

Understanding the Mafia

A project presented by Irene Segone, directed towards young people and the general public.

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Figure 1. Diaz, Alejandro. “La Mafia è una sola”. *Antimafia*, 2019.

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INTRODUCTION.

Aim. This project aims at understanding the mafia, why it is important to talk about it and how it relates to our studies. To do so the project aims at establishing a reflective and formative path that allows a group of young people to first explore and educate themselves and then transmit the knowledge gained from this first part, to the others. This initiative is designed to build upon an already quickly developing understanding connected to the culture of legality.

- Why is it important to talk about it?
- How does it relate with our studies?
- How can we communicate our knowledge to others?

Approaches. Before getting into the specifics of the setup of this project I would like to highlight the two approaches I will be using throughout this project. First of all it is a project in which we we learn together and hence rather than having me teaching others it will be all us of discussing and looking at information to try and understand it together. This because I am not an expert in the field and I strongly believe that it is a much more efficient approach to learning, understanding and remembering the things that are being discussed. Secondly, while all Italians or people familiar with the Italy are welcome to join and are actually encouraged be part of this project, it is designed in such a way that it is mainly directed to those that do not know much about Italy and its culture. This because one of the fundamental aspects of this project is also to deconstruct stereotypes attributed to the mafia, which I more often hear from people that associate Italians to “pizza, mozzarella and mafia”.

The set up. To comply with the aims of this project, the project is set up in two parts. The first part, educating ourselves, will be carried out in six sessions that discuss the various thematics relating to the mafia. The second part, educating others, will be a more hands-on approach aiming at consolidating what we have learned and what we will take from it and transfer it to others. This part will focus on the creation of collages summarizing our take ons from the six previous sessions and will honor the victims of the mafia. This collages will then be exhibited, preferably, in a public space where the residents and tourists of the city will be able to see and question and learn.

I. EDUCATING OURSELVES.

SESSION 1. DEFINITIONS. ORIGINS.

DEFINITIONS.

Brainstorm. What is the mafia? What does the term mean? Where does the term come from? What do you think of when you hear the word mafia? Write down as many words or drawings you can think of that relate or define the mafia.

Defining the term mafia. The term mafia is polysemous, or in other terms, is a word that has various meanings. It is a term that already at its origins was polysemous, and that today, with its application in various fields, such as the media, has strengthened stereotypes and amplified its ambivalence (Fioretti 64, Veltri, Antilibano, Giannini 6, Maugeri, Nicaso 11-12). It is therefore

fundamental that we understand its various meanings and possible origins as to give a definition that is accurate and applicable to the context we use it in.

I. Its etymology

There are various theories on the etymology of the term mafia. According to some it is a term deriving from the Vespri Siciliani in 1282, when the Sicilians rebelled and went to war against the French invaders, screaming Mafia as a way to say “death to the French”. Another theory or legend is that it is the scream of a mother whose daughter was raped by Droetto, a French soldier. Legend has it that she screamed “Ma-ffia! Ma-ffia” meaning “Mia figlia! mia figlia!” and that her scream spread throughout Sicily (Veltri, Antilibano).

Similarly, in the thought that it is a term deriving from Italy, there are some that believe it comes from the Tuscan word maffia meaning *misery*, and others, such as the Sicilian writers Luigi Capuana and Giuseppe Pitre which believe that it was an ancient term used in Sicily to mean *beauty* or *grace*, both on a physical and spiritual level (Fioretti 65, Veltri, Ziliotto).

Luigi Capuana: “mafiosa was the name given to a beautiful girl, mafioso to an object that the French would call chic” (Fioretti 70).

On the other hand, there is an opposing point of view that claims the word comes from the Arabic language, deriving either from the Arabic word Ma-Hias meaning *bravado* (*braggart*) or from Mu’afak meaning *protection of the weak* or from Maha meaning *a cave of rocks*, in which the revolutionaries fighting for the unification of Italy and supporting Garibaldi, found refuge (Veltri, Antilibano, Fioretti 69, Nicaso 17).

II. Its evolving definition: the written uses of the term

Despite the debated etymology of the word, the first written use of the term mafia dates to Giuseppe Rizzotto and Gaetano Mosca’s theatrical play “I mafiusi di la Vicaria”, published in 1863 (Fioretti 65, Antilibano, Ziliotto, Giannini 6). Here the adjective *mafiusi* was used to characterize the way of life of those incarcerated (Fioretti 66).

The first document, however, to talk about the mafia as a Sicilian criminal organization is a report commissioned by the prefect of Palermo Filippo Gualtieri in 1865 (Fioretti 66, Veltri, Nicaso 17). And in 1871 the law of public security refers to delinquents committing crimes related to the camorra as being *mafiosi* (Veltri, Bianchieri 3263).

The first set of law passed, penalizing the mafia and crimes of mafia, is the law n. 646, or better known as the law Rognoni - La Torre, passed on 13 September 1982 which integrates the previous laws - n. 1423 of 27 December 1956, n. 57 of 10 February 1962 and n. 575 of 31 May 1965 - to define the crimes associated with the mafia and its respective punishments (La legislazione”, Ortega 24-26, Ziliotto, Santino).

Article 416-bis - *Anyone related to a mafia-related association is punishable under this law. Mafia related associations are composed of at least three people and which make use of intimidation and establish the principle omertà (the silence of those that do not denounce the crimes committed) within the population, as to commit their crimes. They are able in such way to manage or control in an indirect or direct manner economic activities, grants, authorizations, contracts and public services either to gain profit or*

unjust advantages for oneself or others. If the association is found to be armed, defined by its ability to use weapons or explosive materials, the punishment augments. Lastly, all materials and means used to commit the crime will be confiscated (“LEGGE 13”, Ortega 24-25, Chiabrandò 1, Maugeri, Montante and Saso 144-145, Santino, Nicaso 14).

Since then, with the evolution of the mafia as a criminal organization, new laws have been passed with the aim of defeating it. In 1986 law n. 663, with the article 41-bis, there is the introduction to the further restriction of liberty for those incarcerated under accusations relating to the mafia. In 1991, there is the law decree n. 143 and 8 that specifically deal with money laundering, kidnaps and the protection of collaboratori di giustizia or pentiti, which are those that were once associated with the mafia but are now collaborating with law enforcement against the mafia. The law decree of 1994 passed following the stragi mafiose, massacres of 1992-1993, amplifying the confiscation of illicit or unjustifiable goods. In 1996 the law n. 109 is introduced to allow the confiscated goods to be used for social scopes. More recently there has been the law n. 159 passed in 2009 in order to prevent the infiltration of the mafia in the reconstruction of the region Abruzzo, following the earthquake and the laws n.225 of 2010 and n. 3 of 2012, that further protect the victims of the mafia and of extortions (“La legislazione”).

III. Its evolving definition: the media

What is interesting to look at is the way in which the definition of the term has evolved due to the media’s portrayal and use of it. The academic Fabrizio Fioretti has noted how the film industry has greatly contributed to the creation of stereotypes and ideas the general public associated with the mafia, that are not always appropriate (Fioretti 73, “Analisi criminologica”). He notes that in the American threeology of 1972 entitled The Godfather, the term mafia comes to signify the respect for the family, being respected, vengeance as justice and a system of rules and discipline (Fioretti 73). He then shifts to the newer American television series The Sopranos (1999-2007) highlighting how the boss mafiosi become heroes at the eyes of the spectators (Fioretti 74). Similarly, in 2008, a video game called Mafia Wars was created in which the users get to construct their own mafia families and then fight each other. From 2011 to 2016 a reality TV show called Mob Wives was transmitted to show the lives of the wives of mafia members, depicting all the stereotypes one could have on them. While this undoubtedly attracts many viewers and users, it has very harmful consequences as it distorts the image of the mafia and transforms it into a game, minimizing the sufferance and damage they have caused in Italy and to other parts of the world (Fioretti 74, 75, “La psicologia”, “Analisi criminologica”).

The television and the news, as claimed by Roberto Saviano, also become the best way for members of the mafia to stay updated in times of war between various *mafiose* families, without having to make calls that could compromise them. It can become a strategic military advantage (Saviano 115). Not only that, but as Fabrizio Fioretti showed how the media and cinematic industry created a distorted image of the mafia for its public, Saviano claims that it influenced how the mafia viewed itself and changed some of its actions to correspond to those seen in the movies. Some of the actions are unarmful, such as the new use of the term *padrino* or Godfather to call the boss of a family which was once called *compare* (Saviano 272). However, it has also caused more painful deaths due to the new ways of shooting, appropriated by the movies. Saviano captured the testimony of an old forensics officer that noted a change in shooting after the film of Tarantino, in which the killers rather than shooting holding the pistol straight, they held it sideways, like in the film, hitting the victims from the lower stomach down, creating a slower and more painful death that has to be assured with a final shot in the head (Saviano 273).

Despite these harmful effects, the media, with its film and news industry, can also have extraordinary capacities to educate the public opinion and denounce the mafia. There have been many TV series, movies, protests, documentaries and podcasts recounting the atrocities of the mafia and bringing light to episodes and events that still today are obscure and are in need of clarification.

Let's analyze our thoughts. How many of the terms used to describe the mafia are historically or currently used to define the mafia? What does it say about our knowledge on the topic or the way in which society shapes this knowledge? How many of our thoughts are based on stereotypes?

- What do you think is the best definition to use when talking about the mafia?

ORIGINS.

Cosa nostra. The mafia starts in Sicily, in 1812, with the abolition of the feudal system (Leone, Veltri, Fioretti 72, Giannini 10, Gribraudi 182, Sulli, Chiabrande 2, Nicaso 15-16). As the nobility moves to the cities, the properties and land left in the rural areas is given to the past on to new individuals that will become the new *boss* and families *mafiose*. While many claim that the mafia started as small communities that helped the more vulnerable of society, they soon got carried away by the desire of power and money (Veltri). They soon start splitting the territory among the various cosche or families and, with the excuse of protecting the peasants from the nobility, will force these to pay them interest and maintain the omertà, the silence of those that do not denounce the crimes mafiose (Leone, Veltri, Maugeri, Nicaso 13-14).

As the unification of Italy brings together the various territories under one kingdom in 1861, tension immediately arises between the North and the South, known in broad terms as the *questione meridionale* (Fioretti 67, Lupo 188). As the term mafia becomes known and used throughout the kingdom, both the political right-wing and left-wing use it at its advantage (Fioretti 67). On one hand we had those that denounce the mafia. On the other, there were those that accused the North of inventing such phenomena as to tarnish the image of the South (Fioretti 68-9). While Leopoldo Franchetti and Sidney Sonnino in 1877 published a report for the State accusing the political power of protecting the mafia, there is the underminishment of the mafia, allowing it to penetrate the legal institutions, legitimizing its power in the eyes of the Sicilians (Leone, Fioretti, Veltri).

It is only after Mussolini's visit to Sicily in 1925 that a repressive campaign against the mafia is established, conducted by the prefect Cesare Mori, but while the mafia was claimed to be the main target, the campaign did not stop with the mafia, but rather used it as a justification to repress the society as a whole, abolishing elections and having the State control the whole of the economy (Leone, Veltri, Chiabrande 2). Cosa nostra responded in two ways; 1) with violence, provoking an armed conflict that produced almost 50 deaths in a bit over a year and a half and 2) the migration of boss and other mafiosi to the United States where they created the *Unione siciliana*, today known as Cosa nostra (Leone, Fioretti 72, Veltri, Coco 39, Giannini 10). When Mussolini collapsed, Cosa Nostra came back, in 1943, and became ever so strong, leading the fight against latifundismo, or in other words against agriculture dominated by large estates, and hence supporting the peasant movement (Veltri, Catanzaro 184-185).

- What do you think were the motivations that led Mussolini to become the first 'politician' to publicly acknowledge the mafia's existence and start a fight against it?

What was once a small criminal organization born in Sicily in the 1800 due to socio-economic reasons has evolved thanks to political and economic conditions that have expanded in the market and the world, attracted by new forms of power and profit (Leone, Fioretti 72, Veltri, Sulli, Chiabrando 1).

The structure of Cosa nostra. It is important to understand the pyramid-like structure of Cosa nostra as it highlights the two factors at the basis of the organization; power and profit, and hence the elements that determine whether an individual will be accepted into the system.

While Cosa nostra started with families and common blood defining these, the system has now expanded to take in new comers if considered to have important skills and loyalty, which is a great advancement in the social scale. Nonetheless, blood affiliation with *uomini d'onore*, men of honor, are a predeterminant for an individual's place within Cosa nostra. But, as the system expanded, the traditions of respect, culture, family, honor and secrecy, now do not dictate the conditions of wars which have become more brutal and anarchic (Veltri, Ziliotto, "Analisi criminologica", Maugeri, Nicaso 13-14).

At the basis of this pyramid-like structure we have the *cosca* or the *famiglia*, family, that controls a neighborhood or an entire city. Within the family there are the *picciotti* or *soldati*, soldiers, that are grouped by ten and have a boss called *capodecina*. The boss of the *capodecina* is the boss of the family and is called *rappresentante*.

There is a commission for every province that coordinated the families. Within the commission there are the *capimandamento* which are chosen *rappresentanti* by three or more families who control neighboring territories.

Every province elects a *capomandamento* that will regulate their affairs and interests within the regional territory, by forming the interprovincial commission or *cupola*, the peak of the pyramid (Veltri, Chiabrando 3, Nicaso 13-14).

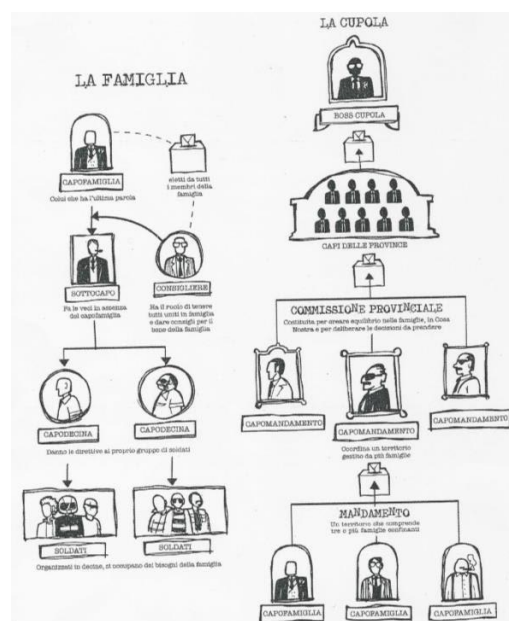


Figure 2. Mariani, Federico. "La mafia spiegata ai ragazzi". Arnoldo Mondadori Editore S.p.A. 2010, pg. 144.

Let's talk. It is interesting because within the pyramid-like structure, the system takes the appearance of a democracy, with a system of elections, but this is rather flawed and hence it takes the form of a dictatorship. Why do you think they nonetheless establish flawed elections? Is it because having a democratic facade is fundamental for their legitimacy of maintenance?

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