Diego Gambetta

"The Sicilian Mafia". Twenty Years After Publication

Abstract

In this essay, I describe the reasons that led me to study the Sicilian mafia, and some of the difficulties that I encountered during my fieldwork in Palermo in 1986-7. I then review the effects that my study - which was first published 20 years ago in Italian and has since been translated into English, German, Spanish and Polish - has had on the scholarship on the mafia as well as on that of similar organisations in other countries.

Keywords: Sicilian mafia; trust; illegal markets; protection; economic development.
The 1960s Sicilian Mafia trials took place at the end of that decade in response to a rise in organized crime violence around the late 1950s and early 1960s. There were three major trials, each featuring multiple defendants, that saw hundreds of alleged Mafiosi on trial for dozens of crimes. From the authority’s point of view, they were a failure; very few defendants were convicted, although later trials as well as information from pentiti confirmed most of those acquitted were Mafiosi members, and Ten years later, he was released from prison and deported to Italy, never to return. There, he became a liaison between the Sicilian Mafia and La Cosa Nostra. When he was convicted, Frank Costello became acting boss because underboss Vito Genovese had fled to Italy to avoid a murder charge. Genovese’s return to the states was cleared when a key witness against him was poisoned and the charges were dropped. In 1969, several years after Valachi began cooperating with the FBI, Vito Genovese died in his prison cell. By then the Genovese family was under the control of Philip “Benny Squint” Lombardo. Unlike the bosses before him, Lombardo preferred to rule behind his underboss. The Sicilian Mafia, also known as simply the Mafia and frequently referred to by members as Cosa Nostra (Italian: [ˈkɔːsa nɔˈstra]; Sicilian: [ˈkɔːsa nɔˈstɾa]; “our thing”), is a Mafia-terrorist-type organized crime syndicate originating in Sicily, Italy. It is a loose association of criminal groups that share a common organisational structure and code of conduct. The basic group is known as a “family”, “clan”, or cosca. Each family claims sovereignty over a territory, usually a town or

The Sicilian Mafia was originally written in English, and published by Harvard University in 1999 (the publisher Einaudi was faster and the book came out first in Italian translation, in late 1992). It has since been translated into German (1994), Spanish (2007) and Polish (2009). The time may be ripe for examining the impact the book has had so far, but first I would like to say a few words about the origins of this study.

My interest in the mafia stems partly from my biography. Having been born and raised in the northern Italian city of Turin, and having spent most of my professional life in England, the Sicilian mafia was not just geographically distant, but as culturally alien to me as it is to a Scandinavian. Still, like it or not, it was part of my country of origin: as the social phenomenon that was at once closest to “home” and about which I understood the least, making sense of the mafia proved an irresistible challenge.

My interest in the mafia has also another source. In the mid-1980s, I became absorbed by arguably the most enduring empirical puzzle in development economics: why has the South of Italy manifested such a persistent inability to develop both socially and economically? In the South – especially in the Tyrrhenian regions of Campania, Calabria, and Sicily – three unfortunate states of affairs have coexisted for a long time: people do not often cooperate when it would be beneficial for them to do so; they often compete in harmful ways and consider violence never too remote an option for settling their controversies; finally, they refrain from engaging from that kind of competition from which they could all gain. While there are other parts of the

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