LETIZIA PAOLI, "THE POLITICAL-CRIMINAL NEXUS IN ITALY"

On March 27, 1993, Palermo prosecutors asked Parliament for authorization to proceed against Giulio Andreotti, the seven-time Prime Minister and one of the most important characters of the Italian political scene throughout the post-war period, on the charge that from the early 1970s, he was the main political referent of the largest Sicilian mafia association, Cosa Nostra. 1 The authorization was granted, and from September 1995 to October 1999, Andreotti was on trial in Palermo. 2 At the same time he was also accused by the Perugia prosecutor’s office of having asked Sicilian mafiosi to murder Mino Pecorelli, a journalist who blackmailed him. In autumn 1999, Andreotti was finally acquitted on both charges on grounds of insufficient evidence, 3 but the court decisions could not dispel all doubts about his political career.

Notwithstanding the verdicts of acquittal, no other case better illustrates the pervasiveness of the political-criminal nexus in Italian society and the efforts that have been made for the first time in the 1990s to denounce and to eradicate it. Furthermore, Andreotti’s inquiry is far from being the only one. Many less important politicians and state officials are facing similar charges (see infra).

The investigations in the 1990s by several prosecutors’ offices in the Mezzogiorno (southern Italy) confirm the denunciations repeatedly made by small minorities of “enlightened” (mostly left-wing) observers since the late 19th century. Despite the great variation of subjects and situations, both past denunciations and current judicial inquiries point to the same fact: collusive agreements with state representatives have been a key element of the success and, truly, the very survival of southern Italian mafia groups. Not by chance, the most durable and powerful Italian mafia associations—the Sicilian Cosa Nostra and the Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta, upon which our attention will be largely focused—are those that have been able to infiltrate state institutions most deeply.

Long doubted by most scholars, 4 the existence of Cosa Nostra and the ‘Ndrangheta has from the mid-1980s been confirmed thanks to information disclosed by hundreds of former mafia members who have cooperated with the judiciary, the so-called pentiti (literally “those who have repented”). Due to these inside source and to the personal commitment of some prosecutors, judges and police officials, knowledge about mafia groups’ internal organization, culture, and actions has also grown tremendously in the last 15 years, today reaching a once inconceivable level. We now know that both Cosa Nostra and the ‘Ndrangheta are consortia, each made up by about ninety mafia families. The ‘Ndrangheta cosche (i.e., mafia families) are located predominantly...
in the Reggio Calabria province and its environs, but entire mafia groups are also settled in northern Italy and abroad, most notably in Australia and Canada. More than 6,000 people are suspected of belonging to the ‘Ndrangheta. Most of the 90 families associated with Cosa Nostra are based in western Sicily (the provinces of Palermo, Trapani, Agrigento, and Caltanissetta), though Cosa Nostra groups also exist in the eastern part of the island and there are branches in northern Italy and in several North and South American countries. Today there are at least 3,000 men ritually affiliated with Cosa Nostra families.\(^5\)

Since the rise of the earliest antecedents of these criminal coalitions around the mid-19th century, there have been contacts and exchanges between their members and state representatives and politicians. Indeed, from the 1880s onwards, the relationship between mafia and politics has been so deep and intense that numerous scholars believed the mafia phenomenon to consist of the interaction between criminal structures and political circuits.\(^6\) Given the information disclosed by former mafia members about the existence of formal mafia associations, this view appears simplistic, but it is nonetheless true that mafia groups owe much of their enduring power and freedom of action to their relationships with politicians.

To reconstruct this century-old relationship, this first section focuses on the social and political context that saw the rise of mafia associations in southern Italy and the spread of a subculture that may be defined loosely as a mafia type. This subculture, it will be argued, has been a fertile “culture medium” for both the consolidation of mafia associations’ power and the political-criminal nexus. The following sections reconstruct the evolution of the political criminal nexus, by focusing on three distinct historical phases. The second section is devoted to the Liberal Age (1860-1922), and the third to the fascist regime and the Second World War (1922-1945). The Republican period (1946-today) is analyzed in the last three sections of the paper: the fourth one is concerned with the first two postwar decades, the fifth covers the 1970s and the 1980s. The sixth and final section focuses on the situation today, highlighting the growing vulnerabilities of the political-criminal nexus and, at the same time, the factors that may favor its perpetuation in the near future.

1. The Rise of Mafia Groups and the Sociopolitical Context in the 19th Century

There is one factor that is pointed out by most scholars to explain the development of the mafia phenomenon, considered as both an attitude and an organization, in 19th century southern Italy: the inability of both the Bourbon and (for a long time) even the Italian governments to monopolize physical force in large parts of the Mezzogiorno and to gain legitimacy from the local population.\(^7\) As such, the mafia is not the residue of a lawless past: “it is an out-