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Types of organised crime in Italy. The multifaceted spectrum of Italian criminal associations and their different attitudes in the financial crisis and in the use of Internet technologies

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Abstract

This paper discusses the opportunity to differentiate four different criminological types of organised crime in Italy by drawing on a subset of case studies and interviews to law enforcement officers and experts collected for two on-going research projects. We hypothesise that, since these types exploit different social opportunity structures for their criminal activities, they have different capacities of adaptation and react differently when confronted with different kinds of innovations and changes. We test these four types against two significant phenomena that have been deeply impacting Italian society, among others, recently: the commercialization of the Internet and the economic and financial crisis that has hit Europe since late 2008. We conclude that these types offer a valid help to guide our understanding of what organised crime is today in Italy, as well as to assess the capacity of the existing legal framework to properly face all them. These criminological types could also serve as lenses to filter the different experiences of organised crime in other European countries, thus facilitating comparative research.

Keywords: Organised crime; Mafia; Internet; Financial crisis; Social opportunity structure; Criminal network; Mafia migration; Criminal association

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1. Introduction

Despite the fact that 'organised crime' has been a major policy and research topic in many European countries – and especially in Italy – for a number of years, this 'umbrella concept' (Von Lampe, 2002 p. 191) appears insufficient to guarantee a common level of understanding in public and scientific debates. Indeed, an absolute consensus on what constitutes organised crime is still missing: the very nature of the criminal phenomena described by this label makes its definition problematic (Van Duyne and Van Dijck, 2007; Wright, 2006), to the point that it appears that there are 'as many description of organised crime as there are authors' (Albanese, 2000 p. 410). First of all, as emphasized by Longo (2010), several disciplines – such as criminal and international law, criminology, sociology, and international relations – deal with (transnational) organised crime in their research agenda and debate about its definition according to their different scientific focus. Secondly, organised crime is conceptualised around the world in different ways (Albanese et al., 2003): as underlined by Savona (2010 p. 133), there is a real 'cultural difficulty' due to the dissimilar contexts in which 'the aggregate paradigm of organised crime' was born.

Debates on the opportunity to include in the notion of organised crime phenomena such as gangsterism or certain types of corporate crime are not new (Wright, 2006). Furthermore, in the last decades this label has evolved to include not only cyber criminality (Choo and Smith, 2008; McCusker, 2006) and international groups (Wheatley, 2010), but also the interactions between organised crime and terrorism have been increasingly underlined (Makarenko, 2005). After all, defining a group involved in illegal activities as organised crime suggests the existence of a whole mechanism to tackle, thus orienting the responses of law enforcement (Cressey, 2008 p. 299) and allowing an 'emotional kick' that helps to get resources and powers (Levi, 1998 p. 336).

In Italy the use of the wording 'organised crime' seems to be especially problematic and risks to be misleading: indeed, the same label may identify a whole range of different crimes and groups, ranging from 'traditional' mafias to new illegal market players that often take the form of looser gangs (Lavorgna et al., 2013). The main problem seems to be caused by the fact that for the expression 'organised crime' the 'dilemma between generalisation and specification' (Edwards and Gill, 2002 p. 204) has not yet been fully solved, probably because it is not a neutral and aseptic notion but one that is deeply soaked with cultural elements of the country. However, this ambiguity in using the term 'organised crime' might be misleading: the risk is that to maintain its evocative capacity while its normative and descriptive values are lost.

This article originates from some reflections over the difficulties encountered in the course of a number of interviews to key observers with expertise on organised crime conducted in Italy by the authors: indeed, depending on the interviewees' areas of specialization, setting the ground on 'what do we mean by organised crime' was often needed before starting with the actual interview. By drawing on a subset of case studies and interviews to law enforcement officers and experts collected for two ongoing research projects, this article discusses the emergence of four different types of organised crime groups in Italy, which explicate a more complex narrative over concerns of what organised crime is. We hypothesize that, since these typologies exploit different social opportunity structures for their criminal activities – i.e., social ties providing access to profitable criminal opportunities (Kleemans and De Poot, 2008) – they have different capacities of adaptation and behave differently when confronted with different kinds of innovations and changes. Thus, it is important to keep them conceptually separate in the rhetoric on organised crime.