

BEYOND CULTURALISM:

A DEWEYAN READING OF THE EXPANSION OF 'NDRANGHETA

Matteo Santarelli

University of Molise

matteosantarelli1985@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I focus on the expansion of 'Ndrangheta's power and influence in central and northern Italy. The Calabrese mafia has been in expanding its activities beyond the relatively poor societies and economies of Southern Italy in many region of central and northern Italy. The key question is then: how has 'Ndrangheta achieved such an astonishing success in exporting its activities to Northern Italian societies?

In this paper, I would like to endorse an anti-culturalist approach to this phenomenon. Culturalist approaches explain the expansion of organized crime outside its original boundaries by understanding mafia as a simple by-product of a certain cultural milieu. Since the culturalist hypothesis appears as one sided and incomplete, I would like to sketch an alternative explanation by leaning on Sciarrone's (2009, 2014) and Varese's (2011) critical stance against culturalism.

In the first part, I discuss culturalist interpretations of 'Ndrangheta, and more generally of mafias, trying to show their weaknesses. In the second part, I propose to deal with the expansion of 'Ndrangheta by articulating John Dewey's concept of interest. In the third part, I discuss the criticism according to which Dewey's approach is unable to account for power asymmetrical relations. In the conclusion, I point at some further issues which this approach will have to consider.

In the recent decades 'Ndrangheta, the mafia from Calabria (southern Italy), has become the most powerful, rich and important criminal organization in Italy. Despite its rise to power, 'Ndrangheta is not very well known, even within Italy. Until a few years ago, it was considered a poor relative of the terrifying Sicilian Mafia, more correctly named *Cosa Nostra*, whose escalation starting from the 80's culminated in a total war against Italian state, in the early 90's. Camorra as well has had their share of attention, thanks in part to popular semi-fictional novels such as *Gomorra*, the worldwide success by Roberto Saviano, which dramatizes the criminal activities of this Naples-based criminal organization (Dickie, 2013).

This did not happen with 'Ndrangheta. For many years and to a certain extent still today, 'Ndrangheta has maintained a low profile despite its constant growth as an

important and powerful international criminal organization. 'Ndrangheta comes from Calabria (Southern Italy), the poorest Italian region according to national statistics. (Istat, 2015) It is perhaps due to its poverty as well as other political and cultural factors that Calabria has often been neglected by the Italian government. This institutional indifference has been exploited by 'Ndrangheta leaders and the lack of government presence in the region has been crucial in helping them to avoid attention.

In this paper, I focus on the expansion of 'Ndrangheta's power and influence in central and northern Italy. While Calabria is officially the poorest region in Italy, central and northern regions are consistently ranked highest in the areas of income, quality of life and social capital (Varese, 2011). These differences have led institutions, political parties and theorists to rule out the possibility that mafia groups could even exist outside the confines of southern Italy. After having been ignored for so long, the staggering importance of 'Ndrangheta's undeniable expansion is finally being acknowledged. Numerous studies and governmental sources show how successful the Calabrese mafia has been in expanding its activities beyond the relatively poor societies and economies of Southern Italy (DNA, 2012; Ciconte, 2011; Gratteri-Nicasio, 2009; Sciarrone, 2009, 2014; Varese, 2011.) All these studies confirm the presence of 'Ndrangheta criminal activities in many region of central and northern Italy. This presence can be classified according to varying degrees of importance: from sporadic episodes, to infiltrations of local government, and finally to radical colonization and transplantation (Varese, 2011).

It is finally becoming clear how widespread these problems are. However, there is still room for discussion about the nature of this expansion. These discussions involve not only scientific discussion, but also commonsensical, cultural and political representations. The key question is then: how has 'Ndrangheta achieved such astonishing success in exporting its activities to Northern Italian societies?¹

¹ This question could be also extended to all the places where 'Ndrangheta succeeded in exporting its activities: Canada, Australia, Switzerland, Germany among others.

In this paper, I would like to endorse an anti-culturalist approach to this phenomenon. Beginning with Hess (1970), Mafia has been understood as a kind of behavior, stemming from the codes of a certain sub-culture. Mafia appears then as a specific kind of social action, which is both produced and kept active thanks to certain crucial values (the code of silence, respect, honor) and means (violence) which structure the culture of Southern Italian regions. In its more radical versions, culturalism functions like a sort of biological reductionism: cultural belonging is a kind of DNA, structuring and determining individual and group behaviors. If someone wants to grasp the meaning of a certain behavior, it is necessary to read the brand that culture has stamped on it.

The weaknesses of culturalism dramatically emerge when we attempt to explain the expansion of organized crime outside its original boundaries. If mafia is the simple by-product of a certain cultural milieu, then how is it possible to explain the success of mafia clans in Northern Italian and foreign societies, whose culture is apparently different from that of southern Italy? In order to solve this riddle, some culturalist theorists have adopted the "contagion metaphor" (Sciarrone, 2009). Mafia expands itself like a bacterium. Its existence and proliferation is made possible by a specific and welcoming environment – i.e. southern Italian mentality. Therefore, in order to infect another body, the mafia bacterium needs to reproduce its safe environment outside its original territory. This strategy has been made possible by emigration. Emigration allows the mafia bacillus to grow in a safe and hospitable environment. Once it is has become strong enough, the bacterium can contaminate the new, and previously healthy, society.

The culturalist hypothesis, and particularly the contagion hypothesis, appears one-sided and incomplete. One-sided, because it splits the process of expansion of Mafia into an active role, played by

"criminal" immigrants, and a passive one, represented by the Northern Italian societies. Incomplete inasmuch as it downplays the complexity of this phenomenon concentrating exclusively on the cultural aspects of the expansion. This approach then is clearly insufficient to explain the complex web of interactions, transactions and negotiations which have made the expansion possible and which are themselves the manifestation of its success.

During the last twenty years, authors such as Sciarrone and Varese have taken a critical stance against culturalism. Despite moving from different perspectives, their work aims at constructing dynamic models, which attempt to understand the expansion of mafia by focusing on the interactive exchanges between criminal groups and northern Italian social actors. Without denying the importance of cultural factors, they aim to single out the process-like nature of this expansion and its interactive grounds.

In this paper, I take the side of these anti-culturalist approaches to the understanding of contemporary crime organizations and their expansion. In the first part, I discuss culturalist interpretations of 'Ndrangheta, and more generally of mafias, trying to show their weaknesses. In the second part, I argue that some of the dynamics constituting the expansion of 'Ndrangheta outside its original territory could be dealt with by articulating John Dewey's thought. The key concept here is interest. Despite being underdeveloped and sketchy, Dewey's reflections on interest included in *Democracy and Education*, *Theory of Valuation* and *Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy* could help in understanding the expansion of 'Ndrangheta as a transactive, reciprocal and dynamic process, rather than as the side effect of the massive spread of a cultural disease, imported by southern Italian immigrants. In the third part, I discuss the criticism according to which this Deweyan interest-based approach is unable to account for power relations. By analyzing a specific episode taken from Sciarrone (2009), I try to answer this criticism by showing the interactive and processual character of a typical power

However, in this paper the focus will be restricted to the expansion of 'Ndrangheta in Northern Italy.

interaction such as extortion. In the conclusion, I point at some further issues – e.g. the role of emotions in power interactions – which this approach will have to consider.

1. Culturalism

During the last two decades, 'Ndrangheta clans emerged as important actors in the Italian, European and even international criminal context. This growth was achieved thanks to several factors: their prominent role in intercontinental drug trade – especially cocaine import, due to privileged relationships with drug exporters in Central and South America (Calderoni, 2012; Gratteri & Nicasio, 2015) -; the presence of 'Ndrangheta clans in many countries, such as Canada, Australia and Germany among others (Sciarrone 2014, Sergi 2014); their ability to control Calabrese territory, sometimes nearly completely supplanting public institutions (Ciconte 2011); their investment in a variety of business interests – drug trade, construction, money laundering, illegal appropriation of European funding, illegal storage of toxic wastes -; the pervasive relationships with legal, political and economic figures; their capacity to deal with different social contexts, by mixing autoplasmic adaptation – i.e. the capacity of changing themselves when interacting with a new environment – and alloplastic adaptation – the capacity of changing the environment to fit their needs (Sciarrone 2009).

How should we interpret the 'Ndrangheta phenomenon and explain its success? Generally speaking, both in common sense and in scientific inquiries on Italian organized crime, much weight is placed on culturalist hypotheses. In a deeply influential work, Hess (1970) defined mafia as a particular kind of behavior, shaped by a particular social subculture. Given its strong dependency on a given culture, this kind of behavior is deeply rooted in the ruling norms characteristic to that particular subculture – above all, the code of silence (*omertà*). As underlined by Paoli (2003), this great interest on the cultural aspects of mafia is shared by many among the authors involved in the first empirical field studies on

mafia during the sixties (Hess, 1970; Block, 1974; Schneider & Schneider, 1986).

Few scholars would be inclined to deny the role that culture and history have played in the genesis and in the development of mafias in Italy. However, there are equally valid reasons to be wary about culturalist tendencies. We could define culturalism as the tendency to assume cultural factors as the sole and exclusive causal grounds in the explanation of social phenomena. While the acknowledgment of the importance of culture-laden factors such as values, norms and habits appear to be a necessary theoretical move, culturalism undermines the understanding of phenomena in their complexity. In the case of mafia, the reduction of criminal activities to cultural mentality may cause us to overlook the importance of economic and organizational factors in the success of Italian organized crime.

These difficulties become dramatic as the theoretical focus shifts from the activities of mafias in their original territories, to the expansion of organized crime outside these narrow boundaries. If Mafia is purely a culturally based phenomenon, how could criminal clans export their activities in other regions, characterized by a different culture and mentality?

An easy way out of this dilemma consists of denying this very possibility, effectively asserting that mafia is a non-exportable activity. In the past, this hypothesis has been held even by authors sensitive to cultural factors, but not endorsing a culturalist approach (see Paoli, 2003), and also by authors explicitly at odds with culturalism (Gambetta, 1993). But this hypothesis is hard to defend in present times. Suffice to say that several central and northern Italian local governments have been removed from power by the Italian national government due to Mafia infiltrations. Such measures are evidence of the existence of a steady presence of organized crime in these territories, or at the very least, a demonstration of their capacity to heavily influence the activity of local democratic institutions, even at great distances from 'Ndrangheta's home territory.

Therefore, the expansion of 'Ndrangheta is something that will have to be explained. But how could it be explained from a culturalist point of view? As brilliantly pointed out by Sciarone (2009), culturalism often leads to the so-called metaphor of contagion: the small but resistant and pervasive bacterium permeates the healthy organism, and destroys it from within. The evil comes from outward, and it is unwittingly and involuntarily interiorized.

An instance of this culturalist approach is Ada Becchi's interpretation of the expansion of Mafia outside its original boundaries. The first explicative element underlined is emigration: Mafia works when it is able to reproduce its original environment, that is, the cultural milieu of southern Italian societies. Once emigrations soak the social milieu of northern or foreign societies with a mafia-friendly culture, imported by means of massive emigration, then organized crime can reproduce itself outside its original boundaries. The mafia bacillus can be cultivated in a friendly niche, constructed by means of emigration. The community of migrants functions then as protection in the hostile environment of the new society. Once the bacillus has grown strong enough, it is finally able to contaminate even the previously healthy sectors of the host society. In many cases the emigrated clans initially perform their activities – for instance, extortion and racketeering – only to the detriment of other Calabrese emigrants.² According to Becchi, the immigrant community support to Mafia members is somehow spontaneous. Similarly, governmental activity against Mafia has been undermined by the fact that many members of the repressive State structure were themselves natives of Southern Italy as well and therefore were “soaked” with Mafia sub-culture, and consequently unable to fight against it. (Becchi, 2000, p. 22) Similarly, Servadio Mostyn-Owen claimed that the transplantation of Mafia in the Northern Italian region has been made possible by the fact that in recent times the “calling” to dishonesty,

fraud and swindle has permeated the entire nation, becoming an “Italian common good” (Servadio Mostyn-Owen, 1983, p. 121).³

This culturalist approach is not just an academic hypothesis. It is a widespread approach also in common sense discussion, in political discourse and also in legal debate. Francesco D'Onofrio, the suspected boss of 'Ndrangheta in Torino, has been recently accused by an informer to be the owner of an entire arsenal, and to be engaged in massive weapons smuggling with East European criminal societies. D'Onofrio has contested these accusations, by stressing the “enormous cultural differences” separating himself from 'Ndrangheta. (Legato, 2016) In this way, cultural belonging works as a sort of behavioral DNA: if you are “culturally different” from someone, then your behaviors and your actions will be in principle incompatible. Conversely, culturalism has been also employed as an excuse for victimization. Romeo, relative of the powerful homonymous clan from Reggio Calabria, has been the object of a dossier by the anti-mafia organization Libera. Libera denounced the presence of 'Ndrangheta in Liguria, a region in northwestern Italy. Romeo reacted by blaming Libera of racist prejudices, and by asserting that Calabrese immigrants living in Liguria should abstain from voting in the next election as a sign of protest (Antonelli, 2014).

On the other side of the bar, culturalist arguments have been employed by judicial power in order to downplay the risk of the expansion of Mafia beyond its original boundaries. During the nineties, the judge Ignazio De Francisci contested the idea according to which Sicilian mafia had undergone a technological update. “Cosa Nostra” – he maintained – “still smells of stable and of sheep. The “men of honor “ basic DNA is that of the shepherd's, and, partially, the peasant (...) they reason like shepherds, because they were born shepherds” (Paoli, 2003, pp. 217-218).

² Mete (2015).

³ All these examples have been taken from Sciarone (2009).

In relation to the expansion of 'Ndrangheta, critics of the "contagion hypothesis" can raise at least two objections. Firstly, as noted by Sciarrone (2009) and Varese (2011), the massive presence of emigrants from Calabria is often not related to the presence of 'Ndrangheta, or of mafias more in general. In fact, the contagion culturalist hypothesis is not able to explain why 'Ndrangheta is deeply rooted in some regions of Australia and Canada, and not in Argentina, where the Calabrese community is massively represented. Furthermore, Cosa Nostra failed to achieve transplantation in Rosario, Argentina, and succeeded in New York. In both cases, an important Sicilian community was present in both cities. The same goes for 'Ndrangheta in Piemonte (success) and Verona (failure). Therefore, emigration is not a sufficient condition to explain the success of the expansion of mafia (Varese, 2011).⁴

Secondly, the culturalist approach does not explain why 'Ndrangheta's leaders are sometimes able to achieve respect, recognition and prestige outside the immigrant community, infiltrating themselves into many social milieu of northern Italian societies. These deep social interactions between criminal subjects and Northern Italian social actors are hard to account for using the approach of cultural reductionism.

In order to show these difficulties in action, I would like to discuss a specific example. In the last several months, public authorities have performed two operations against the Grande Aracri clan, confiscating money and property valued respectively at 3 and 2.5 million euros. Their expansion in the region of Emilia Romagna had begun in the seventies. In the following years, the Grande Aracri clan started to export its activities in this rich part of Italy by creating a criminal system supported through intimidation and violence –

when needed – but principally based on the entanglement between illegal activities – such as drug smuggling – and perfectly legal commercial and financial activities. The entanglement and the complicity between 'Ndrangheta and local administrations and businesses has in some cases been publicly acknowledged. (Mete, 2015) For example, the small town of Brescello had its local government removed from power by the Italian state due to mafia infiltrations in April 2016.

As a result of an important police investigation, logs of an interesting wiretapped telephone call have been published. During this telephone conversation, financial consultant Roberta Tattini from Bologna, Northern Italy, describes the visit she received from Nicolino Grande Aracri, boss of the homonymous clan. In a very excited voice, she refers to Grande Aracri as "The Boss, the Great.. the bloody". She says she feels "honored" by this unexpected visit. Also, she says to the other party that she made it clear to the Mafia members that in case of need she wants "their" lawyers. The affair they are settling is indeed extremely remunerative, but at the same time very dangerous from a legal point of view. However, given their receptive attitudes towards her requests, she concludes that she felt "very important" after this conversation.⁵

In this case, the mafia actor is not simply a client. Rather, he is both the object and the source of prestige and esteem. Tattini is not just excited by the economic gain which the interaction with the boss is supposed to produce. She also feels "important", after receiving his visit.

The culturalist contagion metaphor is apparently unable to explain a case like this – which is far from being an isolated case - unless we postulate this contagion as a sort of mesmerizing and hypnotic identification, by means of which professionals from northern Italy immediately incorporate the values and the mentality of the Mafia. Honestly, this does not look like a very convincing and rigorous hypothesis for several

⁴ Of course, as explicitly acknowledged by Sciarrone and Varese, this does not mean that emigration cannot be a factor of success in the expansion of mafia. In this regard, see Sergi's account of the expansion of 'Ndrangheta in Australia (Sergi, 2010).

⁵ Alberti (2015).

reasons. Firstly, because of its paranormal flavor – we could recall here Sigmund Freud's (1922) brilliant criticisms of the vagueness of Gustave Le Bon's conception of "emotional contagion". Secondly, because it presupposes a sort of one-sided causal arrow. 'Ndrangheta members contaminate healthy societies, which passively receive the disease and fall sick.

But such a facile explanation is not sufficient. During the last forty years, the variety of 'Ndrangheta relationships and interactions has grown and developed in surprising ways. A large percentage of the profits gathered by means of drug dealing are being laundered through legal activities such as construction enterprises, restaurants, and so on. More and more often, these activities are not just a cover. Rather, they become enterprises pursued also for their own sake. This entrepreneurial skill is often recognized by the community after 'ndrangheta clans have begun to operate, and it becomes a source of social esteem. For instance, the Moscatos – the members of a Calabrese family transplanted to the outskirts of Milan, with deep ties to the lamonte clan – are considered by their fellow citizens as "respectable good workers" (Storti, Dagnes, Pellegrino, Sciarrone, 2014). This is likely to be true, at least according to a "separatist" conception of professional ethics, just as Roberta Tattini was probably a "good" financial consultant. Social esteem is a precious thing, and undoubtedly helps to increase the opportunities for contact and communication with other social actors.⁶

Culturalist perspectives are then unable to cope with these dynamic developments. They prove insufficient to deal with the complex net of relationships and interests which is making the expansion of 'Ndrangheta possible.

3. Dewey's concept of interests

The difficulties encountered by culturalist approaches have already been pointed out by authors such as Sciarrone and Varese. Despite the differences between their respective points of view,⁷ they both understand the expansion of mafias in interactive and dynamic terms. While culturalism endorses a one-sided causal approach, and consequently the polarization of an active agent – the criminal organization – and a passive environment – northern Italian societies –, Sciarrone and Varese seem to be interested in the kinds of reciprocal and mutual transactions which determine the success or failure of criminal expansion.

In this paragraph, I will attempt to show that this interactive anti-culturalist approach could be further developed by discussing John Dewey's theory of interests. Indeed, culturalism presupposes a fixed conception of interests, which then coincides with the symbolic, material and moral survival and reproduction of the community. As already pointed out, such rigidity becomes an obstacle in the understanding of social practices, as it is unable to explain the mutual and reciprocal interactions between actors embedded into different cultures. How can these apparently heterogeneous actors and groups pursue, negotiate and sometimes integrate their interests? In order to sketch an answer to this question, I propose to integrate concepts from Dewey.

The concept of interest plays a crucial role in some of Dewey's most important works: from *The Public and its Problems*, to *Democracy and Education* and *Theory of*

⁷ In his impressive work *Mafias on the Move*, Varese stresses the importance of the demand for private protection as a key – but not exclusive – factor in the expansion of mafia. In this regard, he is somehow close to Gambetta's definition of mafia as an "industry of private protection" (Gambetta 1993). At the same time, he explicitly refuses Gambetta's postulate of the non-exportability of mafia. While acknowledging the importance of the demand for private protection, Sciarrone disagrees in conceiving it as privileged explanatory factor in mafia, leaning more explicitly on a multiple causation approach (Sciarrone, 2009, 2014).

⁶ For more on the ambiguity of the social esteem strategies pursued by 'Ndrangheta, see Santarelli (2016).

Valuation, and finally in the recently edited *Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy*⁸. However, the definition of “interests” is only roughly sketched by Dewey,⁹ and it has never been the object of a detailed and painstaking analysis, neither in Dewey’s writings, nor in secondary literature.¹⁰ Although sufficient treatment of this issue would require an entire paper, I will nonetheless attempt to reconstruct some specific features which connote Dewey’s original understanding of interests, and which could help us in clarifying some aspects of the ‘Ndrangheta expansion in Northern Italy.

First of all, according to Dewey, interests represent a motivational embodied component of human behavior; they select opportunities in the environment and they direct attention and practice – for instance, he defines interests as “organizations of desires” (Dewey, 1939, p. 240). However, they are not purely subjective. As witnessed by their Latin etymology, they take place “between” people, and not simply in the actor’s brain:

The word 'interest' suggests in a forcible way the active connection between personal activity and the conditions that must be taken into account in the theory of valuation. Even in etymology it indicates something in which both a person and surrounding conditions participate in intimate connection with one another. In naming this something that occurs between them it names a transaction. It points to an activity which takes effect through the mediation of external conditions. (Dewey, 1939, pp. 205- 206)

Secondly, Dewey refers to interests both in a “psychological” sense – interests as “attention”, as “being interested in” – and in a sociological sense – group interests, economic interests, political interests, and so

on. But what is interesting – no pun intended – is that he sometimes employs the two meanings in the same context. Again, in *Theory of Valuation*, after defining interests as the active connection between personal activity and surrounding conditions, he suddenly refers to interests in the economic and sociological sense:

When we think, for example, of the interest of any particular group, say the bankers' interest, the trade-union interest, or the interest of a political machine, we think not of mere states of mind but of the group as a pressure group having organized channels in which it directs action to obtain and make secure conditions that will produce specified consequences (Dewey, 1939, pp. 206).

We see the same reasoning at work in *Democracy and Education*, in which the existence of a common interest in a democratic society consists in the fact that individuals are “interested, and chiefly interested upon the whole, in entering into the activities of others and taking part in conjoint and cooperative doings” (Dewey, 1916, p. 29).

The coexistence of the two meanings does not necessarily imply a contradiction. Rather, it would seem to indicate that the sociological dimension of interest is deeply entangled with the psychological one: there can be no self/group/private/public interests, unless people are interested, are attentive, are captured by some activity. In this sense, Dewey may represent a sort of third way, beyond the utilitarian reduction of interest to self-interest, and the objectivist conception of class interests advanced by Marxism. On the one hand, it allows us to criticize the utilitarian idea, according to which individuals are moved by a set of undisputable subjective psychological preferences, which constitute their self-interest.¹¹ On the other hand, Dewey can help us understand that group interests¹² – e.g. class interests – become objective, only insofar as they are incorporated into the flesh and mind of people. In this way, Dewey’s theory of interest seems compatible with Thompson’s analysis of the formation of

⁸ For a general introduction to these lectures, see Frega & Gronda (2015).

⁹ It is fair to note that the concept of interest is often sketched and underdeveloped. In fact it often works as a sort of “proto concept”. See Swedborg (2005).

¹⁰ As a matter of fact, some aspects of the deweyan notion of interests have already been explicitly discussed. See Jonas (2011) on the pedagogic concept of interest in Dewey, and Ryder (2013) on Dewey and common interests.

¹¹ Dewey (2015). On the history of interest as self-interest, see Hirschman (1977).

¹² On Dewey’s theory of groups, see Frega (2016).

the English working class: there is no working class, and there are no class interests, unless a group of social actors contribute actively to the formation and the definition of their identity as class, and of their collective interests (Thompson 1963).

Thirdly, interests entertain a dialectical and ongoing relationship with evaluations. Specifically, interests can be questioned and reshaped by evaluation in the face of problems. When something gets broken between people and their environment, people and other people, and between a person and herself, interests can be reshaped and re-discussed by means of evaluation. This re-shaping is by definition neither merely affective, nor merely cognitive. It is a synthetic gesture, as Giovanni Maddalena (2015) would say, condensing the emotional, the practical and the cognitive dimension.

From this point of view, it becomes clear that interests are not static and predetermined, as presupposed by culturalist approaches. Rather, they emerge from – and are reshaped by – mutual and intersubjective interactions and evaluations. This reshaping is not only quantitative re-negotiation –every actor renounces a part of her interest– but also qualitative: it can cause new interests to arise. In Mary Park Follett's terms: The exchange of interests is not always a matter of domination or compromise. It can also become an opportunity for integration. I will come back to Follett's position in the next paragraph.

Given their programmatic underestimation of this pragmatic dimension, culturalist approaches are forced to rely on mysterious mechanisms – such as “contagion”. Conversely, if we apply this perspective to the case of the expansion of 'Ndrangheta into northern Italy, we can grasp the interactive character of this processes in a more articulated way. This escalation has been made possible, as suggested by the example we proposed before, by means of a series of interactions and transactions which cannot be accounted for by postulating the total passivity of one or more of these agents.

4. Interest, reconstruction, asymmetry

However, the application of this deweyan conception of interest to organized crime seems to be problematic. In fact, Dewey's use of the concept of interest explicitly stresses the intersubjective, reciprocal and cooperative dimension of human action. But could it also take into account asymmetrical relationships, such as relationships of power, which are of course a crucial dimension in criminal activities? Does this approach simply ignore power, violence and intimidation, in favor of an over pacific interpretation of mafia?

We touch here upon a delicate point, namely the capacity of a deweyan approach – or more generally of pragmatism – to deal with asymmetrical¹³ relationships of power. In this regard, Dewey's underestimation of this kind of relationship has often been underlined. According to Richard Bernstein, “at times in his reliance on metaphors of harmony and organic unity, Dewey underestimates the conflict, dissonance, and asymmetrical power relations that disrupt the ‘harmonious whole’ “(Bernstein, 1998, p. 149). I consider this to be a reasonable criticism to pragmatism. Pragmatist authors were perfectly aware of the conflicting nature of social life. At the same time, they decided to focus on cooperation, reconstruction and continuity, rather than on violence, destruction and domination. This legitimate meliorist choice clearly implies the risk of leaving the big picture of society incomplete.

That said, the ubiquity of interaction cannot be simply considered as the naïve consequence of the alleged over-optimism of a Dewey-inspired approach. This aspect has also been stressed by celebrated and heterogeneous perspectives in social theory. Both Anthony Giddens' concept of the “dialectic of domination” (Giddens, 1984) and Michel Foucault's analyses of the coexisting processes of *assujettissement* – that is, of subjection - and *subjectivation* – e.g. the

¹³ On asymmetry, see Scillitani (2011).

creation of a new resisting identity of the dominated – (Foucault, 1982) show that even relationships of power cannot be conceived without presupposing a certain degree of mutual interaction. More specifically, and returning to the issue at hand, the emergence of a new interest by means of a mutual interactive relationship seems to be possible even in a deeply asymmetrical relationship. I would like to test this possibility by discussing an empirical case of extortion, that is, an explicit power relation.

In Milan, near the San Siro stadium, there are some food kiosks. The owner of one of these kiosks is approached by some men connected to Pepé Flachi, an important criminal hailing from Reggio Calabria. These men ask the kiosk owner for a payoff—that is, money in exchange for ‘protection’. This man “agrees”, so to speak, and thus begins a relationship with these criminal subjects. Later, a new kiosk opens nearby – this is a false one, opened by policemen as cover for an investigation. The man under extortion, the “passive victim”, goes to the new competitor, claiming he has a monopoly in that part of the city, and that the new kiosk must close. When the fake sandwich seller – in fact, a policeman – refuses to close, the kiosk owner threatens him: if he doesn’t close his kiosk, than his mafia colleagues will come, and will close the kiosk using their own methods.¹⁴

How should we interpret this episode? According to a culturalist perspective, the kiosk owner appears to be the victim of a sort of Stockholm syndrome. Subjected to the bullying and arrogant behavior of the mafia members, the kiosk’s owner becomes one of them. The contagious mafia habit spreads by means of asymmetrical relationships, in which the weak actor identifies himself with the strong one.

However, there is something more going on. If we confine our attention to identification or imitation processes, we risk missing some parts of the bigger picture. When the kiosk’s owner claims his monopoly in

that territory, he is not simply identifying himself with mafia actors. In fact, the opening of the new kiosk does not necessarily go against mafia interests. For instance, a new kiosk could also represent a new source of extortion, and then of income. Therefore, the kiosk owner has not identified himself with the gang’s interests. On the contrary, he expresses a new interest, and asks for it to be respected both by the new – fake – sandwich seller, and by the mafia clan. In virtue of the relationships they have created, the criminals must help him in realizing and protecting this interest. Therefore, there is not just a simple identification: the criminal gang and the kiosk owner are involved in a an asymmetrical but somehow reciprocal transaction.

The interest in the monopoly emerges then from this interaction. But is it an “interest” in Dewey’s sense? Does this episode match with the three features of a deweyan conception of interest that have been singled out before?

First of all, there is a motivational factor and a factor of attention at work. This new interest pushes the kiosk owner to act in a specific direction, to select certain aspects of the situation instead of others, it captures his attention, it pushes him to go and discuss with other social actors in order to achieve his goal.

But the interest of monopoly is not purely a psychological one. In fact – and here comes the second point – monopoly is also a socially defined and organized practice. Monopoly means the exclusive control of a commodity or service in a particular market, and thus implies the absence of competition in this regard. It is a social institution, provided with a socially shared meaning. Therefore, the interest of monopoly is here pursued by means of a deep entanglement between the psychological and the sociological dimension. There is no socially instituted monopoly, unless someone is “interested”, motivated, in realizing and protecting this monopoly. At the same time, this motivation and attention is shaped by the consolidated social meaning of “monopoly”.

¹⁴ The episode is taken from Storti, Dagnes, Pellegrino & Sciarrone (2014).

Thirdly, this new interest is the upshot of an evaluative process. It is a reflective reconstruction of the means-ends relationship when confronting a new situation. It is an interest which can be realistically pursued given the means provided by the ongoing new transaction with mafia actors. Conversely, the availability of new means makes possible the emergence of new ends. As shown by Joas, Dewey radically overcomes the mainstream dualistic version of the means-ends relation, which is shared by both individualistic utilitarian approaches, and ultra-culturalist ones. Neither purely instrumental means nor fixed and indisputable ends exist. The configuration of ends and means can be reconstructed by means of evaluation (Joas, 1996).

I would like to open a brief parenthesis to imagine how something similar to the means/ends entanglement could also be applied to the relation between demand and supply. The kiosk owner's case could be understood indeed as a typical instance of demand for private protection, which is according to Varese a typical activity characterizing the expansion of mafia beyond its original boundaries. In regard to the example under discussion, Varese's approach is not at all incompatible with the approach here proposed, provided that we refuse to interpret the relation between demand and supply in dichotomic terms. We can paraphrase Dewey (1896), by saying that in many cases the supply is not a mere answer to the demand. The two poles are not two completely separated entities, accidentally connected by a one-sided causal relation. Rather, it often happens that the demand is "into" the supply, as long as the supply is "into" the demand.

This entanglement is clearly evident in the example under discussion. On the one hand, the demand for protection does not emerge spontaneously. Rather, it is prompted by a threatening offering of violence — the demand is "into" the supply. On the other hand, the kiosk owner has changed his request from that of personal protection to the protection of his monopoly, thus modifying what is being supplied — the supply is "into" the demand. Of course, there can be cases in

which the demand is causally predominant over the supply, and vice versa. However, these cases should neither be generalized nor substantialized. As shown in the case of the kiosk owner, these preponderances might qualify a certain phase in the developing transaction, rather than representing the static identifying label of the interaction "in itself". Likewise means and ends, demand and supply often appear as two phases of the same, wider "coordination".¹⁵

But let's return to the thread of the discussion. The new interest of the monopoly appears then to be the result of an evaluative process. Of course, from a deweyan point of view we could criticize the quality of the kiosk owner's evaluation; its short-sightedness; its incapacity to clearly foresee all the import of the consequences produced by the attempt of realizing this interest — these consequences are negative both for society, and for the kiosk's owner, who will be incriminated by the fake newcomer, who is in fact a policeman; its incompatibility with "common interest". I am quite sure that Dewey would consider this as a bad evaluation. However, a bad evaluation is still an evaluation, and not necessarily a totally unintelligent, purely instinctive, purely irrational judgment or attitude, completely devoid of cognitive and rational content.

To sum up, this episode is enlightening: the kiosk's owner advances a claim, an interest in monopoly, which did not exist before the interaction with the mafia men. This interaction is of course asymmetrical, it is a power relationship where roles and legal and moral responsibilities can be clearly defined. But still, there is room for some kind of interaction, and for the emerging of a new interest from the development of this relationship.

Of course, this does not imply that every social interaction involves an equal degree and quality of reciprocity and cooperation. In this regard, a distinction

¹⁵ Dewey (1896). For a brilliant discussion of the origin of this idea of coordination in Dewey's thought, see Garrison (2003).

may be shaped after Mary Parker Follett's theory of conflict. According to Follett, one of the key purposes of democracy consists in dealing with conflicts. Conflict is here conceived "as the appearance of difference, difference of opinions, of interests" (Follett, 2003, p. 1). Conflictual differences of interests may be dealt with according to three different strategies: domination, compromise/negotiation and integration. Both domination and negotiation take for granted the nature of the existing interests, and presuppose the background of a 0 sum situation: the gain from one part presupposes the loss on the other, and vice versa. In the case of domination, one interest suppresses the other by means of violence; in the case of negotiation, a compromise is achieved, by means of a distribution of losses between the two parts (Frega, 2016, p. 89). Differently from domination and negotiation, integration involves an experimental and creative process, whose results are in principle unpredictable. Integration causes something new to emerge: a new situation, a new interaction, a new interest.

Follett's useful distinction is compatible with the Dewey-inspired approach we have developed under two conditions. First, these differences have to be understood as differences of degree. There is nothing like a pure relation of domination, a pure compromise, a pure integration. In this regard, hybrids represent the rule, rather than the exception. This idea is the corollary of the previously mentioned assumption that reciprocity and interaction are ubiquitous. Second, these distinctions often represent different phases of the same interactive process. Following our example, the interaction between the 'Ndrangheta clan and the kiosk owner starts as a domination strategy: protection is imposed under the threat of violence. Successively, a new interest emerges from the interaction: the interest in monopoly. This novelty requires a sort of integration into the exchange of interests. Of course, it is not a fully developed and rich integrative process: the shadow of violence always involves a limitation of possibilities. However, as we have seen, something novel has

occurred, and novelty necessarily involves a certain degree of integration.

Conclusions

A deweyan conception of interest appears to be a flexible and suitable conceptual tool, which allows us to overcome the rigidities and tendency towards oversimplification of culturalist approaches to organized crime, and specifically in our case, to the expansion of 'Ndrangheta. Of course, this is not an attempt to deny the import of cultural factors, which are at the core of 'Ndrangheta's identity. But the role played by cultural factors can only be understood by examining their impact on the social interaction actually occurring, rather than considering it as a sort of genetic programming. Even in the embryonic version here proposed, a Deweyan conception of interests seems to do justice to the fact that the snake of interaction and transaction, to paraphrase William James, can be observed everywhere, even within power relationships. Following this approach, it seems productive to deal with the 'Ndrangheta expansion by singling out and understanding which interactions and transactions make their activities possible, instead of leaning on one-sided, and sometimes exoteric explanations.

Of course, some aspects of this approach will need to be further developed. For instance, it could be contested that this approach provides an excessively intellectualist understanding of criminal activities such as extortion. Whereas a similar exchange of interests could account for interactions between criminal actors and resourceful economic and political actors, it does not work in the case of extortion perpetrated against weaker subjects. In the latter case, a crucial role seems to be played by emotions such as fear and angst, rather than by reflexive evaluation.¹⁶

¹⁶ I would like to thank Carlin Romano for making this remark.

I fully recognize the value of this criticism. The role of emotions in the interactions characterizing mafia activities is, to my knowledge, a totally unexplored issue, ripe for discussion and analysis.

However, I tend to consider this issue as a completion, rather than as an alternative to the approach here proposed. Rather than postulating the opposition between evaluation and emotion, it is more promising to analyze the mutual influences between these two dimensions. In which way is the interaction between different interests influenced by emotions? Is evaluation the simple result of an emotion-prompting behavior — e.g. threatening —, or is it a way of managing emotional behaviors? Do criminal threats prompt the same emotional reactions in different cultural milieus? Is the production of a certain emotion — fear, anxiety, uncertainty, paranoia — a service that mafia could offer to economic and political actors all around the world? These are the questions that can only be sketched here, and they will have to be explored in a further work.

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