In or around 1935, Salvatore Lucania, alias Charlie Luciano, was considered as “the head of the underworld in New York City.” He held court at the Waldorf Towers Hotel and, together with his associates from Chicago and other big cities, he monitored his empire, invested his earnings, and raked in considerable wealth from his bootlegging activities. He was very well connected politically thanks to Albert C. Marinelli, a Tammany boss. His name was touted by the New York Times’s Meyer Berger, who included him among the six top “modern racketeers” in the city—here modernity corresponds to the post-Prohibition era. Berger did not view the six bosses as ethnics, though most of them were Jewish and some were Italian. According to him, they had all withdrawn from the firing line and had become businessmen, or at least were “anxious to have the world think of them not as racketeers but as real business men”; as such, they could only be considered American.

In that context Berger portrayed Luciano as a “popular figure on Broadway,” who might be seen at his own night clubs, in one of the best seats at Madison Square Garden, on a Miami beach, or slumming on the East Side in Italian coffee shops—not because nostalgia had overcome him, but only “to show his old friends that success has not made a snob of him.”

Berger’s interpretation was rather forced. I cannot fail to remark that despite all the attempts at modernization/Americanization, the gangsters’ job was still a matter of dust, blood, and also ethnicity. In particular, Luciano was an Italian (Sicilian) mobster whose career had its bloody turning point in 1930–31 when two opposing parties, the former led by Masseria and the latter by Maranzano, took to their guns. Masseria was “the boss” par excellence of the Italian-American mobs; Maranzano was the only Sicilian top-level Mafioso who had reached an equivalent status.
in the United States. Both were killed in 1931, and it was in fact Luciano, the third party involved, who emerged the winner.

Every account of the history of the Mafia in America considers this as the turning point. I am going to reconstruct it once more, using on the one hand, a few contemporary sources and, on the other hand, narratives produced by protagonists long after (30 and even 50 years after) the events they refer to. Great care is required in examining these memories in order to understand why they are sometimes in agreement and sometimes in contrast, what they aim to reveal or perhaps to hide, and the different viewpoints involved. The key point is that they are all likely to be used in myth making, whether or not they concur with the fascinating saga that portrays Luciano as the hero who brought about the Americanization/modernization of the mob and Maranzano as the anti-hero, and the image of the Old World casting its shadow on the New World. Anyway, we need to start from this saga to obtain at least part of the truth.

The Legend of the Americanization of the Mob

We have already encountered Richard “Dixie” Davis, a lawyer, a partner of racketeers and corrupt politicians, and, in the end, a witness for the prosecution. He was the member of the underworld who, in 1939, revealed to the upper world (in his articles in Collier’s Magazine) “things I couldn’t tell till now,” to use his words. These revelations could be summed up with the single term: Unione Siciliana.

Let’s follow Davis’ reconstruction. According to him, the Unione was “the modern version of the old-fashioned Mafia or Sicilian Black-hand, which obtained its first foothold in this country at the beginning of this century”:3 it was a secret society that, in New York City, was “split up territorially into districts, each led by a minor boss, known as the ‘compare’, or godfather.”4 Davis indicated Giuseppe Morello and Ignazio Lupo as leaders of the Unione in the prewar period while, in the postwar years, the organization was divided into two contrasting parties. The first party was led by Masseria and included mobsters that Davis defined as “Americanized.” The other party, that he called “old-line,” was led by Maranzano. The old-liners included recent immigrants from Italy: “smuggled aliens who had gathered in large numbers to cook alcohol,” “unassimilated” people, they were identified with the pejorative popular term “greasers,” or “greaseballs.” Davis placed the 1930–31 gang war inside this framework. After Masseria’s murder, Luciano was expected to replace him as leader of the Unione, but the greasers succeeded in electing Maranzano. So as a favor to Luciano, the latter was killed by a hit squad of