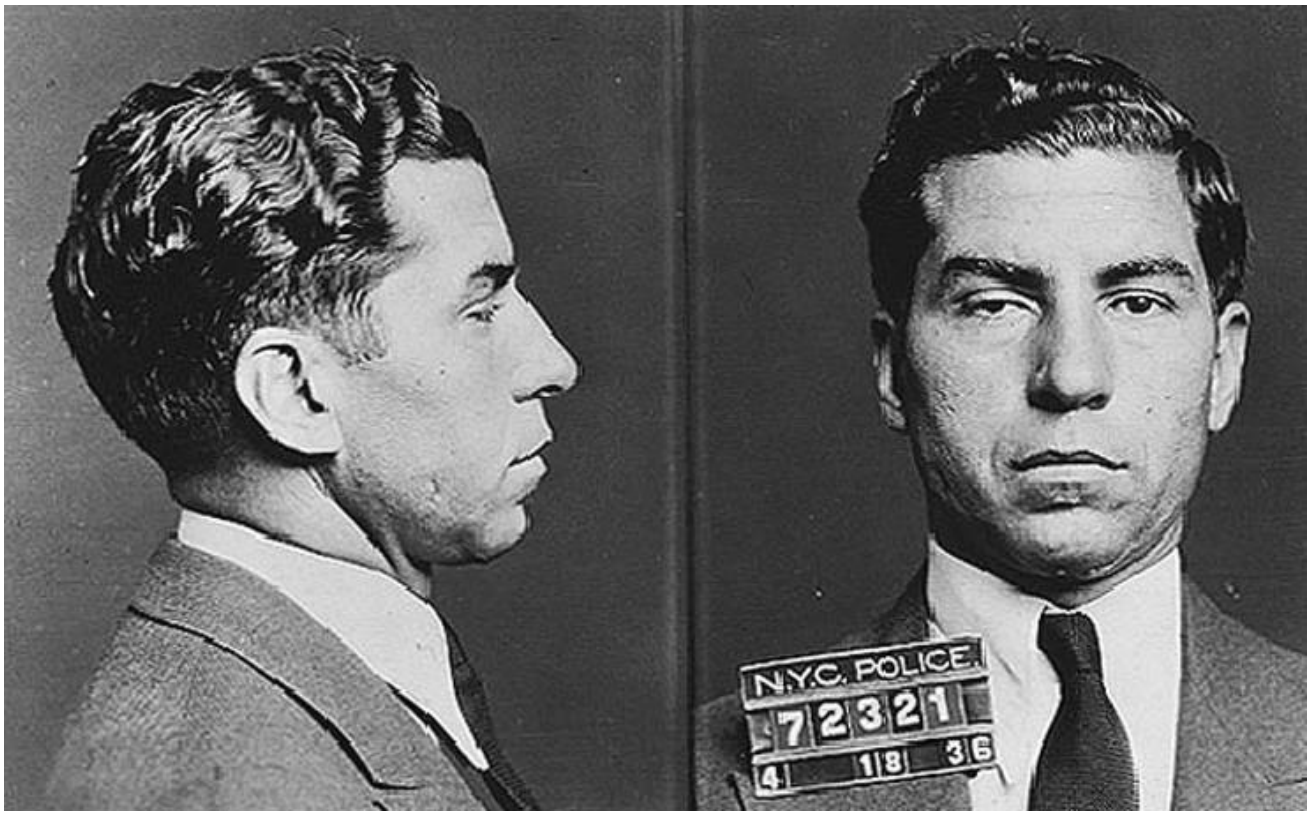
Organized Crime in Today's Italy. A Commentary

George De Stefano (November 25, 2007)



In the midst of the latest overheated political dramas over the national budget, electoral reform, and the high price of pasta, an old specter continues to haunt Italy: organized crime.

Consider the spate of recent news stories in Italian and English-language media: “Brazen killings show power of Italian ‘Ndrangheta’” (Reuters); “Italy Police Arrest Mafia ‘Boss Of Bosses’” (Reuters); “Italy dealt double blow over organised crime” and “Organised crime does pay in Italy” (The Guardian, London); “Fugitive mafia dons held after stake-out” (Associated Press); “Where Savage Parasites Rot a Nation From Within” and “Italians Tune in to Real-Life ‘Sopranos’” (New York Times); “Mafia is ‘Italy's biggest commercial business’” and “Mafiosi warned over their ‘morals’” (The Independent, London), and “La mafia? E' la prima azienda italiana” (La Repubblica).

Perhaps the most significant and doubtless most disturbing items from this small, but fairly representative sampling are those about the October 2007 report from the Italian business

association Confesercenti, which found that organized crime is “Italy’s biggest commercial business.” (“Organised crime does pay in Italy” and “La mafia? E' la prima azienda italiana” also covered the report.) According to the association, organized crime accounts for 7 per cent of the nation’s gross domestic product, with extortion, drugs, loan-sharking and prostitution being major profit centers. The sums “earned” by Italy’s criminal gangs surpassed those of the oil company ENI and were almost double those of auto manufacturing giant Fiat.

The Big Four of Italian organized crime -- Sicily’s Mafia, the Neapolitan Camorra, the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta and Puglia’s La Sacra Corona Unita -- haven’t gotten filthy rich only through illegal activity. For some time they have spread their tentacles to legitimate industries, such as food, health care, and hotels. The Confesercenti report states that criminals have infiltrated big business as well as smaller and family-run firms: “Companies listed on the stock market with headquarters in Milan and Turin are among the victims, not just small shops in the Naples suburbs.”

But northern Italian businesses are by no means only victims of southern criminals. As crusading Neapolitan journalist Roberto Saviano reported in Gomorrah, his celebrated exposé of the Camorra, criminals help businesses from the north and elsewhere in Italy to ship everything from corpses to used computer printer toner to illegal dumping sites in the south.

The Mafia long has been active in public works, controlling many construction firms and building projects. The Confesercenti report alleges that Impregilo, Italy's leading engineering concern, Condotte SpA, a water pipeline company, and Italcementi, Europe's largest cement group, all pay off the Mafia.

The High Price of Organized Crime

Leoluca Orlando, the reformist and anti-Mafia former mayor of Palermo, says the report dramatizes the high price Italy pays for the infiltration of its economy by gangsters. Were it not for organized crime, he observes, Italy would be “one of the most modern of European countries, with state-of-the-art social services and infrastructure.”

As Orlando and many others have noted, organized crime retards social and economic progress in Italy. Such practices as illegal garbage and toxic waste dumping degrade the environment. But criminality also poisons political life, as connivance between the underworld and compliant public officials long has been a fact of life. Italy’s various criminal organizations, in fact, could not have become so powerful without the support of politicians.

“This mixture between illegal and legal, criminal and institutional, is the heart of the Mafia's historical model, but it has grown and spread independently of the presence of Sicilian mafiosi,” according to the Sicilian social scientist Umberto Santino.

Santino’s insight is important, and not only because it identifies the nexus between illegal and legal as central to Sicilian organized crime.

It would be all too easy to regard Sicily and other parts of the Mezzogiorno as mired in criminality, violence, and cultural backwardness. Many commentators – northern Italians, other Europeans, and Americans -- have characterized Sicily and the south in exactly those terms. But take away the exotica of secret criminal societies, blood feuds, and oaths of silence and you can discern some startling similarities between the so-called atavistic Italian south and the purportedly dynamic and open society of the United States.

Crime and Corruption: Whose “Cosa Nostra”?

The presidency of George W. Bush has seen corruption scandals in the departments of Defense, Education, Justice, Interior, Homeland Security, Veterans Affairs, Health and Human

Services, and Housing and Urban Development. The chief procurement officer of Bush's Office of Management and Budget was sent to prison in connection with the bribery scandal involving Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff. In 2007, the General Services Administration came under investigation for steering federal favors to Republican Congressional candidates during the 2006 elections. And as of this writing four inspectors general, the officials charged with investigating improprieties in cabinet department, are themselves under investigation.

But public and private corruption predates and certainly is far more extensive than the malfeasance of the Bush administration and its political and corporate cronies. Wall Street securities frauds, the fixing of public contracts by elected officials in exchange for bribes, the legalized bribery of political campaign contributions and the unscrupulous practices of major corporations make Italy's sleaze seem, if not minor, hardly unique.

The newsletter Corporate Crime Reporter, in a 2004 report noted, "Because the Justice Department's statistics on corruption in the United States have rarely been publicized, the world might not understand the true extent of the decay here in the United States."

In compiling its list of the "Top 100 Corporate Criminals of the Decade," the Corporate Crime Reporter focused on corporations that pled guilty or no contest to crimes and were criminally fined. The corporate malefactors comprised violators of environmental, antitrust, food and drug, campaign finance, fraud, public corruption and tax laws. It's unlikely that employees of these corporations addressed their CEOs by the Old World honorific titles of "Don" or "Godfather." But in their outsized power and disdain for legality and the public good, these business executives bear more than a passing resemblance to Italy's mob bosses.

The Mafia's corruption of politics has engendered cynicism among the Sicilian electorate, an often well-founded belief that politicians serve not the public but the interests of moneyed and powerful elites. Now take a look at the state of participatory democracy in America, with its low voter turnout, an often ill-informed electorate, and corporate-controlled media.

Moreover, American politics has a long and squalid history of corruption – bribes, kickbacks, public bid rigging, and voter fraud. Organized crime groups have enjoyed mutually enriching relationships with politicians since the early days of the American republic, in the frontier towns of the West, New York's Tammany Hall, the electoral wards of Chicago, and the county political machines of New Jersey.

There are, of course, significant differences between Italy and America, and between Italian and American organized crime. For one thing, no matter how powerful American crime groups became, they never enjoyed the same degree of territorial control and political power as Italy's. Today the Italian American Cosa Nostra is a mere shadow of its former self, undone both by vigorous law enforcement and by socioeconomics, including the waning of the old, blue-collar urban street culture that provided recruits for mafia groups.

(Recent news stories from Italy and the U.S. speak of a purported attempt by Palermo mafiosi to regain power through a renewed alliance with New York gangsters of Sicilian background: "La riscoperta dell'America: nuovo fronte di Cosa Nostra," proclaimed La Repubblica. But even if the stories are accurate, the reported plans of the palermitani, who were nearly eliminated during the 1980s by more ruthless gangsters from Corleone, seem more like wishful thinking than cause for alarm. The FBI already has identified one Frank Cali, a Brooklyn resident of Sicilian origin, as the American point person for the supposed Palermo-New York crime connection.)

Reasons to be Hopeful

But there's another major difference between the U.S. and Italy, and it's one that bodes well for Italy.

There never has been an anti-Mafia or anti-organized crime movement in the United States. "I

think it's interesting that we've never had a grass roots movement that's really seen organized crime as a horror that has to be eradicated," says criminologist James B. Jacobs, a New York University professor who has served on the New York State Organized Crime Task Force. "The main momentum for dealing with organized crime came from law enforcement professionals themselves, who saw organized crime as an affront, but didn't really come from the public or from business or from labor."

But in Italy, much of the opposition to organized crime has come from civil society. Community and political activists, trade unionists, business people, feminists, students and other youth, cultural figures, and clergy courageously oppose organized crime and its corruption of politics and the economy. Sicily, in particular, has given birth not only to fearsome mafiosi like Totò Riina and Bernardo Provenzano, but also such heroic anti-Mafia fighters as trade unionist Placido Rizzotto, leftist organizer Giuseppe "Peppino" Impastato, the parish priest Giuseppe Puglisi, Leoluca Orlando, and, more recently, Rita Borsellino, sister of the prosecutor Paolo Borsellino, who, with the internationally renowned magistrate Giovanni Falcone, was assassinated in 1992 by Cosa Nostra.

In Sicily, civil society, law enforcement, and the justice system often have had a relationship of mutual reinforcement, as the arrests and imprisonment of major mafiosi have energized grassroots forces, while police and prosecutors rely on the support of outraged and mobilized citizens.

The struggle to defeat La Cosa Nostra has racked up some impressive victories in recent years, In 2006, police arrested Bernardo Provenzano, the boss of all bosses, who had eluded capture for more than 40 years. Provenzano's arrest, which provided a powerful morale booster to anti-Mafia forces, also opened a treasure trove to law enforcement. When police searched Provenzano's hideout they found hundreds of pizzini – tiny scraps of paper bearing coded messages to his underlings. They revealed names of other top mafiosi, including Provenzano's presumed successor, Salvatore Lo Piccolo, whom police arrested in October 2007.

Sicilian law enforcement has been so successful in its anti-Mafia campaign that Piero Grasso, Italy's national organized crime prosecutor, announced in November 2007 that the government had completely dismantled the "cupola," that is, the Mafia's ruling commission.

The Confesercenti report highlighted not only the shocking reach of organized crime in Italy but also described its political economy, the peculiar mix of legality and illegality, legitimate business and underworld enterprise. The forces of lawfulness and social reform certainly have their work cut out for them. But if the sheer vastness of organized criminality shocks and dismays, sometimes what seem like small gestures of individual resistance offer hope.

Amid all the recent alarming newspaper headlines, the Associated Press reported, on November 22, "Palermo court gives stiff sentences in Mafia extortion trial after bold testimony." It turns out that Vincenzo Conticello, one of the owners of Antica Focacceria San Francesco, a popular Palermo restaurant (and one whose panelle and caponata I've enjoyed on several occasions), not only refused to pay "protection" money -- known as the pizzo -- to local mafiosi; he reported them to police and, in court, pointed out their leader, Giovanni Di Salvo. Di Salvo and several of his associates were convicted and sentenced to prison terms ranging from 10 to 16 years.

Prosecutor Giuseppe Pignatone said the verdicts could help "put the brakes on extortion rackets," which he said were Cosa Nostra's main source of income.

Organized crime is too vast and powerful to be defeated solely by such brave acts of refusal as Vincenzo Conticello's. But it never will be beaten without Italians like him.

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