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The Fascist anti-mafia operation in Campania, 1926-1927

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The anti-mafia operation undertaken in Sicily by the fledgling Fascist government had a powerful symbolic meaning in the construction of the 'new state'. As a result, it left behind a wealth of sources: from the diaries of the prefect Cesare Mori and Alfredo Cucco, the Fascist Party's representative in Sicily, to the many trials against 'criminal associations' from 1927 onwards. These sources are at the centre of a historiographical debate that dates back to the 1980s, and which has recently brought to light numerous elements of the complex relationship between Fascism and the Sicilian Mafia. In contrast, despite a similar level of publicity, the law and order operation launched in the same year of 1926 in Campania, in the province of Caserta, has largely been forgotten, and has received little historical analysis. This article presents the early results of research into the Fascist suppression of the mafia in Campania in 1926 and 1927, focusing on the city of Naples and the province of Caserta (Terra di Lavoro). An initial study of judicial sources suggests that, unlike Sicily, the notion of 'organised crime' that underpinned the inquiries was largely denied in the final verdicts.

Keywords: Fascism; Camorra; loan sharks; Naples; Terra di Lavoro

Introduction

In the mid-1980s a series of studies examined the relationship between Fascism and the mafia, with Christopher Duggan's work (Duggan 1986) leading the way. Between 1926 and 1927, Mussolini entrusted the security forces and the Sicilian judiciary with a dramatic anti-mafia mission, with two aims: incorporating the island into its efforts to convert the country to Fascism and demonstrating symbolically the efficiency of the new state compared to 'the degeneration of an even more serious degeneration, i.e. the democratic system' (Coco 2013, 44). The regime's rhetoric presented the fight against organised crime as a way of showing the distance between Fascism and the liberal state. The aim of the numerous trials, 105 in total, held between 1926 and 1932 (Coco and Patti 2008) was to demonstrate the existence of the Mafia and to land a blow against it, and as a result the accusations focused on the crime of belonging to a criminal association (*associazione a delinquere)*. However, the 1889 penal code prescribed short sentences for this crime (simple associates could receive a maximum of five years' imprisonment, while bosses were subject to stricter sentences), and this choice on the part of the judiciary therefore in many cases had the effect of reducing the effectiveness of Cesare Mori's operation to suppress crime. So a new approach was taken in the 1930s, this time intelligence-based: according to reports from *pentiti*, an oligarchic associative structure remained in place, divided up regionally into 'families' (Coco and Patti 2010). Using this new knowledge as a starting point, the historiographical research

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into the relationship between the regime and the mafia posed further questions about events immediately following the Mori operation. This new research went beyond the interpretation posited by Duggan, who saw purging Sicilian Fascism of its internal opposition, represented predominantly by the federalist Alfredo Cucco, as the Mori operation's main priority.

The symbolic value attributed to the first anti-mafia clampdown in 1926, the large number of arrests and cautions and the dozens of court cases targeting the crime of belonging to a criminal association mean that historians studying Sicily have a significant number of sources at their disposal. It could be said that Fascism did not defeat the mafia, but rather helped cement its place in the history books. And this is true not only for Sicily but also for Calabria, where the attempt to suppress the mafia in the 1930s, although not as widely publicised as the Sicilian operation, nevertheless left behind important judicial testimony on the structure of the criminal community (Truzzolillo 2013). The relationship between the mafia and Fascism and evaluating the success of the Fascist fight against organised crime are particularly sensitive topics in the history of post-war Italy, since they raise crucial questions on the ability of the democratic system to tackle mafia activity. The subject has recently been able to return to the centre of the historiographical debate thanks to the expiry of time restrictions on consulting sources. The perspective we enjoy today, it has been noted, is substantially different from that of the 1980s; following the results of the clampdown that began during that decade, the Fascist suppression of the mafia can now be assessed in the light of undeniable proof of the ability of the democratic republic to forge and apply new tools in the fight against organised crime (Lupo 2008).

With the myth that the regime succeeded – for the first time – in overcoming the liberal state's reluctance to fight the mafia finally put to bed (Petacco 1978), historians investigating the judicial and police documentation from the 1920s and 1930s have managed to uncover the complexity of the relationship between Fascism and the Sicilian clans, and between the exploitation of violence, political alliances and the militarisation of law and order for repressive purposes. In addition, these works have raised new questions regarding the enduring nature of criminal families, the languages of mafia networks and their social composition, which tends to bridge social divides.

Nothing similar has emerged for Campania, where an attempt to restore law and order took place at the same time as the Mori operation, as well publicised as the Sicilian one, as we will see below, but of which few traces remain. Despite a lack of empirical evidence, or even archive materials, comparable with the Sicilian sources, the little historiography focused on the period tends to consider the effectiveness of the Fascist suppression of criminal groups in Campania as a given (Barbagallo 2010, 99–100). However, we know very little about the premises and aims of the law and order policies in the region under the fledgling Fascist government, both in Naples and the surrounding area. This paper provides the results of an initial survey of police and judicial sources from 1926 to 1927, which suggest that a major rethink is required on the notion that the early years of the regime coincided with the 'sinking' of the Camorra brand of organised crime.

Inside the Fascist city: redevelopment and moral cleansing

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Naples' criminal elite increasingly lost its sectarian and working-class connotations, drawing instead ever closer to the ruling classes, in both local government and business circles. In 1901, a parliamentary inquest into the city's governance, headed by senator Giuseppe Saredo, brought to light a web of vested interests and accommodation of the criminal elite from sectors of the ruling class, which the Socialist Party had been reporting for some time. This revealed the imitative abilities of the 'high Camorra', which had moved dangerously close to government institutions (Monzini 1999, 23). The Cuocolo trial, launched

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following a murder in 1909, represented the reaction of the city's ruling classes against the infiltration of the criminal elite into the relationship between local government and businessmen. The inquest into the murder produced a vast haul of Camorra members, and soon took on the form of a large-scale anti-Camorra trial. However, it was conducted using rather unorthodox methods (forcing witnesses to testify and falsifying evidence) and so led to widespread national attention (Marmo 2003 and 2009; Barbagallo 2010, 90–93). This extraordinary era of suppression ended the crisis that had arisen in the early years of the century, and the Camorra, wounded by the raids and the trial, disappeared from public discourse.

On the eve of the First World War, criminal activity in Naples appeared disjointed, a mix of predatory offences predominantly practised in the port area, procuring of prostitution and illegal lending (Monzini 1999, 53–55). Looking at the city in the early 1920s through police sources, it is the latter that appears to have been the main priority in their control of the population. In a city of commerce characterised by widespread, small-scale trading and greatly affected by the post-war financial crisis, the phenomenon was extremely common, and even before the March on Rome it was the focus of intense correspondence between the judiciary and police bodies regarding the best administrative measures to take to protect public safety. This primarily involved the *ammonizione*, or caution, a police sanction introduced into liberal Italy to monitor groups considered to be 'dangerous', from 'idlers and vagrants' and procurers of prostitution to loan sharks and anyone suspected of committing a serious crime. The chief of police could, following a report or charge, use a caution to impose a series of conduct-related measures (forcing people to search for a residence and fixed employment and preventing them from meeting certain people or performing suspicious activities) along with partial restrictions on freedom of movement. These lasted two years, at the end of which, if the person who received the caution had not 'reformed', they could be subjected to internal exile or imprisonment (Fiore 1988). However, the measures taken by the police turned out to be largely ineffective in clamping down on crimes like illegal lending, because it was difficult for police officers to demonstrate the danger to society of the suspected loan sharks, who often also had another profession and gave the appearance of being honest workers far removed from the 'idlers and vagrants' on the margins of society. Although 'dangerous' persons could be directly reported by the police, those who were deemed to be socially respectable (i.e. those with a home and a job) required a report from the victims, who were either too obliging or too scared to report illegal lenders.

Along with the difficulty in applying the measures designed to constrain the practice, police sources also show the large number and spread of these figures. When, in early October 1922, the city's police stations were asked to produce a census of loan sharks in their districts, the most obvious finding was the large concentration in the areas with most footfall, such as the district of San Giuseppe, set around central Piazza Dante and the trading thoroughfare between Via Roma and the Archaeological Museum, where in November 1922 there were 37 people offering illegal lending in various sectors, from prostitution and the world of struggling small businesses and craftsmen to 'young people from good families, but without morals'.[1] This area seems to have attracted loan sharks, given that alongside the 20 resident in the district the police commissioner added another 17 from other districts but regularly seen locally. An equally high number of moneylenders (20) was recorded in the district of Pendino, a busy, bustling area adjacent to San Giuseppe, stretching from the main roads just before Piazza Dante through to the eastern side of the neighbourhood around the central station. A few more (22) were recorded in the Avvocata district, immediately north of San Giuseppe. As well as being many in number, the category of lenders was also extremely varied, and the total number of loan sharks counted by the police in the city (189) therefore only offers an indication, since the police commissioners only wrote down the

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names of people actually liable for a caution, ignoring the world of small-scale lending, which was widespread but innocuous in the eyes of the police since it did not give rise to conflict.[2]

As a result of the widespread public alarm caused by the scale of loansharking, it became one of the main objectives set out in the Fascist law and order policies established in Naples once the regime had cemented its position. The post-war financial crisis had created a high level of social conflict in the city, in which trade unions played a key role. The city's Fascist movement, which attracted the largest number of members in the region (Varvaro 1990a) and which as early as 1921 achieved a significant electoral result (over 5000 votes: Millan 2014), was originally ideological, intransigent and revolutionary, in stark contrast to the transformist nationalism elsewhere. During the years of social conflict, the charismatic leader of Naples' Fascist movement, Aurelio Padovani, turned the violence of the Fascist squads against the socialist trade unions, determined to undermine workers' support for them (Colapietra 1962; Varvaro, 1990a, 949 cites the crucial attacks on the striking port workers). According to the evidence collected by Paolo Ricci in the 1950s, several Neapolitan Camorra members also played a part in these squads, choosing to offer their violent credentials in support of the campaign of political violence in exchange for protection from the clampdown launched in 1926–1927. Some of them even reached lofty positions. Ricci notes various cases of Camorra members being assimilated into the movement and then into the Fascist regime: young *guappi* enlisted as heads of districts, a *camorrista* named as director of the tobacco factory, and a member given various roles at the fruit market in exchange for his services to the Fascist squads, as well as to strengthen public support in the city (Ricci 1989, 109–111). The years of Fascism's rise to power, between 1921 and 1923, when it also achieved good electoral results in the city, provoked deep conflict between the movement in Naples and the nationalist party represented by the member of parliament for Terra di Lavoro, Paolo Greco. In contrast to the city's 'movementist' wing, Greco's party pushed for *transformismo* among the principal elites, and it really took off after 1923, when it joined forces with the nationalist Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF) (Bernabei 1975; Lupo 2000).

In 1925, Fascism in Naples was organised and led by the moderate Vincenzo Tecchio, and running the city was entrusted to the High Commission for the City and Province, led by Michele Castelli, the former prefect of Naples. Castelli launched a redevelopment programme in the city following the acquisition of new surrounding rural and semi-industrial districts, which almost doubled the size of the urban area (De Antonellis 1972; Varvaro 1990b; Musella 2010, 88–90).[3]

The regime granted a new role to the city, in its newly expanded form and under the rule of the High Commission, naming it the 'cultural capital' of southern Italy, in an era of radical centralist restructuring of local government throughout the country. The focus of the law and order policies launched in the city following the reform of the police in 1926 should be seen in the light of this triumphalist urban development plan which, in the Fascist discourse, was associated with the moral cleansing of the population, aiming to reaffirm people's trust in the new state. This is reflected in the description of the regime's urban redevelopment policies by Alberto Consiglio, a liberal journalist who in those years gravitated towards Fascism: 'The Fascist regime, over a 12-year period, has not needed to implement any specific measures against crime in Naples. The mere establishment of the authoritarian regime and its overall efficiency was enough to clear the atmosphere [...] and to completely overcome the traditional antagonism between the people and the police, while the other scourge, *small-scale moneylending* [...] has disappeared without a trace' (Consiglio 1935, 92; my emphasis).

Camorra membership did not appear in the categories liable for a caution in the 1926 law, and as a result the criminal association was not mentioned in the public portrayal of the police's new direction, which instead presented a parasitic image of the city's crime, focused on loansharking. In Naples, as in other major Italian cities, the November 1926 reform led to the foundation of a

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provincial commission directed by the city's high commissioner for the administration of police measures, cautions and internment (*confino*). This marked a profound shift from the liberal era, removing these matters from the control of the judiciary and entrusting them exclusively to the police. The provincial caution commissions comprised police managers, from the chief of police to the commander of the provincial Carabinieri, and a judge chosen by the head of the court, and were chaired by the prefect; in Naples the commission was chaired by High Commissioner Castelli. They would gather substantiated police reports for the categories under suspicion, and administer the cautions or even internment, following a procedure whereby the reporting authority worked together with the judiciary (Poesio 2011, 37). The press reacted favourably to this purge of the city's criminality, and a report in Naples' main daily newspaper presented the commission's first eight months as a mission 'to suppress loansharking and delinquency', thanks to which 'the blight of loansharking [could] be considered to be eradicated' (Il Mattino 1927). The report focused on illegal lenders in its examination of the individuals given cautions, many of whom, scared of the new police measures, presented themselves voluntarily to the chief of police to hand over the promissory notes of their debtors, thus giving up their activity. However, loan sharks were not the only figures targeted: in the summary of the cases overseen by the commission in its first eight months of work, the most numerous categories were those suspected of predatory crimes ('thieves and crooks', 'violent and bloodthirsty individuals', followed at some distance by pick-pockets and muggers), procuring prostitution, enabling illegal immigration, drug trafficking and organising gambling: in total 850 cautions were administered in the province of Naples and the recently abolished province of Caserta.[4]

Many of the 'dangerous' individuals examined by the commission came from the province of Caserta, where, as we will see shortly, the military crackdown on the Camorra was beginning in the same period. During its first year of operation, however, the statistics reveal the largest amount of crime took place in the urban area of Naples, which, with approximately 830,000 inhabitants (De Antonellis 1972, 14), was the largest in the kingdom; here, over the course of ten months, almost the same number of cautions were handed out as in the entire province of Caserta, which, according to the 1921 census, had approximately the same number of inhabitants as the city of Naples, 867,826 (Bernabei 1975, 23).[5] The crimes were a mix of predatory and parasitic occupations typical of a large city and, despite the triumphalist tone taken by the press in response to these measures, there were very few cases of 'repentance', i.e. criminals spontaneously giving up illegal activities to avoid police measures.

The word 'Camorra' does not feature in relation to this small-scale criminality, nor are Camorra associates mentioned in reports from the city. The sect was seen to have been dissolved, and even in the posthumous reconstruction of the biographies of the Neapolitan Camorra members it is the leading loan sharks who are given most attention during the Fascist era. One such example is Michele Aria, known as *il capraro*, a leading loan shark who moved to New York after 1926 to escape imprisonment: considered 'a benchmark figure for all of Naples' moneylenders' (Di Fiore 2005, 132), in New York Aria came into conflict with the Sicilians due to his attempt to tax moneylending transactions in the Brooklyn region, and came off worse. His story follows the standard meteoric rise of any great criminal: the use of violence, duels and charisma directed towards the working classes, which the city's press tried to challenge, describing him as 'the most vulgar of the common criminals; superstitious and vain, cynical and cruel […] helped by blind luck, which gave him an aura he was able to exploit' (from a report in *il Mattino*, 1923, cited in Di Fiore 2005, 131). He also had clear business links with the remaining members of the Camorra sect active in Naples after the Cuocolo trial, who used the lender to reinvest illicit funds. This model of relationships between the top figures in the Camorra and the leading loan sharks crops up

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frequently in the group's history after the Second World War. Another example is the case of Mario Potenza, a former smuggler and then major loan shark in Santa Lucia, Naples, who in the last three decades of the twentieth century had business relationships with the city's clans, including with rival associations: 'the Potenzas lend money with interest to various clan representatives, effectively acting as a bank for them, a cash reserve [...] But they [the Potenzas] also obtain financial resources from them, which they then launder' (Brancaccio 2017, 37).

The initial data gleaned on the work of the caution committee in Naples do not do anything to contradict the disappearance of the Camorra crisis from public discourse, and reaffirm the picture of crime policies that were created in response to the alarm amongst the general public regarding loansharking, the financial nerve centre of criminality that was still widespread and highly active.

While the Camorra was not discussed in Naples, it was in the surrounding regions that the true anti-mafia operation took place.

In the unruly provinces: the Carabinieri's mission in Terra di Lavoro

The military crackdown on criminality in Campania began in November 1926, the year that saw the start of the Mori operation in Sicily, beginning with the siege of Gangi in January, and involved the northern part of Campania, in the province of Caserta, to the north of Naples. Both missions were announced in Mussolini's manifesto speech given on 16 May 1927, known as the 'Ascension Day Speech', in which he outlined how the new Fascist state would look: anti-parliamentary, centralist and focused on the authoritarian reworking of the decadent and corrupt liberal democracy (Lupo 2000, 16). The crime-fighting mission was launched on the eve of a major overhaul of the governance of the region. Caserta was the capital of an enormous province, Terra di Lavoro, made up of 191 municipalities divided up into five districts (with 70 municipalities in the district of Caserta alone), and stretching from what is now southern Lazio in the north to the Vesuvius area in the south, and from the Pontine coast in the west to the slopes of the Matese mountains in the east. As part of a general reform of provincial borders, in January 1927 Mussolini decreed, without warning, that Terra di Lavoro was to be broken up, and divided between the provinces of Naples, which acquired the district of Nola, and Campobasso, which took over the upper Volturno area, while Lazio's border was moved southwards by the assimilation of the district of Sora into the province of Rome. This measure was intended to facilitate the Fascist regime's infiltration of more rural areas, and went hand-in-hand with the stabilisation of the regime: increasing the number of local institutions, having removed them from the electoral system and entrusted them to centrally-appointed mayors, or *podestà*, meant creating a new connection between the 'new state' and the social classes called upon to represent it. But breaking up Terra di Lavoro also stemmed from the need to calm a particularly turbulent region (Baris 2007). In the period since 1924 the nationalist and transformist wing of the local elite had had the upper hand, and the occupation of the institutions had led to a new surge in internal conflicts, exacerbated by the divisions between local parties.

Terra di Lavoro was not only extremely large in size, it was also a hotbed of political clientelism during Giovanni Giolitti's period in office, symbolising the connections between local government, the political establishment and the Camorra brought to light by reports in the socialist press at the beginning of the century (Musella 1990). In 1901, while the results of the parliamentary inquest into the municipality of Naples were being published, in Terra di Lavoro the municipality of Aversa in the Caserta area, where the Giolitti-supporting member of parliament Peppuccio Romano was based (whose constituency was in the nearby Sessa Aurunca), was put under the administration of an external commissioner due to administrative irregularities. Romano

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was one of the most controversial politicians in the region, accused of administrative anomalies dating back to the late nineteenth century, although these were never proven in court. In addition, he was accused of using Camorra henchmen in his electoral campaigns, an accusation that was put to him in parliament in 1904. In other words, he represented the 'high Camorra', the meeting point between the political establishment and the violent mobs, at the heart of the scandals that arose at the beginning of the century which also involved, in 1903, his companion Pietro Rosano, a lawyer and Giolitti-supporting member of parliament, who committed suicide that year (Di Fiore 2008, 30). Giolitti's decision in 1913 to finally end these embarrassing alliances led to a large-scale public order operation (Dickie 2014, 271–272).

The police reports arising from this operation describe Aversa as the criminal epicentre of the province: here, according to the report sent by Aversa's chief of police to the Ministry of Interior in 1913, out of 35,000 inhabitants an enormous 6,000 had an open file in the criminal records office, and the 'Camorra' was 'incredibly well-organised and [...] colossal in its numbers', ready to 'take to the streets' during elections for financial gain (Criscione 2011–2012, 276). Alongside the danger of infiltration of the electoral process, the investigations launched in 1913 revealed disquiet among the general public about the violence and intimidation that was widespread between Aversa and the plain of the lower Volturno valley, in the swampy area known as the Mazzoni, with its occasional homes dotted around a single urban centre, Mondragone, on the Pontine coast. This area was dominated by large agricultural estates, shared between tenant farmers, predominantly dedicated to rearing buffalo and producing dairy products. These highly prized products and competition over the rental of the land were linked to a high frequency of violent episodes and acts of intimidation connected to protection racketeering (*guardiania*, involving threats, fires and criminal damage) or to the theft of livestock. The parliamentary inquest in the first two years of the century into the living conditions of farmers had revealed the widespread violence that surrounded buffalo rearing and dairy product production (Bordiga 1909): here organised crime predominantly aimed to control the rent for the various parcels of land into which the estates were divided, and achieved this by putting pressure on the landowners by damaging crops, starting fires and killing animals.

Meanwhile, livestock rustling and armed robberies were the most common crimes around Nola, a city with a successful agricultural market at the meeting point between the Vesuvius area and the east-west main road Via Nazionale delle Puglie. Rustling was frequently followed by imposing a price for the return of the stolen animals. The highway robbers that operated on the routes followed by the traders caused substantial public alarm in the area; one of the most significant investigations launched in 1913 followed the killing of a goldsmith in broad daylight during a highway robbery between Nola and Avellino, which led to a campaign of mass arrests. In this case, the inquiry revealed the existence of an association of thieves and robbers with its headquarters in Piazzolla, a district of Nola. The association, which, according to the police, numbered between 53 and 67 individuals, and which included joining rituals and promotion up the criminal hierarchy, was divided into a series of local groups, known as *rocchie*. These were located in the centre of Nola as well as the districts of Piazzolla and Carbonara, both logistically important due to their position near the main transport routes. The main activity carried out by associates was highway robbery, in an area with heavy traffic between the villages around Vesuvius, the prosperous agricultural area of Nola, the province of Avellino and even into Puglia; a 'sort of brigandage', as the subprefect of Nola wrote to the prefect of Caserta in 1913, which was difficult to defeat because it was protected by the *omertà* of the population, and which required a military intervention instead. Despite years of requests, however, a Carabineri base was opened in Piazzolla only in 1917 (Criscione 2011–2012, 224–225). In Nola, like in Aversa, the

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investigations carried out by the police before the war had linked, with a degree of certainty, the widespread criminality (from predatory crimes to the production of fake coins and offences against the person) to the existence of a criminal association whose *camorrista* nature was evident from its various rituals.

The military action launched by the Fascist government targeted the areas affected by the public order crises in the preceding years: the Nola district, the municipality of Aversa and the nearby Mazzoni plain. Mussolini made explicit mention of the Mazzoni area and its wild and backward nature in his Ascension Day speech, describing it as an epicentre of widespread criminality that now, he implied, with a reduction in its political and administrative backing, could finally be wiped out militarily. To give further weight to a highly symbolic operation, the speech made extensive use of statistics collected by Major Vincenzo Anceschi from the Carabinieri, who was entrusted with the mission in November 1926. These figures can be seen in the documentation collected and published by Anceschi's son (unfortunately without any reference details), which are widely cited and practically the only source of information on the Fascist anti-mafia campaign in Campania. According to the statistics provided by the Carabinieri, over four years in the three affected areas there were 432 counts of arson, 592 robberies and 200 murders (Anceschi 2003, 24).[6] The data collected regarding the crackdown, which involved 'thoroughly combing and searching the area', 'disarming dangerous families en masse' and capturing 'the most dangerous sought-after individuals, who had evaded the campaigns for years' (Anceschi 2003, 44),[7] were similarly impressive. By the end of the operation, on 1 May 1928, Ancheschi had notched up 9,143 arrests, for crimes ranging from desertion and draft evasion (60) and murder (53) through to 'assorted crimes' (the largest category, with 5,456 arrests) and theft and robbery (1,268). Naturally, the major did not refrain from pointing out all the limitations that still prevented peace being restored in the province. As well as the weakness of the local governments, many of which still did not have a *podestà*, he also noted the 'poor sense of morality' of some of those holding office; according to the information gathered by the Carabinieri, certain political secretaries also had criminal connections (Anceschi 2003, 44). Overall, therefore, the picture painted by Anceschi portrayed the continued existence of the ties between criminality and politics that had plagued the province during the liberal era.

Criminal associations in Terra di Lavoro and the first sentences

Of the significant results of the operation, Anceschi focused on the uncovering of 20 criminal associations described in 18 trials listed at the end of the 1928 report, which resulted from the raids and the denunciations that finally arrived after years of fear and *omertà*, featuring a total of 494 defendants, both men and women. These trials were all held at the court in Santa Maria Capua Vetere, apart from two large cases sent to the *corti d'assise* in Naples and Potenza, for which the corresponding paperwork could not be consulted: the documentation for the Potenza trial, particularly significant because it brought together two separate inquests into a close-knit network of robbers (with 95 people on trial) active between the Mazzoni area and Aversa, was never sent to the city's state archive, and was lost by the court archives.[8] The 11 verdicts from the courts of first and second instance that could be traced (the way the trials are catalogued in Caserta State Archive does not allow a sentence to be linked to its paperwork) nevertheless provide a general overview of the legal proceedings that resulted from Anceschi's mission.

The trials concerned the three areas at the heart of the public order operations that had been taking place since before the war: the municipalities and districts of Nola, the Mazzoni area and Aversa. The accusation of belonging to a criminal association was shared by all the people involved,

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combined with various types of crime, mostly a range of predatory offences and coercion (threats, criminal damage and intimidation), with no charges of serious violent crime. The accused were therefore not assassins, but rather groups of various types of thieves, alongside gangs of thugs, operating in the rental market and, in a single case, in the rural sector. The latter was outlined in the inquest into events in Nola since 1924, which described how nine 'market brokers' (including one woman), led by a 67-year-old man, Giuseppe Ruggi, were accused of conspiring to buy up agricultural products arriving at Nola market, taking advantage of their role as brokers, before selling them on at inflated prices, thereby acquiring a monopoly on the prices, as well as receiving their payment for acting as middlemen. The accused were acquitted of belonging to a criminal association, as happened in almost all of the verdicts examined.[9]

The dominant type of crime in this group of trials, however, was theft. There were gangs of petty thieves, involving women and some very young children: Manfredo Ciccarelli, for example, was 16 years old, and accused of 26 counts of breaking and entering with the theft of objects of a range of value, from linen and domestic utensils through to jewellery, committed at the behest of his mother, Luisa Visconti; the crimes were committed in Santa Maria Capua Vetere, where Manfredo lived with his family. The six people in court (including the mother and an accomplice of hers) were convicted of theft and collusion in this offence, but acquitted of belonging to a criminal association.[10] A gang dedicated to ransacking commercial warehouses also operated in the same city, but the final verdict of the case is not known.[11]

Cases of rustling occurred more frequently than petty theft, often with a ransom demanded for the stolen animals' safe return. In more than one case the networks of thieves were large and spread across a wide area, but often with a central headquarters in Aversa. This was the case, for example, in the theft of three mares in Santa Maria la Fossa in the Mazzoni area, where in December 1926 Domenico Policastro was arrested for acting as the middleman for the payment of the ransom for the return of the animals, which in the meantime had been taken to Aversa, roughly 20km further south.[12] Policastro was 43 and a well-known thief, and therefore, according to the investigators, belonged to the 'disreputable crowd'; after his arrest, he willingly told the Carabinieri that he became involved in the affair at the request of the two caretakers of the plot where the horses were stolen, and they, along with him, were tried for belonging to a criminal association. However, the judges clearly saw the accusation as contrived for the two caretakers, who at the court of first instance were acquitted of belonging to a criminal association, along with the main defendant, Policastro, who was convicted at the court of appeal for the sole crime of receiving stolen goods.[13] The judges at the court of first instance recognised the typical network of interests that revolved around horse theft, involving the receivers (in this case a woman and her lover in Aversa) and the middlemen hired to collect (or impose) the price for the animals' return.

The role of middlemen in ransom payments is important, as in general these figures were described as the heads of the groups of thieves. One example was the case of Biagio Murano, a cattle trader who, along with an accomplice, was accused of organising a gang of thieves that had targeted apartments and cattle since 1920 in the districts around Nola, some of whom had already been acquitted of similar accusations by the court of Avellino due to a lack of evidence.[14] The gang of 36 people, including five women, were all reported by the Carabinieri in April 1927 for a series of thefts committed since 1920 at private homes and warehouses, including the theft of a female donkey, followed by a ransom request sent by Murano to the owner. Almost all of the suspects were convicted of theft and handling stolen goods, while they were all acquitted of criminal association. As well as horse thieves, there were also highway robbers, who operated in the area known as Campania Felix, along an approximately 30km line connecting the

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cities of Aversa and Nola: the gangs of robbers who worked along the roads connecting the prosperous agricultural market of Nola and the surrounding villages seem, once again, to have had their headquarters in Aversa. This, at least, was the hypothesis of the investigation into the group led by Eugenio Di Bello, accused of robbing 13 carters in one night on the road between Casal di Principe and Villa Literno. This case was heard together with one in which Luigi Iovino was accused of heading a group of 90 people dedicated mostly to stealing cattle, committing robbery and carrying out criminal damage for intimidation purposes in the countryside around Aversa, where the group was run: the trial was transferred to the *Corte d'Assise* in Potenza due to a 'well-founded suspicion' of bias, where, as stated above, the court documents have been lost.

Of the sentences examined here, only in one case did the judges, who predominantly handed down sentences for theft, arson, criminal damage and violence against the person, acknowledge the crime of belonging to a criminal association. This was the case of Massimino Iovino from Casaluce, a suburb of Aversa. According to a report sent to the Ministry of Interior in 1920 by the mayor of Casaluce, Iovino had previously been involved in an attempt to create 'a Camorra-style association' in the city, supported during the war by a certain Mr Fedele, a local criminal, discharged from duty due to a psychiatric illness (simulated, according to the report), who during the war set up a gang that, in the words of the mayor, 'practised [...] every type of Camorra-style crime': predominantly theft (with demands for ransom) and the production of false coins.[15] The mayor's report was contradicted by a report from the Carabinieri, which stated that Fedele, despite his previous history, was a reformed character. In the 1927 trial, Iovino (who was one of the criminals brought into the Camorra association by Fedele) was accused of leading a group of 25 thieves targeting warehouses and agricultural products, and, despite the 1920 Carabinieri report, was convicted of theft and belonging to a criminal association.[16]

The verdicts examined here for the most part follow a principle established in the liberal age: complicity in a crime was not sufficient to prove belonging to an association, the foundation of which, according to the 1889 penal code, was a crime in itself, regardless of the individual acts committed by its associates.[17] The judges therefore did not acknowledge the crime of belonging to a criminal association, and handed down rather mild sentences, from one to three years, in some cases with additional penalties attached (special surveillance).

Having ascertained that complicity in theft was not sufficient to prove the existence of an association, let us now look at the weight given in court procedures to the notion of *Camorra*. The intimidating presence of a criminal association emerged, for example, in the verdict of a trial examining threats and criminal damage involving a plot of land in the countryside near Nola, in which two family groups were accused (70-year-old Raffaele Ceruso and his son, and 64-year-old Raffaele Manco, with his two children). This is one of three trials on the Anceschi list involving criminal damage and threats in the Nola area. The owner of the plot of land, probably encouraged by the Carabinieri operation, went to the subprefect of Nola to report 'that for several years she had received constant threats from criminals from the Nola area',[18] and in particular from the Ceruso family, owners of the adjacent plot of land, who wanted to take over her land by imposing *guardiania* on it. Numerous pieces of evidence confirming the intimidation to which the woman and the caretaker of her plot of land were subjected (shots fired at the door and threatening notes) and the responsibility of the accused for burning down a barn were also collected by the subprefect and the local Fascist party's political secretary. But many of the accusations were withdrawn, a change of mind clearly due 'to intimidation from the *Nola Camorra* [...] before, in age-old style, accusing the police of beatings'.[19] The judges convicted all the accused of threats and criminal damage, in spite of the many statements in their favour (which, in their excessive enthusiasm,

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ended up contradicting themselves), but acquitted them of belonging to a criminal association: the sentence was confirmed at the appeal court, and in May 1928 an appeal to the court of cassation was also rejected.

Conclusion

In the verdicts examined the presence of criminal groups can be seen in the recurrence of predatory crimes, the widespread use of violence and intimidation, and the networks of complicity connecting areas with different operational roles: Aversa, the central location for storing goods and receiving stolen horses; the small settlements of the Mazzoni; the trading centre of Nola and the criss-crossing surrounding roads. In some cases, like the final one cited above, the Camorra was explicitly named by the judges, yet the accused were systematically acquitted of belonging to a criminal association, with one known exception, the Iovino trial. Although 11 sentences (not all of which reached the appeal stage in the two-year period under consideration) certainly cannot be taken to represent the entire judicial result of the Anceschi operation, various considerations can nevertheless be drawn from the information gathered. The Camorra is acknowledged and mentioned in more than one passage, both as an operating method (protection racketeering) and as a group of criminally-minded people. However, this clear presence did not prove the existence of the criminal association, unlike the same period in the Sicilian courts, where the crime of belonging to a criminal association took on a primary role in the identification of the Sicilian Mafia as a foreign body, an 'anomaly' in the Fascist state (Patti 2014, 30). The accusation of belonging to a criminal association in this context acquired such significance that it led to a heated debate between defence lawyers and judges on its use in the Fascist clampdown on the mafia. In the trials in Terra di Lavoro, meanwhile, the judges continued to contradict the existence of the associations, and their verdicts denied the picture painted by the investigations of numerous predatory acts all connected to central headquarters, or of violent groups operating in the land and agricultural products markets.

At this stage of the research, is not yet possible to say how much these attitudes were conditioned by a tendency, harking back to the liberal era, to reject applying this type of crime to collusion, or whether it was a result of the accommodation of criminality, denounced by Anceschi himself, by local authorities, including the judiciary.[20] This reluctance to recognise the Camorra networks as criminal associations and the contrast between the offhand way in which the judges mentioned the Camorra before denying its existence in the criminal justice setting suggest that the judiciary's double vision of widespread organised crime may have contributed to the fading of the memory of these criminal phenomena through history, aggravated by the poor state of the archives and neglect in the preservation of the judicial records. While the Camorra was difficult to identify at a judicial level in the provincial courts, the Camorra groups in Naples were equally invisible, hidden by the widespread and widely publicised loansharking crisis in the 'moral cleansing' of the city. Initial research into judicial sources suggests that the limited use of the notion of belonging to a criminal association during the clampdown contributed to the notion that the Camorra went silent during the 20 years of Fascist power. However, the inquests launched at the time in Terra di Lavoro, in some cases linked to the suppression carried out previously under Giolitti (and particularly the 1913 operation) revealed a precise type of criminal network, characterised by a prevalence of predatory crimes, intimidation and violent groups operating in agricultural markets. These visible traces in the area around Nola and Aversa demand further reflection on the links that connect these criminal networks with those emerging after the Second World War, which could only be confirmed by more in-depth research.

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Notes

1. *Relazione del Commissario di P.S. del quartiere San Giuseppe al Questore, 20 novembre 1922*. The census of illegal lenders in the city was demanded in the report produced by the head of the Naples Public Prosecutor's Office on 14 October 1922. Archivio di Stato di Napoli (ASNa), *Questura di Napoli*, Gabinetto, prima parte 1919–1932, busta 19, f. 318.
2. For example, the commissioner for the Mercato district noted: 'In this district there are no true loan sharks, people who achieve the means for a life of laziness and luxury exclusively from illegal and shady speculation. Instead, here so-called small-scale loansharking is practised, with loans of no more than 200 lira, at an exorbitant rate of interest, but which do not lead to competition between the various parties'. *Rapporto del Commissario della Sezione Mercato, 13 dicembre 1922*, ASNa, *Questura*, Gabinetto, prima parte 1919–1932, envelope 16, f. 256.
3. The new district included the rural farmhouses on the western (Soccavo and Pianura), eastern (San Pietro a Patierno, Barra and Ponticelli) and northern (Chiaiano, Secondigliano) edges of the city, and the industrialised villages of Bagnoli in the west and San Giovanni a Teduccio in the east.
4. The cautions handed out by the commission between 2 December 1926 and 22 September 1927 in the provinces of Naples and Caserta covered, in descending order, the following categories of suspects: 347 thieves and crooks; 141 procurers of women; 137 violent and bloodthirsty individuals; 74 loan sharks; 72 muggers; 40 facilitators of illegal emigration; 12 traffickers of narcotic substances; and five gambling organisers. *Ammoniti dalla Commissione provinciale dal 2 dicembre 1926 al 22 settembre* 1927, AsNa, *Questura,* Gabinetto, prima parte b. 19 f. 322.
5. The commission, which started work on 2 December 1926, by 22 September 1927 had issued cautions to 307 people in the municipality of Naples, 156 in the province of Naples and 327 in the province of Caserta: *Ammoniti della Commissione Provinciale dal 2 dicembre 1926 al 22 settembre 1927*, AsNA, *Questura*, Gabinetto, prima parte, b. 19 f. 322. 1,014 cases were examined in total: as well as the people given a caution, there were 164 cases where the Commission did not find sufficient reason to issue one and 23 in total where a caution was not issued for various reasons, including the 'repentance' mentioned above.
6. *Statistica numerica dei reati verificatisi nella plaga de' Mazzoni e nell'Agro Aversano dal 1mo gennaio dell'anno 1922 al Novembre 1926*.
7. *Repressione della delinquenza. Al Comando dell'Arma dei CC. in Roma, Caserta 1° maggio 1928*.
8. The investigations involved Luigi Iovino plus another 90 people accused of theft, robbery and attempted murder between 1920 and 1926 in the area between Aversa, in the province of Caserta, and Giugliano, in the province of Naples; this inquest was combined with that carried out into the clan of Eugenio Di Bello and four others, for robberies committed in July 1927 (Anceschi 2003, 32 and 37).
9. Tribunale di Santa Maria Capua Vetere, seconda sezione, 26 November 1927, sentence of Ruggi Giuseppe plus nine others.

10. Tribunale di Santa Maria Capua Vetere, prima sezione penale, sentence given 15 June 1927. In July that year, Naples Appeal Court reduced the sentence for Manfredo Ciccarelli only.
11. This refers to the trial of Pasquale Cristiano plus ten others 'for belonging to a criminal association and numerous thefts'. However, the verdict is not given in the court's records for 1927 and 1928.
12. Tribunale di Santa Maria Capua Vetere, seconda sezione, 20 May 1927, Policastro Domenico plus eight.
13. On 17 March 1928 the Naples Court of Appeal confirmed the sentences of the two receivers, Alberto Golia and his lover Margherita Nettuno, both from Aversa, of two years in prison for handling stolen goods; Policastro and another accomplice were convicted of the same crime: Corte di Appello di Napoli, n. reg. 413, sentenza n. 2658.
14. *Tribunale di Santa Maria Capua Vetere,* 21 June 1927, trial of Biagio Murano plus 32 others for conspiracy to commit crimes against property, breaking and entering, illegal entry by extraordinary means and rustling as part of a criminal association. The crimes took place in Domicella, Casola and Carbonara di Nola from 1920 onwards. We know Murano's profession from the wording of the sentence, as information regarding the accused is very limited: their profession is not given, and sometimes nor is their place of residence.
15. Archivio di Stato di Caserta, *Questura*, b. 203 f. 344, Associazioni a delinquere – Casaluce, cited in Criscione 2011–2012, 311–312.
16. Tribunale di Santa Maria Capua Vetere, 2 sezione, 4 July 1927, sentence handed down to Iovino Massimino plus 25 others for conspiracy to commit crimes against property as part of a criminal association, with the aggravating factor for the former of being the leader. The maximum penalties were four years and four months of imprisonment for Iovino and another accomplice, and two years of special surveillance. The defendants were all very young, including a 17-year-old.
17. *Codice penale italiano e codice di procedura penale diligentemente collazionati su testi ufficiali e colle modificazioni del r.d. 1 dicembre 1889,* Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice 1889 articles 248 and ff. See also above regarding the Mafia.
18. Tribunale di Santa Maria Capua Vetere, quarta sezione penale, 12 April 1927. Sentence handed down to Mangano Nicola plus eight others, accused of conspiracy to commit crimes against property, criminal damage and threats as part of a criminal association.
19. Ibid. The italics are my own.
20. Anceschi, in his final report on 1 May 1928, wrote that 'the crimes have almost stopped'; although 'To complete the redemption work sought by the National Government [...] the choice of Podestà and Political Secretaries must be a strict process [...]. In many Municipalities the Podestà is still not nominated, but rather proposed and re-proposed'. He also reported that the political secretaries included some 'protectors of criminality' who put pressure on the judiciary. Ibid, p. 44. For more details on the numerous critical points highlighted by Anceschi in his final report, see Dickie 2014, 280.

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Italian summary

La repressione della mafia siciliana affidata al prefetto Mori dal regime fascista nei suoi primi anni di vita ha avuto grande rilievo simbolico nella costruzione dello 'stato nuovo', così da farne un oggetto storiografico di prima importanza. Il dibattito si è aperto già negli anni Ottanta, e, grazie alla nuova disponibilità di fonti archivistiche, si è arricchito in anni recenti di nuovi contributi, che leggono quella stagione in una prospettiva

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più articolata e di lunga durata. Molto meno studiata è stata la missione di ordine pubblico lanciata dal fascismo nella provincia casertana di Terra di Lavoro, negli stessi anni della missione Mori. Il saggio ricostruisce i presupposti e il contesto dell'antimafia fascista, tra Napoli e la provincia casertana, e propone i risultati di un sondaggio sulle fonti giudiziarie e di polizia per il biennio 1926 e '27, dal quale emergono primi dati sulla scarsa presa delle imputazioni di associazione sul piano repressivo, e sulla debole visibilità dei fenomeni camorristi nel contesto cittadino, negli anni cruciali della costruzione del regime.

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