

Italian mafia in the spectrum of culture and politics

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Abstract

This paper examines the rising of the Italian Mafia from the perspective of culture and politics. Culture has significant effects on rising of the Mafia in Southern Italy which mainly represents traditional values with collective characteristic features in the agricultural economy of the region so honour and trust are the two significant outcomes of this cultural attribution. Apart from culture, politics has major influence in the development of the Italian Mafia. Governments used different preventive measures against the Italian Mafia but they could not manage to eradicate the Mafia from the country completely. Although, Italian Mafia has already been examined through culture and politics by various scholars, this paper firstly introduces the concept of 'double oppression' as a new paradigm from the angle of the failure of individualism in Southern Italy and the concept of 'lack of ad hoc and decisive policies' as the outcome in the absence of strong, transparent and uncorrupted governments in the fight against the Italian Mafia. The paper argues that Italian Mafia has become stronger and undefeatable because of two major facts; failure of individualism and lack of state determination and decisiveness.

Key words: Italian Mafia, politics, culture, double oppression, ad hoc indecisive policy.

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1- Introduction

Mafia phenomenon in Italy is the most historical devastation which has extended through the political and social institutions. It infected the public with the virus of mistrust, corruption and violence. To examine the Mafia notion in the country, firstly it should be noted the reasons of its emergence in connection with history and culture of the region. Secondly, its empowering and becoming a real threat for the unity and future of the country ought to be analyzed through the Mafia's networks' in the political system. Therefore, this paper will analyze firstly the cultural spectrum of the region where mafia emerged and approved publicly and then will move to the political spectrum to investigate a clear answer in dealing with its power extension.

2- Italian Mafia in the Spectrum of Culture

Mediterranean culture and its strong bond with the traditions, customs and symbolism triggered empowering of the Mafia especially from the 'honour' and 'trust' perspective. Different from economic and political aspects, cultural paradigm caused mafia members to gain more legitimacy which is more durable and unchangeable as the outcome of the power of culture. This is not a big surprise when considering the culture as an ongoing process since starting of the humankind history so it has direct effects on the way of thinking of the people. Traditional Mediterranean culture has notably announced a social system with features of subsistence economy and gathered around two scarce values: honour and trust.¹ On the one hand, honour is placed at the meeting point of individual and society, on the other hand, trust is more regarded with the organization of the society and to its material culture but they have both common points.² Cottino mentioned that trust, as similar to honour, is a limited, vulnerable good which can be injured anytime.³ Seindal stated that "the Mafia's idiosyncratic culture is a mixture of traditional Sicilian values and norms, but in extreme and distorted version."⁴ Although, Blok (1974) asserted that mafia can not be explained just because of 'Sicilian character'.⁵ Different from Blok, many scholars acknowledged that this is key instrument in giving soul to the Mafia and make it stronger in the eyes of the people who glorified manliness, power and honour which are also main tools that were abused by mafia in order to reach their targets. The code of honour is purported to defend a general interest and take care of their community.⁶ This argumentation is essential to emphasize that code of honour ensures their prestigious statue in the society.

Like honour, the trust is another significant attribution in the Mediterranean culture. The trust notion has always been perceived to be one of the proofs why the Sicilian society is so susceptible about anything related with the state and turning towards another power.⁷ The reason of mistrust can be traced by different societies' invasions of the island during the history. Sicily had been invaded throughout history by different societies and countries like Vandals, Romans, Arabs, Normans, French, Aragon, Spanish, Austrians,

Bourbons, British and the U.S.A.⁸ Finally; Sicily had been the one of the regions of Italy by declaration of the Italian Republic in 1946. Hence, after being under the power of many different ruling systems, Sicilian people have obstacles to comprehend the state as something related with them because of this reason the state has mainly lack of prestige and positive perception in the region.⁹ Furthermore, aristocrats were also perceived negatively like the state because of their collaboration with the invaders during the history.¹⁰ In addition to this, Seindal claimed that absence of state raised a Hobessian type of world in which the highest of all virtues was named as 'personal honour'.¹¹ What is more, untrustworthiness perception of the state has unfortunately been effective until and after 1946 and its negative impression increased when the central authority has mainly neglected not only Sicily but also whole Southern region, in other words *Mezzogiorno*, in terms of social and economic aspects. Therefore, 'trust' as a notion and its meaning, more than a notion, have widely been used by the Mafia to make that notion vulnerable. Thus, they would tempt the people to ask private protection from the Mafia abusing such an historical perception of the 'trust' already existing in the society.¹²

Therefore, the concepts of honour and trust are the instrumental tools that have been frequently applied by Mafia to control society over these two concepts and secure themselves whenever their safety is in danger. Such a control can be varied like isolation and threatening of the people who make collaboration with the state, or violating the unwritten rules of the society and disobedience to the power of the Mafia. *Omertà* was emerged as the natural outcome of this process which is one of the well-known concepts in Mafia and means that being silent and showing obedience in the affairs of Mafia.¹³

There are other theories which argue that *Omertà* is not special to Sicily and was not created by the Mafia but is a term composed of traditional and historical facts of the region and belongs to the Mediterranean society.¹⁴ Such a claim is proven by observation of *omertà* also in Crete, Greece.¹⁵ Apart from the roots of the word, the meaning of it and its function have more significant outcomes. *Omertà* is one of the most essential concepts which safeguards mafia whenever the oppressed people decide to cooperate with the state apparatus or justice. The local people who have been persecuted economically, socially and psychologically would like to resist this subordination by resisting legally and making collaboration with the police but many times Mafia showed its cruelty on these people who made such cooperation. The person who violates *omertà* is named *pentito*. *Omertà* is also a cultural acceptance in contrast to the term of *pentito* which is mostly regarded with devious or betrayer in the society. The sword of the Mafia over the head of the *pentito* has always been a noteworthy deterrence to prevent people from making cooperation with the police. There are some courageous people who had done this cooperation. The number who made cooperation increased over a thousand from 1992.¹⁶ In contrary to the significant number

of the ones who preferred to make cooperation, the ones who did not would likely to be larger because of extreme threats and brutality of the Mafia.

Schwartz in his cultural values asserted that mastery values are bonded with hierarchy and this linkage is related with the subordination of the others for upper positions which causes to unequal distribution of roles and resources.¹⁷ This perception would likely to be justified where hierarchy seems to be legitimate. The situation of the Mediterranean culture and Sicily are highly related with the paradigm of cultural values of Schwartz. The Mastery of the Mafia has been perceived as the legitimate source because of its power and order domination in the region. What is more, power and order are the two remarkable sources of the region which make legitimate any instrument without any concern of its legality. Although power and order provider, in other words, the Mafioso is the sole character to dictate over Southern Italy, honour and trust are the basic notions which give soul to the Sicilian society to be respectful to the owners of power and order; the Mafiosi.

The Sicilian society have generally been observed as a place where extensive traditional values and social pressure are appreciated highly so much so that honour and trust became major tools to have impact on the certain type of behaviours in the society. Many scholars established the linkage in the rising of the mafia as a result of backwardness economic situation of the region besides its traditional agricultural structure and expanding of the Mafia.¹⁸ On the contrary, failure of individualism has widely been neglected. Despite the impact of the traditional and conservative values existing in the society, the value of individualism has an important place in terms of observing it on another person's life style. For instance, the Mafiosi was named as 'man of honour' and respectable person when they first emerged. The local person who gave more value to the Mafiosi more than himself also had opened the gate of the domination to the Mafioso. Neither focusing on the needs and desires what he wants and nor giving any struggle for these values caused not to care first the individualistic benefits for himself. On the other hand, the tendency to search a model person outside who is oriented by power could be the best one to represent him which is more appropriate to his Mediterranean cultural attributions because of the importance of power in the society. Such a satisfaction by transferring his individual value to another person who is more powerful than himself led in creation of Mafiosi as a stronger figure and the local person as a weak character who would have been oppressed and exploited by the stronger one. Undoubtedly, failure of individualism in other words failure of giving up the values for him that makes the humankind unique through his desires and wills were neglected and this ignorance triggered the appearance of the Mafiosi as a person who is the culturally accepted power. Undoubtedly, this is the most significant resource to progress in his profit making, and any illegal and violence activity.

Double oppression emerges after the failure of individualism in the existence of two fold oppression by the Mafia on the local people. The first oppression is settled by exploitation of the people in terms of racketeering, fraud, kidnapping, cheap labour, smuggling and etc. The second oppression emerges whenever the oppressed people try to resist the mistreatment and brutality through application to the legal institutions to ask for protection. Mafia uses its networks in the bureaucracy, politics, and local contacts to prevent such an application. If it is not possible to close the channels of the legal protection for the oppressed people complains', they start using threats, bloodshed and violence on the oppressed ones to deter them from their decisions about taking any legal initiative against the Mafia. Unfortunately, this is the vicious cycle which helps maximization the profits of the Mafia over the oppressed people. That is important to mention that honour and trust as already mentioned above have been the other effective reasons as being pressure instruments because making such cooperation with the legal organisms and police also means that social isolation, infame and putting their lives in danger for the local people. Thus, the first oppression is dominated by the pure different types of violence and second one is under the control of the fears not to be harmed by the Mafia because of the fear of existing brutality of the first oppression and as it is mentioned in the study of Scalia, this fear is the natural outcome of the physiological weakness of the humankind.²⁰ Unfortunately, besides other factors, the failure of individualism prepared the most appropriate atmosphere for the allocation of the double oppression on the local people over the violence and fear tools of the Mafia. There are economic, political, social and cultural reasons in the expansion of the Mafia and emerging as an evil monster but the roots of this evil monster had become stronger under the suitable cultural background of the region which gave sufficient resources to the roots of the Mafia through honour and trust perceptions.

3- Italian Mafia in the Spectrum of Politics

Block remarked that "... organized crime is increasingly taken to represent a series of relationships among professional criminals, upper world clients and politicians."²¹ Besides that, Maffei and Betsos mentioned this relationship as an outcome of dissolving of the several town councils in southern Italian cities in the regions of Calabria and Campania.²² What determines Italian mafia's different position than the other criminal organization depends on its relationship with the politics and this relationship could be defined as "the alliance between politics and crime. This fact implies for the control of the economic sphere, the trade union organizations, influence of judiciary, the police and administrative and political bodies."²³

Except during the fascist regime (1922-1943), the elite administrators acknowledged the existence of the 'parallel administration' of the Mafia bosses until the 1960s.²⁴ During the 1960s Mafia commenced losing its popular support and radicalized among itself. The distribution of the public contracts to the Mafia's during the 1960s, 70s and 80s were also not only created a strong bond in the relationships between Mafia and Politics but also figured out new type of Mafia politicians.²⁵ An anti-mafia commission was founded by the Italian Parliament in 1962 and by the end of the decade the statue of the organized crime in the society replaced its place with marginality.²⁶ Anti-mafia commission was not the only measurement taken against the Mafia. After the dramatic assassinations of politicians, judges, journalists during 1960s and 70s, the brutality of the Mafia was reached its peak level by early 1980s. *Maxiprocesso* (Maxi Trial) was the significant response to the Mafia's brutality by the Italian justice system. The first time Italian state decided to take hard preventive measures against the Mafia by this trial and thereafter. Hundredths of Mafiosi were put behind the bars. This trial proved that the state became aware of the fact that it should take the control back from the Mafia in the whole country but Mafia became crueller after *Maxiprocesso* and started its shocking assassinations. In the year of 1992 murdering of two senior prosecutors who became the famous as Mafia fighters; Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino caused a deep turbulence in the country. Other preventive measurements put on the table like increasing the confidentiality of the judicial investigation into mafia crimes, permitting more flexibility in the gathering of evidences (i.e. wiretaps).²⁷ Furthermore, more though rules were established by the article 41-bis to restrict certain rights for the ones in the prisons who involved in Mafia crimes whereas this suspension would be removed when the Mafioso cooperates with the legal authorities.²⁸ Although, all of these considerable reforms and measurements against the Mafia the main point why Mafia has still become apparently leading role both in legal business through irregular ways and illegal drug trafficking would be reasoned by their linkage of the politicians which was defined as 'collusive agreements'.²⁹

The problem of the Italian state in dealing with the Mafia is a problem creating the perception about existence of this fight. In fact, such a fight has never been taken with full of commitment in contribution of all bureaucrats, politicians and media. Thus, the problem of the Italian elite system in any attempt to fight against the Mafia was deep rooted on the ground of corruption, lack of transparency and dirty network system between mafia and politicians. This dirty relationship is clearly more observable during the election times and any cooperative corruption. For instance, it is a widely known fact that how the Mafia dominated many elections in the country. One of the last extensive known manipulations was held in 1987 election. Their supported politicians won the seats in the local towns through using different tricks.³⁰ What is more, in the early 1990s the last biggest corruption story was occurred which was named as the 'Clean Hands' inquiries and revealed a system of corruption. The investigation was extended across all of the political parties, public officials, politicians and entrepreneurs. 3200 suspected offenders were found themselves in the trial due to economic related crimes between 1992 and 2002.³¹ Therefore, the mafia was appeared 'a state within the state' in main Southern Italian regions like Sicily and other cities in Calabria and Campania where two regions host famous Mafia organizations named as *'Ndrangheta* and *Camorra* respectively.³² Another argument was raised again because of the relationship between the powerful Italian figures and Mafia crimes. This argumentation defines mafia as a 'formidable enemy' because of many powerful Italian elites have somehow interest in the mafia type crimes. Therefore, until this fascination was terminated, Mafia would go on surviving in the country.³³

In contrary to the success of the Mafia, during the last years Italian public witnessed capturing of the leading Mafia chiefs. Arresting of Salvatore Russo, Gianni Nicchi and Pasquale Russo would be firstly counted as a success for the Berlusconi government and prominent examples to show the government's determinant fight against the Italian Mafia whereas the last attempt to change the law about the confiscated goods of Berlusconi government increases the doubts about their sincerity in this fight. The law obliges that goods which are confiscated from the Mafia must be used for the public good for instance as a library or a nurse school. This could be interpreted that on the one hand the government takes the attention by the arrestments of the Mafia chiefs. On the other hand, the government gives back the financial power to the Mafia by the law which purposed to change the aim of the confiscated goods. Public auction will be liable after modification of the law so confiscated goods which were derived from Mafia will have the chance to buy their properties back.³⁴ Mancini expresses this attempt 'giving back with your left hand what you take away with your right.'³⁵ The approach of the today's government against the Mafia is unfortunately lack of persuasiveness when lastly the argument raised that "Berlusconi quite

officially employed a Mafioso in his immediate entourage to manage his horses – pentiti maintain that the man acted as a contact".³⁶ The rising power of the Berlusconi as being one of the richest men in the country is the controversial topic as how he succeeded it without any networks from the Mafia.³⁷

The story of the Italian Mafia in the country is the story of the paradoxes and fluctuations. The political organisms, policy makers, justice system and bureaucrats, all these responsible stakeholders in the solution of the problem have never proved their fight against the Mafia with full of commitment in the contribution of all responsible persons in this fight. Although, it is undeniable the existence of some courageous prosecutors and politicians to halt the Mafia but when the issue is Mafia, it needs a perfect alignment to fight against Mafiosi who are well organized and strategically plan makers to reach their targets. The Italian state had taken many legal and social measurements to bring to an end the brutal story of the Mafia but the real problem is the way how to implement these policies with strategic decisions in a suitable time period and in the contribution of all people in the country without any exception. Undoubtedly, postponing the Mafia problems many years and lack of ad hoc and decisive policies which should have been followed full of commitments as a state policy made the Mafia notion as a destiny of the country. Unfortunately, the last government draws more pessimistic picture. Even tough capturing of the some Mafia leaders gave strong signals to the public, the last attempt on changing the law in dealing with the confiscated goods and the network of Berlusconi government with certain type of people who belong to other Mafia structures increases this doubt.

4- Concluding Remarks

This paper hopefully showed and put different paradigms in the examination of the mafia reality in Italy. The first significant remark that firstly argued in this paper was the notion of double oppression after elucidation of the cultural role in the emergence of the Mafia. Double oppression is essential to understand not only implemented methods of Mafia in their success but also despair and hopefulness of the local people and mafia victims who oppress under the system of double oppression of the Mafia. The second important outcome is how corruption, lack of transparency and accountability among the politicians put a country in a violent turbulence. Lack of ad hoc and decisive policies against the Mafia is the other face of the coin which has the remarkable role in the failure of such a fight against the Mafia.

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