularly disturbing. In stark contrast with the hagiographic image that the mafiosi like to give of themselves – i.e. that of the negative hero, executioner and rebel – their manipulation of violence and death bear the mark more of exploitation and cowardice. The victims, often after being brutally tortured, are killed barbarously, many as a result of being betrayed by friends and relatives. "The myth of the mafioso as a < brave, generous man of honour > must be dispelled, because the mafioso is quite the opposite" – wrote judge Terranova - "the mafioso strikes from behind, in the back, when he is sure that he has his victim at his *mercy* and that there is no risk of response, he never faces his adversary unmasked and is willing to go to any lengths, any baseness,

¹⁰ Cf. Roberto Scarpinato, *Il Dio dei mafiosi*, in “Micromega”, 1/98 and Roberto Scarpinato, *Cosa Nostra e il male oscuro della dispersione del Sé*, in Girolamo Lo Verso (ed.), *La Mafia dentro. Psicologia e psicopatologia di un fondamentalismo*, Franco Angeli, Milano 1998.

¹¹ Renate Siebert, *I bambini e la Mafia*, in *Cenerentola non abita più qui*, cit.

¹² Giorgio Chinnici and Umberto Santino, *La violenza programmata*, Franco Angeli, Milano 1991, p. 195.

just to save himself from danger, to avoid the just rigour of the law, and the consequences of his roguery"¹³.

The threat is effective, both on the victims, but also on the mafiosi themselves, because the sentence cannot be appealed against. For the victim the power of the threat is amplified by the imagination which tends to remove limits and boundaries. Strong emotions, connected to the bodily offence, mean that it is not only the integrity of the body that is affected, but inevitably also of the person as a whole. This is how the mafioso's blackmail works. "The imagined violence shines like a will-o'-the-wisp in all one's daydreams and nightmares"¹⁴.

Mafia arrogance is totalitarian in nature and intrusive: it despises its own enemies, the Mafia refuses to recognise them as free individuals. Mafia dominion insinuates itself in the social fabric and in the interpersonal relations that go well beyond the merely observable. A mafioso denies others the right to have control over their own body. And as such the Mafia threat does not stop at the threat of physical death; Mafia dominion also tends to threaten their physical integrity. "The recognition that through scorn the person is denied the obvious respect for control over his/her own body, which in turn was acquired through experiences of emotional investment in socialisation; the successful integration of physical and mental behaviour is to some extent interrupted, and the most basic form of the practical relationship with themselves, the trust in the fact that they have control over themselves is thereby lastingly destroyed"¹⁵.

The devastating halo of disdain and scorn that accompanies mafiosi crimes also affects the relatives of the victims, hanging heavily over their pain, their struggle. Many accounts given by the victims of the Mafia and by their families reveal a social reality that is not so invisible, and which Hans Magnus Enzensberger does not hesitate to describe as a *civil war*: "We are deluding ourselves if we really think that we live in peace only because we can still go out and buy some bread without being shot at by snipers. Civil war is not imposed from the outside, it is not an imported virus, but an endogenous process"¹⁶.

The Mafia seeks to have power over the territory, a "territorial signoria" which in many ways is "similar to an absolute dictatorship"¹⁷. It is in this absolute prerogative of power that the Mafia differentiates itself from other forms of ordinary crime. "The Mafia strives to control all economic activity, be it legal or

¹³ Cesare Terranova, Tribunale di Palermo, decision of 8 May 1965 ordering the trial of Pietro Torretta and others, cit. in Paolo Pezzino, *cit.*, p. 232.

¹⁴ Heinrich Popitz, *Fenomenologia del potere*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1990, p.71.

¹⁵ Axel Honneth, *Riconoscimento e disprezzo*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 1993, p. 21.

¹⁶ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Prospettive sulla guerra civile*, Einaudi, Torino 1994, p. 11.

¹⁷ Giorgio Chinnici and Umberto Santino, *cit.*, p. 319.

not, in a given territory: territoriality is the fundamental element that configures Mafia power..."¹⁸.

Territoriality, impunity and visibility. A unique visibility, linked to an apparent invisibility which for many, many years has given credence to the claim made by the political forces in power that the Mafia does not exist. The criminal organisation skilfully alternates periods of strident visibility, marked by many murders, with periods of apparent non-existence: "it goes, in other words, into that specific form of hiding that makes it present in the territory without causing <rash> institutional responses... in their unique clandestine way (the mafiosi) have returned to being visible and unassailable at the same time"¹⁹.

Brutality and normality overlap and merge in Mafia crimes. Territorial dominion of the Mafia and mere politics of power have characterised the alliance between politics and Mafia which devastated Italian civil society after the Second World War. Max Weber described the attitudes of the mere politics of power as "the product of a scepticism that has nothing in common with the awareness of the tragic which is part of every sphere, above all of politics"²⁰. Hannah Arendt, speaking of National-Socialism, emphasised the *absence of thought* as the intrinsic quality of the *banality of evil*: "I truly believe that evil is never <radical>, but only extreme, and that it neither possesses depth or a demon-like dimension. It can invade and devastate the entire world because it mushrooms on its surface. As I have said it <challenges> thought, because thought attempts to go in depth, to get to the roots, and when it looks for evil, it is frustrated because it finds nothing. This is its <banality>. Only good is profound, only good can be radical"²¹.

The Mafia does not only arouse fears that can be traced to real fears. A good part of its power is based on the acquiescence of persons who intimately, feel terrorised, intimidated by threats and blackmail. Anxiety creates a state of precariousness, of continuous agitation that greatly conditions the individual. Freud describes the uniqueness of this state of mind when he writes: "Anxiety is undeniably connected with expectation: it is anxiety *before* and *in the face of* something. It possesses a character of *indeterminacy* and of *absence of object*"²². As a result of this indeterminacy, anxiety is infinitely more powerful than actual

¹⁸ Salvatore Lupo and Rosario Mangiameli, *Mafia di ieri, Mafia di oggi*, in "Meridiana", n. 7-8, 1989, p. 34.

¹⁹ Giuseppe Di Lello, *cit.*, pp. 147 and 226.

²⁰ Max Weber, *Il lavoro intellettuale come professione*, Einaudi, Torino 1980, p. 103.

²¹ Hannah Arendt, "Eichmann a Gerusalemme". Correspondence between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt, in AA.VV., *Ebraismo e modernità*, Unicopli, Milano 1986, p. 227.

²² Sigmund Freud, *Inibizione, sintomo, angoscia*, in *Opere*, vol. 10, Boringhieri, Torino 1978, p. 310.

fear itself, which constitutes a reaction to concrete situations of danger. Fear and anxiety are synonyms of lack of freedom. There can be no freedom where fear rules.

This specific aspect of Mafia violence - the strong manipulation of fears and anxieties to acquire power - seems particularly important in this context, because it represents the aspect that most prevents the development of civil society and the acceptance on the part of citizens of their rights and duties. Franz Neumann wrote: "On 6th January 1941 the President of the USA Franklin D. Roosevelt proclaimed the establishment of the four freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and *freedom from fear*... Anxiety not only greatly conditions freedom to decide, but can even make it impossible to make a decision; only a man without fear can decide freely"²³.

Mafia cruelty reserved to the bodies of its enemies deserves particular comment: a particularly cruel way to defile the memory of the dead person and, perhaps even more so, to threaten relatives and friends. In 1986, in the tiny cemetery of Limbadi in Calabria, the coffin of carabinieri sergeant Saverio Laganà was unearthed and burned together with the remains of the commander of a squad that had successfully combated the 'Ndrangheta in the Fifties. "The events in the tiny cemetery of Limbadi were interpreted as a gesture of scorn and a challenge to the Carabinieri"²⁴.

The cruelty inflicted on the family of police superintendent Aversa was particularly savage. Salvatore Aversa and his wife Lucia Precenzano were gunned down in the centre of Lamezia Terme in Calabria on the evening of 4 January 1992. The tomb of Salvatore Aversa was desecrated and the body burned – killing him for the second time and disfiguring his memory to cause pain to his three children, who were civil parties in the trial of the assassins. The savage cruelty inflicted on the victim's dead body is a mortal threat to anyone who dares to testify, who dares to remember²⁵.

In certain respects the Mafia is an exceptional phenomenon - sensational news stories, shootouts, bombs, betrayals, vendettas, murders. There is the collective imagination, nurtured by the stereotypes spread by the mass media and by the Mafia itself, which tends to relegate the phenomenon to the sphere of the extraordinary. This social representation is accompanied by the reassuring certainty that the Mafia, in any case, is the problem of others.

²³ Franz Neumann, *Lo stato democratico e lo stato autoritario*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1973, p. 113.

²⁴ Pantaleone Sergi, *La "Santa" violenta*, Edizioni Periferia, Cosenza 1991, p. 16.

²⁵ Cf. Renate Siebert, *Secrets of Life and Death*, cit., Part I, 5.

And, in addition, the Mafia is often represented through the counterposition between a fundamentally healthy society, and entire regions that are infected - a clean North versus a dirty South.

Unfortunately, the reality is very different. Sensational events aside, the Mafia – in the many subtle and effective ways that are particular to it - attacks democracy at the roots, the entire democratic system, our way of life in an obvious and almost "natural" manner the rights and the minor and major freedoms. In this way the Mafia infiltrates the "normal" social fabric, the relations between people. Behind the facade of sensational events and exceptional facts lies, in a shroud of highly effective silence, the most dangerous aspect of Mafia-related organised crime – that of becoming accustomed to tyranny and tolerating threats and blackmail. Living and conniving with Mafia violence alter the perception of one's rights and transform citizens into subjects. It is almost a full-scale socialisation and education (often unintentional) into the Mafia²⁶.

Everyday life is the ground on which an important part of the struggle against the Mafia takes place: the struggle between life and death, between Eros and Thanatos. And it is in *everyday life* that the war against Mafia dominion is fought, with superhuman effort. In a widespread climate of *civil war* citizens are called to offer peaceful forms of *civil resistance*. Combating the Mafia requires not only exceptional courage, but also an ability to resist that is rooted in daily life. It is through the very category of *everyday life* that it becomes possible to identify the elements that stubbornly prevent an awareness of the danger the Mafia poses by arousing fear and anxiety²⁷.

The Mafia means death. Imagining it far from us, imagining our daily life immune from its influences, is part of the field of psychic defence mechanisms effectively activated by everyday thought. The commonplace - *that's the way it is, it will be, and always has been*– is the backbone of daily thought and common sense. The repetitiveness of the gestures and of daily practices generates mechanisms of "familiarisation": these things happen, what can you do. It's obvious they happen. This is how everyday life represents a privileged sphere of social control, a sphere within which the individual learns to adapt, to conform.

Mafia women

²⁶ Cf. Renate Siebert, *Dinamiche psichiche, condotte violente: uomini e donne di Mafia*, in G. Lo Verso (ed.), *La Mafia dentro*, cit.

²⁷ Cf. Renate Siebert, *Mafia e quotidianità*, Il Saggiatore-Flammarion, Milano 1996.

As we already stressed, the Mafia is a 'monosex' male organization. Affiliation is precluded to women. Nonetheless, in a multiplicity of complex ways, the female presence would appear central to the Mafia's deployment of its 'signoria' at a local level, not only in terms of the continuation of its day-to-day dominion but also of its immediate control and administration of illegal activities.

For a long time, the role of women in the world of the Mafia remained in the shade. Silent and unknown, virtually the only occasion in which such women became visible was at funerals. In the collective imagination the portrait was largely one of women eternally dressed in black, always in dramatic poses midway between a reverential, subordinate silence and an atavistic invocation of revenge. They were, in short, traditional in every way. The rare comments of Mafia men on Mafia women which filtered out of this 'world apart' all went in the same direction: they described women totally dedicated to their families, exemplary mothers and obedient wives, women unaware of the violent criminal activities of their menfolk, stereotypes, icons of the male imagination, women functional to Mafia criminal activity precisely on account of their invisibility.

Yet, on occasion, these women also got killed, either because they found themselves caught 'by chance' in some violent conflict or because they unwittingly witnessed crimes or because (the impression we have today) they were directly involved themselves.

Sometimes they would change sides and appear as witnesses for the prosecution in trials, testifying, describing and accusing. One such example was Serafina Battaglia. Her husband was murdered by the Mafia in the early Sixties, as was her son when he sought to avenge his father's death. In many respects, the case of Serafina Battaglia is emblematic. At first she sought revenge. She began by ordering her son to avenge his father. Then she tried to call in third parties to avenge both. Finally, she took revenge by herself by following a new, relatively unexplored path, the only one left open to her - justice. She turned directly to judge Cesare Terranova, whom she trusted. She trusted him as a person, not justice as such, a fact which is also highly significant.

Her statements paint a portrait of Mafia women very different from the stereotype of the time. Serafina Battaglia was familiar with the activities of the Mafiosi and the cosche. She was acquainted with all the tiniest details of the various connections and relations because her house was frequented by Mafiosi. Hearing them taking from behind the door, she had found out that these apparently sterling individuals were actually human beings like anyone else, with all their weaknesses and need for familiarity. 'Pupi whose bark is worse than their bite' she called them in an interview.

Yet the case of Serafina Battaglia is emblematic for another reason. Alas, for her as for others in those years and in similar conditions, justice failed to prove a valid

alternative to private vendetta. The sad fact is that her long, obsessive judicial odyssey eventually came to an end in 1979, after almost 20 years and 20 trials, with the acquittal of all the accused for lack of proof.²⁸

This episode calls for critical reflection on the administration of justice against Mafia crime in general and the penal responsibility of women in particular. Even on the rare occasions in which they were incriminated, women were acquitted because judges saw them as subordinately bound up in a traditional family role. They were not, that is, deemed autonomously responsible for crime. The drafting of these sentences, stresses Teresa Principato, a member of the District anti-Mafia Department of the Attorney's Office in Palermo, was based on sociological indicators 'inside' the criminal organisations themselves and instrumentally elaborated according to them as opposed to autonomous criteria of juridical evaluation²⁹.

If the image of women which the Mafia organisation sought to attribute publicly was one of subordinate traditional mothers and perfect wives, all kitchen sink and church and, above all, in the dark about their menfolk's criminal activities, the reality was very different. When exploring the responsibility and effective commitment of women in Mafia-type crime, it is necessary, above all, to make distinctions between the various different levels of involvement. Just as the Mafia itself, from the point of view of the social composition of its affiliates, is non-homogeneous, so the women we find in its sphere of influence are extremely diverse. It is necessary, first of all, to distinguish between those born and bred in Mafia families (i.e., with one or more men affiliated to the organisation) and those who enter into relation with the Mafia either for temporary criminal activity or on account of personal relations with Mafiosi.

Among the women of Mafia families, the wives of bosses in particular, levels of complicity and joint responsibility are very high indeed. Suffice it to consider their role during the long years in which their husbands are on the run from the law (the most obvious examples are those of Ninetta Bagarella, wife of Totò Riina, Grazia Minniti, wife of Nitto Santapaola, murdered in a vendetta against her husband, and Saveria Benedetta Palazzolo, wife of Bernardo Provenzano, who is still in hiding)³⁰. Not only do they offer psychological and material support; through 'men of straw', asset and financial management and mediation they also take control of economic power by proxy on a temporary basis. Usually

²⁸ Cf. Renate Siebert, *Secrets of Life and Death*, cit., Part III, 10.

²⁹ Teresa Principato and Alessandra Dino, *Mafia Donna. Le vestali del sacro e dell'onore*, Flaccovio, Palermo 1997, p. 76.

³⁰ Cf. Renate Siebert, *Secrets of Life and Death*, cit., Part II, 8.

these women act as a trait d'union between men on the run or in prison and members of the organisation who can move freely in the light of day.

Underpinning this form of involvement is, in all likelihood, a bond of loyalty among family members, a common sense of belonging and, unquestionably, the power the violent men of the Mafia exert over their women. How far this violence has, in specific cases exerted a special charm over women who live in this context daily and how far the violence leads unhappiness, psychological disturbance and suffering is still an open question. We are familiar with examples of both tendencies. On the one hand, there was Giacomina Filipello who, even after the violent death of her companion, the Mafioso Natale L'Ala, spoke of the attraction which the violence of that environment exerted on her. On the other, we have Vincenzina Marchese, the daughter of a Mafioso and wife of the boss Leoluca Bagarella, but also the sister of the state's witness Pino Marchese. After being actively involved in criminal activities, she committed suicide. The state's witness Antonio Calvaruso has described how towards the end of life Vincenzina was so obsessed by the idea of being caught by surprise by the police she even wore wigs at home. Even before she committed suicide, she had 'let herself die' in a process of psycho-physical depression and decline.

A different level of complicity is expressed by women who are not strictly organic members of the Mafia family context, but who have a degree of autonomy and responsibility in the management of business activities, financial transactions (including money laundering) and logistic factors in the context of Mafia activities. More often mistresses than wives, it is precisely because they are less visible that they play such an important role as go-betweens in illegal and legal business.

A whole army of often poor women in socially deprived environments is available for a whole array of Mafia-directed activities such as drug dealing and receiving. Such women are vital threads in a spider's web which extends over men, women and things in neighbourhoods and areas where the Mafia holds sway.

If, as I said at the beginning, until comparatively recently Mafia women represented a sort of largely unexplored submerged continent, the phenomenon of collaborating with justice has torn this dense, invisible veil and offered us glimpses of wide-ranging connections, relations, activities and responsibilities. The term *submerged centrality* has been coined to describe the phenomenon.

This new, unforeseen visibility of Mafia women - on television, in the newspapers, through phone calls to press agencies, interviews, melodramatic outbursts, always in support of the criminal organisation - clashes with the rare public appearances of the few women from this environment who, in the past,

acquired public notoriety for the opposite reason, speaking out against the Mafia to denounce and rebel³¹.

It is no coincidence that this sort of reversal happened in conjunction with an increase and intensification of the phenomenon of *pentitismo*. If, in some cases, it is possible that the sensational public appeals of women may be spontaneously motivated by their fear of transversal vendettas, it appears more likely that the main force behind these changes is Mafia strategy, which seeks to use women for the purposes of the organisation. In perfect tune with the post-modern times, Mafia experts, specialists and social scientists speak in terms of a new communication strategy by the Mafia. But it must be emphasised that the consequences of the “pentitismo” phenomenon are multidimensional and complex. An indicator of the current situation may be the fact that, emphasised in several quarters, that the divisions following evidence provided to the state by one or more members of a family generate conflicts that are starting to *surface*. Public mental healthcare providers have, for example, reported cases of members of Mafia families, usually women, turning to them for help³².

Greater visibility and greater protagonismo, the desire to be in the limelight, correspond or have to correspond to a greater responsibility - civil and penal, first and foremost - for women.

A public debate is raging on this point at the moment, involving magistrates, judges and politicians, not to mention psychologists, sociologists and representatives of civil society, such as associations, circles and groups of women who identify with the feminist movement. So what are the bones of contention?

Roughly speaking, it is possible to pinpoint three strands, which of course intersect. For comprehension's sake and at the risk of over-simplifying and schematising things, let me sum up these positions briefly.

In some respects, the first reverses the previous removal of the feminine presence from Mafia contexts and interprets the new visibility as a confirmation of the omnipotent presence of an archaic yet still distinctive feature of Mediterranean society, and of Sicily in particular. It may be summed up as the strong, centralising figure of the mother, both on a symbolic and psychological plane, where it may be traced to the myth of the Great Mediterranean Mother, and on the real plane, where it can be observed in the relationship between mother and child.

³¹ Renate Siebert, *La Mafia e le donne*, in Luciano Violante (ed.), *Mafia e società italiana. Rapporto '97*, Laterza, Bari 1997.

³² Cf. Girolamo Lo Verso, *Mutamenti dello psichismo mafioso: uno studio psicopatologico e psicoterapico*, in Girolamo Lo Verso, Gianluca Lo Cocco, Saverio Mistretta, Graziella Zizzo (ed.), *Come cambia la Mafia. Esperienze giudiziarie e psicoterapeutiche in un paese che cambia*, Franco Angeli, Milano 1999.

The Mediterranean Mother then: she who poisons the minds of her children, she who underlies Mafia psychology and the maternal-symbiotic culture of Mafia society; the woman who transmits the culture of vendetta, the woman who educates her children to Mafia disvalues, the wicked, revengeful woman who embodies the substratum of Mafiosità, the Mafia way of being. In this interpretation, the woman as a fulcrum of alleged 'amoral familism', becomes the very soul of Cosa Nostra. From which it is a short step to the assertion that 'the Mafia is female'³³.

The second strand unveils the submerged centrality of women. Albeit acknowledging their importance for the cohesion of the Mafia organisation in a broad sense, this approach nonetheless stresses the civil and penal responsibility of women in relation to Mafia-type crime. Setting out from a critical analysis and a denouncement of the sentences of the past, which acquitted Mafia women whatever their penal responsibilities by virtue of their alleged traditional subordination within the family, this interpretation places the onus on individual responsibility. This view of the phenomenon, based on the principle of equality, sees in the crimes perpetrated by women a form of emancipation, albeit in certain respects perverse. Despite the formal exclusion of women from the organisation, a certain temporary delegation of power can be traced to the fact that the vast processes of emancipation which affect Italian society as a whole graze and, in part, invade the terrain of hegemonised Mafia relations. The temporary delegation of power translates into the participation of women when it comes to exercising economic power, whereas the power of deciding the organisation's strategies stays, for the moment, in the hands of the men³⁴.

A third approach, in many respects close to the second, tends to explore not only inalienable assumptions of equality, but also differences between men and women in the Mafia context. This gender interpretation does not deny the specific responsibilities of women, but tends nonetheless to decipher the particular forms of female violence generated by the Mafia context. By analogy with the historical and sociological studies into the female identities which have been formed in misogynous, totalising contexts such as totalitarian regimes, this interpretation is based, above all, on a feeling for subjectiveness, and seeks to understand how the process of female socialisation and identification in the forced and violent Mafia context, male by definition and tradition, is gradually 'metabolised' by individual

³³ Cf. Silvia Di Lorenzo, *La grande madre Mafia. Psicoanalisi del potere mafioso*, Pratiche Editrice, Parma 1996.

³⁴ Cf. Teresa Principato and Alessandra Dino, *Mafia Donna*, cit.

women. This path seeks substantially to raise further contradictions, doubts and questions³⁵.

Women and anti-Mafia

A considerable part of the day-to-day anti-Mafia drive is female³⁶. Women occupy a key role in bearing witness to a phenomenon which flourishes on its very lack of visibility, where the witness does not dare, and nobody ever testifies for the witness. Their suffering has become a material factor of change in the conflict between legal democratic order and this subversive, invasive, totalitarian and illegal force which exploits emotions, feelings and intimate relations (as well as the economy and politics, obviously). The subjective experience of loss, bereavement, and pain has become, in the Italy of these dark years, the stimulus for a powerful moral and political vindication. Emotions have proved to be a precious public resource and women play a special role in these forms of protest³⁷. Women “of the people”, mostly from Mafia circles or, at least, those colluding with the Mafia, have raised their voices against the Mafia. And women from social groups quite outside the Mafia have committed themselves against the Mafia, such as the widows, sisters and mothers of the men murdered for their anti-Mafia commitment. Regardless of their individual stories, regardless of their obvious difference in class, status, age - biographical -, they must all be placed on a par in terms of their courage, civil commitment, and pain.

This brings us to a controversial and conflictual dilemma, which has never been solved once and for all within the very associations of women against the Mafia. In the words of Maria Benigno, whose brother and husband were murdered by the Mafia, and who alone, setting herself against relatives, friends and neighbours, denounced the killers of the powerful Marchese clan in Corso dei Mille in Palermo: "When I first turned to these women for help, I encountered the widow of a judge. Her husband had also been killed by the Mafia, and she was full of hatred. She was suspicious that we colluded with the Mafia, because we lived in Corso dei Mille, a no go area. What's more my brother had been convicted of being involved in a shootout. She told me <if some one shoots they can't be

³⁵ Cf. Renate Siebert, *Donne in terra di Mafia: i riflessi del processo di emancipazione femminile*, in “il Mulino”, anno XLVII, n. 375 and Renate Siebert, *Il fantasma del matriarcato*, in *Cenerentola non abita più qui*, cit.

³⁶ Cf. Anna Puglisi, *Donne, Mafia e antiMafia*, set of notes nos. 7-8, “Giuseppe Impastato” Sicilian documentation centre, Palermo 1998 and Renate Siebert, *Secrets of Life and Death*, cit., Part III.

³⁷ Cf. Renate Siebert, *La Mafia, la morte e il ricordo*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 1996.

honest>... Later when I got to know Giovanna Terranova, our relationship changed "³⁸. And Giovanna – widow of judge Cesare Terranova who was assassinated in 1979 – and president and co-founder of the *Associazione donne siciliane per la lotta contro la Mafia* [Association of Sicilian women combating the Mafia], confirms: "It was hard until the group opened its doors to these women too. Many were afraid to work with them, they were prejudiced. However, they did recognise that these women are also victims of the Mafia"³⁹.

The decision to disobey the unwritten laws of the Mafia, to break the shroud of omertà, however, has a high cost. First and foremost they risk their own lives and, what's more, those of their nearest and dearest. All the women who have experienced this rupture have found themselves alone, avoided by their neighbours and by the inhabitants of their area and, in most cases, repudiated by their own relatives, parents, brothers, sisters, and uncles. Those who had a business, a bar, a shop, a butcher's shop before, have suddenly found themselves without any more clients. Alone, blackmailed and poor, these women, through their decision to tell what they know, choose to radically change their world in terms of reference points, relationships, physical places, work. What is lost is all too clear, what is won is totally unknown. Only a solid interior integrity, powerful emotions and feelings can lead to such a decision.

Abandoning their own environment and entrusting themselves to the State and to the values of civil society often, unfortunately, has turned out to be a bitter experience: incredulous or corrupt judges, institutions colluding with Mafia power, little assistance with their legal expenses, have further weighed on the solitude of women such as Michela Buscemi, Pietra Lo Verso, Felicia Bartolotta Impastato, Vita Rugnetta or Maria Benigno, to name just a few. Joining as civil parties despite a host of difficulties, they have not found that solidarity and that material and moral support which their gesture was supposed to arouse. Two of them, Michela Buscemi and Vita Rugnetta were the only civil parties apart from the "servants of the State" in a maxi-trial were refused access to a fund set up to cover the legal costs of the civil parties. The reason given was that the fund was only available to relatives of those who had died on active service such as policemen or judges.

But these women have not resigned themselves. A strong sense of rebellion, an emotionally charged demand for justice and, above all, loyalty to the memory of their murdered men, husbands, brothers or children have given them courage. Felicia Bartolotta Impastato, wife of a mafioso, but also mother of Peppino

³⁸ Birgit Kienzle and Maria Teresa Galluzzo, *Frauen gegen die Mafia*, Rowohlt, Hamburg 1990, p.85.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

Impastato, a young anti-Mafia activist - and for this reason murdered barbarously reports: "I chased them all away. They might have given me revenge if I had wanted it. But I wanted the truth for Peppino as Peppino had wanted it. And the truth was against them. And I shouted it out – the Mafia murdered my son. And I will continue to shout it out as long as I live. Those who come to talk to me about my son honour me"⁴⁰.

For some, however, the presence of other women - women against the Mafia united in association and present at their side in the trials and in various contacts with the institutions – was undoubtedly very helpful. Maria Benigno recalls during a conversation with some of these women: "But when I had to go alone to the trial with my son, my son was very downhearted, because he couldn't draw up the strength to look at them in the face and he would say: <Mum, I'm going to fall sick. I'm not coming, I can't come to the court. You can write a letter to the senior judge and tell him that I'm not presenting myself as a civil party. Because I don't have the strength to come with you. Can you understand that I can't look at these guys in the face?>. That's what my kid would say to me when we were at home. Then when you were there he plucked up more courage and came willingly, and he would always ask me about you, he felt supported"⁴¹.

What unites women from different social backgrounds, with different life histories and cultures such as women historically of anti-Mafia environments and women from circles colluding with the Mafia, is their love for *memory*, the need, the necessity of memory. What ties the *before* – with respect to the interruption marked by violent death – with the *after*, what guards and re-works the before into the after, is the intense activity of memory. Herbert Marcuse asserted that the utopia of happiness is anchored to memory. Individual memory attempts to go beyond private borders. The widow of judge Terranova said in an interview: "I would have felt guilty if I had stayed at home. I would have thought: Cesare died for nothing. Yes because being killed is terrible, but being forgotten is even worse. It's like dying twice "⁴². Likewise the widow of doctor Paolo Giaccone, who was killed by the Mafia because he refused to falsify a report: "Now the hospital has been named after my husband. This is also a way of rendering justice. As long as somebody walks by that plaque and wonders who Paolo Giaccone was, he will live"⁴³.

Memory becomes word, nurtures protest, invokes justice.

⁴⁰ "PM", September 1984, cf. also Felicia Bartolotta Impastato, *La Mafia in casa mia*, La Luna, Palermo 1987.

⁴¹ Antonia Cascio and Anna Puglisi, *Intervista a Maria Benigno*, "Giuseppe Impastato" Sicilian documentation centre, original transcript, Palermo 1986.

⁴² "Donna Più", September 1985.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

The "totalitarian quality" of Mafia dominion and "civil resistance"

It is by listening to their stories and testimonies, by giving the right weight to the subjectivity of individuals, that we are able to recognise the devastating and negative force of Mafia dominion. Although Nazism and Mafia are very different phenomena – they appear nevertheless relevant to emphasise the *totalitarian quality* of the Mafia phenomenon. Through our analysis of the profound anxieties that it arouses and the devastation it wreaks on intimate relationships, we see how the Mafia is a force capable of undermining and corroding the very fabric of civil co-existence. Before killing the body the Mafia kills the soul.

The *Mafia* problem - in this respect is similar, perhaps, to the question of racism which has today become crucial for our civil, individual and collective conscience. The cultural and political reworking of these phenomena mark a watershed, a point of non return between civilisation and barbarity. Day-to-day connivance, sometimes against our will - but often with our tacit assent born out of tiredness, fear, indifference - with these shadows overhanging our lives, tends to become routine. We have got used to the "banality of evil".

If we do not recognise this aspect of the phenomenon we risk underestimating it and proposing only partial remedies, based only on repression. Indeed, the strategies used in the fight against the Mafia divide into two fields.

On the one hand there are those who maintain that the fight against the Mafia is a matter exclusively for the State; that only the forces of law and order should combat this type of "anti-state" crime. But Mafia power is based on terror. In the words of Tzvetan Todorov: "Terror is fear extended in every sense: it threatens everything all the time, and not just opponents, nor solely in times of revolt. It is all-consuming, and makes no distinction between the public and private sphere. It does not hesitate to use death, the ultimate punishment, whenever necessary"⁴⁴.

The other manner of understanding the struggle against the Mafia is as a battle on several fronts. On the one hand, the firm response of the State, contested – with arms – in the exercise of its legitimate monopoly of violence. On the other, however, the Mafia threatens and attacks by infiltrating civil society whose values and quality cannot be preserved solely by arms. Something else is needed. What is needed is what has been called *civil resistance*: "the fight by individuals

⁴⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *Di fronte all'estremo*, Garzanti, Milano 1992, p. 277.

and groups not through force of arms but through moral courage, invention, adaptability, and the ability to change relationships"⁴⁵.

There is an intrinsic connection between *Mafia* and *anti-Mafia*. If we do not recognise the profound implications that the presence of the Mafia implies for the life of *all* citizens in our day-to-day context, we circumscribe the phenomenon to the sphere of the State and reduce it to a criminal pathology. And denying the implications on civil society is tantamount to delegating and shirking off responsibility. Ultimately this weakens democracy.

⁴⁵ Anna Bravo refers to the concept originally formalised by Semelin. Cf. Anna Bravo and Anna Maria Bruzzone, *In guerra senza armi*, Laterza, Bari 1995, p. 15/16.