



Marco Santoro, *Mafia Politics*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022

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Volume 27, numéro 1, 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1108386ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1108386ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Edizioni ETS

ISSN

1616-2552 (imprimé)

2512-1022 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Mele, V. (2023). Compte rendu de [Marco Santoro, *Mafia Politics*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022]. *Simmel Studies*, 27(1), 142–148.

<https://doi.org/10.7202/1108386ar>

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VINCENZO MELE

Marco Santoro, Mafia Politics, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022.

Is there a politics of the Mafia? Is it possible to consider the Mafia a historical institution like feudalism, city states, and empires, which pursues political functions – not necessarily noble ones – such as the welfare of its associates, the control of the territory in which they live, and the persuasion (peaceful or violent) of others regarding the legitimization and justification of its power? Italian sociologist Marco Santoro’s book brings together a mature reflection, the result of years of research on a fundamental and much-debated topic in the Italian and international social sciences.

One of the central goals of the book is to overcome some approaches that have become established in the so-called mafia studies, especially that of economic derivation represented by the 1990s study by Diego Gambetta, “La mafia come impresa”. Referring to a very rich theoretical background – in which Pierre Bourdieu’s economics of symbolic goods certainly stands out, but also Marcel Mauss’s famous study of the *Gift* and Georg Simmel’s sociology of secrecy, as well as little-known sources such as the writings of Gaetano Mosca (among the founding fathers of modern Political Science and a profound connoisseur of Sicilian life) and Max Weber on the Mafia, or the social theory of Ibn Khaldūn, an Arab scholar of the medieval period and non-Western forerunner of the idea of proto-positivist sociology à la Comte – Santoro proposes a political anatomy of the Sicilian Mafia.

As is evident from the very first pages of the book, the author decides to take the risk of being politically incorrect in order to look the monster – well exemplified by the book’s cover image of a wolf – directly in the eye. In fact, the sociological perspective can gain much in terms of depth of analysis if it decides – similar to what the Sicilian writer Leonardo Sciascia argued in his famous article on “I professionisti dell’antimafia” (1987) – to place itself epistemologically neither with the State nor with the Mafia. This point is worth emphasizing: the author runs the risk – political and moral – of considering the Mafia as a social object sui generis and not simply as a “cancer” in the body of the state and modern economy. This is a risk that – to our knowledge – is not only rather rare in the literature of the social sciences but is decidedly countercurrent in Italian public discourse. Indeed, in Italy, the debate on the Mafia is inevitably tinged with emotional and moral overtones. Indelibly imprinted in the nation’s collective consciousness are the victims of the many Mafia massacres, first and foremost – for the terrifying spectacle of the execution – the Capaci massacre (1992), where Cosa Nostra did not hesitate to blow up a stretch of highway with the equivalent of half a ton of TNT to end the lives of Judge Giovanni Falcone, his wife Francesca Morvillo

(also a magistrate), and their escort. When the magnitude of the clash between the state and the mafia reaches such political and symbolic intensity, it becomes difficult for the sociologist not to adopt the categories of “state thinking” and not to look at the mafia phenomenon only in politically negative (“the anti-state”) or at least morally neutral terms (“the mafia as an enterprise”). Instead, the purpose of the “political anatomy” of the mafia that the author proposes is to understand the mafia phenomenon as something that does not represent a mere “residue” of the Western economic and political modernization process but an institutionalized form of power that can potentially exist in virtually all societies, present, and future.

The analysis is divided into three main parts that correspond to the central chapters of the book: chapter 4 (*The Public Life of Mafiosi*) – surely the most Simmelian of the book – deals with the mutual relationship between publicity and secrecy in the social life of the mafia; chapter 5 (*The Mafioso’s Gift, or: Making Sense of an ‘Offer You Cannot Refuse’*), on the other hand, examines the peculiarity of the exchange and social bonding that characterizes the life of the Mafioso and that represents the very “social weaving” of the Mafia itself; finally, this analysis is continued in chapter 6 – entitled *Blood, Bund and (Personal) Bonds: The Mafia as an Institutional Type* – which tries to answer the question about the very nature of the Mafia from an organizational point of view, once again questioning the dominant metaphors of “industry,” “company,” etc. Finally, the last chapter 7 (*Mafia as an Elementary Form of Politics*) pulls together the threads of the previous argument and offers us the book’s concluding theses on the inherent and autonomous politicalness of the mafia phenomenon.

As we have already mentioned, the book nevertheless starts from a conspicuous methodological premise (Chapters 1, 2 and 3) – at times overwhelming even for the specialist reader – in which the author not only confronts the dominant approach in mafia studies (“the Economic Theory of Mafia,” ETM) but also tries – Bourdieusian-style – to construct and reconstruct the mafia as a

socio-historical “object.” This reconstruction, however – as the author suggests in Chapter 1, *Mafia, Politics and Social Theory: An Introduction* – must free itself from a state-centric and Eurocentric view that can be set aside by referring to so-called subaltern studies and the critique of “state thinking.” If these perspectives are adopted, specific political functions of the Mafia can be identified as a sui generis social phenomenon in the context of modernity. According to Ibn Khaldūn’s theory of social solidarity – a particularly relevant author, precisely given the Mediterranean and Arabic origin of the word “mafia” – the fundamental force underlying human society and its historical evolution is the *'asabiyya*. Originally founded on the tribal bond of blood and kinship (on a male basis), *'asabiyya* is the primordial force that leads human groups to assert themselves, excel, establish hegemonies, and found empires and dynasties. *'Asabiyya* is based on personal leadership ties and loyalty rather than on objective, impersonal institutions – a point that mafia researchers often tend to underestimate. It is therefore possible to say that “something very similar to *'asabiyya* is what empowers mafia groups, providing them with that social cohesion and strong inner solidarity that is the main resource of mafiosi and that mafia institutions are supposed to cultivate and reproduce. In a sense, we could even suggest that ‘mafia’ is a manifestation of *'asabiyya*, that the latter is what the term really means” (ibid.: 21). Thus, the mafia represents a different and alternative way of organizing political and social relations to the modern European state based on “rule of law.” This is probably most evident in the cases of Asian mafias, such as the yakuza and the triad, but can also be affirmed in the West for the case at the center of the research, namely the Italian (and specifically Sicilian) mafia: “As a Mediterranean institution focused on personal ties and obligations among selected males, *the Sicilian mafia asks to be understood not as a failure of the modern Western state (and its companion, ‘civil society’), nor as an industry (whose conditions of existence are rooted in the failure of the state to provide generalized trust), but as a different, typically Southern, institutional arrangement of social life with strong political implications*” (ibid.: 22). If, therefore, the mafia can best be understood when considered with a

view that is neither state-centric nor economistic, then even the typically Western categories of public/private and public/secret are not effective in understanding the mafia phenomenon. According to ETM, the mafia would in fact be a private economic institution that offers a good in the marketplace (protection), using secrecy to protect that trade and its covert agents. This economic model actually corresponds to two other general models that are widespread in political theory and many influential in sociological research as well: the liberal economic model dominant in these all “public choice” analyses (public choice analysis), which sees the public/private distinction primarily in terms of the distinction between state policy and market economy; or the republican virtue approach (republican virtue approach), which conceives of the public as the realm of political community and citizenship realization, to be distinguished analytically from the market and the state as administrative machine. These models coincide in defining public space as the space of transparency and visibility, where universalistic politics prevail as represented by the legislative sphere and the idea of distributive justice. Private space, on the other hand, would be that of the economy, where individual private interests meet equally in the marketplace and individual actors exchange goods and services in a regime that is never one of absolute transparency, but dominated by secrecy and privacy. In fact – as Simmel teaches us in his famous chapter on Secrecy and the Secret Society – all social relations are based on a certain rate of secrecy and secrecy thus on a certain rate of silence – essential qualities of mob social life. In the Sicilian dialect there is a word whose existence runs parallel with the very use of the word mafia and that is *omertà*. The word *omertà* expresses exactly the merit and value of the ability to keep silent, that is, one of the essential conditions for a secret to persist and remain protected. Sicilian folklore scholar Giuseppe Pitrè (ibid.: 130) identified *omertà* as one of the fundamental characteristics of mafia identity, pointing out how its etymology has nothing to do with humility, as it might at first seem, but with homineity, that is, with the very quality of being a man – a certain kind of man – that is precisely serious, solid, strong. This not only leads us to the gendered structuring of this world (a point often surprisingly overlooked by Mafia scholars) i.e., to the fact that Mafia secrets are “male secrets” but also to the aspect of the “rituality of secrecy” and

the more general function of secrecy as a source of social limitation. The issue, in fact, is that the Mafia secret is a “public” secret, as indeed are all secrets. Many widely known behaviors testify to this. Consider, for example, what has been referred to as the “funeral pattern” of Mafia organizations (and which has been captured in almost all Mafia cinematography). The splendid funeral ceremonies that characterize many Mafia funerals are symbolic public representations that express power, create consensus and visibility in a given territory. Moreover, many mobsters conduct their activities in public places (car dealerships, pubs, clubs, etc.) where “visibility” is guaranteed. Therefore, if one abandons a rigid public/private and public/secret dichotomy familiar to the Western, liberal, secularized observer, one can see that symbolic boundaries are blurred and fluid, precisely as a function of the “political” operations of the mafia. Once again, the issue is not to oppose a transparent state and modernity to an opaque and criminal phenomenon, but to understand precisely that secrecy is a “form of association” that produces a very strong bond and social identity. In the third chapter of the political anatomy of the Mafia proposed by the book – *The Mafioso’s Gift, or: Making Sense of an ‘Offer You Cannot Refuse’* – Santoro delves into the characteristics of the political-economic exchange at the heart of Mafia activity – typically protection granted by means of money and/or extortion – according to Marcel Mauss’s well-known anthropological theory, not disdaining (as the very title of the chapter evokes) an encounter with the literary and cinematic sources of the Mafia. In these pages, the author attempts to build an argument about the constitutive presence in the Mafia of a total service system of the kind Mauss identified in the 1920s and defined by the “gift” mechanism, supporting it with evidence (necessarily circumstantial given the nature of the sources) with a view to a more complete theoretical systematization. The ambiguity of gift – the word gift in Germanic languages can be used simultaneously for “gift” (as in English) and for “poison” (as in modern German), a linguistic paradox the French ethnologist could not help but dwell on – reverberates in the ambiguity of the “service systems” that are based on it, including the Mafia. After all, even Gaetano Mosca, one of the founders of contemporary political science and a Sicilian by birth, had observed, “In this way, they act in such a way that the victim himself, who actually

pays a tribute to the cosca, can flatter himself that it is a gracious gift or the equivalent of a service rendered rather than something extorted by violence” (ibid.: 132). Mafiosi are aware of the productivity of gift-giving in creating social bonding. The famous banquets – mentioned above – whose existence is confirmed by several mafia turncoats are occasions not only for socializing, but also for the circulation of goods, favors, and commitments with which to strengthen existing relationships and create new ones. But also, the more or less violent and illegal acquisitions, often disguised in the form of custody or management of villas and estates – indispensable places not only for the display of wealth through which the competition of status between mafia families takes place, but also for the exercise of the rights and duties of hospitality between mafiosi and their families. Without this availability of independently managed spaces and shelters, long-time fugitives such as Provenzano, Riina, and Matteo Messina Denaro could not have remained free for so long. It can therefore be argued that the Mafia operates in a necessarily broader sphere than simply the “protection market,” which it is possible to call in Bourdieusian terms the “protection field.” In a “field” what is public and what is private is not defined a priori but is the result of a struggle of forces, where “public” and “private” cease to be fixed identities and become relational properties of the field itself. The “field of protection” is thus where mafia and state coexist, sometimes in conflict, sometimes peacefully, but always in terms of an objective relationship due to the exercise of a competitive function.