

## “Old Mafia” and “New Mafia” in the Novels of Saverio Strati, 1957–1977

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### Abstract

**D**ESPITE being Italy’s most powerful mafia, Calabria’s ’ndrangheta has long been dwarfed by its Sicilian and Neapolitan cousins in terms of cultural representations. Such representations, however, though frequently overlooked and ignored outside of their native region, have played a definite role in shaping wider perceptions of the ’ndrangheta. This article examines three novels by Saverio Strati (1924–2014), one of Calabria’s few celebrated authors, published between 1957 and 1977. These realist novels contain rich and detailed depictions of the ’ndrangheta, and encompass a significant phase of change and development within the organization. My reading of the novels considers the nature and pace of this change, with reference to historical debates concerning the “old” and “new” mafia, particularly Pino Arlacchi’s traditional/entrepreneurial dichotomy. I further explore Strati’s portrayal of the ’ndrangheta’s relationship with traditional Calabria, considering the consensus enjoyed by the mafia within its host communities, and argue that this presents a departure from the work of Corrado Alvaro (1895–1956). Finally, I explore the ways in which Strati’s novels have been used and interpreted by ’ndrangheta scholarship and literary criticism. I argue that while contemporary literary critics appear keen to downplay the presence of the ’ndrangheta in the texts, historians and sociologists have frequently cited them as eyewitness historical accounts of the organization, blurring the line between fact and fiction.

### Introduction

**T**HE ’ndrangheta is frequently acknowledged to be Italy’s most powerful mafia (Giap Parini 173–84; Sergi and Lavorgna 113), yet the organization has long been dwarfed by its Sicilian and Neapolitan cousins in terms of cultural representations. In a reflection of the political, economic, and geographical marginality of its native region, Calabria’s mafia has been the subject of substantially fewer books, films, and column inches over its long history.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, though the corpus is

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that only in the last two to three decades has the word *’ndrangheta* come to be used with any degree of exclusivity to refer to the Calabrian mafia, and before the 1950s, this

limited in size, there is evidence that cultural representations of the 'ndrangheta have existed for almost as long as the organization itself (P. Crupi), dating back to the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, although these texts tend to be produced regionally, for a predominantly regional readership,<sup>2</sup> their incorporation into the historiography of the organization extends their impact beyond their original audience. The work of Corrado Alvaro (1895–1956), arguably Calabria's most vocal and respected literary emissary, serves as a notable example; the author's journalism and fiction are frequently cited in historical and sociological studies of the 'ndrangheta (Phillips 181).

Most of the few literary representations of the 'ndrangheta produced by Alvaro coincided with the organization's emergence into the Italian national consciousness in 1955, largely as a result of the Marzano Operation, a police crackdown ostensibly launched in response to a breakdown of law and order in Calabria. After Alvaro's death in 1956, there began a long period in which the 'ndrangheta was barely acknowledged in the national public imaginary (Dickie, *Mafia Republic* 148). Following the conclusion of the Marzano Operation, Calabrian organized crime received virtually no mention in the national press or in parliament until 1969 (Gambino 198). The years which followed saw a steady rise of press interest in the phenomenon, as the 1970s brought corruption scandals, an influx of high-profile kidnappings, and a bloody internal conflict (the so-called "first 'ndrangheta war"), which finally concluded in 1977 after three years and some 233 murders (Dickie, *Mafia Republic* 192). By the end of this period, Calabrian organized crime was gaining a firm foothold in the national public imagination; though it would be decades before the true scale and extent of the problem would begin to be recognized.

The period 1957–1977 thus marks an important stage in the 'ndrangheta's history, encompassing a significant phase of change and development within the organization. The precise nature and extent of this change, however, is a question that has provoked debate amongst sociologists and historians. It is generally agreed upon that around the mid-twentieth century, Italy's mafias took advantage of the country's "economic miracle", and significantly expanded their areas of activity (Ciconte 298). However, until the 1980s, social scientific discourse surrounding the mafias was dominated by the theory that in both Sicily and Calabria, the nature of this transition consisted of a shift from a "traditional mafia", a loose, disorganized phenomenon manifesting a set of cultural attitudes and behaviours typical of specific regions in the South of Italy, to an "entrepreneurial mafia" (Arlacchi 125–27). The latter term, proposed by sociologist Pino Arlacchi, described the phenomenon by which mafiosi took advantage of Italy's post-war economic transformation and became focused on the accrual of wealth as opposed to the

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word was barely used at all (Truzzolillo 234). Prior to this, the organization went by a number of different, broadly interchangeable names, including *Onorata società*, *Fibbia*, *picciotteria*, *malavita*, and *la famiglia Montalbano*, as well as the term *camorra*, borrowed, like *mafia*, from the 'ndrangheta's better-known criminal counterparts (Ciconte 11).

<sup>2</sup> For an anthology of titles, see P. Crupi.

"traditional" pursuit of personal strength and honour (9). Arlacchi furthermore suggested that

Contrariamente a quanto viene suggerito da gran parte della pubblicistica letteraria e giornalistica sull'argomento, non esiste e non è mai esistita un'organizzazione criminale segreta, gerarchica e centralizzata chiamata *mafia*, *'ndrangheta* o *onorata società* [. . .]. (63)

[Contrary to the impression given in most literary and journalistic treatments of the theme, there does not exist—and there never has existed—any secret, hierarchical and centralized criminal organization called *mafia*, *'ndrangheta*, or *onorata società* [. . .].]

This latter assertion has since been disproved, thanks to the weight of evidence demonstrating that even as early as the nineteenth century both the Sicilian mafia and the *'ndrangheta* had organized, hierarchical features (Dickie, *Mafia Brotherhoods*; Truzzolillo). Arlacchi's insistence on the existence of a traditional/entrepreneurial dichotomy in the mafias' history has also since been discredited. Salvatore Lupo (25) and Diego Gambetta, for example, pointed to the "entrepreneurial" nature of the activities of even the earliest incarnations of the mafias. Lupo furthermore observed that if the mafias were simply a manifestation of traditional culture, they would be ubiquitous across Sicily and Calabria, rather than being clustered in specific areas (22).

However, the trope of the "old" mafia as a distinct, unsophisticated phenomenon, rooted in traditional Southern culture, has endured in public discourse. Labelled the "culturalist" view by Letizia Paoli (15), its roots are deep and complex. It can be traced back through the work of foreign sociologists studying Sicily in the 1960s and 1970s (Hess; Schneider and Schneider), and further to *Sicilianisti* such as nineteenth-century folklorist Giuseppe Pitrè, who portrayed the Sicilian mafia as part of the traditional culture of the island, viewing "the essence of mafia conduct as a grand, Robin Hood Resistance to bullying and oppression" (Farrell 18). In cultural representations, the "traditional" mafia is often represented as comparatively benign in contrast to its "modern" incarnation; Alvaro's 1950s literary depictions of the *'ndrangheta*, for example, are imbued with a distinct romantic nostalgia for a traditional mafia that has been corrupted and transformed by the march of modernity and consumerism. For Alvaro, the Second World War marks the key point of transition or transformation, though as I will explore below, there is a marked lack of consensus in cultural production as to precisely when the shift between "traditional" and "entrepreneurial" began.

Cultural representations of organized crime produced in Calabria have featured heavily in *'ndrangheta* scholarship (Phillips), and Arlacchi's work is no exception; his writing on the "traditional mafia" makes frequent recourse to Calabrian cultural products, especially novels, as sources. In this article, I offer a focused analysis of three of these novels, exploring their portrayals of the *'ndrangheta*'s development. The central questions I explore are: what do Calabrian literary texts produced during this eventful period have to say about the "modernization" of the *'ndrangheta*?

Is the traditional/entrepreneurial dichotomy traceable in the novels, and if not, what alternative narratives might emerge?

The novelist whose work will be examined is Saverio Strati, who, for a range of reasons, is particularly well-suited to this area of enquiry. Strati has been described as "lo scrittore che, più di ogni altro, si è occupato di 'ndrangheta nella sua vasta produzione letteraria" ["the author who, more than any other, focused on the 'ndrangheta in his vast literary output"]<sup>3</sup> (Nicaso 56), and his work has been extensively referenced by 'ndrangheta scholars (including Arlacchi). Three of Strati's novels will be examined,<sup>4</sup> the publication dates of which neatly bookend the article's period of focus: the author's first published novel, *La teda* [*Terrarossa*]<sup>5</sup> (1957), *Mani vuote* [*Empty Hands*] (1960), and *Il selvaggio di Santa Venere* [The Beast of Santa Venere] (1977), the latter of which is by far his most celebrated work, as well as being the most quoted and referenced by historians and sociologists (see, for example, Arlacchi 30, 32; Ciconte 8, 15, 32, 38; Paoli 69, 72, 151, 189).

As I will show, the prominence of the mafia within the narrative, and the level of detail with which it is described, increases with each novel. While *Il selvaggio* has been widely cited by 'ndrangheta scholars, the two earlier novels—*La teda* and *Mani vuote*—have received very little critical attention. However, they can be used to contextualize Strati's representation of the 'ndrangheta in *Il selvaggio*, offering an opportunity to chart and analyse the development of the author's portrayal of the organization over time. Such analysis has been undertaken to an extent in the small corpus of work which is dedicated to literary representations of the 'ndrangheta. However, as I explore below, previous scholars (P. Crupi; I. Crupi; Nicaso) have tended to focus on the author's portrayal of change and modernization within the mafia, framed through the false dichotomy of traditional vs. entrepreneurial. I argue for an alternative reading, which places greater emphasis on the author's insistence on the elements of continuity within the 'ndrangheta: its barbarism, its backwardness, and its role as an unambiguously negative minority actor within Calabrian society. I explore the novels' depictions of the socio-economic causes of organized criminality, and the degree to which it enjoys consensual support within its host communities. I argue that Strati's novels represent a departure from Corrado Alvaro's literary representations of Calabrian organized crime in this regard.

This article adopts a cultural studies approach, appreciating texts as part of what Robert Stam terms a "spectrum of cultural products" (10). I will thus examine the differing ways in which these novels have been used and interpreted

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<sup>3</sup> All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated. Although *La teda* and *Mani vuote* have been translated into English as *Terrarossa* (1962) and *Empty Hands* (1963), respectively, both translations are somewhat outdated and contain terminology which does not reflect contemporary understandings of Calabrian organized criminality.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the author's literary representations of the mafia are not limited to these texts: the mafia is mentioned in the titular short story of his very first published collection, *La marchesina*, in 1956, and also features in novels published after 1977.

<sup>5</sup> *La teda* was published in English as *Terrarossa*, named for the village in which the story takes place. There is no literal translation of the Italian *la teda*, which derives from a dialect term for a kind of primitive lamp.

by different recipients: 'ndrangheta scholarship (predominantly from the fields of history and sociology), mainstream literary criticism, and the much smaller field of 'ndrangheta-specific literary criticism. While contemporary literary critics appear keen to downplay the presence of the 'ndrangheta in the texts, historians and sociologists have frequently cited them as if they were eyewitness historical accounts of the organization, blurring the line between fact and fiction.

### Alvaro and Strati

IT seems fitting that Saverio Strati's first book should have been published in 1957, the year after Corrado Alvaro's death. Alvaro, Calabria's most famous literary export, was an author and journalist who had gained national fame for his writing.<sup>6</sup> Although he never lived in Calabria again after leaving in his teens, his native region formed a central theme in his writing throughout his life, with Dickie naming him "the unofficial spokesman for the voiceless poor of his home region" ("Mafia Republic" 83). Alvaro had been a source of great inspiration to the young Strati, who was born in 1924 in the village of Sant'Agata del Bianco, around ten miles from Alvaro's native village of San Luca on the Ionian side of the Aspromonte mountain range (Strati, "Un incontro" 93). Until the age of twenty-one, Strati was semi-literate; born into a poor family, he initially followed in his father's footsteps to become a stonemason (Neri 7). However, a loan from an uncle in America allowed him to pursue his dream of studying literature, and in 1953 he moved to Florence to complete his degree. Strati's humble origins had a powerful influence on his work, and his fiction was marked by his own experiences of poverty (Esposito 21–38). He enjoyed considerable prominence at the peak of his career, receiving the prestigious Premio Campiello in 1977 and winning a host of other literary prizes, both in Italy and abroad. Despite these successes, and having his work translated and reviewed in numerous foreign languages, a year before his death in 2014 he had become, in the words of *Il giornale*, "un grande dimenticato della letteratura" ("Il ritorno") ["one of literature's forgotten greats"]. Following the decision by Mondadori to end Strati's publishing contract in 1991, the author fell gradually into obscurity, and his financial situation became so desperate that in 2009 the newspaper *Il quotidiano della Calabria* launched a campaign to grant the author a state salary (Ordine).

Despite this unfortunate career progression, as a literary ambassador for Calabria, it seems fair to regard Strati's status as similar to that of his predecessor, Alvaro, given the considerable popular and critical acclaim he enjoyed during the period of this article's main focus (1957–1977). The two authors share other important similarities; both spent time abroad, and both wrote about Calabria from the perspective of an émigré to a more prosperous region (Alvaro moved to Rome, while Strati lived in Tuscany from 1953 until his death, with a period spent in

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<sup>6</sup> Alvaro's most celebrated work, *Gente in Aspromonte* (1930), was set in rural Calabria, and won the newspaper *La Stampa*'s prestigious literary prize in 1931, having been judged by a panel including Luigi Pirandello. In 1951 his autobiographical novel *Quasi una vita* won the Premio Strega.

Switzerland). Both, too, were concerned with representing the lives of the poorest inhabitants of Calabria in their work, leading to their commonly being identified as realist writers (Pizzutti). However, the degree to which they are comparable in this regard is subject to debate (Pizzutti). While both authors set the majority of their fiction in the same geographical area (in and around the Aspromonte), and often depict the same broad chronological period (many of Strati's novels are set in Calabria's past), their representations of early twentieth-century rural Calabria differ substantially. Alvaro's Calabria is often viewed through a filter of romantic nostalgia, while Strati's work is characterized by a brutal and highly politicized form of realism, which spares the reader no shocking detail in the descriptions of poverty and squalor.

Concettina Pizzutti (313) identifies the differing social environment at the time of writing as a reason for Strati's harder-hitting realism, which painted grimly detailed portraits of the poverty and suffering rife in early-twentieth century Calabria without Alvaro's gloss of myth and idyll. Bourgeois audiences, she claims, were not as receptive of realism at the time Alvaro was writing, so he used a less stark, less "threatening" brand of realism to relay the problems of the South in his work. Pizzutti argues that Strati, writing in the 1950s, had greater freedom, as the reading public was by then accustomed to realism.

The degree to which this paradigm can be applied to the two authors' differing representations of the 'ndrangheta, however, is questionable. Alvaro's extensive literary and journalistic writings on Calabria featured almost no explicit references to organized criminality until 1955 (the year before his death), by which time this new brand of realism should, by Pizzutti's measure, already have taken hold. And yet, on the occasions when the author did engage with the topic, he tended to portray an idealized vision of an "old" or "traditional" mafia, which he differentiated from the corrupt, modernized incarnation that developed following the Second World War (see, in particular, the 1955 short story "Angelino"). Alvaro's work often points to a level of consensus enjoyed by this "traditional" iteration of the 'ndrangheta within its host communities (Phillips 182). Strati, by contrast, paints a very different portrait of Calabrian organized criminality, as will be discussed below.

### *Il selvaggio di Santa Venere (1977)*

As has been noted, Strati did not share Alvaro's reluctance to represent the mafia within his fictionalized Calabrian landscapes, and of all of Strati's novels which refer to the 'ndrangheta, *Il selvaggio* features most frequently in the work of historians and sociologists. Indeed, the book is even credited by some scholars as the first published novel ever to use the word 'ndrangheta, although this might be more accurately ascribed to Luca Asprea's *Il previtocciolo*, published six years previously.<sup>7</sup> The use of the novel by historians and sociologists falls into two

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<sup>7</sup> This claim is made by Pasquino Crupi and by Nicola Gratteri and Antonio Nicaso (30), though its soundness is very much open to debate; Luca Asprea's novel, published six years prior to Strati's, in

broad categories. The first involves quoting passages from the text to add narrative colour to points of fact, a practice employed by Arlacchi (30, 32), Enzo Ciconte (8, 15, 32, 38), and Letizia Paoli (151, 189). However, the second category involves citing the novel to provide supporting evidence, without explicitly acknowledging that the text is fictional. Both Arlacchi (33) and Paoli (69, 72) occasionally reference the novel to support statements regarding the 'ndrangheta's practices in the early twentieth century, but do not mention the genre of the source, nor the potential implications of using fiction to support a sociological thesis.<sup>8</sup> Given that the novel arguably also represents the peak of Strati's literary career, earning him the Premio Campiello, it seems fitting to begin the analysis by looking closely at the portrayal of the 'ndrangheta within this highly cited text, and consider it in the context of the traditional/entrepreneurial dichotomy.

*Il selvaggio* is a complex, ambitious novel, both in terms of its narrative structure and its chronology. Its first-person narrator, Dominic, is not its sole protagonist, but rather shares the role with his father, Leo, and grandfather, Don Mico. The text is characterized by inter-generational dialogue, and shifts in time occur frequently. Dominic, a Calabrian émigré living in the North of Italy, writes from the perspective of his present-day reality in the 1970s, but the novel is situated primarily in the past. The framing chronology follows the passing of one year, 1964, when Dominic is around eighteen years old, and culminates in his decision to leave Calabria against the wishes of his father, Leo, who would rather he stayed to continue to work on the family farm. The plot, however, is driven substantially by Leo's retelling of events from a pivotal year of his own life—again, around the age of eighteen—leading up to his departure for military service, at some point in the early 1940s. As the novel progresses, Leo tells his son the story of how he reluctantly came to be involved with the 'ndrangheta, juxtaposed with his memories of the military service which ultimately allowed him to escape the criminal life. Throughout, Leo makes veiled allusions to a mysterious and catastrophic event, which is revealed near the end of the novel to be his passive involvement in a murder committed by the mafia.

The 'ndrangheta is introduced at the beginning of the novel as a fact of life in the Calabria of the 1960s, emerging as one of the many push-factors which are driving Dominic to consider leaving the region. No mention is made of the situation at the time in which Dominic is writing, but the reality in the 1960s is made clear; a wealthy class of mafiosi, deeply entrenched in the local administrative authority, are protected by the complicity and silence of the state and the law:

tutti sanno chi sono sti mafiosi, sti coraggiosi. Sono personaggi pubblici: occupano posti in Comune come assessori, o addirittura come sindaci. Protetti dai politici—si sussura che a una riunione plenaria della mafia regionale

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1971, uses the term *'ndranghita* (p. 223), and neither P. Crupi nor Gratteri and Nicaso insist on the importance of spelling, indicating that they are unaware of this precedent.

<sup>8</sup> Paoli references the novel as a source to support her descriptions of the 'ndrangheta's initiation ceremony and use of blood rituals.

c'era perfino un ministro [. . .]. Anche la legge sa chi sono sti mafiosi. (Strati, *Il selvaggio* 13)

[Everybody knows who they are, these mafiosi, these "men of courage". They're public figures: they hold municipal positions as councillors, or even mayors. They're protected by politicians—there are whispers that there was even a Minister at one of the regional mafia's meetings [. . .]. The forces of law know who these mafiosi are.]

In contrast with this sophisticated, powerful organization, Leo begins to reveal the details of his previous involvement with the mafia of a generation past. At the very beginning of the novel, he expresses sentiments which would seem to indicate a whiff of nostalgia towards the mafia of his youth; he makes a distinction between "quella di ieri e di quella di oggi" ["those of yesterday and those of today"], musing that "tutto è mutato. Anche la 'ndrina. La 'ndrina s'è però incattivita"<sup>9</sup> (14) ["everything's changed. The 'ndrina too. But the 'ndrina has got worse"]. While Leo's identification of a change within the organization is significant, it is important to note that his references to the earlier incarnation of the mafia are in no way positive. In his comparisons, Leo is predominantly concerned with the evolution of the mafia's activity and interests, and the more ambitious scope of its priorities and capabilities, rather than its fundamental nature. At no point is the "mafia di ieri" [mafia of yesteryear] represented as anything other than violent, duplicitous, and reprehensible and, whenever he speaks of his mafioso past, Leo expresses bitter shame and regret.

As the plot unfolds, we learn that Leo reluctantly joins the 'ndrangheta after meeting a *malandrino*,<sup>10</sup> Santo, who spends months persuading him with intriguing stories and promises of status and prestige. Santo comes from a neighbouring village "di caprai, d'indranghetisti, di ladri rinomati e di povera gente che tagliava la miseria a fette" (21) ["of goatherds, members of the 'ndrangheta, renowned thieves and poor people living in abject misery"], while Leo is persuaded to join "per la solitudine, per l'ignoranza e anche per le circostanze del suo destino" (15) ["out of solitude, ignorance, and the circumstances of his life"]. The specific socio-economic environment of rural Calabria in the late-fascist period is thus established as a key contributor to the proliferation of the 'ndrangheta, and repeatedly driven home by Leo's references to his naivety, poverty, and isolation during his youth. Interest in the mafia is accompanied by a narrow worldview, and a lack of ambition and education, embodied neatly by the character of Santo, in whom "non c'era alcuna aspirazione di migliorarsi, di piantare questo mondo nero, misero, angusto, e sistemarsi altrove" (48) ["there was no aspiration to improve himself, to leave this dark, miserable, backward world and settle somewhere else"].

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<sup>9</sup> *Ndrina* is a term referring to a structural division of the 'ndrangheta, effectively a local cell.

<sup>10</sup> *Malandrino* is a term used to describe an individual mafioso. It may have derived from the term *malandrino*, which referred to the area of Italian prisons where gangsters were held (Dickie, *Mafia Republic* 39).

While Strati uses these socio-economic factors to explain the mafia's appeal, it is important to note that they are not presented as a moral justification for criminality, as is the case in Alvaro's writing (Phillips 186). Strati is careful to emphasize that in spite of the environment, there is a moral choice to be made, exemplified by Leo's conscience-driven aversion to becoming involved with the mafiosi; portrayed as violent, ignorant men who have developed a cult of honour in order to valorize their pitiful, impoverished existence. Crucially, furthermore, while the mafia of Leo's generation has a clear and well-defined appeal for the young men of his area, it does not enjoy universal popular consensus. It is made clear from the opinion of Leo's father, don Mico, that the mafia has existed for a number of generations, and that its values have always been at odds with those of the decent, hardworking majority in Calabria:

i delinquenti sono delinquenti, e basta; ma hanno la spudorataggine di nominarsi omini, visto che ammazzano e manco pagano [...] sono degli sfaticati, dei ladri sfruttatori della povera gente. (Strati, *Il selvaggio* 151)

[criminals are criminals, and that's the end of it; but they have the audacity to call themselves men, since they kill without consequences [...] they are lazy thieves who exploit the poor.]

Indeed, Strati makes it clear throughout the novel that the mafia is firmly incompatible with the interests of the region and its people. In *Il selvaggio*, he proposes a kind of manifesto for the liberation of Calabria from the mafia, embodied neatly by Leo and Dominic; former mafioso Leo is exposed to progressive social attitudes during his military service in the North and, once home, is determined to put his new knowledge and experience into practice, by modernizing the family farm. However, Strati's vision is steeped in pessimism, as the continuing success of the project depends on Dominic's willingness to stay. In leaving, he condemns Calabria to a bleak future, as only by remaining and working for change can there be any hope of moving the region towards more progressive attitudes and practices. Interestingly, Leo makes it clear that the socio-economic drivers for mafia recruitment that existed in his own generation are no longer valid in the 1960s, which have brought increased education, opportunities, and social cohesion. He does not proffer explanations for its continued existence, but Strati implies that in failing to stay and bring about change, young Calabrians are abandoning the region to the mafiosi.

As well as these broader socio-political observations, *Il selvaggio* is also rich in historically accurate detail regarding the 'ndrangheta's rites, customs, and internal structure from the pre-war period. Through Santo, Leo's 'ndrangheta initiator, we are introduced to the names of the differing structural elements and ranks in the organization, and Leo himself provides a detailed account of the initiation ceremony. Links between the Calabrian mafia and America are made explicit, and details are also given of the organization's internal hierarchy and decision-making process (94-96). The appeal of the novel to 'ndrangheta historians and sociologists is therefore evident, particularly given the purportedly semi-autobiographical

nature of Strati's work (Esposito). It is interesting, however, that the novel insists on the hierarchical, formalized nature of the early 'ndrangheta—an element which directly contradicts Arlacchi's thesis, though he quotes from the novel to support other areas of his argument (6, 9).

In summary, *Il selvaggio* offers a complex portrayal of the 'ndrangheta spanning three generations from the 1940s to the 1970s. During this period, the organization undergoes a definite evolution in terms of its power and influence, but is consistently portrayed as separate from mainstream Calabrian society and values, in contrast to Alvaro's portrayal of the "traditional" mafia, and somewhat in contrast to Arlacchi's emphasis on its embeddedness within traditional culture. The novel's most detailed portrait of the organization focuses on its state in the early 1940s, at which point it is hierarchical, ritualistic and organized, unlike the organization Arlacchi's observes. All of these elements are also significantly distinct from the portrayal of the 'ndrangheta in Strati's first novel, *La teda*, published twenty years previously.

#### **"Malavita" and "malandrini" in *La teda* (1957)**

**L**A *teda*, Strati's first full-length published novel, is also his first to feature the Calabrian mafia. Set in the late fascist period, the action is relayed via a male first-person narrator, a young Calabrian stonemason named Filippo, who must travel from his home village to work in a remote mountain village named Terrarossa. Once there, the boy discovers poverty and deprivation on a scale he had never imagined, and narrowly escapes danger as a result of his dalliances with women whose lives are governed by their violent, controlling male relations. The mafia, or *malavita*, as it is referred to in the text, is embodied by this small but dangerous group of men. Bound together by a shared set of codes and behaviours, they are fixated on honour and respect, enforcing their will and asserting their dominance either through displays of violence or, most prevalently, by controlling the actions of the women close to them. By flirting openly with these women, the young narrator places them, and himself, in considerable danger, as such behaviour is viewed by the *malavita* as "una mancanza di rispetto a tutto il paese" (246) ["disrespectful to the entire village"].

In *La teda*, the *malavita* is not described explicitly at any great length, nor are its inner workings examined; although the group is headed by a "capomafia", Strati gives no further indication as to the existence of any organized structure which bonds it formally together. Instead, it is identified predominantly through its values and priorities, represented, as Pasquino Crupi puts it, as "un modo di essere, una cultura primitiva, una ristretta concezione della vita" (106) [a way of being, a primitive culture, a narrow-minded view of life]. It would therefore initially seem to represent a good fit with the "traditional" mafia thesis, in aligning the mafia with socio-cultural motivators. However, a closer examination of Strati's portrayal of the *malavita*'s position within Calabrian society indicates a firm rejection of any such alignment between the *malavita* and Calabrian traditional values.

An exchange which takes place in the opening pages of the novel is illustrative of this, as the young narrator is introduced to the remote village of Terrarossa by his fellow stonemasons:

[. . .] A Terrarossa c'è altra gente, altro modo di vivere". [. . .]  
"È gente della malavita" disse mastro Gianni. "Abbandonata da Dio e dagli uomini".  
"E che vive rubando vacche e capre" disse mastro Cosmo.  
"E che per un niente ti danno una coltellata" disse mastro Gianni.  
"E che per la gelosia si ammazzano tra loro" disse mastro Cosmo.  
"Questi sono quelli della malavita, ma ci sono dei braccianti che la pensano come noi" disse Costanzo. "Non è che la gente sia diversa dalla nostra o da noi stessi, ma è il paese che è diverso. Non c'è la strada rotabile, manca la farmacia, il medico non c'è mai. È l'ambiente che è disgraziato. E tutto dipende dall'ambiente". (Strati, *La teda* 7-8)

["In Terrarossa the people are different, the way of life is different." [. . .]  
"They belong to the malavita," said Gianni. "Forsaken by God and by other men."  
"And they make their living by stealing cows and goats," said Cosmo.  
"They think nothing of using a knife on you," said Gianni.  
"And murder each other out of jealousy," said Cosmo.  
"That's just the members of the *malavita*, but there are others who are just workers, people just like us" said Costanzo. "It's not that the people are different from those we know, or even from ourselves, but the village is different. There's no road, no pharmacy, the doctor's never there. It's the environment that's godforsaken. And everything depends on the environment."]

Here, Strati makes it very clear that socio-economic factors are key contributors to the mafia phenomenon in Terrarossa, a point which is underlined repeatedly throughout the text. However, just as in *Il selvaggio*, he is also at pains to establish that the culture and values of the mafiosi are firmly separate from those of the rest of Calabrian society, drawing a clear distinction between socio-economic and socio-cultural motivators for the mafia phenomenon.

This is demonstrated by the views of the visiting workers, who represent "ordinary" Calabria; while these men are no strangers to poverty and deprivation, they feel no affinity with the *malandrini* in Terrarossa, but rather shock and disgust. The *malavita* is thus established as an isolated phenomenon, restricted to the most desperate and impoverished remote communities. Significantly, however, extreme deprivation is not offered as a moral justification for the *malavita's* actions, nor a reason for its acceptance by the community. Unlike the poor villagers of Alvaro's "Angelino" (1955), who share the values and traditions which the "honoured society" purports to uphold, the inhabitants of Strati's Terrarossa are under no illusion as to the true nature of the *malavita*, or the priorities of its affiliates, who are consistently and unambiguously represented as a moral and social minority. Following the natural disaster which overcomes Terrarossa towards the end of the

novel, one villager curses "i delinquenti di quel paese che non si erano fatti vedere" (267) ["the delinquents of the village who were nowhere to be seen"], while earlier in the text another character labels them "bestie e peggio" (257) ["animals and worse"].

As well as condemning the *malavita* explicitly through the words of his characters, Strati also indicates its incompatibility with the interests of Calabrian society through his depiction of its role within the micro-society of Terrarossa. The author's firmly Marxist worldview is key to this representation; in the novel he strives above all to both expose the suffering of the lower classes in Calabria, and to rally them to act in order to achieve their emancipation. The distinction in the novel between the *malavita* and the interests of the people is exemplified by Strati's portrayal of the women of Terrarossa. When the mayor wilfully inflicts famine on the inhabitants by withholding flour, the men complain bitterly, but do nothing; it is the women who pour into the piazza and stage a revolt. In oppressing and controlling the women of the village through their brutally enforced, archaic code of honour, the *malavita* symbolically holds back the only element of society willing to take real action to break the cycle of poverty and exploitation.

It is important to note that although its archaic, oppressive practices have an indirect role in proliferating this exploitation, the *malavita* does not collaborate directly with the authorities. The inefficacy of state authority in Terrarossa works in favour of the *malavita* in some respects; the total disinterest of the police, for example, allows it to carry out acts of violence and terror with impunity. However, like the fascist-era mafiosi of Leo's generation in *Il selvaggio*, its affiliates do not enjoy any privileged relationships with official authority figures. Furthermore, although the *malavita* has a fearsome reputation and consequently a certain status within the community, this status, and their delinquency, bring them no financial gain.

It is clear that in *La teda* the shift to the powerful organization we see in the 1960s in *Il selvaggio* has not yet taken place, and since the novel is free from analepsis, the author looks to the future with a sense of hope. At the end, the near-total destruction of Terrarossa by flooding<sup>11</sup> symbolizes the opportunity for a fresh beginning for its inhabitants, one which is potentially free of the *malavita*. Hope in the novel is further represented by the character of mastro Cola, one of the stonemasons; revealed to have once been a *malandrino*, he is now a reformed character, dedicated to bettering himself for the sake of his family.

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<sup>11</sup> The fate of Terrarossa indicates that the village is a fictionalized version of the real Calabrian village of Africo, which was partially destroyed by a devastating flood in 1951. As an apprentice stonemason, a young Strati had helped his father build houses in Africo, adding further weight to this theory (Staropoli Calafati 16). Furthermore, a story strikingly similar to the women's piazza revolt in *La teda* is relayed in Corrado Stajano's non-fiction work *Africo* (1979), perhaps indicating that this is an episode in the history of this real village which Strati has absorbed and adapted for his fictional narrative (40–42).

### *Mani vuote* (1960)

IF the portrayal of the *malavita* in *La teda* is characterized by this sense of hope for the future, with the mafia a phenomenon tied implicitly to the past, the same could not be said of *Mani vuote*, published three years later. Set a generation before the events of *La teda*, between 1913 and 1918, the novel is once again introduced by a first-person narrator, Emilio, and focuses on his early adolescence in rural Calabria. The narrative structure is closer to *Il selvaggio* than *La teda*, since it introduces an element of reflection and hindsight; Emilio is writing in the 1950s, having emigrated to America, and the events of the novel follow his struggle to save up the funds to make this move. The eldest son of a once-prosperous family which has fallen on hard times, Emilio is sent out to work by his mother when he is still a child. He subsequently finds work first as a goatherd, then a farmhand, and finally a charcoal burner, with each job offering ample opportunity for Strati to showcase his "socialist realism" (Esposito 29) through detailed accounts of the miserable living conditions. Just as in *La teda*, the *malavita* forms a constant presence in the social landscape of the novel—appearing in the first chapter and in the last—but this time, it occupies much more of the foreground of the narrative, and emerges as a more developed, organized outfit than *La teda's* loose association of violent, honour-obsessed males. Three characters in the novel serve as different manifestations of the *malavita*, each representing a different aspect of its impact and position within Emilio's rural Calabrian environment. Together, they offer a complex portrayal of an organized criminal phenomenon capable of expanding into Calabria's future.

The first such manifestation is Rosario Grosso, a character who is initially introduced as a goatherd. Rosario's involvement with the mafia is implied at the very beginning of the novel, through the mysterious language he uses to communicate with his comrades over a meal of stolen livestock. As the novel progresses, this connection is gradually made explicit. We learn the details through Giovanni, an aspiring mafioso of Emilio's acquaintance, who idolizes Rosario as "l'uomo piu valente della provincia" (55) ["the bravest man in the province"], and a respected member of the "*famiglia di Montalbano*" (61)—another alias of the 'ndrangheta. Emilio, who spent time with Rosario during his brief spell as a goatherd, tries to win Giovanni's admiration by telling him stories about Rosario's exploits. The fact that these stories are invented, however, is highly significant, as Rosario's character effectively embodies the conflict between the myth and the reality of the mafia. As his numerous thefts of livestock catch up with him, Rosario is forced to go on the run, and when he and Emilio meet later in the novel, Rosario has become obsessed with emulating his hero, the infamous outlaw Giuseppe Musolino. Known as the "King of the Aspromonte", Musolino (1876–1956) was a real bandit, who became enshrined in Calabrian folklore as a Robin Hood-style figure in the early twentieth century, despite being a violent 'ndranghetista in reality (Dickie, *Mafia Brotherhoods*, 196–209).

The facts of Musolino's life contrast starkly with the popular folk legend he became, and Strati's reference to the legendary figure is an allusion to the reality of Rosario's own existence. For it becomes clear, as the novel progresses, that despite the fear and esteem he inspires among mafiosi and ordinary folk alike, Rosario is actually a naive victim of the mafia myth to which he has subscribed; a myth built on codes of honour and valour. Emilio comments: "non è che sia un vero brigante, si dà arie e basta. Non ha ammazzato nessuno. Solo qualche vacca ha rubato, o fatto rubare. Altri delitti non ha commesso" (195) ["he's not a real brigand; he just gives himself airs. He hasn't killed anyone. He's just stolen a few cows, or had them stolen. He hasn't committed any other crimes"]. By living his life strictly by the mythicized, honour-based doctrines of the *malavita* in imitation of his hero, Rosario stands as an anomaly in the text, since all the other mafiosi around him openly reap the rewards of systematically flouting these supposed codes.

The second manifestation of the *malavita* in *Mani vuote* is Giovanni, to whom we have already been introduced. As a representation of a *mafioso*, Giovanni functions as Rosario Grosso's cynical counterpart, displaying very different priorities and ambitions which seem to align with Emilio's perception of a "real brigand". Both characters show a predilection for violence, but where Rosario is brave and, to a degree, principled, Giovanni is lazy, cowardly, and devious; he shirks any real work on his father's farm, preferring to commit petty crimes in order to rise up the ranks of the mafia. The character serves to provide a portrayal of the appeal of the mafia to Calabrian youth, enabling Strati, through Emilio, to lament and explain the socio-economic factors which drive recruitment. Describing the young *malandrini* of the village, Emilio comments:

Capivo che non avevano colpa, alla fine. In quei tempi e fino a quest'ultima guerra, non c'erano vie aperte. Ora tutto è cambiato, o sta cambiando [. . .]. A quei tempi non c'erano scuole, non c'era luce. Non c'era speranza, non c'era senso di progresso. (Strati, *Mani vuote* 123)

[I realized that it wasn't their fault, in the end. At that time, and until the last war, there were no opportunities. Now everything has changed, or is changing [. . .]. At that time there were no schools, there were no electric lights. There was no hope, no sense of progress.]

Here, just as in *La teda* and *Il selvaggio*, Strati ties the mafia to the socio-economic conditions of the region and the time period, but he stops short of morally justifying its behaviour, once again drawing a line between socio-economic and socio-cultural drivers for the mafia. It is repeatedly made explicit that Giovanni's decisions are driven by his poor personal character; both young men are seeking a better life in America, but Giovanni's chosen path is to become a "bravo mafioso" (49), which ultimately leads him to a sticky end.

The means by which Giovanni intends to achieve his criminal ambitions are offered by the third embodiment of the mafia in the novel, don Matteo Ficara, who is mentioned early on by Giovanni as a kind of mafioso benefactor. The mysterious don Matteo has, we learn, made his fortune in America as a *camorrista*, and

represents a very different brand of mafioso to the naive, honour-fixated Rosario. As a wise old charcoal burner explains to Emilio,

don Matteo è un uomo astuto, intelligente e di fegato. Qui era il capobriscola e lì [in America] non sarà di meno. Capobriscola non come Rosario Grosso, capisci? Lui camminava in piazza col brigadiere, da signorone, mentre muoveva la matassa di tutta la malavita della provincia. (Strati, *Mani vuote* 249)

[don Matteo is a shrewd man, intelligent and courageous. He was *capobriscola*<sup>12</sup> here and there [in America] he'll be no less. Not *capobriscola* like Rosario Grosso, you understand. He used to walk in the square with the *brigadiere*, like a lord, while he was involved in all the criminal life of the province.]

Don Matteo's ostentatious wealth and links with authority represent a break with Strati's portrayal of the *malavita* as a problem of the past in *La teda*. When he makes his entrance at the very end of the novel, "vestito come un re" ["dressed like a king"] and accompanied by "un codazzo di gente che non lo lasciava mai" ["a crowd of people that never left his side"] (271) it is clear that the promise of a lucrative career as a mafioso could extend the organization's appeal into the future, and that the mafia is making inroads into the administrative structures of the region.

This represents a crucial and fascinating difference from the portrayal of the mafia in *La teda*, particularly given the dates at which the two novels are set. Emilio narrates *Mani vuote* from his perspective in 1950, a time which he says has brought progress, in the form of modern conveniences and increased social opportunities, but he offers no comment on the situation of the mafia at the time when he is writing; just as in *Il selvaggio*, the narrative present is a space only ever occupied fleetingly by the narrator. Crucially, however, the events which he describes occur between 1913 and 1918, and thus a full generation before those portrayed in *La teda*, and yet, as we have seen, the mafia which it represents is far more developed and sophisticated, incorporating the infiltration of local administration, intercontinental links, and a coherent organizational structure. This more complete picture of the mafia is adorned with a considerable amount of detail: reference is made to the payment of an entry fee, the use of blood rituals, and the baptism ceremony (62), all of which are historically accurate reflections of the 'ndrangheta's behavior in the early decades of the twentieth century (Cicone 32-40); while the existence of a sophisticated internal structure is alluded to through Giovanni's references to the mafia's internal justice system and a *tribunale* which hands out punishments if a member strays from the society's rules (76).

These details anticipate the structure and rituals described in greater detail in *Il selvaggio*, but the contrast with the backward, disorganized mafia of *La teda* is stark. *Mani vuote*, published just three years after *La teda*, effectively over-writes

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<sup>12</sup> *Capobriscola* presents difficulties to the translator; it might be interpreted either as a generic term akin to "cock of the walk", or perhaps as a specific rank within the criminal hierarchy.

its depiction of the mafia in sharper detail, but locates this more sophisticated organization a generation behind it, suggesting that the transition between "old" and "new" 'ndrangheta was well underway long before Italy's mid-century economic miracle. This representation is clearly somewhat disruptive to the conception of a mid-century shift from a traditional, honour-based mafia to Arlacchi's so-called "entrepreneurial" mafia; first in the timing of this development, and second in the nature of the development itself. Indeed, Strati's portrayal of a hierarchical, ritualistic organization with foreign links and relationships with local authorities also stands considerably at odds with the prevailing (and incorrect) sociological consensus at the time of its publication.

### Strati's "Changing" 'Ndrangheta: An Alternative Perspective

THIS brings us to the question of how Strati's representation of the 'ndrangheta develops across the three novels. Taken together, the three texts offer a complex and interwoven portrait of the 'ndrangheta stretching from 1913 to the mid-1960s, with each more detailed than the previous one. However, as has been noted, the chronology of the texts is not straightforward, and the temptation to draw simplistic conclusions must be resisted. A significant stylistic development needs to be considered, in that *La teda* lacks any narrative hindsight or critical reflection and is also, consequently, the most optimistic of the novels, offering a snapshot of just one phase in history. By contrast, the use of analepsis in *Mani vuote* and *Il selvaggio* allows the author to chart a kind of evolutionary development in the 'ndrangheta's priorities, manifested by an increased aptitude for accruing wealth and establishing links with authority. To an extent, the novels certainly offer a portrait of an evolving, modernizing mafia, with *La teda* representing the past, and *Il selvaggio*'s powerful 1960s mafia representing the present and future.

However, in emphasising these changes I argue that there is a tendency in 'ndrangheta scholarship (P. Crupi 106–28; Nicaso 56–57) to overlook the consistencies between the portrayals of the 'ndrangheta across the three novels. These elements of continuity, which I have outlined above, are significant as they complicate any attempts to map the novels onto Arlacchi's "traditional vs. entrepreneurial" thesis, which also rejects the hierarchical, organized element of the 'ndrangheta. Pasquino Crupi, for example, leans heavily on the distinction between the "old" and "new" mafias in Strati's novels, identifying *Mani vuote* as the point at which the *malavita* begins a "mutamento in associazione a delinquere" (113) ["change into a criminal association"], with Ficara's arrival marking "la degenerazione dell'Onorata Società in mafia" (112) ["the degeneration of the honoured society into a mafia"]. The echoes of the traditional/modern dichotomy here are clear; with the "honoured society" representing the supposedly traditional, honour-based mafia and the "criminal association" indicating a more organized and sophisticated iteration of the phenomenon.

This distinction, however, is problematic, not least because Strati is so doggedly committed to dismantling the myth of the earlier incarnation of the mafia in the

novel that the pejorative "degeneration" feels somewhat inappropriate, indicating that the former iteration is somehow more benign. Strati is at pains to expose the myth of the honoured society, through the hopelessly deluded figure of Rosario Grosso, and through the pragmatic, hypocritical Giovanni, who represents the majority of mafiosi in his pursuit of personal gain at any cost. More significantly, as Pasquino Crupi himself acknowledges (120), Strati's representation of the *malavita's* debased, immoral nature remains firmly consistent in all three novels; it is the quality and not the quantity of their crimes which changes as they begin to modernize. The values of Strati's *'ndranghetisti* always stand firmly at odds with the values of the majority of Calabrians, and there can be no suggestion that the author equates mafia values with traditional culture.

My own view is that Pasquino Crupi's reference to a presumed change into a criminal association is flawed, chiefly because *Mani vuote* contains such a level of detail as to the structure, hierarchy, and organization of the *'ndrangheta* that it seems redundant to speak of a change in *Il selvaggio*. The mafia may have widened its horizons and business interests, but the core aspect of the criminal association—i.e., a structured organization whose goal is to further its own interests through criminal acts—remains constant in both *Mani vuote* and *Il selvaggio*, and a key aspect of Strati's portrayal of the *'ndrangheta*.

An intriguing unresolved question raised by this research lies in the possible explanation for why the level of detail in each representation increases over time. It has been established, for example, that the level of detail offered as to the inner workings of the organization, as well as the terminology used to describe it, increases with each novel, culminating in the eventual use of the word *'ndrangheta* in *Il selvaggio*. The descriptions of the mafia in *Il selvaggio* and *Mani vuote* are remarkably detailed, and can be corroborated with contemporaneous historical evidence; there is also a marked difference between the clarity and precision of the depictions of the organization offered in *La teda* and *Mani vuote*, despite their nearness in publication. The reasons for this are impossible to establish with any level of certainty; perhaps the author was exposed to some new information in between *La teda* and *Mani vuote*, or perhaps he actively chose to use details which he already knew. It is important to recall here that Strati's fiction, by the author's admission, was heavily influenced by his own experiences (Esposito 21–38), although of course, the precise extent of this experience can never be known.

### Critical Invisibility

HAVING analysed the representation of the *'ndrangheta* in all three novels, it is interesting to observe a curious reluctance among contemporary Italian literary critics to engage with the presence of the mafia in these texts. For example, it has been established by this point that *Mani vuote*, published in 1960, contains what Isodiana Crupi identifies as "tutti gli elementi che definiscono l'aggregato criminale" (53) ["all the defining elements of the criminal association"]—that is, the

culture of honour, the swearing-in ceremony, violence and acts of intimidation, and killing—as well as considerable knowledge of the social causes of the mafia phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, both *Mani vuote* and *La teda* offer complex portraits of the mafia's relationship with Calabrian society, complemented by thinly-veiled (if not entirely explicit) political commentary from the author on the socio-economic reasons for this. However, the presence of the *malavita* within these novels is barely acknowledged in much of the mainstream literary criticism of Strati's work, even when they later acknowledge its existence in *Il selvaggio*. Antonio Piromalli (216–18), for example, makes no mention of mafia whatsoever in his brief analysis of *La teda* and *Mani vuote* (*Il selvaggio* is not included, not yet having been published). Esposito, who acknowledges the mafia's presence in *Il selvaggio*, ignores it completely in *La teda*, and makes only two fleeting references in her analysis of *Mani vuote*, suggesting (incorrectly) that Emilio's encounters with the *malavita* occur only in the mountains, where it is referred to collectively as "i piccoli mafiosi calabresi" (32) ["Calabrian petty mafiosi"].

Antonio Motta, meanwhile, in his analysis of *La teda*, uses the terms "mafioso" and "capomafia" only as epithets (42). In his analysis of *Mani vuote*, he engages somewhat further with the mafia presence in the novel, but does not treat it as a criminal organization, Rosario Grosso is described as a "brigante", not as a member of the *Famiglia di Montalbano*—an important distinction—while don Matteo Ficara is interpreted as an optimistic figure and a symbol of the American dream, rather than a criminal with explicit mafia associations (42). In interpreting Ficara in this way, Motta fails to acknowledge the character's significance as a tangible representation of mafia power and social capital, or his role as a harbinger of the potential future socio-economic consequences of the organization's proliferation.

What reasons could there be for such reluctance among mainstream literary critics to acknowledge the presence of the mafia in Strati's earlier novels? It cannot be attributed purely to the less prominent role of 'ndrangheta within the plot, because, as we have seen, its presence is explicitly signposted by the author in both novels. In simple terms, I argue that this represents a further manifestation of the "culturalist" perspective on the mafias.

A reluctance to view the Calabrian mafia as an organization in *Mani vuote* is certainly visible in Motta's analysis, and in Esposito's diminutive reference to "i piccoli mafiosi calabresi", both of which reflect the prevailing culturalist perspective on the early 'ndrangheta as individuals expressing particular behaviours, rather than an organized entity (Arlacchi 125–27). It therefore seems reasonable to assume that the influential narrative of the "traditional" 'ndrangheta may have contributed to the critics' failure to interpret *Mani vuote's* early twentieth-century *malavita* as a criminal association. *Il selvaggio's* brief references to the 1960s incarnation of the phenomenon, and its use of the name 'ndrangheta move it into the period of Arlacchi's "entrepreneurial mafia", the modernized incarnation which symbolizes

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<sup>13</sup> Isodiana Crupi is Pasquino Crupi's daughter. Forenames have been used throughout in order to distinguish between them.

a more organized threat. It is significant to note, as an aside, that although *Il selvaggio* is cited at length by Arlacchi, *Mani vuote* is ignored; perhaps because, in pointing to the existence of firm organizational structures within the 'ndrangheta as early as 1918, it does not sit comfortably with his hypothetical "traditional mafia".

### Conclusions

**D**ESPITE the 'ndrangheta's rising public profile and the high levels of mafia-related violence that Calabria was experiencing particularly toward the end of this article's period of focus, none of the novels analysed above depict the contemporary reality at their time of publication. Instead, they offer a complex, interlacing set of portraits of Calabrian organized criminality from the early twentieth century to the post-war economic transition. Across the three texts, an evolution in the 'ndrangheta's power and influence emerges, which might be equated with a modernization; certainly the texts have been subject to historical, sociological, and critical interpretations that distinguish between traditional and modern manifestations of the organization. However, it is significant that the point of this modernization is placed at slightly differing stages in the novels and, in some cases, differs from the opinion expressed by the scholars who actually cite the texts in support of their arguments. While *Mani vuote* locates a shift towards entrepreneurialism in 1918, *Il selvaggio* seems to point to a period between the 1940s and the 1960s; Arlacchi's thesis, on the other hand, identifies a shift between the 1960s and the 1970s. It almost seems that there are as many different points of modernization within the 'ndrangheta as there are authors and scholars to interpret them; a point that merits further investigation.

The exact nature of the transition from "old" to "new" mafia is an equally intriguing question, particularly in light of Alvaro's portrayal of a benign traditional mafia made corrupt through modernization. In this article, I have argued that Strati offers highly critical portrayals of the 'ndrangheta at every stage of its development. The analysis above has indicated that, even while making distinctions between these different phases in the 'ndrangheta's development, the novels all present a level of continuity in the organization's violence, and its separateness from the values of the majority. While Strati's 'ndrangheta is firmly rooted in socio-economic contexts, there is a clear distinction between socio-economic drivers and socio-cultural drivers for delinquency. To him the mafiosi are an aberration whose values and priorities are rejected by the majority of Calabrians. Strati's portrayals of the mafia thus sit somewhat uncomfortably alongside the assertions of some of the sociologists and critics who have cited his works, leaning on an association between 'ndrangheta culture and Calabrian traditional culture and the associated values and behaviours.

The brief analysis of interpretations of the novels by different recipients has revealed that while 'ndrangheta scholars quote the texts as historical sources, there is a tendency among literary critics to downplay the presence of the 'ndrangheta

in the novels. This is perhaps indicative of the pervasiveness of the sociological consensus on the mafias at the time the texts were published, which conflated organized criminality with elements of Southern Italian culture and tradition. That Calabrian voices such as Strati were, through the medium of fiction, clearly expressing the existence of an organized, hierarchical criminal threat in the region in the 1960s and 1970s is therefore striking; and all the more so given that the 'ndrangheta was only recognized as a criminal organization in Italian law in 2010.

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