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The cultural foundations of political support in eastern Sicily: Mafia clans, political power and the Lombardo case

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From 2008 Sicily's president was Raffaele Lombardo, leader of the *Movimento per le Autonomie* (MpA), a party founded by politicians who were already well established in the city of Catania and its province. In the summer of 2012 Lombardo's government was forced to resign following an investigation that exposed the connections between the president and Mafia families in eastern Sicily. This article draws on two ethnographic studies carried out in Catania between 2009 and 2013: in describing the political behaviour and power relations between voters, local councillors and MpA executive officers, the research examined the tendency to internalise the widely understood narrative about politics and patronage in Sicily that Lombardo and his colleagues embodied. By relating ethnographic data to the legal documents showing the links between MpA leaders and Cosa Nostra bosses, I argue that social and cultural support for the party will have included support from local Mafia members.

Keywords: support; Cosa Nostra; Mafia; Raffaele Lombardo; clientelism; political anthropology.

Introduction

In the space of just a few years, the judiciary exposed the links between Mafia families from different parts of Sicily and two of the most popular Sicilian presidents of recent times.

As the year 2008 started, the regional president Salvatore 'Totò' Cuffaro was sentenced, in the first instance, to five years' imprisonment for having assisted representatives of the Sicilian Mafia.[1] After some months of negotiation the person chosen to succeed Cuffaro was Raffaele Lombardo, one of his former political associates and a previous regional secretary of their party, the Union of Christian and Centre Democrats (UDC). Lombardo was by then leader of the *Movimento per le autonomie* (MpA), a party espousing greater autonomy for Sicily; he had founded this with the support of a group of leaders who had been close to him for much of his political and governmental trajectory within the Christian Democrats (DC). For the centre-right coalition his nomination was almost inevitable, as from the very foundation of the MpA Lombardo had repeatedly demonstrated his strong hold on the electorate, particularly in Sicily's eastern provinces.

The regional elections of 2008 were won by the centre-right, and Lombardo was elected president. In June 2012 he resigned, due to his entanglement – alongside his brother Angelo, then an MpA parliamentary deputy[2] – in a judicial inquiry that had exposed his links with Mafia families of the city and province of Catania. The investigation that drew in the Lombardo brothers

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helped to clarify the relationships between the Mafia clans of eastern Sicily, some important political and state representatives, and significant elements of Catania's business community (Tribunale di Catania 2010). The charges against Lombardo included aiding and abetting a Mafia organisation and exchanging political favours for Mafia electoral support, and in early 2014 he was sentenced, in the first instance, to six years and eight months in prison.

This article examines the MpA's deep-rootedness in eastern Sicily and the cultural basis of support for the party, in the belief that only by considering these matters can we properly understand the nature of the relationship between the Lombardo brothers and Cosa Nostra bosses. The recent court cases reveal, once again, the age-old relationship between the world of politics and government and the Sicilian Mafia, while noting, first, the profound changes affecting Cosa Nostra, whose clans have reached a point of relative weakness, and, second, the wider political environment within which this relationship continues.

The analysis is based on both the documentation that the Catania magistrates produced for the case involving the Lombardo brothers and, in contrast, ethnographic research undertaken between 2009 and 2013 which investigated how support was built up, and how it was widely understood among the leaders, upper echelons and elected representatives of the MpA in the Catania area (Vesco 2015).

The empirical material presented thus relates both to the specific court case against the Lombardo brothers and to the social context, ethnographically observed, in which they operated. The image of the authority embodied by the MpA leaders that emerges from the wire-tapping and other recordings of Mafia members is broadly consistent with more general representations of the party's politics that emerged from interviews during the ethnographic work. Analysis of these sources prompts some general reflections on the nature and persistence of links between Cosa Nostra and long-serving politicians who represent a power system that is based on the clientelistic and interest-driven management of local authorities and public resources, but which is nevertheless far from lacking in social recognition.

The mode of state operation in a Mafia context

Until the 1990s, a full understanding of the notably political nature of the mafia phenomenon had developed exclusively in relation to the clans based in Sicily. It was here, and with reference to Cosa Nostra, that there had been the fullest analysis of the respective roles played by the mafia and the state in actual control of the territory.[3]

Critics of cultural interpretations of the mafia have argued that seeing Cosa Nostra as a structured organisation for violent crime is crucial to an understanding of its power (Chinnici and Santino 1991); however, this should not negate the social, political and economic context in which it operates, and with which its members interact every day (Santino 1994, 120). In each era the Sicilian Mafia has enjoyed 'a degree of social support' (121–122), generally acquired by the efficient manipulation of various cultural codes by the bosses and their associates: this allowed *mafiosi* to place themselves in key positions within a complex relational system that has benefited from the support and the effective 'deeds of mystification by local and national elites' (Gribaudi 1990, 350). All in all, it has been the Mafia's ability to establish relationships with people outside the organisation that really explains its strength and endurance (Sciarrone 2011, 7; Sciarrone 2009).

The most recent interpretations of the political role played by Mafia organisations in Sicily have tended towards attributing their strong territorial embeddedness both to the effectiveness of the bonds of partnership between *mafiosi* and to the importance of local environments; they have

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examined the determining role played by governmental bodies and the territory's various economic actors in establishing a power system that includes the Mafia actor, but within which the latter does not necessarily have any higher status (Pezzino 1990; Lupo 2009 [1993]; Dickie 2004; Sciarrone 2011).

The Sicilian Mafia thus currently appears as a phenomenon of territorial domination upheld by the relational resources deployed by the bosses, their associates, and individuals outside the organisation. The composition of these relationships and the symbols that foster them, however, are still to be investigated; the interpretative approach to this should consider the cultural elements that ensure social recognition for a power system structured in this way.

In the case studied here, particular importance is attributed to the consensus of the different actors (Mafia members, politicians, civil servants and electors) regarding the system of unofficial norms that regulate the organisation of political and Mafia power in Sicily. The creation of 'circles of recognition' (Pizzorno 1991), among the main representatives of the MpA, local politicians close to the party, and the bosses of various Cosa Nostra families, emerges as crucial to the legitimation of a system of illicit resource management.[4] Engaging in local political activity within a party that, as discussed later, employs forms of clientielistic exchange, means engaging at the same time with methods of managing public resources that have broad social recognition.

On the theoretical and analytical level, the work presented here is particularly risk-laden. The task is to understand two phenomena at the same time: first, the relationships between the mafia and politics; second, the clientelistic methods of accumulating support. A fundamental link between them is frequently assumed, but they have long been observed using different theoretical perspectives, creating research paths that rarely meet. Moreover, the progressive refinement by researchers of strong analytical concepts – in particular 'clientelism' – has contributed to the delineation of some supposedly unvarying functions of political systems in the Italian South, thus profoundly reducing their interpretative potential.[5]

While still acknowledging the understandings developed in the two fields of study, I attempt to break through this impasse by interpreting events in Catania in the light of the rich literature that discusses how the state actually operates in a range of territories, including some very different from those where the Italian mafias have their roots.[6] In other words, I have used a non-normative perspective which may help us to identify how, in the real world, the state is governed and public policies are implemented (Olivier de Sardan 2008, 1).

This description of actual governance in some areas of the Italian South, affected by a long-standing mafia presence and an established interest-driven management of public resources, is made unusual by the fact that the local populations have gradually developed genuine collective narratives regarding the particular ways that state systems are applied in their area. This article therefore especially examines the role played by representations, both public and private, of the clientelistic and corrupt political practices employed by MpA leaders and officials. It has thus been essential to consider the discourses that make up what Blundo and Olivier de Sardan call the 'popular semiology' (2006, 110–134) of the clientelistic and corrupt mafia practices that affect the local political environment, at the same time as observing political and criminal behaviour. As they say, 'the statements and words relating to corruption [...] describe, as it were, the symbolic, ideological and argumental landscape of corruption' (110). In the same way, the narratives of those involved, at different levels, in the political processes investigated here have been an important object of analysis; this starts with a position developed during the ethnographic work, to the effect that the clientelistic practices promoted by a party like the MpA are not only everyday practices experienced and operated by the subjects, but are also elements that are continuously expressed by those actors who utilise them, both in public discussion and in the private sphere

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(110). Bosses and their associates are among those giving candid descriptions of how the state machinery operates in Sicily, influencing the ways in which they relate to political power.

In my analysis of the authority embodied by Lombardo, I will therefore be referring to a cultural meaning of the concept of 'consensus'.[7] We can take our cue from Clifford Geertz, who discusses the mechanisms whereby collective identities are legitimated:

> There is, at least in most cases, and I suspect in all, no point at which one can say that this is where *consensus* either stops or starts. It all depends on the frame of comparison, the background against which identity is seen, and the play of interest which engages and animates it. (Geertz 2000, 253, my italics)

In Geertz's well-known interpretative approach (1973), individual behaviour refers to a semantic world that takes on meaning insofar as it is locally constructed and shared (see also Gribaudi [1992, 101–103]). Thus in order to properly comprehend the nature and persistence of political and criminal power in a context where mafia organisations are established, it is not enough just to explore their social support, which is often referred to by researchers yet only rarely adequately investigated. We need to challenge the analytical terms and examine the form taken by the support from mafia families – just as from other segments of the electorate and through similar cultural processes (albeit with different aims) – for the political actors responsible for the future of the local area, including that of the clans.

Political power, business, and Mafia groups

The last 20 years have seen a reduction in the influence of Cosa Nostra families on how political and economic systems function where there is a Mafia presence, largely because of more determined action by state bodies (La Spina et al. 2013). The progressive curtailment of the Sicilian Mafia's room for manoeuvre has been highlighted in regard to both the criminal activity undertaken by the clans in Sicily and the Mafia presence in various areas of the Italian Centre and North (Sciarrone 2011, 2014). However, despite the severe blows sustained, the system of criminal power that the Mafia gangs are involved in has not been defeated. While the courts have witnessed an effective response by the main state bodies with repressive functions, the '*comitati d'affari*' (business groups) that manage resources illegally in various parts of Sicily now consist not only of businessmen, professionals and Mafia members, but also of people with formal responsibilities such as politicians, administrators and state officials.

Like the families elsewhere on the island, the Catania Mafia currently seems weakened by the efforts of magistrates and police forces, and increasingly dependent on other parties in their attempts to maintain a significant role in local socio-economic life. However, the difficulties of the Etnean Cosa Nostra also stem from particular local features of the development of Mafia groupings in eastern Sicily.[8]

For a thorough understanding of the dynamics that govern these interactions, a brief description of some typical features of the Mafia phenomenon, as evident in eastern Sicily, will be helpful. In particular, it must be remembered that in these provinces the structural features of organised crime were only established relatively recently (Lupo and Mangiameli 1990; Mangiameli 1992; Sciarrone 2009). In the immediate post-war period the weak Mafia of Catania still seemed to be an offshoot from Palermo, but during the period 1960–1980 the construction boom and the resultant interweaving of the city's gangs and its substantial construction businesses gave a significant boost to the Etnean Cosa Nostra. The relationship of close collaboration between local firms and the Mafia clans seems clear from the fact that for a long time the latter rejected practising extortion on economic activity (Mangiameli 1992, 259).

It was the protection given by Catania's major business groups to Mafia bosses that guaranteed the Etnean Cosa Nostra its definitive recognition by political power. After gang warfare that left the city's underworld unsettled for some 30 years, the factions that emerged victorious were the most bloodthirsty and those that enjoyed the greatest protection from the political and economic system. The rise of the Santapaola family, for example, resulted from the close link between its leader Benedetto ('Nitto') and Catania's 'Cavalieri del Lavoro' (Knights of Labour) (Tribunale di Catania 2004, 2).[9]

The court proceedings that involved the Lombardo brothers provide a good example of some of the mechanisms that have characterised the relationship between the Mafia, politics and business in the Catania area. In order to delineate the recurring features of the operating methods of the business groups established for managing public and private contracts, it could be said that in Catania, as elsewhere in Sicily, the activities of crime and corruption generally occur within a crowded 'grey area' populated by various types of actor: politicians, officials, local administrators and businessmen. In a process of mutual acknowledgement, Mafia groups and representatives of official bodies and the business community conduct exchanges of goods and services, benefiting 'from each other's resources and authorities' (Sciarrone 2011, 16).

The investigation into the Lombardo brothers broke a long silence from Catania's anti-Mafia magistrates. The judges accused the two politicians of 'total willingness to comply with the needs of the Mafia group in the particular areas of direct and indirect control of economic activity, licensing, authorisation, contracts and public services by means of their own political activity and the political and governmental activity of representatives of the same area' (Tribunale di Catania 2011, 4). The links between the Lombardo brothers and Catania's Mafia bosses conform to a rather common rationale. The politicians would have asked the leadership of the Etnean Cosa Nostra to procure votes for the MpA, and these political and electoral agreements would have extended over a long period; the Lombardo brothers would have benefited from Mafia assistance in the European elections of 1999, the provincial elections of 2003 (when Raffaele Lombardo was elected president of the Catania province), the European elections of 2004, Catania's local elections in 2008, and the same year's regional elections (Tribunale di Catania 2011, 4–5; 2014, 256–318).

For the local elections in Catania and the Sicilian regional elections of 2008, specifically, the Lombardo brothers instructed two emissaries to link up with the leaders of the Cappello clan and the boss of Catania's Cosa Nostra family, Vincenzo 'Enzo' Aiello; their task, after a successful election, was to protect the clans' interests in the main business activity generated in Catania in the following months, which included major work to create a distribution hub, the construction of buildings as bases for large commercial enterprises, and construction works for the city's new fish market. The two politicians busied themselves with helping the Mafia families gain entry to activities where direct or indirect political involvement was expected: people put forward by the clans were given jobs in social co-operatives overseen by the region and in business centres owned by companies that were close to the Lombardo family, and assistance was guaranteed with building permits and adjustments to the town-planning scheme (Tribunale di Catania 2011, 18–19).

These, therefore, were the arrangements for the political and electoral exchange: the *mafiosi* supported the politicians' electoral campaign, procuring votes for the various electoral rounds as well as financing the MpA's campaigns with money they obtained from extortion, while the politicians guaranteed their support for the Catania families who, in turn, wanted to take over from other clans in the protection of companies engaged in public works in various parts of the province.

As discussed, interpenetration between the Etnean Cosa Nostra and the business world is a long-standing phenomenon.[10] Recent research into the large-scale commercial distribution sector in Catania gives a detailed description of the system that links Mafia families to the firms. The latter, while not actually subordinate to the clans, work closely with them according to two main modes of involvement: sometimes they are 'organic' to the Mafia groups, and in other cases '"only" at their disposal' (Arcidiacono and Avola 2011, 261). As elsewhere in Sicily, the businesses linked to Cosa Nostra, mainly involved in the construction industry, are 'capable of dealing with public and private work, large and small, from mountain top to valley bottom (including earth moving, truck hire, concrete provision, plant engineering and maintenance)' (261). Sometimes the bosses and company managers have looked together for the political backing to ensure the success of their planned illegal activity.

To better understand the interactions between the Lombardo brothers and Catania's Cosa Nostra family, we need to examine closely some of the matters regarding which these politicians were charged by the magistrates.

One case relates to the building sites established in Lentini, just over 30 kilometres from Catania, by SAFAB, a Roman company involved in large public and private projects in various locations in Sicily.[11] From 2006 to 2009 SAFAB had paid the '*messa a posto*' (protection money) to Sandro Missuto, a Mafia businessman from nearby Gela who had secured numerous sub-contracts for the company. When the '*taglieggiamenti*' (extortion) from SAFAB by Missuto came to the attention of Enzo Aiello, head of the Santapaola family, he urged Giovanni Barbagallo, a geologist and MpA member close to the Catania gang, to open contact with SAFAB's managers and force it to accept protection from the Etnean Cosa Nostra. Aiello suggested that Barbagallo warn his contacts that Missuto was absolutely not to be trusted, as he was accustomed to 'talking too much' (Tribunale di Catania 2011, 21). Something that thus emerges from the investigation is the lack of co-ordination between the various Mafia gangs over imposing protection on the sites of a company that was actually operating in a defined area, presumably subject to the control of one single Mafia family. Discussing Missuto, Aiello also referred to the Gela businessman's habit of holding back some of the extortion income which, he maintained, should instead be deposited in Cosa Nostra's coffers, in line with procedure.

After meetings with Paolo Ciarrocca, the company's technical manager and director, Barbagallo managed to establish the protection terms guaranteed by Cosa Nostra. Ciarrocca, however, told him that the company wanted more than just Mafia protection. He said that in fact he needed political sponsorship in order to carry out another large project: a 'holiday village for Americans' in the neighbouring area of Sigonella, where there was a military airbase. Barbagallo's closeness to the leading representatives of the MpA, which was then governing the Sicily region, could help the company to avoid various problems that had arisen with Catania's *Genio Civile* (Civil Engineering), the body responsible for the control and oversight of public works.

The Mafia organisation then had to turn to its political resources. With Raffaele Lombardo unavailable to representatives of the Santapaola family after his election as regional president, Barbagallo decided to contact his brother Angelo, who had promised him the support of MpA leaders for the prospective business of the Roman company. Lombardo's commitment to assist the company protected by the Etnean Cosa Nostra was in return for the work done by the Mafia organisation at the time of the MpA's recent electoral campaign.

The SAFAB affair tells us nothing new about the dynamics of management of the construction industry in various parts of Sicily: the scant checks and minimal penalties make it an area especially suited to involvement by the gangs (Sciarrone et al. 2011). However, the SAFAB case, like

other affairs that emerged from the investigations, shows how the power relationships and pacts between political power and Mafia organisations respond, in Catania, to changing norms.

The element that is particularly relevant to our discussion is the behaviour adopted by Raffaele Lombardo towards the gangs throughout this affair. As mentioned, after his election as regional president he broke off communication with the clans. Barbagallo reported to the boss Aiello that 'nowadays one can no longer talk with him!' (Tribunale di Catania 2011, 21). Lombardo was also rebuked by representatives of other Mafia families in the province for his lack of respect for the commitments taken on in their regard, notwithstanding the electoral assistance he had received. The *pentito* Gaetano D'Aquino, a member of the Cappello clan, responded to questioning by the magistrates during this investigation:

> After the regional elections of 2008 Raffaele Lombardo, unlike his brother Angelo, dropped out of sight, didn't keep his promises, no longer kept up with people, and this made the entire criminal world of Catania unhappy, because they felt betrayed. […] Enzo Aiello said, '*stu curnutu scumpariu*' ['this bastard has disappeared']. (Tribunale di Catania 2011, 20)

The nature of relations between the Lombardo brothers and Cosa Nostra families also emerges from the relationship between the two politicians and Rosario Di Dio, a Mafia boss and former mayor of Ramacca, in the province of Catania. Di Dio could boast of a long criminal career and numerous arrests for mafia membership. His standing is clear from his dispute with Aiello in the early 2000s over his intention to take control of other areas in the province of Catania. Aiello had decided to block these attempts at expansion by cutting him out of the Etnean Cosa Nostra family, but was forced to repair this rupture: the Ramacca boss retained his personal political and criminal stature due to the prestige gained over the years, thanks to preferential relationships established with important businessmen and other prominent Cosa Nostra members, as well as with influential politicians (Tribunale di Catania 2014, 219).

According to the magistrates' reconstruction, Lombardo, already an important politician in the Catania area, visited the house of Di Dio, at that point under formal police supervision, the night before the European elections of 2004. He had already made electoral agreements with other *mafiosi* over support for an MpA candidate. After changing his plans, he had decided to ask Di Dio to talk to his contacts so that they would vote (or determine the vote) differently from the previous understanding (Tribunale di Catania 2014, 230).

Some time later, Angelo Lombardo contacted Di Dio and asked him to support some candidates on behalf of his brother Raffaele, but Di Dio firmly refused and reminded him about the 2004 European elections: 'Angelo, you know that it's pointless to come and look for votes, as there are no votes for Raffaele ... absolutely clear ... for me, he's beyond the pale' (Tribunale di Catania 2011, 14). Talking to an associate, the boss accused Raffaele Lombardo of ingratitude:

> After all that I did, when he [was elected] the first time, not even the Eternal Father, if he came, would find these people any more, and as I risked my life and prison for him and his fuck-ups, I don't ... It means that I'm trash [in his eyes]. He came to mine at half past one at night, and was here, with me, for two and a half hours, from one thirty to four in the morning […] My wife ... he hadn't eaten ... she cooked for him […] but I'm not scared of him. (Tribunale di Catania 2011, 20)

Di Dio's disillusionment is also clear from other phone-tapped conversations, and relates to episodes between 2004 and 2009 in which Lombardo ignored overtures for business discussions.

Lombardo's standing is evident from the concluding phrase of the extract, in which Di Dio says that he is 'not scared of him', unexpectedly inverting the popular assumption that it is the politician who is normally afraid of the *mafioso* because of the latter's resources of violence. Here, however, Lombardo did not just have greater bargaining power: Di Dio granted him a certain

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respect, which explains his hospitality and the willingness of his wife to cook something for him in the middle of the night (if we trust Di Dio's account, which there is no reason to disbelieve).

Apart from being a respectable contact, in Di Dio's eyes the former president remained, even after the break in relations, a politician who knew how to manage power. After the magistrates' charges against Lombardo, Di Dio spoke to a friend about his political talents, saying that, despite the political and judicial problems Lombardo was facing, he would be capable of retaining his position for the full period of office: 'He'll last five years, I'm telling you! Because he's a [wily] Jesuit, you understand?' (Tribunale di Catania 2014, 221–222).

In time, relations between Di Dio and Angelo Lombardo also became tense. The boss told another Cosa Nostra family member about an episode which again related to both the Lombardo brothers:

> I needed something when the manager was Tolomeo, one of [Raffaele Lombardo's] trusted men in the *Consorzio* [agricultural association]. But not jobs ... I'd bought some land. And there was a pile of debt to the *Consorzio*. [Raffaele Lombardo said:] 'Tomorrow morning at nine, go to the *Consorzio*, and my brother Angelo will be expecting you'. (Tribunale di Catania 2014, 222)

According to Di Dio, he asked his own son to go on his behalf to the *Consorzio*, but Angelo Lombardo failed to arrive for the appointment. Di Dio ordered his son to come back home and called the politician:

> You're a piece of shit, Angelo! You left my son at the *Consorzio* from nine until half past eleven! And all you had to do was call Tolomeo and square things with him! (Tribunale di Catania 2014, 222)

Angelo Lombardo's reply, that he had simply forgotten, sent the boss into a rage, and provides some idea of the limited respect the politician had for him.

Sources such as the tapped telephone calls have made us wary of declarations by *mafiosi*, as their inter-personal repertoire includes the capacity to boast about relationships and resources that are not necessarily real. However, in the cases discussed here we have disclosures that merit serious attention, because Di Dio, Aiello and the other bosses recorded would have had no ulterior motive in discussing matters that were intrinsically embarrassing as they indicated a lack of acknowledgement of their role by the politicians they related to.

In the conversations reported, the bosses talk about putting the fate of the clans' economic activities in the wrong hands, but their annoyance relates not only to material concerns. The aspect of greatest interest here is that in both cases the discontent that emerges from the recordings seems to be also due to the confirmation that they are dealing with politicians who lack respect for the unofficial norms operating within this context. Their disappointment clearly results from their potential financial losses and the reduced power of the clans after the withdrawal of Lombardo's availability, but the flavour of Di Dio's reflections suggests the influence of other factors, linked to recognition and respect for the norms, albeit fluid, usually shared by an area's political and Mafia actors.

As seems clear from both the SAFAB affair and others unearthed by Catania's magistrates, the gangs needed the protection of political power in order to secure public works. It is the politicians who intercede with businesses in order to ensure adequate recompense to Mafia members for the electoral services rendered. However, the affairs described above only go a certain way towards understanding the reasons for the elevated bargaining power that the MpA leaders had with respect to the Mafia actor. In order to fully understand the political power of the Lombardo brothers, we need to examine the widespread support that their political activity had enjoyed: this emerged during the ethnographic work in Catania.

The MpA: a tangible political power

At the point when Raffaele Lombardo was sentenced for aiding and abetting a Mafia organisation, he was secretary of the MpA. Founded in 2005, this party demonstrated its capacity to register high voting numbers in every electoral contest up to 2008, when Lombardo was elected president of the Region of Sicily. From its early successes until its dissolution, the MpA played an increasingly large part in the island's political dynamics. Success in the local elections in Catania in 2005 and the regional elections of 2006, winning the regional presidency, the constant upheavals within the regional council led by Lombardo: the party was at the centre of both Sicilian and national public debate.[12]

The MpA's affairs were very closely linked to its leader's political history and personal authority in the various provinces of eastern Sicily, to the extent that its dissolution in 2013 can be seen as a direct consequence of the investigations by Catania's magistrates into the then president. Lombardo's earlier political career developed entirely within the DC, whose provincial and national youth section he led from 1977, and the post-DC parties of the 'Second Republic'.[13] The MpA's immediate electoral impact can only be understood from a long-term perspective that perceives the substantial continuity between the networks woven by political officers of the DC and the circles within which the higher echelons of the autonomist party moved.

The DC retained a relative majority at elections for over 30 years, thanks to an entrenchment in the territory 'based on its occupation of the authorities, control of public resources, clientelistic use of both the former and the latter, and the power bloc that it constitute[d] with the ruling classes' (Caciagli 1977, 17). The transition to the Second Republic, the dissolution of the DC, the dispersal of its leading members, and the creation of parties that inherited its political legacy such as the UDC, for which Lombardo became regional secretary, were all fundamental to the MpA's development.

Although over time support for the party gradually increased across the whole region, it was most well established in Catania and its province (Vacante and Spadaro 2008). According to early commentators, this was first and foremost due to shrewd management of the local authorities in line with the customary practices of patronage. During their long political careers, Lombardo and his party colleagues managed to weave an 'extensive micro-network of interpersonal relationships, which they cultivate[d] thanks to the ongoing allocation of consultancies, external appointments, board memberships and presidencies of public-private partnerships (involving either the province or district of Catania)' (Vacante and Spadaro, 28). The system that Lombardo co-ordinated reached its greatest effectiveness as he ascended to the regional presidency; the recent strengthening of local administrations gave the managers selected by the governing parties an almost absolute power to make appointments, allowing the political power effective co-ordination of allocation to the various roles (Di Mascio 2012).

The management of public bodies was the most powerful weapon possessed by the MpA leaders, who during the Lombardo presidency managed to extend their sphere of influence into other parts of the region. Numerous press investigations into the political power of the then regional president have examined the specific areas of vocational training and health services. The sphere of training is a very flexible means of meeting the needs of clients, due to the scope for distributing jobs in many different sectors. As for the health sector, various observers have emphasised the crucial role played by Lombardo, highlighting the close relationship between the electoral success of MpA parliamentary candidates and their allocation of important positions within regional health bodies (Di Bartolo 2006, 25–26). As interviews with local politicians and ordinary voters in Catania illustrated, the Sicilian public also gradually became aware of the particular interest that Lombardo fostered for this sector.

However, the capacity of the MpA leaders to distribute patronage only partly explains the party's firm entrenchment. The build-up of support across the city quarters of Catania and the districts of the province was above all ensured by the activism of the candidates and those elected to the local councils: mostly individuals with limited political experience but strong roots in their own areas, who could mobilise a high vote (Vesco 2011).

The substantial control by the MpA leadership of strategic sectors such as health services and employment training, as well as of management roles in local bodies and administrations, was thus complemented by the skilled and careful management of the candidatures of local representatives. In this, the particular abilities of the MpA's officials and elected representatives were well described by a woman councillor for Catania's city centre, who after election in the lists of Lombardo's party subsequently joined the *Popolo della Libertà* (PdL), the main party in the centre-right coalition during this period:

> In the MpA we were much more organised. Once you have a candidate, you have to completely support him/her. Whatever happens, people must be persuaded they need to vote for that candidate. Telephone calls, letters ... continual pressure. I see that this doesn't happen with the PdL. […] Yes, they always organise meetings, ring you, invite you, but it's softer. It's not systematic like with the MpA. (City centre councillor, Catania, 25 October 2012, Vesco 2015)

The efficiency of the party machine was thus based on close relationships established by MpA leaders and activists with the party's grass roots, and hence with the electorate. A leading member of a local council in the Calatino area, from where the Lombardo family came and where the party was especially well rooted, called the MpA 'a military organisation': 'If there's an assembly, or a rally, there are men who are responsible for ensuring that a certain number of buses depart. Whole families go!' (Councillor in Militello, Val di Catania, 3 February 2009, Vesco 2015).

During the ethnographic work, another phenomenon emerged from the relationships of dependence and the mechanisms for managing public resources summarised here: the tendency of different commentators (publications, researchers, various types of informant) to highlight the clientelistic skills of the MpA leadership. The strong bargaining power of the party's leaders and their exchange of resources were just the visible element of broader processes of legitimation of the leadership and construction of collective political identities.

A credible political authority: the cultural foundations of support

The power dynamics that characterised the political episode of the MpA correspond to the dominant interpretation of political practice in the Italian South postulated by the human and social sciences. Dozens of investigations and research studies into informal political relationships across Sicily have contributed to the rigidification of analytical and interpretative systems for local political phenomena, significantly shaping public discussion and influencing the vision that Sicilians themselves have gradually developed of how they practise politics (Lenclud 2001). The DC origins of the leaders of Lombardo's party helped to establish the local public's awareness that these people had few equals in their ability to manage public affairs by recourse to clientelistic and corrupt practices.[14] Most local members of the MpA interviewed in Catania had a clear idea of the significant disparities between the methodology for managing the vote for their party and the ideals of political behaviour generally shared in the democratic world: it was these interviewees who on various occasions described practices widespread in Catania as '*clientelari*' ('clientelistic'). However, it was their perception of this deviance that located the political practice of their own patrons within a familiar world. In other words, for

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many local candidates and councillors the process of developing genuine party belonging came from recognising, in the routine behaviour of party leaders, those features that defined the political identity of their region: features 'considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation' (Herzfeld 1997, 3).

To interpret the success of this kind of party it is necessary to identify the processes that delineate the boundaries of the political identities of the actors who support or participate in this sort of political project: identities and affiliations that are created in a symbolic arena very much wider than that addressed by the official publications of the MpA, which refer to Sicily's demands for autonomy and are all but unknown to the MpA elected members interviewed (see also Violante 2003; Palumbo 2006). Widespread allegiance to the party related to the more personal dimension of the political identities of local MpA activists and representatives, and concerned their identification with the vices of Sicilian politics (clientelism, personalisation and corruption), personified by Lombardo and other leaders. On various occasions during the ethnographic research, the local representatives interviewed allowed themselves to comment on this: 'at bottom, politics here is this: identifying concrete possibilities. If you want to participate, you have to recognise that things are in these terms' (local councillor, Scordia, CT, 21 October 2009, Vesco 2015). Another MpA councillor made similar observations:

> I'll talk to you openly about certain things because, where I work, if I talk like this no one will take offence. I know you're thinking that if only ... but here, among the people I spend time with, nobody is attached to moralising. Understand what I mean? I know what ideals are ... but here, politics is something else. (Catania, 27 March 2013, Vesco 2015)

Sometimes people who described the defects of local politics were linked to the party but wanted to distance themselves from such methods:

> Most [councillors] practise politics by imitating professional politicians like Lombardo, which is a very widespread approach in Catania, but we're certainly not all the same. I put myself forward with the MpA, but I don't see Lombardo as a model: my idea of politics is different. (Former president, city centre council, Catania, 29 May 2012, Vesco 2015)

The clientelistic approach of the MpA was sometimes made explicit in its publicity, and can be seen in statements to the media by Raffaele Lombardo and his representatives during the period of the party's greatest successes (Vesco 2011). A straightforward and thorough description of the features that characterised the rootedness of the MpA was provided by Nuccio Molino, one of Lombardo's closest associates, formerly his spokesperson and subsequently head of the press office for the *comune* of Catania. Molino was seen locally as the 'ideologue' of the party, and produced a book that presented its political trajectory. Invited, on interview, to offer his own view of Lombardo's political activity, he listed the factors that he thought had allowed his party to establish itself so quickly in the Catania area:

> To reduce everything to crude clientelism is misleading. Clientelism is there, there are some elements of crudeness, but if we offered an analysis ... […] OK, first: there's the organisational aspect, because you can practise clientelism, but if it's not organised, you get completely lost, it's not structured. So, what do I mean by the word 'organisation'? Apparatus. What do you researchers say? The themes are:
>
> - apparatus
> - structure

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- organisation
- presence
- closeness to the institutions (by 'institutions' I mean everything that in society has something organised. What do I mean? The unions, the Church, the *comune* ... a relationship of closeness)
- relationships: a great, perhaps extraordinary, ability with relationships (human, personal, political), cross-party and beyond the usual logic of memberships (people from the most diverse political spheres have been brought together)
- roots (historical, going back into our Christian Democrat past)
- prospects

(Catania, 31 October 2012, Vesco 2015)

Molino carefully and frankly set out these aspects, which would officially be seen as detrimental to the workings of a democratic system.

As actors with special skills in weaving relational networks and bestowing public resources by following widespread and well-established local practices and codes, the MpA leaders embodied a credible political authority during the party's brief existence. Giving electoral support to a party with these characteristics in eastern Sicily, or taking an active part in local politics with this party, implied identification with the narrative of clientelism in local politics that its higher echelons represented. Support for the MpA thus appears to have cultural connotations, and cannot just be explained with reference to the material resources its leaders deployed. In putting their trust in Lombardo's associates, the party supporters interviewed contributed, as did Mafia bosses, to legitimating its political activity, seen as appropriate in its adherence to unofficial local norms that were well and widely established.

Without delving any further into the mechanisms for building support that contributed to the success of Lombardo's party, we can observe that its relations with Catania's *mafiosi* fitted within the framework of wider public perceptions of clientelistic power embodied by the former regional president. Before their disillusionment, the bosses had put all their trust in the MpA leadership to ensure the success of their criminal affairs.

Conclusions

The politics of the MpA were widely supported by local society – including, within it, the Mafia – because of the effectiveness of its protective action, which conformed to the codes of this territory's politics. In placing their trust in people they believed would ensure that an interest-driven stewardship of public bodies continued, Mafia members took account of the crucial role performed by political actors in the illegal management of resources. Thanks to their electoral and social legitimation the Lombardo brothers could count on the official positions occupied by people close to them, and thus on close links to local manifestations of the state, where the distribution of resources was determined. These arrangements authorised the party leaders to act in the ways most likely to maintain their own positions of power. Violent entrepreneurs, both *mafiosi* and others, had to respond accordingly.

In the Lombardo case we see the non-violent requisition by political power of full autonomy in the management of local resources. Phone-tapped conversations reveal that after Raffaele Lombardo's election to the regional presidency he and his brother failed to respect pacts made with the Catania Mafia bosses, demonstrating the fluidity of power relationships within the business groups. As has also been highlighted elsewhere in Sicily, there continue to be 'robust and

enduring' business ties today, but these have an 'unsettled geometry' as they are 'characterised by a degree of instability and uncertainty' (Sciarrone 2011, 4).

The power systems revealed in the instances discussed demonstrate that in Catania political power can significantly influence how Mafia actors operate: the relationships within the various gangs and between the different families depend at least partly on the protection that political representatives are willing to guarantee to local bosses.[15] As the SAFAB case shows, it was the Mafia members who acknowledged the key role of the politicians, seeking their patronage for involvement in business. Like many of the MpA's electors and candidates, the Catania bosses acknowledged the notable effectiveness of the party leader, to the extent that they trusted in his protection for at least 20 years.

Regarding the relationship between the Lombardo brothers and the Mafia family of Ramacca, the phone-tapped calls of Di Dio, its boss, show him laying claim to at least the aura of an important player in Sicilian criminal dynamics: the supposed dominant role of the mafia actor, recognised in public discourse and embedded in the collective imaginary, persists in the recorded conversations of the bosses and their associates, who made embittered demands for better treatment by their political contacts, in line with the assumed system of norms for the area. In their complaints over material damage suffered by the families because of Lombardo's behaviour, however, the Mafia men confirm the volatility of this system. The social norms that supposedly regulate interactions in this context cannot actually be allowed to undergo formalisation,[16] for at least two reasons: first, interactions between politicians and *mafiosi* take place in the world of impropriety and illegality and can therefore never be made explicit; second, a criminal environment with variable co-ordinates, wherein the positions of the different actors are not clearly defined, does not allow genuine norms to be formalised. This is certainly not possible in Catania, where the relationship between Cosa Nostra and political power has had a less defined structure than elsewhere. The norms that envisage mafia involvement in the management of public resources, which resemble the 'practical norms' described by Olivier de Sardan (2008),[17] thus actually come into operation by means of significant irregular activity by politicians.

By contrast, the wider cultural framework within which the various actors operate seems more concrete and restrictive. The unmistakable hegemony of Lombardo's political circles cannot be attributed just to the resources he could mobilise or the strategic positions his representatives held within the local political system. To fully understand the nature of the political power to which the Mafia gangs related, it may be helpful to consider the broader legitimation of the Lombardo brothers' political activity. In gauging their trustworthiness, the bosses, just like the local politicians interviewed, evidently espoused ideas about power management that were specific to the local political context and, for a while, were clearly embodied by the two MpA leaders. In assessing their own economic and material interests, Mafia members also seemed to adhere to the widely held narrative wherein the clientelistic forms of local rule implemented by the Lombardo brothers were effective and socially legitimate practices within which to locate the criminal behaviour that also involved Mafia membership.

It was, essentially, the narrative regarding the actual practice of local rule, perceived as clientelistic, that was the frame of reference for the support that the two politicians received, from Cosa Nostra bosses as from others.

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Notes

1. Cuffaro, twice elected president (2001 and 2006), was given his definitive sentence, for aiding and abetting the Mafia, by the *Corte di Cassazione* in January 2011.
2. Angelo Lombardo was an Italian parliamentary deputy from 2008 to 2013, after many years as his brother Raffaele's political secretary.
3. The first pieces that dwelt at length on the structural interrelationship between the state apparatus and Mafia organisations in Sicily appeared in *Meridiana* (vol. 7–8, 1990) and in Fiandaca and Costantino 1994. This perspective is given substantial support by the well-known Franchetti investigation (2011 [1876]), and by Blok 1974 and Pezzino 1990.
4. In this article 'legitimation' has the meaning intended by Berger and Luckmann 1991, 110.
5. Recent attention has been given to the restrictive nature of social science constructs by Mastropaolo and Sciarrone 2011, 12; see also Palumbo 2006, 22.
6. See, among many examples, Bayart 1989; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006.
7. More limited understandings of 'consensus', with its connotations of both 'support' and 'agreement' (Cotta 1992), are inadequate for identification of the processes whereby collective political identities are constructed.
8. The 'Etnean' area covers the territory around Mount Etna, in the province of Catania.
9. This title was first used by the journalist Giuseppe Fava in 1983 in 'I quattro cavalieri dell'apocalisse mafiosa', an article in the first issue of the review *I Siciliani*.
10. See the relationship between the Santapaola family and Catania's *Cavalieri del lavoro*, discussed earlier.
11. In 2007 alone, SAFAB was involved in two other large projects in Sicily, in Palermo.
12. In the local elections in Catania in June 2005, four civic lists related to a small group of Lombardo's political allies took more than 20 per cent of the vote. In the Sicilian regional elections of 2006, the MpA reached 12 per cent of the vote (24 per cent in the province of Catania).
13. In addition to his significant political roles, over a long career Lombardo held various administrative responsibilities at local, provincial and regional levels.
14. Lombardo's political reputation was also affected by his earlier involvement, as a politician and DC official, in the 'Tangentopoli' court cases.
15. This is not at all unusual, and has long been like this for the Mafia: without legitimation by other actors with power, it could not have endured and reproduced itself over time.
16. The Durkheimian concept of 'social norms' used here refers to a system of implicit rules for social behaviour which also surreptitiously penetrate the public sphere (Olivier de Sardan 2008, 10).
17. 'Such practical norms are not necessarily expressed as such by social actors: they are more often than not automatic and routine, existing in a vein more latent than explicit' (Olivier de Sardan 2008, 16).

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Italian summary

Dalla primavera del 2008 la Sicilia è stata governata da Raffaele Lombardo, leader e fondatore del Movimento per le Autonomie (MpA), un partito politico a vocazione autonomista fondato da uomini politici di provenienza democristiana fortemente radicati nella città e nella provincia di Catania. Nell'estate del 2012, Lombardo fu costretto a rassegnare le dimissioni in seguito a un'inchiesta della magistratura che portò alla luce i suoi legami con alcune famiglie mafiose della Sicilia orientale.

L'articolo si basa su due ricerche etnografiche condotte nel territorio catanese tra il 2009 e il 2013. Nel descrivere i comportamenti politici degli elettori, dei rappresentanti locali e dei notabili del partito, la ricerca si sofferma sulle relazioni di potere instaurate tra questi diversi soggetti e sulla loro tendenza a interiorizzare le diffuse narrazioni relative alla politica e al clientelismo in territorio siciliano. Le pratiche clientelari messe in campo nell'attività politica quotidiana, oggetto di rappresentazioni pubbliche e private da parte degli attori politici intervistati, sono state impersonate per qualche tempo da Lombardo e dai suoi colleghi di partito. Mettendo in relazione i dati reperiti nel corso dell'osservazione etnografica con i documenti giudiziari che descrivono i legami tra i dirigenti del MpA e i boss di Cosa Nostra, è possibile avanzare alcune ipotesi in merito alla natura del diffuso consenso garantito al partito anche dai membri delle locali famiglie mafiose.