

Myths and Realities of the Importance of Drugs in the Mafia Economy (The Italian Case)

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, drug trafficking is associated with mafias as if this illegal activity were the core of this type of criminal organization. A review of the history of Italian mafias shows, on the contrary, that drug trafficking is not essential to the existence of mafias: in particular, the control of the territory that is the basis of the power of these criminal organizations is established long before exercising a dominant position on these illegal markets; participation in drug trafficking can even be considered as a factor that has also partly weakened the mafias. The anti-mafia investigations mentioned in the reports of the Direzione Investigativa Antimafia allow us to relativize the weight of drugs in the mafia systems and to better understand their specificities. This observation makes it possible to suggest ways to better orient anti-crime policies.

Keywords: Anti-crime policy, drugs trafficking, illegal markets, Mafia, organized crime, power

Mitos y Realidades de la Importancia de las Drogas en la Economía Mafiosa (El Caso Italiano)

RESUMEN

Tradicionalmente se asocia el narcotráfico con las mafias como si esta actividad ilícita fuera el núcleo de este tipo de organización criminal. Una revisión de la historia de las mafias italianas muestra, por el contrario, que el narcotráfico no es esencial para la existencia de las mafias: en particular, el control del territorio que es la base del poder de estas organizaciones criminales se establece mucho antes de ejercer una posición dominante en estos mercados ilegales; la participación en el narcotráfico puede incluso considerarse como un factor que también ha debilitado en parte a las mafias. Las

investigaciones antimafia mencionadas en los informes de la Direzione Investigativa Antimafia nos permiten relativizar el peso de las drogas en los sistemas mafiosos y comprender mejor sus especificidades. Esta observación permite sugerir caminos para orientar mejor las políticas contra el crimen.

Palabras clave: Política anticrimen, narcotráfico, mercados ilegales, mafia, crimen organizado, poder

毒品在黑手党经济中的重要性：传闻与现实（意大利案例）

摘要

传统观点认为，贩毒与黑手党相联系，就好像这一非法活动是此类犯罪组织的核心一样。相反，一项关于意大利黑手党历史的述评表明，贩毒对于黑手党的存在而言并不是必需的：特别地，这些犯罪组织的权力基础——领土控制——早在其主导非法市场之前就已经建立；参与贩毒甚至能被视为一个在部分程度上削弱黑手党的因素。意大利反黑手党调查局(Direzione Investigativa Antimafia)报告中提到的反黑手党调查允许我们对黑手党系统中毒品的权重进行相对化，并更好地了解其特殊性。这一观察让“提出用于更好地定位反犯罪政策的方法”一事成为可能。

关键词：反犯罪政策，贩毒，非法市场，黑手党，有组织犯罪，权力

It is common to associate mafias and drug trafficking. This assimilation is part of a more general logic of the narrowing of the perception of what the criminal economy is. It is regularly reduced to its strictly illegal dimension (trade in prohibited goods), ignoring the question of criminal infiltration into the legal economy and, within the illegal markets, the one linked to drugs tends to capture almost all the attention. One reason for this focus is the U.S. war on drugs, as well as work such as that of Schelling (1967). However, this bias carries risks: a wrong or partial understanding of criminal realities—first and foremost those of mafias—leads to wrong anti-crime policies. It is therefore important to clarify how the equation between (Italian) mafias and drugs is fundamentally a preconceived idea that promotes confusion (1) in order to be able to specify the place of drugs in mafia “systems” (2). Overestimating the weight and significance of drugs is a risky diagnostic error (3).

The assimilation of (Italian) mafias and drugs: a preconceived idea that promotes confusion

Reducing the Italian mafias to the issue of drug trafficking is a frequent posture, but it is a sign of a double misunderstanding of the history of these criminal organizations: on the one hand, the emergence of the mafias is not linked to drug trafficking; on the other hand, the entry into this illegal activity was not an obvious operation, and it may even have been a source of fragility for the mafias.

The mafias in the strict sense of the term (see definition in the second part) pre-existed drug trafficking: this is true for the three traditional Italian mafias—namely Cosa nostra in Sicily, the camorra in the Neapolitan region and the Calabrian 'ndrangheta—but also for the Japanese Yakuza and the Chinese Triads. In the Italian case, many historians (such as Lupo, 1993) and sociologists (such as Catanzaro, 1988 and Gambetta, 1993) have pointed out that the mafias appeared as early as the nineteenth century and developed as their basic activity intermediation and protection, far from the drug problem.

It is therefore criminal organizations, already old and well rooted territorially, that will enter the drug trade in the 20th century. But we must also keep in mind that this entry is late and ultimately problematic while the control of the territory is already in place.

This entry, which Cosa nostra is the first to implement, is not made in the name of the criminal organization. The different Sicilian mafia families do not have a unanimous position on the subject. The first mafiosi to start trafficking drugs were few in number, isolated and acted in a personal capacity. Those who do were those who could exploit existing networks: mainly illegal emigration and tobacco smuggling. These two networks connect the Sicilian mafiosi to the United States, where there is a learning effect in drug trafficking. Pioneers in this traffic were the mafia families from the territories west of Palermo (Alcamo, the future drug laboratory, Cinisi, Partinico, Castellamare del Golfo, from which the Bonanno family, firmly established in New York, originated), because they managed the channels of clandestine emigration, as well as the Greco family, which logistically dominated the tobacco smuggling channel. Even so, the mafia presence is not massive: it is an initially modest and secondary presence for the Sicilian mafia. The latter does not master the techniques of production to dominate the market. Moreover, the place is already occupied, in particular by the French and the Corso-Marseilles network which will be dominant until the beginning of the seventies. It should be noted that until then Italy and Europe were relatively unaffected by the scourge of drugs.

The mafia pioneers of drug trafficking were successful in the production and marketing of the drug. The considerable profits they made from this activity created a ripple effect with the entry of other families into the heroin trade, in-

cluding those from Catania, on the east coast of Sicily. To the first names—those of Badalamenti, Buscetta, or Greco—will be added those of new entrants such as Bontade, Inzerillo, Spatola, Vernengo, Marchese, and Spadaro. In passing, this dispersed entry highlights another mafia reality that is too often ignored: Cosa Nostra is not a unitary pyramid structure. Mafia families engage in this illegal activity without unitary instructions because Cosa Nostra is gradually ceasing to be an explicit obstacle.

This should not make us forget that, despite the gains, the entry into drug trafficking has fundamentally weakened the Sicilian mafia. It was drugs that caused the two so-called “mafia wars” that bloodied the island. The first war (1962–63) began following accusations of fraud on a shipment of heroin and led to a dramatic series of cross-cutting settlements of accounts between the La Barberas and the Grecos. The second mafia war stems from the internal weakness of Cosa Nostra in the face of the changes brought about by the drug market. Generations clashed: the “traditional” mafia of Bontade, Badalamenti, and Buscetta was decimated by the rising mafia of the Corleone around Riina and Provenzano.

Another factor of fragility was the increase in the number of Sicilian collaborators of justice in the 1980s. Many of them motivated their decision by a disgust for the Mafia’s involvement in activities considered “dirty” and “despicable,” such as drugs and prostitution. More prosaically, the violence of the second Mafia war and the relentless cruelty of the Corleone family were surely the main reason for the surge in these collaborations. Finally, the violence of the mafia wars and the first damages linked to the local consumption of narcotics led to a reaction of the forces of order. This led to the maxi-trial of 1986 under the aegis of judges Falcone and Borsellino, thanks in particular to the revelations of the “repentant” Tommaso Buscetta.

Place of drugs in mafia “systems”

The relativization of the assimilation between mafias and drugs imposes to put the dimension of drug trafficking in the more general framework of mafia “systems” and thus to understand the specificity of a mafia.

Only one country has legally defined the crime of Mafia association, and that is quite naturally Italy, in article 416 bis of the Penal Code. It reads:

The association is of mafia type when those who are part of it use the intimidating force of the associative bond and the condition of subjection and omerta that derives from it to commit crimes, to acquire in a direct or indirect way the management or at least the control over economic activities, concessions, authorizations, tenders and public services, or to obtain profits or unfair advantages for oneself or for

others, or to prevent or hinder the free exercise of the vote or to obtain votes for oneself or for others in electoral consultations.

This allows us to understand how these criminal organizations constitute real “systems.” Present in both the illegal and legal spheres, the mafias manipulate electoral consultations and condition the population. By combining these dimensions, the mafias are able to build a form of social legitimacy such that they exercise a power that is increasingly accepted on their territory. However, this quest for social consensus is in contradiction with the share of public disorder induced by drug trafficking (assaults, overdoses, and *junkies* on the public highway, etc.). This explains why Cosa Nostra has long denied its involvement in drug trafficking or blamed it on the Italian American mafia and the Neapolitan camorra, which would have been the first to market drugs on Italian territory, while the Sicilian mafia would have been reluctant to supply the island. This behavior tends to support the idea that Cosa Nostra perceived its long-term interests and anticipated the risk that this traffic would jeopardize its local presence.

It also helps to understand why drug cartels—while they may seek to copy the mafia method—are not mafias. The specialization, at least initially, of the activity is the opposite of the constitution of a system. Drug cartels emphasize the productive and profit-generating dimension, and then may seek to exercise forms of control/legitimacy over a population or a territory (via the diffusion of a criminal “culture” through *narcocorridos*, or the distribution of food aid during the health crisis). The mafias are in an inverted sequence where power takes precedence and where drugs are only one activity among others and potentially, as we have seen, a problematic one.

The mafia insertions are multiple and not all have the same meaning for the criminal organization. However, if there is an essential activity—in the sense of what makes the essence of a mafia—it is not drug trafficking but racketeering, a symbol of the exercise of territorial sovereignty. Judge Borsellino clearly underlined—at the time when Cosa Nostra triumphed in drug trafficking—that the heart of the mafia is not the quest for profit but the quest for power, stating:

“(...) even when the mafia drew - and perhaps still draws, even if probably in lesser proportion - its most important resources from the production and trafficking of narcotic substances, the mafia organization never forgot that this was not at all its essence. So much so that, as all those who participated in the experience of the maxi-trial and the anti-mafia pool have experienced, even in those moments and even when there were mafia criminal families who earned hundreds and hundreds, if not thousands and thousands of billions [of lire] from the trafficking of narcotics, these same families did not neglect to continue to carry out those activities that were the essential activities

of mafia criminality, because drugs were not and have never been one. The fundamental characteristic of Mafia crime, which some people call territoriality, can be summed up in the claim, not to have but to be the territory, just as the territory is part of the State, so that the State “is” a territory and does not “have” a territory, since the latter is an essential component. The Mafia family has never forgotten that one of its essential characteristics is to exercise full sovereignty over a given territory.” (Collective, 1992, pp. 27–28)

Even if we consider that the entry into drug trafficking and the rise of the Corleone family may have reshaped the criminal organization by reinforcing the logic of profit, the mafia's multi-insertion once again puts the importance of this traffic alone into perspective. There are other types of trafficking that are sometimes much more profitable than drug trafficking, notably environmental trafficking, in the forefront of which is waste trafficking. In 1992, the Neapolitan camorriste leader Nunzio Perrella revealed, during his collaboration with the justice system, that he had given up drug trafficking to dedicate himself to the “transformation of waste into gold,” a very profitable and much less risky business.

It is possible to give up drugs. Moreover, Cosa nostra has lost its dominant position to the 'ndrangheta, without disappearing. We find this mafia specificity of claimed and long-term criminal poly-activity. The study of our three Italian organizations highlights the lasting accumulation of illegal and legal activities (Champeyrache, 2022). It is rare that a mafia withdraws from a traffic for a long time (unless it loses its grip to a more powerful organization in a specific market); on the contrary, mafias tend to extend the scope of their activities, whether in the legal sector (where infiltration affects ever more diverse sectors: from the traditional infiltration of construction and public works, to large-scale distribution and shopping centers, to funeral services, etc.) or in the illegal sector (with waste trafficking and food fraud, etc.).

The secondary nature of drugs in this galaxy of activities and, above all, the damage to the image of honorability of crime claimed by the mafias can provide clues for analyzing the phenomena of criminal delegation currently observable in mafia territories. The biannual reports of the Direzione Investigativa Antimafia (DIA) have been highlighting for some time now an observation from the field: the retail market for drugs (this is also largely true for prostitution) is delegated to Nigerian criminal organizations. Some have seen this as a sign of weakness in the mafias. It seems rather that it is a strategy, as shown by the “Ballarò pact”: this pact negotiated with Cosa nostra authorizes the Nigerians to manage prostitution in this district of Palermo. The delegation of trafficking appears to be a way of getting rid of businesses which, firstly, bring in relatively little money (wholesale trade brings in a lot of money, not street dealing), secondly, attract social disapproval, and thirdly, mobilize the forces of order because they are the most visible. Second-

ly, it can help the mafia to divert attention by exploiting racism, a strategy that is particularly dear to the camorra.

The risks involved in this diagnostic error

The inappropriate equation of mafia with drugs and, more generally, the overrepresentation of drug trafficking in the representation of the criminal economy and the understanding of criminal organizations lead to errors in diagnosis and therefore in treatment. Among these errors, the following can be mentioned:

- To believe that the mafia can be brought down by exclusively attacking drug trafficking is a delusion

The non-specialization of mafias and the interdependence of the markets in which they operate make action targeted at a single type of trafficking ineffective. Legalizing certain drugs would not solve the problem either (contrary to the provocative title of Emmanuelle Auriol's book, 2016). Regulating the market does not prevent the development of a black market in the hands of criminal organizations.

- Thinking of criminal organizations solely in terms of profit is reductive

Reducing criminal organizations to entrepreneurial forms driven by profit maximization (as the economics of crime does in the manner of Becker and Schelling) does not allow us to understand the economic irrationality of certain activities such as racketeering when it is systematic and regular (which implies extremely costly logistics for relatively mediocre gains), or the distribution of food rations during a health crisis. It is imperative to take into account the power dimension of the most important criminal organizations: corruption involves money (payment of bribes), but also control of territory, as illustrated by what the Italians call the "exchange vote." Italian mafiosi, but also Yakuza, are in a position to give voting instructions in their territories and therefore to offer these "vote packages" to the politician who, once elected, will return the favor in the form of public contracts, transformation of urban plans, access to places in day-care centers or retirement homes, etc. Unfortunately, this dimension is not taken into account by the definition of organized crime elaborated in 2000 at the United Nations Conference in Palermo. Yet this definition permeates the public policy of the signatory countries.

- A French example of underestimation of the mafia danger

In concrete terms, the tendency to analyze crime through the prism of drugs alone may explain the discrepancy between DIA reports warning of the risk of mafia infiltration in France and the French response, minimizing this risk by considering France to be only a transit country. However, this simplistic vision can only lead to fears that the mafia system is not taken into account: during an

anti-drug operation carried out in Menton against the Calabrian Pellegrino clan, it appeared that one of the accused owned an earthmoving company. No patrimonial investigation was carried out. However, the Italian experience shows that the construction industry is a privileged target for infiltration into the legal productive economy because it allows the mobilization of manpower (territorial control) and is a gateway to the public sphere (through the obtaining of public contracts).

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