Ransom kidnapping: the anonymous underworld of the Italian Republic

Alessandra Montalbano*

Modern Languages and Literatures, Loyola University, Maryland, USA

This article offers a comparative analysis of the phenomenon of ransom kidnapping in Italy between the late 1960s and the late 1990s, a period in which hundreds of citizens were abducted and held by Sardinian banditry, the Sicilian Mafia, and the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta. While ransom kidnapping far surpassed political kidnapping in the number of victims it produced, it has received only a fraction of the scholarly attention that has been given to political abductions during the *anni di piombo*. Tracing the different roots, periods, and development of ransom kidnapping, this article sheds light on the distinct uses that banditry, the Mafia, and the 'Ndrangheta made of this crime; highlights the impact that national economic transformations and the state had on the increase of this phenomenon; and demonstrates how for the Italian underworld, kidnapping was both a reaction to and a means of modernisation. It also argues that particularly in the case of the 'Ndrangheta, kidnapping became a veritable industry.

Keywords: ransom kidnapping; banditry; Mafia; 'Ndrangheta; 1970s; *anni di piombo*

Introduction

Ransom kidnapping was a crime that marked the history of the Italian Republic for almost thirty years (*c.*1969–1998). Nearly 700 people were abducted by the so-called *anonime sequestri* (criminal syndicates dedicated to kidnapping), whose roots were in Sardinian banditry, the Sicilian Mafia, and the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta. The targets of the abductions were predominantly upper middle-class men and, less frequently, women and children. Hostages were isolated in abandoned houses, forests, caves, and underground tunnels and subjected to traumatic treatment – sensory deprivation, mutilation, torture, and the threat of death. Their imprisonment was anything from a few weeks to several years. The media paid great attention to the capture and release of the victims and created a strong sense of empathy in public opinion, especially when the kidnapped were children or when the period of captivity reached two years. Demonstrations, torchlight processions, public meetings, and other forms of visible protest are just a few examples of the kind of public reaction to every abduction.

Though its extent far surpassed the number of political kidnappings perpetrated during the *anni di piombo* by the Red Brigades and other left-wing terrorist groups – such as the well known abduction of Aldo Moro – ransom kidnapping has gone relatively understudied. Moreover, because scholarship on the subject often adopts a regional focus, centres on one of the criminal organisations, does not consider the full historical period, or relegates kidnapping to the fields of criminology and the history of crime, a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon is still needed: one that takes into account not only the activities of the culprits during these three decades but also

*Email: amontalbano@loyola.edu

the role played by the Italian state and the insight that ransom kidnapping gives into modern Italy. This article offers a comparative study of Sardinian, Sicilian, and Calabrian kidnapping that underscores the relationship between local and national criminal contexts, and between regional communities and the state's economic, legal, and political reach (or, at times, lack thereof). It shows that ransom kidnapping was not merely an Italian crime but was rather a specific tool through which banditry and criminal organisations found access to the wealth produced by the national economic transformation and converted the country's less developed and isolated regions into areas of profitable business.

As reported by the *Commissione parlamentare d'inchiesta sul fenomeno della mafia e sulle altre associazioni criminali* (1996), between 1 January 1969 and 18 February 1998 there were 672 cases of ransom kidnapping in Italy. As some of these cases involved more than one victim, the number of people kidnapped reached 694, of whom 564 were men and 130 women (Pardini 1998, 34). The highest incidence was in 1977, with 75 cases. Kidnappings occurred with the greatest frequency between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s. In the period between 1975 and 1984, there were 471 cases with 489 victims, amounting to 70 per cent of all kidnappings. The year 1985 marked the beginning of a decline in the phenomenon, which decreased even further after 1991 (Pardini 1998, 35). The worst hit regions were Lombardy (158 cases), Calabria (128), and Sardinia (107). Of the victims, 81 never returned home, and of these 53 were never found. Of all the people kidnapped in these years, only 93 were freed by the police. In the majority of cases (511), investigations nevertheless obtained positive outcomes that brought about the arrests of 3,302 criminals (Pardini 1998, 39–40). While it is not possible to calculate the total proceeds from the ransoms, the sum likely reaches hundreds of billions of lire (the presumed average ransom in the period between 1969 and 1990 is almost 500 million lire). Last but not least, one statistic to consider is supplied by the important study on the subject, *I sequestri di persona a scopo di estorsione* (1984), which analysed the years 1968–83. Its authors, Salvatore Luberto and Antonio Manganelli, compared the Italian data with that available from other European countries. Italy, it turned out, was the country in which the phenomenon was the most widespread for the longest period of time, a sad honour (Luberto and Manganelli 1984, 76–83). For this reason, the historian Enzo Ciconte defined kidnapping as 'an Italian offence' (Ciconte 1997).

Before the 1970s, kidnapping existed in Italy but not on a national scale. The impacted areas were circumscribed: central-eastern Sardinia, southern Calabria, and Sicily. In chronological terms, Sardinia is considered the phenomenon's place of origin. It would nevertheless be a mistake to see Sardinian kidnapping as an 'archetype' that was subsequently exported (Marongiu and Paribello 2004, 115). The crime's diffusion is actually linked to another matrix, that of the Mafia. Within organised crime, the 'Ndrangheta in particular specialised in the abductions carried out continuously between the 1970s and the 1990s. As Pietro Marongiu and Francesco Paribello illustrate, the Calabrian mafia 'produced a transformation of the rural kidnapping traditionally present in their territory into a functional, effective structure capable of organising the capture of many hostages in the northern regions of the country in order to hold them in Aspromonte' (2004, 113). Yet even Sardinian kidnapping later spread throughout the mainland, giving rise to what would come to be called 'Sardinian-Tuscan' kidnapping. Of the 26 kidnappings that took place in Tuscany, 20 were traceable to Sardinian roots. Although a small percentage of the kidnappings was performed by '*nomadi-giostrai*' (members of nomadic circuses), the perpetrators that so alarmed the Italian Republic were Sardinian banditry and organised crime.[1]

Two English-language historical studies examine kidnapping on a national scale, both chapters within longer studies dedicated to questions of violence and mafia: Vittorfranco S. Pisano's 'The Kidnap Industry' (Pisano 1987, 57–59), and John Dickie's 'The Kidnapping

Industry' (Dickie 2013, 166–183). Pisano's and Dickie's are two very different works that, while acknowledging the phenomenon as a whole, provide excellent analyses of political and mafia kidnappings, respectively. Pisano dedicates almost his entire chapter to the 26 'politically motivated abductions' performed by the Marxist-Leninist left (24) and the neo-Fascist right (2), and includes a concise but detailed section on 'kidnappings and common crime'. The result is an effective comparison that sheds light on the various techniques adopted by the kidnappers (especially political) and their scope. Dickie instead analyses predominantly criminal abductions, paying particular attention to the role that ransom kidnapping played for the Sicilian Mafia in the first half of the 1970s. His chapter, as we will see below, provides a critical tool that helps to understand why Cosa Nostra ultimately decided to prohibit kidnapping in Sicily. Notably, these two studies share a title, one adapted from journalist Ottavio Rossani's *L'industria dei sequestri* (1978). While the authors suggest that this phrase had become a 'journalistic cliché' (Dickie 2013, 166) used to give a sense of the magnitude of kidnapping in Italy, the term 'industry' is justified. Its main players were not terrorists and *mafiosi*, however: the highest number of abductions were performed instead by the Sardinian banditry and the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta, which Pisano and Dickie only partially examine.

Aside from journalistic investigations, there are few Italian analyses of the phenomenon that bring together all the different matrices of kidnapping. Ciconte's chapter 'Un delitto italiano: il sequestro di persona', included in the volume on criminality in the Einaudi *Storia d'Italia* (1997, 185–215), is the only historical examination of criminal and political abductions at the national level and represents a significant exploration of the less covered 'Ndrangheta matrix. Indeed, criminology is the field that has most explored abductions.

Luberto's and Manganelli's 1984 essay, for example, offered the first detailed and reliable statistical analysis that revealed the extent of the crime and compared this data to that of other countries. However, criminological literature has primarily investigated the phenomenon at the regional level, providing an analysis of Sardinian kidnapping, but has not explored the other examples to the same degree. To fill this gap, the present article looks at the literature written by prosecuting attorneys and magistrates, such as Carlo Macrì and Nicola Gratteri, who shed light on the 'Ndrangheta cases. The reports written by the *Commissione parlamentare d'inchiesta sui fenomeni di criminalità in Sardegna* (1969) and two *Commissioni parlamentari d'inchiesta sul fenomeno della mafia e sulle altre associazioni* (1988; 1996) will also be a central means through which to compare Sardinian bandits, Sicilian *mafiosi*, and Calabrian *'ndranghetisti*.

Combining interdisciplinary perspectives with parliamentary committee documents, this article explores the roots, evolution, and demise of ransom kidnapping in the Italian Republic, demonstrating that this was a modern crime linked to the economic transformation of the country and the innovation of its underworld. Unlike Pisano's and Dickie's, this inquiry argues that kidnapping was an 'industry' beyond a mere clichéd use of the term, and traces the emergence and development of such an industry in modern Italy. Furthermore, unlike Ciconte's, this study emphasises the impact that both economic dynamics and the state had on the increase of this phenomenon by offering, for example, a different reading of the 1969 parliamentary committee's report on Sardinian kidnapping. While Ciconte insists on the socio-cultural motivation of the crime that the committee certainly highlights, this investigation also underscores the committee's strong critique of the state's policy as applied in Barbagia, Sardinia, which they say was equally responsible for the increase in the abductions. In short, this analysis provides not only a full picture of Italian ransom kidnapping but also highlights what that crime shows about an Italy not completely able to control its own territory. By pinpointing kidnapping's roots and the evolution of abductions, we will observe how and why organised crime spread across the country and affected its citizens for years – citizens whom the state ultimately failed to protect.

Sardinian ransom kidnapping

In the Italian Republic, kidnapping for ransom started in Sardinia, where banditry gave rise to a specific model of abductions that criminologists call pastoral kidnapping. In the years between 1966 and 1968, we find 33 cases on the island. The phenomenon caused great alarm throughout the entire country to the point that in October 1969 parliament instituted a *Commissione parlamentare d'inchiesta sui fenomeni di criminalità in Sardegna*. On 29 March 1972, the committee's president, Senator Giuseppe Medici, submitted to the chambers a report that defined kidnapping as a modern variant on the island's traditional rural brand of criminality:

> The crime characteristic of Sardinia belongs to its pastoral world, which has its centre in Barbagia (…) it is not that there is no crime in the city (…) but in Barbagia and in the nearby countryside, there exists a typical crime, whose deep roots must be sought in the nomadic pastoral world that produces it. As long as that nomadic pastoral world – which we will call *barbaricino* in order to better define its characters – exists, the crime of its bandits will also exist: a crime that is a product of that world. (Medici 1972, 19)

The committee therefore asserted a correlation between Sardinian crime and the crime characteristic of its internal area, the Barbagia, long a land of brigandage. Ransom kidnapping was thus a modern crime perpetrated by traditional Sardinian banditry. The 'new' aspect of kidnapping was not its novelty – in Sardinia it had ancient roots going back to the fifteenth century – but the fact that it had become a 'dominant crime' (Medici 1972, 21–38). Indeed, between 1950 and 1971, 80 kidnappings were carried out on the island. To the committee, the crime appeared to be a reaction by banditry to the region's industrialisation and economic transformation in those years. The greater availability of wealth and the new consumerist lifestyle models provided a corresponding number of new reasons to commit crimes. Nevertheless, as Nereide Rudas and Pietro Marongiu later noted, 'kidnapping … is not reducible to a simple origin of *pauperism* but rather more complex and dialectic interactive processes' (1988, 108). The Medici report was of the same opinion, with two documents illustrating that the most well-known figures of Sardinian banditry came from well-to-do shepherding families.[2] While poverty should not be considered the crime's direct cause, Sardinia's economic structure nevertheless remains crucial to understanding pastoral kidnapping. It was between the world of the Barbagia, founded on the precariousness of its nomadic shepherds, and the modern development of the island that the bandits found both the support and the resources with which to enrich themselves.

The committee's insistence on the region's social-economic situation had three objectives: to suggest that the state intervene by means other than the force that had been adopted thus far and that had proven unsuitable for resolving the question of banditry; to bring Sardinia's internal areas out of the isolation that criminologists had singled out as facilitating crime (Poggioni and Rudas 1972, 145); and to change the lifestyle of the nomadic shepherds which facilitated *latitanza* (the presence of fugitives) that, as we shall see, constituted a fundamental source of manpower for kidnappings. The Medici report deemed it necessary to transition from a nomadic to a settled form of shepherding because the former produced a socio-cultural environment in which such crimes could exist. The so-called *barbaricina* (of Barbagia) culture was considered the ideological basis of banditry and therefore at the origin of Sardinian extortion kidnapping. Life in the Barbagia communities was based on their own laws and customs, handed down for centuries, which contrasted starkly with the legal code of the Italian state. Several anthropologists have identified egalitarianism (that is, the just distribution of scarce resources), vendetta, and envy to be among the guiding principles of this archaic society.[3]

Stealing was considered 'taking' by the shepherds, and killing in response to a suffered offence was a 'duty'. Many of the behaviours judged to be criminal by the official state power

were therefore not only accepted in the *barbaricina* perspective but represented archaic methods for re-establishing social order. Among the typical crimes in the nomadic pastoral world, those most perpetrated were destruction of property, extortion, livestock theft (*abigeato*), and kidnapping. Observing these trends, the parliamentary committee noted that on the one hand kidnapping perfected the pervasive phenomenon of blackmail and, on the other – and more importantly – offered a progressive 'substitute' for rustling. In the *barbaricina* culture there was no ethical distinction between the theft of sheep and the abduction of men (Pardini 1998, 20–21). This lack of distinction is reflected in the saying 'men do not bleat', common among shepherds and indicative of how it was easier for them to hide the owner of a flock and to keep him from speaking that to hide the flock itself – not to mention the greater ransom to be gained from a person (Pardini 1998, 20).

However, the most serious problem of criminality in Sardinia was *latitanza* – the high number of fugitives. In 1967, there were 139 officially clandestine outlaws (Ciconte 1997, 190). Indicted by the state, these men were considered bandits by Italian society but not by their *barbaricine* communities of origin, which instead protected them from investigations by the police and magistracy. Furthermore, these communities helped them withstand a difficult life hidden among the mountains of the Barbagia, whose territories were more accessible to the wandering shepherds who belonged to that environment than to the forces of order. These bandits therefore enjoyed the support of their villages, and they often came to be mythologised and celebrated as heroes capable of epitomising the most prized quality of that world, *balentìa,* the courage and strength of an ideal masculinity. Amongst the most renowned bandits of this era, Pasquale Tandeddu and Graziano Mesina were famed as elusive outlaws and encircled by a romantic aura that made them appear more like symbols than men. It was often around these charismatic and economically well-off figures that the bands responsible for numerous kidnappings formed. The Medici report held *latitanza* to be 'the natural school for banditism', and it identified the slowness of the Italian legal proceedings, as well as the marked contrast between the laws of the state and the *barbaricino* code, as causes of the phenomenon. Shepherds suspected of criminal behaviour were subjected to a preventative imprisonment that could last for years before a definite sentence was reached, one that often established the innocence of the accused. This process meant the economic ruin of the shepherds, since they had to abandon their flocks. Mistrust of the legal system and its delays thus led many to choose the life of the *latitante* and dedicate themselves to the holding of hostages, thereby becoming bandits.

In their in-depth criminological study, Marongiu and Paribello frame the Sardinian matrix of kidnapping within the broad time span between 1966 and 1997. According to these two scholars, it is necessary to subdivide the abductions occurring in the region into 'at least two fundamental subtypes, called *internal* and *external kidnapping* respectively':

> in internal kidnapping – the traditional criminal manifestation of the agro-pastoral areas of 'internal' Sardinia – offenders and victims belonged to the same geographical, social, and cultural space. This subtype, predominant until the mid-1970s, has been numerically exceeded by the external, evolutionary form of the traditional type, in which the victims are above all entrepreneurs and professionals of urban origin rather than local farmers and landowners, often natives of continental Italy and at times foreigners. (2004, 116–117)

Analysing the temporal distribution of the 143 kidnappings that took place between 1966 and 1997, Marongiu and Paribello demonstrate that 50 per cent were concentrated in two five-year blocs. Between 1966 and 1970, 40 kidnappings took place in Sardinia, of which 24 were internal and 16 external. In the five years between 1976 and 1980 the kidnappings numbered 33, of which 9 were internal and 24 external. The most important fact emerging from these data is that even if

the identity of the victims changed during the evolution of the crime, that of the kidnappers did not. This is clear from the fact that no matter where they were picked up, the hostages were released mainly in the district of Nuoro, in Barbagia, the geographical origin of the perpetrators. Far from scaling back following the 1969 parliamentary investigation, in the subsequent ten years banditry spread, striking more often in urban and tourist centres of the island whose inhabitants represented the possibility of accessing greater wealth. The expanding radius of captures signalled a radical change in the crime on multiple levels. With regard to the hostages, the duration of their imprisonment lengthened notably as a result of the vast sums asked of their families, who found it difficult to procure the money. The bandits – ever more inclined towards attaining the privileges they saw in their victims, and less and less symbols of the values of *barbaricina* culture – progressively lost the approval of the pastoral community, which now expressed an 'inert' and merely 'economic' solidarity towards them, linked to the 'advantages induced by the flow of riches that arrived in the community through kidnapping' (Rudas and Marongiu 1988, 112). For this reason, as well as the elevated risks and the difficult profits that the crime by then represented, the phenomenon completely disappeared after a last flare-up in 1991–5, when 10 kidnappings saw Sardinia surpass every other region of Italy.

As a conclusion to this discussion of pastoral kidnapping, we must consider a few final aspects that distinguish this form from the Mafia matrix. These relate, on the one hand, to the provisional nature and the structure of banditry and, on the other, to the use made of the profits. While the Sardinian criminals were connected horizontally and formed bands that dissolved at the end of each kidnapping, the *'ndrine* (families of the 'Ndrangheta) who specialised in the crime were internally hierarchised, always remained the same, and thus over time became true professionals, as we shall see below. While the evolution of the crime occurred in such a way that the bandits came in contact with other criminal organisations capable of laundering the ransom money, they nevertheless did not invest this money in illegal activities like the drug and arms trafficking that constituted the Sicilian Mafia's and the 'Ndrangheta's springboard into the international sphere. Rather, the bandits invested in construction, building dwellings in the towns of the Barbagia. Finally, the 'Sardinian-Tuscan' postscript of kidnapping's pastoral origins should not be forgotten. The emigration of *barbaricini* shepherds recreated the socio-cultural conditions that protected bandits in the mainland mountainous territories of Tuscany, of Lazio, and part of Emilia Romagna, regions in which abductions took place until the end of the 1990s (Luberto and Manganelli 1984, 38). Moreover, numerous Sardinian shepherds, having emigrated, took part in the Mafia-inspired kidnappings, assuming secondary roles.

However, the highest number of abductions performed by banditry happened in Sardinia, where the phenomenon remained linked to its pastoral roots. As the parliamentary committee and criminologists highlight, though, kidnapping was not merely a result of the *barbaricina* culture but the consequence of its clash with both the island's economic development and the state, which had a strong role in shepherds becoming bandits and in the isolation of the Barbagia. The crime therefore shows the presence in the Italian Republic of an entire area excluded from progress and in contrast with the modern state. The well-to-do figures of banditry (and those who could benefit from the money laundering) transformed the precariousness of the Barbagia into a business. The same happened in another mountain area of the country, the Calabrian Aspromonte. Unlike Sardinian banditry in Barbagia, however, the 'Ndrangheta had complete territorial control over Aspromonte.

Organised crime and ransom kidnapping

In the underworld of the Italian Republic, the Sicilian Mafia and the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta were the criminal organisations most active in the field of ransom kidnappings, transforming the crime

into a phenomenon on a national scale. Nevertheless, between these two organisations the 'Ndrangheta was the one that became a true specialist capable of creating a model of crime definable as a kidnapping industry. In this section, we will first explore how and why the Mafia carried out abductions, then analyse the 'Ndrangheta matrix of the crime, and finally compare both the impact that these two criminal organisations had on ransom kidnapping and, conversely, that ransom kidnapping had on them.

Mafia roots

For the Sicilian Mafia, ransom kidnapping was a means of acquiring both capital and power. However, within the Mafia only the Corleone branch briefly dedicated itself to this crime, and only in the first half of the 1970s. The *corleonesi* were active in both Sicily and the mainland, especially in Lazio, Piedmont and Lombardy. After a few kidnappings on the island, they moved their activity to the north, where in 1972 they abducted the entrepreneur Pietro Torielli Jr. in Lombardy, and in 1973 snatched Luigi Rossi di Montelera in Piedmont. Of the defendants convicted by the tribunal and Milan's court of appeal, the powerful boss Luciano Liggio was identified as the 'organiser and leader' of the band responsible for the crimes (Pardini 1998, 25–26). The Sicilian season of abductions in the mainland basically coincided with Liggio's activity and ended after his arrest in 1974. But even if brief, it marked the beginning of a long period of ransom kidnapping in the industrialised areas of the country and allowed the Mafia to create connections and collaborations with other national and international criminal organisations – such as the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta and the French Marseillais clan – with whom Liggio carried out several abductions.

The brevity of the Mafia period is attributable to several factors, at both regional and national level. Sicily, unlike Sardinia and Calabria, was not a centre for kidnapping in the Italian Republic because the Cosa Nostra regional commission banned the crime within the island in February 1975. This prohibition has been interpreted in diverse ways that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Historian John Dickie sees kidnapping and its forbiddance in terms of power struggles between Mafia branches. The Corleone branch –whose bosses were noted figures like Salvatore Riina, the aforementioned Luciano Liggio, and Bernardo Provenzano – was responsible for three strategic abductions on the island (those of Pino Vassallo, Luciano Cassina and Luigi Corleo) between 1971 and 1975. By kidnapping key figures of the Sicilian upper class close to and protected by Mafia leaders such as the La Barbera brothers, Tano Badalamenti and Stefano Bontate, the *corleonesi* proved both the weakness of these other bosses' territorial control and the rise of their own power. It was in response to this power grab, Dickie suggests, that the Sicilian Mafia adopted a kidnapping ban that was 'a tactical move as well as a practical one: it was aimed at the *corleonesi*, and intended to isolate them within Cosa Nostra' (2013, 172).

Voices from within the Mafia, on the other hand, suggest that the ban was an act of consensus taken to protect the organisation's social position and authority. Tommaso Buscetta, the powerful boss from Palermo who became a police informant, explained that the prohibition was a question of convenience (Pardini 1998, 25). The Mafia bosses worried about attracting the attention of the police and public opinion to the island, which would have impeded the development of other more lucrative criminal activities, as well as losing the support of Sicilians, who might have disapproved of a crime as odious as kidnapping. Buscetta's interpretation of the ban shows us that the Mafia, unlike the 'Ndrangheta, decided against using kidnapping as a means of territorial control.

Another factor in the Mafia's resistance to kidnapping in its own territory was that *mafiosi* had already developed different ways to access the capital of the region's richest social classes. Journalist Ottavio Rossani – author of the aforementioned *L'industria dei sequestri* – asks with

bitter irony: 'Who to kidnap, if almost all the powerful, the holders of economic power, were connected to the Mafia and political power?' (1978, 40). On the problem of the dearth of potential victims, Luberto and Manganelli (1984, 45–46) further observe that the island's entrepreneurial and commercial sectors, elsewhere generally targets for kidnapping, were compelled to pay the Mafia in order to conduct their activities, which probably immunised them from other forms of extortion.

Among the reasons that made the Mafia halt the kidnapping business on a national scale, the *Commissione parlamentare d'inchiesta sul fenomeno della mafia e sulle altre associazioni criminali* (1996) identifies three main factors. First, after having accumulated an initial financial capital, the Sicilians invested in drugs and arms trafficking. Compared to these crimes, abduction was a less profitable and much slower activity. The second factor was that the Mafia lacked an available territory that would permit it to continue to kidnap. The Cosa Nostra committee's kidnapping ban prevented Sicily from becoming a place where hostages were kept, in contrast to what happened in Calabria, as we shall see below. The third determining factor is linked to the different models of settlement that the Sicilian *mafiosi* and Calabrian *'ndranghetisti* developed in central and Northern Italy to which we now turn.

Luberto and Manganelli highlight what can be taken as a decisive reason for the Mafia moving the kidnapping business off the island and what made it possible to extend the crime – especially its Calabrian matrix – into the rich regions of central and northern Italy. The state's 1965 anti-Mafia laws, which compelled dangerous criminals to take up compulsory residences far from their regions of provenance, 'created numerous Mafia hotbeds in a large part of the national territory and especially in the north' (Luberto and Manganelli 1984, 45). Thus it is possible to understand how, from 1974 onward, 'the geography of the crime was completely upset' (1984, 17), encompassing not only Sardinia, Calabria, and Sicily but also involving a large part of Italy, and Lombardy in particular. The anti-Mafia law (which of course included the 'Ndrangheta as well) had a different impact on the Sicilian and the Calabrian criminal organisations. Compelled to abandon their places of origin, the Calabrian *'ndranghetisti*, unlike the Sicilian *mafiosi*, moved their families with them into exile and thereby recreated their networks in the north:

> By sending to the north parts of the *cosche* (Mafia clans) that established themselves there permanently, Calabrian *mafiosi* were able to create real enclaves. This conscious choice of the 'Ndrangheta allowed it to create – in the heart of the industrial triangle and amidst the full economic boom – a real control of the territory, a Mafia dominion of squares, streets, portions of villages and neighbourhoods in cities such as Turin and Milan or in municipalities of the Torinese and Milanese outer belts. (Pardini 1998, 28)

While the presence of the Sicilian criminals in the north did not have a territorial character, the *'ndranghetisti* established themselves permanently, colonising those territories to which they were constrained to move. In short, the 'Ndrangheta was able to export from its native region not only crime, as the Mafia did, but also an operating model that took control of the territory away from the state and entrusted it to the *locali* of the *'ndrine* – urban businesses or rural farms that became true meeting places for 'Ndrangheta families. In this way, the Calabrian criminal organisation was able to create colonies in Calabria – and in particular the Aspromonte – within the Italian state. In the next section we will see how the network established between the *'ndrine* settled in the north and the *cosche* in Calabria was the key factor that allowed the 'Ndrangheta to create a perfect kidnapping machine.

The roots of the 'Ndrangheta

The 'Ndrangheta is the criminal organisation that had the strongest impact on the phenomenon of ransom kidnapping and the one which was the most impacted by it. Present all over the country

with its *'ndrine*, it was capable of blackmailing Italy for more than twenty years until it decided to stop abducting. Through this criminal activity, the 'Ndrangheta became famous in the whole nation (and beyond) and was identified as the Mafia of kidnapping. Unlike the Sardinian banditry and the Sicilian Mafia, the 'Ndrangheta made use of this crime as a strategic tool of territorial control, to solidify the network between the *'ndrine* in Calabria and those settled outside the region, and to challenge the state. After a first abduction scored in Calabria on 26 August 1970, the *'ndranghetisti* operated uninterruptedly in this sphere until 1991, performing 128 kidnappings in the region and numerous others nationally. Lacking a committee at the time that decided matters for all of the clans (*cosche*) in a manner akin to that in Sicily, the Calabrian organisation did not have a univocal line of conduct. In the first period of the crime, many *'ndrine* were involved. This changed profoundly after the second half of the 1970s, when only a few 'Ndrangheta families had complete control over this business.

In the early 1970s, while the more traditional *cosche* resolutely resisted this type of money-making activity, due in part to the dishonour that the kidnapping of women and children brought to the Honoured Society (*Onorata Società*) (Pardini 1998, 27–28), numerous *'ndrine* of the younger generation rejected the ideology of the patriarchs and subverted their authority, becoming active abductors. As the magistrate Nicola Gratteri and the historian Antonio Nicaso aver, 'kidnappings were a pretext and contributed to creating a vortex in the bosom of the 'Ndrangheta' that resulted in the 'first Mafia war' (1975–9), which was regarded as a generational clash between the old and new bosses (2009, 54). Antonio Macrì and Mico Tripodo, declared opponents of kidnappings and respected supporters of a certain kind of Mafia morality, were assassinated by younger *cosche* of which the Piromallis of the Gioia Tauro plain, the Strangios of San Luca, the Barbaros of Platì and the Iettos of Natile di Careri – *'ndrine* of unscrupulous kidnappers – were all allies (Gratteri and Nicaso 2009, 54).[4] Ciconte also noted the ideological conflicts between the various 'Ndrangheta families such as that in 1978 between the De Stefanos and the Mammolitis. The boss of the 'Ndrangheta in Reggio Calabria, Paolo De Stefano, proclaimed himself completely against the kidnappings, while in the provinces the Mammolitis – responsible for the 1973 abduction of Paul Getty III (the first victim to be captured outside the region and held in Aspromonte) – continued undeterred in their activity. In the following years, the 'Ndrangheta not only learned how to carry out abductions perfectly but also transformed abducting into a veritable industry, able to snatch hundreds of hostages and earn money for thousands of collaborators.

However, we cannot understand why and how ransom kidnapping became an industry by looking exclusively at a moral shift in the 'Ndrangheta. We also need to consider the economic transformation of Calabria and its impact on the different *cosche*. Carlo Macrì, the public prose-cutor of Locri – a hotbed of kidnapping – highlighted the connection between the Calabrian economy in the 1970s and the escalation of abductions. According to Macrì, at that time the region was divided into three macro zones – the city of Reggio Calabria, the Tyrrhenian area, and the Ionian area – to which corresponded three distinct economies, respectively an urban tertiary economy; a developed and quite rich agricultural economy; and a combination of pastoral, poor agricultural, and small tertiary economies. The 'Ndrangheta was present in all of these zones, but it was in the Tyrrhenian and Ionian areas that kidnapping became the crime which, for different reasons and in different periods, financed the local *'ndrine*. The capital accumulated with the abductions allowed the *cosche* of the Gioia Tauro plain (in the Tyrrhenian area) to develop from 'a mafia which exercised its domination parasitically mostly through extortions' (Macrì 1984, 164) to entrepreneurs and drug traffickers.

As a consequence of the 1970 Reggio revolt that broke out when Catanzaro and not Reggio was named the region's capital, the Italian state decided to support Calabria through a massive

public investment project, the construction of an iron and steel centre and a port in Gioia Tauro (the so-called Colombo package). The 'Ndrangheta used the money extorted from victims' families to acquire 'trucks, lorries, excavators, and gave life to the formation of Mafia companies in the construction industry that participated in the competition for public contracts' (Pardini 1998, 28). In other words, kidnapping allowed the 'ndranghetisti to seize the state's investments in Calabria. Moreover, the 'ndrine immersed into the licit market the illicit capital obtained from ransoms, which therefore contributed to their transformation into entrepreneurs capable of controlling both public investments and the construction market in Calabria.[5] Furthermore, the powerful *cosche* of the Gioia Tauro plain (the Piromallis and the Mammolitis) used ransom kidnapping as a means of accumulating money to invest in different and more profitable crimes such as drug and weapons trafficking. Active as kidnappers in the decade between 1970 and 1980, they performed extremely remunerative abductions at the national level – especially in Lazio, Piedmont, and Lombardy – and, with the above-mentioned kidnapping of Paul Getty Jr. in 1973, opened the era in which Calabria became Italy's hiding-place. Nevertheless, the *cosche* of the Gioia Tauro plain were allied with the 'ndrine of the Ionian zone, whose members, as we shall see, were the true professionals of ransom kidnapping.

The 'Ndrangheta of the Ionian area was strongly connected to the 'Ndrangheta families settled in the north, who became organisers of the kidnapping business, and gained complete control over the Aspromonte. This zone was the poorest in the region and the one in which kidnapping remained present for the longest period (up to the 1990s). The local 'ndrine were active at the regional level since the beginning of 1970s, performing abductions that targeted small business owners, professors, lawyers, doctors, and often pharmacists. The judicial response to this early 1970s phase of kidnapping in Calabria was very weak, and coincided with the removal of criminals from the region (Macrì 1984, 164) that, as we saw above, had the side effect of both exporting and re-rooting the 'Ndrangheta all over the country. As a result, in the second half of the 1970s a close collaboration developed between the 'ndrine of Calabria and those in the rich regions of Northern Italy.

The revelations made by two 'ndranghetisti who became police informers – Antonio Zagari and Saverio Morabito – helped the magistrates of Milan understand the 'Ndrangheta's operating model. While the 'ndrine settled in the north handled the capture of the victims (who were more well-to-do and accessible than their southern counterparts) and their transport to Aspromonte, where they would be hidden, the 'Ndrangheta families in Calabria oversaw the imprisonment, the ransom payment negotiations, and the liberation of the hostages. This explains the birth of a monopoly over extortion kidnapping. The *cosche* of Locride, and especially those of the Aspromonte triangle – Platì, San Luca, Natile di Careri – became the most active, given the suitability of their locations for the hiding and keeping of hostages (Pardini 1998, 28–29). The Calabrian mountains, geographically very similar to those of the Barbagia in Sardinia and therefore impenetrable to those who did not know them well, were rich in 'natural prisons' in which the prisoners were confined for very lengthy periods. Carlo Celadon, a young man from Vicenza (Veneto) kidnapped on 25 January 1988, and released on 5 May 1990, was held chained in the caves of Aspromonte for 831 days. In the same period the 18-year-old Cesare Casella of Pavia (Lombardy), seized on 18 January 1988, and freed on 30 January 1990, was hidden in the area for 743 days.

In reality, what rendered Aspromonte 'naturally' ideal for the disappearance of victims was the consensus about the crime that the 'Ndrangheta was able to foster in this region, thanks to the production of 'a particular economy linked to the material administration of the kidnappings'.[6] The 'ndrine entrusted the care of the hostages to the numerous *latitanti* present in the area, thus

notably lowering the costs of running the imprisonments, as well as to shepherds and their young affiliates. At the end of the 1980s, the *Commissione parlamentare d'inchiesta sul fenomeno della mafia e sulle altre associazioni criminali* (1988), asking why the 'Ndrangheta abductions continued even though the criminal organisation had for some time dedicated itself to much more lucrative crimes, responded:

> As many prosecutions against followers make clear, the custody of the hostage allows very poor shepherds to make about 20 million lire per year while maintaining their own jobs. The main benefit to the masterminds is probably not directly economic in nature. Aspromonte connects the Ionian and Tyrrhenian seas, that is, the top of North Africa and the Middle East with Naples, Rome, and Genoa, the heart of Italy and the door to Europe. Through kidnapping, the masterminds therefore guarantee an annual income to an extensive network of followers and in so doing receive consent, loyalty and, above all, the control of an essential territory for their more profitable activities. (Violante 1990, 24–25)

For the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta, kidnapping was an activity that went beyond the earnings that the extortions guaranteed for their bosses. Rather, it appeared to be, in the words of the committee, a system that allowed the bosses, with the support of the local population who were guaranteed an economic advantage, to win territorial control over the Mediterranean crossroads. This extraterritoriality of Aspromonte carried a strong political connection, in that the 'Ndrangheta was challenging the state, making it appear incapable of liberating the hostages that everyone knew were imprisoned in those caves (Ciconte 1997, 206). Rendering the mountains of Calabria inaccessible to the forces of law and order meant demonstrating the inviolability of the territories around San Luca, a town in which all of the leaders of the *'ndrine* and their affiliates from around the world met annually. The impenetrability of Aspromonte therefore symbolised the invulnerability of the 'Ndrangheta itself.

One peculiarity of the 'Ndrangheta matrix that distinguishes it from other matrices was, therefore, that for the Calabrian *cosche* kidnapping had a broader strategic function, that is, it acted as a '*delitto esca*' (a diversion from another crime):

> The particular social alarm caused by some abductions induced police to focus all their energy in places around certain mountain villages in Aspromonte where the hostages were traditionally kept. This left other areas of Calabria undefended, predominantly the coastal ones, where it was possible to operate in a completely undisturbed way. It was in this way that, on the Calabrian coast, huge quantities of drugs or significant amounts of weapons were unloaded. (Ciconte 1997, 201)

If Cosa Nostra rejected extortion kidnapping in order to not attract the forces of order into Sicily, the 'Ndrangheta utilised it in order to focus that attention on a circumscribed territory of hinterland Calabria, thereby creating for themselves the freedom to pursue the illicit trafficking that they conducted on the coast. Their specialisation in this crime also meant that the 'Ndrangheta was identified for a long time as the Mafia of kidnapping, something that allowed them to craft an image of themselves that was archaic and falsely linked to the traditional brigandage of the region. Anything but rural and pastoral criminals, the *'ndrine* experienced a radical modernisation that carried them into the 1990s as renowned international narcotics criminals and at the cutting edge of money laundering.

The year 1991 drew the Mafia matrix of kidnappings to a close. The phenomenon wound down for several reasons. Motivated in part by the law on the freezing of assets (which prevented hostages' families from paying ransoms), drawn up that very year, the decision to end the kidnappings was one of convenience for the 'Ndrangheta. The year 1991 coincided with the end of the 'second Mafia war' (1984–91) that over about seven years caused nearly 700 deaths. The long trail of blood was the consequence of the conflicts that arose between different *'ndrine* of Calabria (as well as some in northern Italy) over important contracts and territorial control. The war concluded with a *pax mafiosa* – more than anything else 'a non-aggression pact' (Gratteri and Nicaso 2009, 54) – that

allowed the 'Ndrangheta to concentrate fully on the international narcotics trade in which it had that year become the undisputed leader. One fundamental aspect of the truce was the creation of a committee charged with the direction of the Calabrian Mafia. In addition to putting an end to the feud between 'Ndrangheta families, the committee 'decided to put an end to ransom kidnapping' (Gratteri and Nicaso 2009, 64). The year 1991 therefore signalled the birth of a common direction in the 'Ndrangheta that, engaged on other criminal fronts, decided to prohibit a crime that had by then become expensive and too visible.

A comparison of how the Sicilian Mafia and the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta kidnapped leads to the following conclusions. First, within the Mafia only one branch – the *corleonesi* – carried out abductions in Sicily and in the mainland during the first half of the 1970s. Conversely, within the 'Ndrangheta numerous *cosche* were active in the crime at both regional and national levels from 1970 up to the early 1990s. Therefore the internal pervasiveness and the duration of kidnapping was far more pronounced with the 'Ndrangheta. In these years, it is possible to trace a further distinction. In the decade 1970–80, the collaboration between the *'ndrine* in the Tyrrhenian area, in the Ionian area, and those settled in Central and Northern Italy, gave rise to an extremely well organised network that transformed a rural regional crime into a modern national industry. Over the following decade the *cosche* of the Aspromonte triangle developed even further, becoming the majority owners of this business. While the Mafia did not transport victims to Sicily, hundreds of hostages were brought to Calabria from all over the country – in particular from Lombardy – and we can understand why it was the 'Ndrangheta (together with Sardinian banditry) that was identified by journalists and public opinion as the *anonima sequestri*.

Second, kidnapping has been for both the Sicilian and the Calabrian criminal organisations a means of acquiring capital to invest in other more lucrative activities. Nevertheless, the financial impact that the abductions had on the Mafia cannot be compared with the impact they had on the 'Ndrangheta. The ransoms from kidnapping in fact radically changed the latter, helping the *'ndrine* to become entrepreneurs capable of taking advantage of public investments in the 1970s and, by the beginning of the 1990s, of becoming leaders in international drug trafficking. Finally, the crime also played a different role at a political level. In Sicily, kidnapping became a means of negotiating power within the organisation. After having marked an internal generational clash within the *cosche* in the late 1970s, ransom kidnapping represented for the 'Ndrangheta the means by which to challenge the Italian state, to assert complete territorial control over the Aspromonte, and to shape an image of itself as archaic, unscrupulous, and impenetrable.

Conclusion

To bring our analysis of the phenomenon of ransom kidnapping in the Italian Republic to a close, I want to highlight a few last considerations that emerge from the material explored above. The expression 'kidnap industry' is not merely a 'colourful term coined in journalistic circles' (Pisano 1987, 57). It is also a term that criminologists, magistrates, historians, and parliamentary committees used to frame both the dimension of the crime and especially how it was organised. In terms of numbers, the years between 1975 and 1984 were those in which this industry was particularly productive, given that 70 per cent of the abductions happened when the Sardinian banditry, the Sicilian Mafia, and the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta were active kidnappers at the same time. In terms of structure, though, it is more appropriate to label ransom kidnapping as an industry in relation to the 'Ndrangheta.

It was in fact the 'Ndrangheta that was able to create a perfect machine in which a small number of clans commissioned specific tasks to different *'ndrine* inside and outside the region and

created an entire economy based on ransoms. The underworld of the 'Ndrangheta involved thousands of collaborators at all levels: from the warders and conveyors of hostages to the bankers for money laundering. This does not mean that the Sardinian banditry or the Sicilian Mafia were amateurs in this business. Bandits and *mafiosi* were both also able to perfectly organise lucrative and long abductions. For the reasons examined above, the Mafia decided to dedicate less time to this kind of crime. Unlike the 'Ndrangheta, the Sardinian banditry did not create a large structured system because at the end of each kidnapping the bands dissolved. In other words, banditry was not a criminal organisation and lacked the scope of other illicit investments such as drug dealing. Moreover, even if bandits performed abductions in the mainland, the Sardinian pastoral matrix never achieved the national dimension of the 'Ndrangheta matrix. While the Barbagia became the 'natural prison' of Sardinia, Aspromonte became the 'natural prison' of Italy. This different significance was linked not only to the difficulty of transporting hostages onto an island. It was also, as this article highlights, the expression of two different models of criminal kidnapping – a pastoral kidnapping and a kidnapping industry – and their correlate challenge to the state.

One further aspect to stress is the modernity of abducting for ransom in the Italian Republic. It is true that the crime was not new in Sardinia, Sicily, or Calabria, but it was between the late 1960s and the 1990s that kidnapping became both a reaction to and a means for modernisation. The criminological literature available on Sardinia insists on the relation between the increase in abductions and the industrial development of the island. They were simultaneous processes – one the side effect of the other – in a region where the presence of the state was lacking. It would therefore be misleading to frame the phenomenon as a legacy of a past that is still present in modern Italy. This also applies to the Calabrian matrix of the crime. As observed, though, pastoral kidnapping has been more investigated by scholars from different angles that shed light on the socio-economic dynamics of this phenomenon. However, the analysis of magistrates and historians, and the revelations made by police informants, show how for the 'Ndrangheta abductions represented an access to the wealth of industrialised Italy and, in addition, a way to innovate and modernise itself. As a result, the 'Ndrangheta, unlike Sardinian banditry and the Mafia, was able to use the period of abductions to widen their future horizons. Today, while banditry has more or less disappeared, the 'Ndrangheta is one of the most powerful criminal organisations in the world. Ransom kidnapping helped make this transformation possible. Finally, nearly 30 years of abductions in the second half of the twentieth century do not only tell us about an Italian crime, they also open a window onto modern Italian history. Italy was (and in part still is) a country in which the state did not have complete territorial control nor the monopoly of force, and where the price of its economic development was extremely high for hundreds of its citizens, who, snatched from their world, endured unbearable ordeals in the underworld of the Italian Republic.

Notes on contributor

Alessandra Montalbano is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Italian at Loyola University Maryland. She received her PhD in Italian Studies from New York University. Her recent and forthcoming publications engage with issues ranging from victim-centered narratives of the *anni di piombo* to kidnapping victims' experience of captivity. Other publications explore her interests in body, language, gender, and life writing, including studies of Pier Paolo Pasolini and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the famed political satirist Sabina Guzzanti, and contemporary Italian feminism. She is currently working on her first book, *Kidnapping in Modern Italy: Language, Disembodiment, Experience.*

Notes

1. During the 1970s Rome was also the centre of an urban phenomenon of ransom kidnapping whose mastermind was a criminal organisation known as the *Banda della Magliana*.

2. Panico and Oliva (1972, 363). On the same subject, see also Puggioni and Rudas (1972, 192, 245–246).
3. The anthropologist Antonio Pigliaru maintains that there exists an unwritten code of law handed down from antiquity in the *barbaricina* culture and based upon vendetta. See Pigliaru (1959).
4. Sharo Gambino also spoke about kidnappings as an expression of generational change in the 'Ndrangheta, demonstrating that the crime was motivated by a desire by the new generations to gain wealth (Gambino 1971, 161).
5. On this transformation of the Mafia, see Arlacchi (1983, 2007).
6. For a concise and detailed account of Zagari's and Morabito's revelations see Pardini 1998, 27.

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Italian summary

L'articolo offre un'analisi comparata del fenomeno del sequestro di persona a scopo di estorsione in Italia tra la fine degli anni '60 e la fine degli anni '90, periodo in cui centinaia di cittadini sono stati rapiti e tenuti in

ostaggio dal banditismo sardo, dalla mafia siciliana e dalla 'ndrangheta calabrese. Sebbene il sequestro estorsivo superi di gran lunga il sequestro a scopo politico in numero di vittime prodotte, esso ha ricevuto una minore attenzione accademica rispetto a quella rivolta ai rapimenti politici degli anni di piombo. Ricostruendo le differenti radici, lo sviluppo e l'andamento del sequestro estorsivo, l'articolo getta luce sui diversi usi che di questo crimine hanno fatto il banditismo, la mafia e la 'ndrangheta, sottolinea l'impatto che le trasformazioni dell'economia nazionale e lo stato hanno avuto sull'incremento del fenomeno e dimostra come per il mondo della malavita italiana il sequestro sia stato insieme una reazione alla e uno strumento di modernizzazione. Il saggio mostra inoltre come, in particolare nel caso della 'ndrangheta, il sequestro a scopo di estorsione sia diventato in Italia una vera e propria industria.