

BOOK REVIEW

Mafia Politics

by Marco Santoro, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 2022, 336 pp.
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Mafia Politics unveils the multifaceted world of the mafia, intricately linked as it is with politics and societal structures. Opening with an introduction to key concepts (Chapter 1), the book lays down a strong foundation for the exploration ahead. It continues by re-evaluating and challenging established mafia stereotypes (Chapter 2) and by criticising the economic theory of the mafia (Chapter 3). The book then gets to its core by examining a number of related topics: a glimpse into the public personas and lives of the mafiosi (Chapter 4); the roles of gifts and offers, i.e., coercive and persuasive tactics employed by the mafia (Chapter 5); and the specific internal organisational structure, relationships, and bonds within the mafia (Chapter 6). The book concludes with an exploration of the mafia as a ‘political’ entity (Chapter 7). In one sentence, *Mafia Politics* is a thought-provoking critique of the economic theory of the mafia. The book challenges the traditional understanding of the mafia’s economic motivations and highlights the complex social dynamics at play within it.

The author, Marco Santoro, argues that the economic theory of the mafia falls short by being too basic and lacking a deeper understanding of the non-economic elements characterising the Sicilian Mafia. The economic theory is also criticised for being too abstract and limited in its approach. Moreover, while the economic theory focuses on private protection, it neglects other economic roles played by *mafiosi*, i.e., mediation and cartel enforcement (the roles of mediation and cartel enforcement, though briefly mentioned without much detail, are especially interesting to economists).

Instead of viewing the mafia solely as profit-driven entities, the author argues that *mafiosi* are historically deeply entrenched in a web of social relationships where offerings and counter-offerings, both material and symbolic, continuously circulate. In the mafia’s historical and social universe, economic profit is not the exclusive pursuit. Symbolic capital and symbolic profits hold significant value, shaping the mafia’s actions and relationships. The acquisition of economic resources is a means to support the group’s members, rather than an end in itself. This system is rooted in personal ties and mutual aid, reminiscent of fraternal societies that have deep historical roots in Sicily (from Arab and Norman times).

Contrary to its secretive nature, the mafia traditionally operates in the public sphere and is involved in public life. The book emphasises that the protection offered by *mafiosi* is not merely a private good but is deeply personalised. Moreover, the aim of *mafiosi* to

'protect' everyone within their area of influence is again in contrast with the economy theory, which focuses on *private* protection.

The roots of mafia groups are traced in brotherhoods that provide mutual support among their members, grounded in a unique social structure known as the *Bund*. Loyalty and fidelity are essential to these organisations, resulting in strong solidarity but also the risk of betrayal. *Mafiosi* engage in 'gift exchanges' rather than traditional market transactions, framing their services as acts of generosity and friendship. The rituals, norms, symbols, and organisational forms of the mafia are not merely instruments for market strategies but are deeply rooted in local culture and history, making them familiar to the local population.

Overall, the book makes two main contributions. First, the economic theory of the mafia is challenged through a historical account of the dynamics mentioned above, which contrast with the idea of private protection as a commodity. Second, Santoro depicts a detailed picture of the cultural elements characterising mafia dynamics: honour, violence, mutual help, protection, and public life.

The book does have some shortcomings worth noting. It may not be a easily accessible for readers who are not sociologists and therefore lack the necessary theoretical background to grasp the concepts presented throughout the text. This is a significant limitation, especially if the aim is to make the book's insights accessible to a broader audience within the social sciences, beyond just sociology. A simpler and more straightforward approach might have been more effective in achieving this goal.

Furthermore, the book's impact on our understanding of current mafia dynamics is somewhat limited. It leaves important questions unanswered, such as why the mafia is less violent today compared to the past, how it successfully expanded into Northern regions, why it originated in Sicily rather than elsewhere, and the current patterns of infiltration into the economy (which are well explained by the much-criticised economic theory). Hopefully the author will consider addressing these questions in a future book, particularly by exploring the similarities between the Sicilian Mafia and other mafia-type groups around the world, such as the Camorra and the 'Ndrangheta. This book does touch upon other mafia groups in its final chapter, but the coverage is relatively brief and limited in scope. This could provide valuable insights into the evolving nature of organised crime and its impact on contemporary society in a comparative perspective.

Nevertheless, *Mafia Politics* offers a fresh perspective on the economic and social dynamics of the mafia, challenging conventional theories and highlighting the intricate relationships and cultural influences that shape these groups.