



Original article

The ‘Ndrangheta Down Under: Constructing the Italian Mafia in Australia

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Abstract: The In the past decades, the Australian ‘ndrangheta has been object of media attention, academic inquiry and growing policing concern. In Australia, however, the phenomenon is not new. Next to contemporary manifestations of mafia clans and activities, there is an historical ‘ndrangheta, with families and networks in specific areas of the country. Their activities peaked between the 1950s and the 1970s and their reputation still persists and populates mafia narratives. This article will analyse historical archives broadly related to a nebulous idea of the Italian mafia in Australia. These archival sources contain both institutional documents (from police forces, intelligence services and law enforcement agencies) and, to a lower extent, media sources ranging from 1940s to 1980s. The analysis will show how Australian authorities observed, approached and attempted to fight the mafia phenomenon—and specifically that of Calabrian origin—very early and with mixed results. This article will eventually argue that also thanks to the geography and history of Australia as a country-island, the ‘ndrangheta phenomenon has developed and prospered until today.

Keywords: Italian Mafia – mafia narratives – criminal migration – organised crime

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Introduction

Even first-time visitors to Australia can perceive the vastness of the Australian territory when they realise how covering its distances is often a matter of taking planes rather than cars and that crossing states might take days and not hours. The vastness of the Australian territory is also in its extremely varied landscape, very diverse weather conditions from Queensland to Tasmania, and even different time zones across states. Nevertheless, to this feeling of vastness is often paired the awareness that everywhere, in Australia, the ground meets the sea and, in that sense, even when moving around through the huge distances, one cannot ever go beyond geography. This is intrinsically connected to the perceptions of borders on Australian soil, that “seal, in the sense of both securing and validating, the “nationalist compact” between citizen and state” and where the beach becomes “both the actualisation of the border of the insular state and the stage where the Aussie eth(n)os is performed in its most banal as well as its most flagrant and violent manifestations” (Perera, 2009: 163).

Together with perceptions of vastness and insularity, Australia remains a nation born on early globalisation, based on Anglo-Saxon governmental traditions, but nevertheless a largely immigrant country. In the ages of technological revolutions and globalisation of movements “Australia nervously watches its region, and the rest of the world, as it attempts to charter its way through the second century of its existence as a nation” (Moran, 2005: 2). Interestingly, scholars (Moran, 2005; Moran, 2011) note that until the 1980s Australia was a more inward looking society, where a wide policy of protection negotiated by different political factions, was aimed at building Australia’s identity on ethnic diversity following the waves of European migration since World War II and following the abandonment of the White Australia Policy. After the 1980s, discourses on globalisation profoundly changed Australian politics as much as the rest of the world and brought new challenges in securing the borders against threatening others as well as for ensuring protection of an Australian national identity.

This article will focus on early evolutions of policing approaches to ethnic organised crime of Italian descent in Australia. A research on ethnicity in organised crime and criminal mobility must include considerations on the place of arrival (Australia). Criminal mobility and ethnic organised crime are indeed themes that can be approached within migration and cultural studies (Arsovska, 2015; Sergi, 2015; Sergi, 2018b). The structure of Australian society, in this sense, has not only impacted upon what Italian organised crime has been and still is in that society, but it also has shaped responses and institutional reactions to the phenomenon.

This article will argue that the particular geography and the history of Australia both influenced the understanding and the responses to Italian organised crime in the country. The main findings of this work, in fact, aside from their relevance to criminological and policing literature, certainly relate to various extents to studies of migration, multiculturalism, and national identity as well as being reflections upon the relationship of Australia with the rest of the world and especially with American and European societies. The main discussion points emerging eventually from this research are threefold:

1. Ethnic organised crime of Italian descent in Australia is almost exclusively associated to the Calabrian mafia, the ‘ndrangheta or Honoured Society, since early 1930s. Australia has been quicker than Italy in singling out the phenomenon as independent mafia-type organised crime.
2. Historical manifestations of the ‘ndrangheta have developed within multicultural but insular Australia, thus across Italian communities everywhere in Australia.
3. Early policies and policing approaches to the Italian/Calabrian mafia in Australia are deeply affected by foreign interpretations of the phenomenon even though a willingness to develop local responses, which could be effective within the particular settings of Australian society, is clearly visible.

Criminal Migration, Mafia Mobility and the ‘Ndrangheta in Australia

Criminal migration, especially in the form of mafia mobility, is a well-established sub-field of enquiry between history and sociology, which the media and film industries have made extremely popular, from the Godfather trilogy to the Sopranos in the USA, and the Underbelly series in Australia. Mobility of criminal groups is a by-product of globalisation as much as it is an effect of capitalism (Ruggiero, 1985; Morselli *et al.*, 2011). When organised criminal activities are linked to migrant or ethnic groups abroad, questions on the similarity or the difference between those activities and the ones back home necessarily surface (Arsovska, 2015). Most of the discussion on criminal mobility, therefore, seeks to unpack how much and to what extent groups have adapted and/or diversified when they moved abroad, and how knowledge of their characteristics back home can help prevent their rooting elsewhere (Sciarrone and Storti, 2014; Lupo, 2002b; Sergi, 2017b).

From the Italian perspective, scholarly interest on the topic has peaked around the 1980s/1990s due to the events surrounding the Sicilian mafia in the USA (Lupo, 2008; Lupo, 2002a; Lupo, 2002b), and is peaking now, with the current discussion on the

internationalisation of the Calabrian ‘ndrangheta (Storti *et al.*, 2016; Varese, 2011; Sergi, 2018b; Sergi, 2018a; Sergi, 2015) and the activities of the Neapolitan/Campanian camorra groups outside of Italy (Allum, 2016; Allum, 2014). Mafia mobility is a complex subject as it requires taking into consideration the features of the criminal groups both in the country of origin and in the country of arrival. These considerations also need to mix with analysis of the responses to the criminal phenomenon in the country of arrival, leading to discourses on the links between ethnicity and crime that can be very disruptive for societies. It has been noted that ascribing organised crime activities to an alien/immigrant group can be a way to preserve an ideal of the host society as virtuous and non-criminal instead (Luconi, 2007; Woodiwiss, 2005). This is mirrored in the very successful, albeit largely proven wrong, “alien conspiracy theory” supported, among others, by official reports on American-Italian La Cosa Nostra by Donald Cressey almost 50 years ago (Cressey, 1971; Cressey, 1969). The alien conspiracy theory has been one of the mainstream views among politicians and policy-makers especially in the first half of the last century until the 1980s. It has been harshly criticised for its rigidity and ethnic bias, for example by authors like Joseph Albin pushing instead for a recognition that “Mafia is a synonym not for a secret criminal organisation but for a method of organized criminal activity” (Albin and Rogers, 1998: 107). Other theoretical standpoints have been applied to studying the mobility of mafia-type criminal groups. For example, the idea that migrants organise to commit crimes has been read through the lenses of a deprivation model—whereby migration is seen as the possibility for social and economic improvements for disadvantaged groups and so are criminal opportunities across migrant communities (Arsovska, 2015).

More recently, criminology has looked at the various levels of mobility of Italian criminal groups abroad, with a clear preference to the mobility of the Calabrian ‘ndrangheta. Scholars have been discussing mobility on a spectrum ranging from transplantation or colonisation (Varese, 2011), to delocalisation and functional mobility (the latter referring to Camorra groups) (Allum, 2016), and various stages in between, describing settlements abroad and the hybridisation of groups within different communities (Sergi, 2018a; Sciarrone and Storti, 2014; Sergi and Lavorgna, 2016).

Today, the ‘ndrangheta—whose Greek etymology comes to roughly mean “Honoured Society”—is considered the most powerful Italian mafia, and originates in the Southern region of Calabria. Its clans are pictured as the wealthiest, the most influential in the drug trade and with strong ties abroad, especially in North America (Canada and USA), in Australia, in Germany and, although less embedded, in other European countries as well (DNA, 2017; Sergi and Lavorgna, 2016). While the history

of this mafia group is quite old (Ciconte, 2011), the attention to its activities and reach both in Italy and abroad is fairly recent, dating back only a couple of decades. This is due, to a large extent, to the fact that—differently from the paradigmatic case of the Sicilian mafia - it has been historically difficult to understand the organisational features that hold together the Calabrian clans (Ciconte, 2011). Only in 2010, the ‘ndrangheta has been recognised as a mafia-type organised crime groups within Italian law. Indeed, the clans and their territorial structures of coordination, relentlessly use the mafia method, that is the employment of intimidation that originates from the associative bond, that creates fear and subjections in others and that is aimed at achieving financial and political gains (Sergi and Lavorgna, 2016).

The ‘ndrangheta is a challenging subject for research, because it is a *glocal* phenomenon: on one side mass migration from Calabria certainly seem to have facilitated the exportation of mafia methods and interests abroad, and, on the other side, the current reputation of the ‘ndrangheta remains linked to the evolution of this mafia in its homeland.

The arrival and settlement of ‘ndrangheta clans, their structures and activities, in Australia dates back to almost 100 years ago, and it has a fictional birthday in 1922, when the ship King of Italy arrived in Melbourne carrying the three mythological founders of the Australian Honoured Society (Sergi, 2015). The existence and resistance of legends around its birth and evolution shows how stratified its mafia culture in the territory. For a full historical account this article refers to other sources on the subject (Bennetts, 2016; Spagnolo, 2010; Macrì and Ciconte, 2009; Sergi, 2015). The history of the ‘ndrangheta in Australia overlaps almost totally with the history of Italian mafias in the country: indeed, Australia has almost exclusively known Calabrian clans across Italian communities (Sergi, 2018a). The institutional attention paid to this phenomenon has gone through waves of visibility—when the mafia was considered a serious threat to Australian society - and others of forgetfulness—when the problem seemed to have been marginalised (Sergi, 2017b). Nevertheless, various events populate the history of the ‘ndrangheta in Australia, some of which very popular, like the connection of clans from the Calabrian town of Platì - settled in Griffith (NSW)—engaged in drug cultivation and distribution—and responsible for the murder of anti-drug campaigner Donald Bruce MacKay in 1977 (Sergi, 2015). More recently, following the 2008 “world’s largest ecstasy bust” (4.4 tonnes of MDMA) at the port of Melbourne, some Calabrian clans have regained attention in both public and institutional domains (McKenzie *et al.*, 2015). The ‘ndrangheta in Australia is a very complex phenomenon today, still at the forefront of policy-making (Masters, 2018). The clans have developed a very diverse criminal portfolio, ranging from drug trafficking to

murder to political corruption; they are ethnically hybrid, but mostly homogenous with traditional Calabrian codes and values, that they exploit through the use of intimidation, violence and a network of instrumental friendships (Sergi, 2018a).

This article will explore how Australia got to where it is, from an institutional perspectives mainly focused on the decades before the 1980s. In other words, this article will question how the institutional discovery, perception and categorisation of the Italian mafia in Australia appeared and how the discourse evolved and translated to arrive to current conceptualisations of the ‘ndrangheta in Australia.

Notes on Method

The starting question leading this work is related to the study of the ‘ndrangheta, the Calabrian mafia, in contemporary Australia, as one of my main research interests. After approaching historical narratives (Sergi, 2015), policy challenges (Sergi, 2017a) and socio-behavioural and organisational features of the ‘ndrangheta in Australia today (Sergi, 2018a), a question remained on the evolution of policing of the ‘ndrangheta through a broader eye to policing ethnic organised crime in Australia. In other words, how did the countering of the Calabrian mafia evolve? This question was prompted by the collection of archival resources in the National Archives, mainly in Melbourne, in Canberra and through the online portal. These sources (hereinafter “the documents”), amounting to almost 1000 pages of documents—of which many however are copies of newspaper articles or formal correspondence across agencies—aim to put together reports, official and unofficial communication broadly related to the topic of “Italian Mafia” in Australia, across all states and territories, under various names, including Mafia, Italian Secret Society, ‘ndrangheta, ‘ndranghita, Camorra, Black Hand (or *Mano Nera*), Honoured Society, Italian Organised Crime. The picture these documents paint the evolution of an approach to Italian/ethnic organised crime across 40/50 years (1930s/1980s) is worth exploring also in light of other research conducted in this field of enquiry in contemporary days.

The review of archival sources has been carried out through a 2-stage content and discourse analyses. A first stage was descriptive and organised the resources across location and time: a matrix was built to organise the documents chronologically for all the six states and two territories of Australia (South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania, Western Australia, Queensland, Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory) and across all decades starting from 1930s until 1980s. The second stage was analytical and assessed emerging discourses transversally across various

categories, which are: evolution of discourse on ethnic organised crime and mafia; types of activities recorded; support needed/sought; policing approaches.

The article will therefore proceed by presenting the main findings that relate to the first stage of the content analysis performed, to then delve more into the analytical stage, by particularly focusing on three aspects: the journey to define the mafia phenomenon in Australia (what the mafia is); the classification of mafia activities (what the mafia does); and the responses against the phenomenon, primarily in the decades 1950/1960.

Main Findings

Already at the first-stage content analysis some of the working ideas, emerging from previous fieldwork, were confirmed. In fact, the documents ranging from 1930s to 1980s show that all nine jurisdictions of Australia, the six states, the two territories and the Commonwealth, have at different moments recorded a variety of issues broadly indicated as Italian mafia. A major exception to this are Tasmania and the Northern Territory, which did not record any criminal activity related to Italians, but nevertheless participate in the correspondence from the Commonwealth on the matter. The almost total absence of Tasmania and Northern Territory in these documents seems to correspond to what already found in other research, where they appear to be only very mildly involved in the (known) activities of the ‘ndrangheta even today (Sergi, 2018a). Overall, these documents show how different states had similar problems at different times.

For example, as already discussed in literature (Brown, 2017; Sergi, 2015), the documents confirm that, in Queensland, public order issues linked to Italian criminal networks were recorded earlier than anywhere else, since the 1920s. Calling the phenomenon indifferently as the Black Hand, or its Italian equivalent *Mano Nera*, or *Mafia* or *Camorra*, Queensland presents a history of organised rackets among Southern Italians, and primarily Calabrians, that peaked in 1930s with a range of violent crimes, such as wounding, assault, murder and extortion, especially in Innisfail and Ingham. Already calling it *Mafia* and with an eye on the phenomenon of the Black Hand as developing in North America, authorities of the time in Queensland called for further proof and investigation of the existence of such a criminal organisation and on the ties with the Italian community. Interstate connections with other criminal families, especially in New South Wales Riverina Valley around Griffith, were already observed but not fully investigated. In 1931, on the occasion of an important murder in the

Calabrian (and ‘ndrangheta) community, the one of Domenico Belle, a Commonwealth Investigation Branch (CIB in Sydney) memo to the Canberra office reads:

It may at once be said that nearly a year’s observation has produced no conclusive proof that the Camorra flourishes in Australia as any part of the make-up of locally domiciled Italians, but it does seem that a certain few members of those in and around Sydney, and who originated in the Calabria district of Italy, either have had some previous connections with a group abroad or are inclined to favour its organisation here for their own personal ends¹.

Even later, as reported in a note by the Police Headquarters of Adelaide, South Australia, in 1963, accounting for Italian organised crime in Queensland: “although it cannot be proved that people belong to the Mafia, it is general knowledge in Innisfail District that residents belong to that society”². In Queensland discourses on “the Mafia” appeared earlier than anywhere else in Australia, but also seem to disappear earlier as well; by the 1960s, when the rest of the country seems to be in unison in assessing the risks associated to ethnic/Italian organised crime, Queensland seems to have largely moved past these problems instead. The lack of communication, however, might also be due to police malpractice and corruption, which has been flagged later on in the Fitzgerald Inquiry into police misconduct of 1989 (Fitzgerald, 1989).

Another major finding from the first-stage content analysis confirms that the peak of recorded interaction, across law enforcement agencies, as well as across states, starts in mid-1950s and continues until 1970s—in particular with an overlapping between Mafia and Black Hand (Mano Nera) during the 1950s that fades away to differentiate between mafia and ‘ndrangheta since the mid-1960s. This, again, mirrors historical accounts that capture the emergence of ethnic organised crime in Italian communities following mass migration after the Second World War (Sergi, 2015; MacDonald and MacDonald, 1970).

Also interesting to find is that many different agencies and offices across Australian institutions contributed to the discourse of those twenty years (mid 1950s-mid 1970s). In fact, while certainly a matter for local and state police interests, the issue of whether or not there was ethnic organised crime of Italian descent and to what

¹ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 1*, Commonwealth of Australia, Commonwealth Investigation Branch Sydney - Correspondence to Director Commonwealth Investigation Branch Canberra, 7 January 1931, [page 261 of 285 – 3/2/364 – 13618165]

² National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 1*, South Australia Police Correspondence between Detective Senior Constable P.J. Crowle to Commissioner of Police - Police Headquarters Adelaide South Australia, 8 April 1963, [page 51 of 285 – 3/2/364 – 13618165]

extent this was “the mafia”, was of interest of other authorities too, including Commonwealth’s institutions such as the Immigration Department and the Criminal Intelligence units in all major cities within the ASIO (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation). The constant involvement of federal authorities shows two things: first—as we will see later in this article—that there was a tension in the classification of the phenomena under investigations as either a security matter or a criminal one; second, that the Commonwealth in the 1950s was already trying to act in a bridging capacity by asking information and sharing documents across law enforcement agencies throughout the whole country and by taking the lead in the investigations. For example, in July 1966, a memo from the Regional ASIO Director for the Australian Capital Territory confirms that an ASIO officer has been seconded to the Commonwealth Police Force to set up “an efficient system for the receipt of information concerning Italian criminal organisations and activities from all available sources”³. Although the bridging actions of the Commonwealth had mixed results—as the tension between state and Commonwealth police relations is known (Masters, 2002), this also confirms that the mafia phenomenon—notwithstanding differences in names and activities recorded—was already perceived since early days almost everywhere in Australia.

The involvement of different agencies, however, does not imply similar engagement across territories. Victoria and New South Wales state police forces were indeed the most active particularly in the cities of Melbourne and Sydney, the rural area around Mildura and other rural areas in NSW. The Australian Capital Territory (ACT—mostly administered by the Commonwealth Government), South Australia and Western Australia followed, but clearly the focus of concerns and the majority of reporting came from the areas most traditionally linked to Italian migration and settlement in Australia. These different levels in contribution also mean that it is mostly through the voices of Victoria, NSW and the Commonwealth offices in these cities and in Canberra that Australia has constructed the idea of Italian mafia and then the ‘ndrangheta. Furthermore, it is also through these offices, and their concerns, that foreign authorities, mainly in the USA and in Italy were approached to attempt clarification and seek enlightenment on how to approach the problems observed.

Defining the Mafia: Names, Labels and Misunderstandings

³ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 2*, Regional Director for the Australian Capital Territory Liaison with the Commonwealth Police Office, 27 July 1966 [page 184 of 196 – 3/2/364 – 32562327]

As previously said, the Australian experience of ethnic organised crime of Italian descent appears almost entirely linked to the Calabrian ‘ndrangheta/mafia. Even when other forms or criminality from other Southern Italian regions were detected, they did not amount to any other particular mafia type, in terms of ethos, subculture and organisational features, but the ‘ndrangheta (albeit differently called at the beginning). Throughout the documents analysed in this article, at the second level of content and discourse analysis, two main crucial issues appear to have impacted upon the evolution the mafia phenomenon and its identification as ‘ndrangheta.

First of all, Australia asks for help and support in identifying the mafia threat from foreign countries, supposedly those who have experience of fighting mafia-type criminality, namely Italy and the USA. International support is deemed crucial to understand the nature of the phenomenon in Australia. However, seeking international support and knowledge from both Italy and the USA brings to substantial misunderstandings in relation to what the mafia is, what should it look like and what its internal functioning is expected to be. This misunderstanding is particularly important in the documents after 1970s when concerns across all Australia had led to internal inquiries and discrepancies with information from abroad becomes more obvious as both Italy and the US since the 1970s define the mafia as Sicilian mafia on one side and American-Sicilian La Cosa Nostra on the other (Sergi, 2017b). In particular misunderstandings relate to the confusion—and therefore differentiation—between camorra, mafia and ‘ndrangheta and the fluctuating but growing expectation that any ethnic organised crime group of Italians—whether called mafia or honoured society of *mano nera* or camorra—could or should be an expression of the Sicilian mafia.

Already in December 1930 in a CIB Sydney memo “Camora” (with one r but still referring to Calabrians) we read:

It would a great achievement for this Branch if it could definitely state that a branch of the Camora exists in Australia. Our inability to give details would be entirely due to the strict secrecy of the members of the Society, but we would be in an admirable position to give advice on all matters relating to Italians in Australia. I am seeking information from overseas as well (...) This is certainly a very difficult task as it took nearly a century for the Italian Police to unmask the Mafia in Italy and stamp out a reign of terror.⁴

⁴ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 1*, Commonwealth of Australia, Director Commonwealth Investigation Branch Correspondence to Inspector in Charge Commonwealth Investigation Branch, Sydney 7 January 1931, [page 269 of 285 – 3/2/364 – 13618165]

Furthermore, a Commonwealth of Australia memorandum to ASIO by the Attorney’s General Department in Melbourne, dated 1st April 1959 has an interesting subject line “Black Hand Society—Mafia”. The memo establishes that ASIO will cooperate with the Department of Immigration and the Italian police authorities to identify members of the Black Hand or the Mafia arriving in Australia after 1950. However, we read in the memo:

There are two other points, which, it is considered, should be borne in mind and they are: (a) The Italian authorities’ persistent denial of the existence of any such body as Mafia and (b) The State Police are already making enquiries overseas through their own connection with Interpol.⁵

The difficulty in understanding the nature of the phenomenon internally and from abroad is even more visible in a Victoria Police (Melbourne) report dated 22nd January 1958 titled “Activities of ‘Black Hand’ Society or ‘Mafia’ in Melbourne”. Here the misunderstanding is spelled out:

...a branch of the Italian “Society”—the aims and objects of which are on the same lines as the notorious Italian “Black Hand” or “Mafia”, is in existence amongst the Italian community in Melbourne, Shepparton and Mildura. The “Mafia” is a worldwide criminal organisation, which originated in Sicily in the early part of the 19th century by Sicilian landlords and professional men to safeguard their interests against the peasants and Government of Rome. The Society later extended its activities to a criminal organisation and became established in Calabria and the Southern portion of Italy where it is still very active (...) Many gang members later migrated to America where it became known as the “Black Hand” Society. It has since spread to other parts of the world where large numbers of Italian nationals are prominent and it is associated with many vicious killings, wounding, blackmail, extortion and other serious crimes.⁶

These extracts can be read together with citation of even earlier report provided by a migration officer in Rome and asked for by the Department of Immigration in Canberra in late 1952 titled again “Black Hand Society”.

⁵ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 1*, Commonwealth of Australia, Attorney’s General Department Melbourne Memorandum to Headquarters ASIO (Director), 1st April 1959, [page 73 of 285 – 3/2/364 – 13618165]

⁶ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 3*, Victoria Police Criminal Investigation Special Branch – Correspondence between Detective Sergeant in charge to Superintendent, Activities of “Black Hand” Society of Mafia in Melbourne, Early History of Society, Melbourne 22 January 1958 [page 266 of 287 – 3/2/364 – 32562328]

No such organisation called the “Black Hand Society” is operative in Italy, although it is stated that such a Society was formed in the United States by the Italian community, with the express purpose of engaging in organised crime. The existence or “inauguration” of such an organisation in Australia is therefore reasonably possible.⁷

In mid-1960s Australian and Italian authorities set up a permanent partnership—through a liaison office in Rome, also following reports—such as the Cusack and Brown’s reports in 1964 and 1965 on the extent of the “Italian Criminal Society” in Australia. These reports will be explored further later on in this article. Paradoxically, while Australia was moving towards its own local understanding of what the Italian/Calabrian “mafia” looked like in the country—and slowly coming to the conclusion that it was not the mafia as everyone thought of it—messages from abroad in the 1960s tend to consolidate (and impose) the Sicilianness of the mafia phenomenon. A memo to the Deputy Director General for NSW within the Attorney’s General Office by the Commissioner’s Office in Sydney in August 1966 shows Australia’s steps forward:

Information collated regarding this secret Calabrian Society indicates that it is organised along the lines of the “Onorata Società”, which is the Calabrian version of the Sicilian Mafia Society. Little information is available regarding the “Onorata Società”, however, it is believed to have come into existence in the province of Reggio Calabria during the 14th or 15th century. Several books have been published dealing with the Mafia Society, but it would appear that no publication has ever been released which deals with the Calabrian “Onorata Società”. Inquiries made throughout Australia have definitely revealed the existence of this society in NSW, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland.⁸

This, together with other similar findings of those years, marks Australia as the first country to have officially placed the ‘ndrangheta at the same (significant) threat level of the Sicilian mafia, at a time when Italy still struggled with it. In 1967 ASIO Headquarters receive a report from the Liaison Officer in Europe after a visit to police and Carabinieri offices in Calabria and in Messina (Sicily). The report is illuminating for what concerns the history of the ‘ndrangheta (in general and in Australia specifically).

⁷ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 1*, Memorandum for Chief Migration Officer Rome - Black Hand Society, 31 October 1952, [page 173 of 285 – 3/2/364 – 13618165]

⁸ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 3*, Commissioner’s Office Phillip and Hunter Streets Sydney Correspondence between Commissioner of Police to Deputy Director General (NSW Operations) Attorney’s General Department Sydney, 31 August 1966 [page 193 of 287 – 3/2/364 – 32562328]

Traditionally, and typically, the Mafia is a Sicilian organisation, or a combination of criminal organisations, operating in the Western part of the island. (...) Across the straits in Calabria, the mentality of people differs considerably from that of the Sicilians. (...) Most senior Carabinieri officers agree that Calabrian organised criminal activity, also called Mafia at times, takes place principally in the province of Reggio Calabria. (...) The Calabrian “Mafia” differs considerably from the Sicilian one in efficiency (the Sicilian Mafia is more organised and has political connections), and because of the different mentality of the people.⁹

Notwithstanding these steps towards a more precise approach to the mafia-type phenomenon in Australia, reports on American LCN (La Cosa Nostra) keep being compiled in Washington DC at the end of the 1960s and circulate across authorities in Australia. Similarly, the Commonwealth continues to seek and receive information and notices of trials from Italy related mostly to the evolution of the Antimafia approach, almost exclusively centred on the Sicilian mafia—especially after the setting up of the Parliamentary Antimafia Commission in 1962 (when it was still a commission on Sicily). Mixed messages arrive from Italy: on one side, Italy starts admitting that the mafia in Sicily exists and its power is worrying; on the other side, Italians insist that this mafia is not—cannot be—in Australia. In 1970, a report from the Australian Embassy in Rome clearly states:

As far as Australia is concerned it can be fairly safely stated that the true Mafioso would have no wish to migrate. He would be like a fish out of water (...) Remove him from his own little corridor of power and he becomes nothing. Whether he would migrate is another matter. (...) Conditions in Australia would not appear to be congenial.¹⁰

A similar report—reiterating this (mistaken) view on the possibility that migration of mafiosi could be “strategic”—comes from the same authority in the same year commenting on the nature of cooperation with Italian authorities.

I understood that “mafiosi” without a penal record or a “warning” were to be found mainly in Sicily, rarely in Calabria, and they would be highly placed with good political links. Because of their position, they would be unlikely to

⁹ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 2*, Migration Office Australian Embassy in Rome, Correspondence to Headquarters ASIO on Mafia Activity in Sicily and Calabria, 18 January 1967 [page 175 of 196 – 3/2/364 – 32562327]

¹⁰ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 2*, Liaison Officer Rome Memorandum 2 November 1970, [page 129 of 196 – 3/2/364 – 32562327]

migrate anywhere. Even if they did, Australia would not be a country rating high in their list of priorities (distance, lack of highly placed connections lack of an “organisation” worth their calibre, etc). In any case, I was confident that if any of them did try to migrate to Australia, the ministry of Interior would have informed us of their movement even if only to keep track of them as they do with those travelling to the USA.¹¹

It can be clearly seen in the documents how the influence from Italian authorities in those decades leads to confusion over a phenomenon that in Australia had been already observed as being mostly linked to the Calabrian mafia. Italian authorities’ insistence on the status, the nature and the supremacy of the Sicilian mafia leads many to question whether Australia has a mafia phenomenon at all, considering that there is no sign of Sicilian clans there and that the Calabrian mafia was considered, in Italy at the time, a second-rate type of mafia instead.

The Classification of “Mafia Activities” in Australia

Next to the difficulty in understanding and assessing what the mafia was, also difficult appears to have been the qualification of what the mafia *did* in Australia, again in relation to what was expected (from Italian and American experiences) and in different areas of the country. The analysis of the documents considered in this article points out to two emerging perceptions. First, a tension exists on the qualification of the mafia as an organisation, and specifically on whether it is criminal or political in nature, which brings to a dilemma on whether its activities are a matter for security agencies or police forces only. Second, records across all of Australia reveal that activities linked to the “Italian mafia” are quite similar in the country, even though important differences—in terms of diffusion and sophistication—exist across states.

The security vs criminality dilemma is often brought up by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) to understand whether there is, or should be, any scope of action for the agency. The ASIO did contribute massively to the debate, by seconding Colin Brown in 1964 to the Commonwealth Police to undertake a survey to determine whether “an Italian criminal organisation exists in Australia and if so (...) to indicate the character and extent of its activities”, as we read in the report¹². Notably this 196-page report remains under embargo from the National Archives of Australia,

¹¹ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 2*, Liaison Officer Rome Note for File 11th December 1970, [page 122 of 196 – 3/2/364 – 32562327]

¹² The Italian Criminal Society in Australia, Report by C.H. Brown, personal copy of the author, confidential, page 4

despite its age, but the author has accessed it through other means with the help of Federal Authorities. The Brown report contains the name of over 600 individuals across all of Australia with connections to Calabrian and to a lesser extent Sicilian communities in Australia and in Italy. It shows how the organisation is indeed a version of the Calabrian Onorata Società and how criminal activities—ranging from firearms and narcotics to coffee lounges and forging of immigration documents—are indeed recorded across all Australian jurisdictions.

This report marked an enormous step forward, considering that for decades the question on whether or not the camorra, mafia, Black Hand, Honoured Society—or any other name the “Italian Secret Society” was given—was anything but criminal in nature against state law or rather a security threat against Commonwealth law - had remained central, especially in the 1940s and 1950s. The word “terror” had been frequently used to describe the activities, violence and the intimidation techniques employed against the Italian community. An assumption that the Italians engaging in extortion and “terror” were part of a larger organisation abroad (Mafia or Black Hand), created the expectations for a security threat in addition to criminal profiles. For example, a Queensland police report to the CIB in Sydney on the activities of the Black Hand until 1940, in May 1951, reads:

Members of the Gang were of either Calabrian or Sicilian extraction, this no doubt being the consequence of the fact that the “Mafia” originated in the island of Sicily and continued with their terrorist activities. (...) The basis of their activities was the extortion of large sums of money from the respected members of their own community, by terrorism. (...) The tension of the terrorism was maintained when bombing and shooting outrages were committed.¹³

Queensland authorities also questioned whether there was a link between this criminal organisation and the communist party of Australia, which would confirm the politicisation of the criminal organisation (at the time of the Fascist regime in Italy this was of particular concern). A report from the CIB in Townsville, Queensland, dated 6th of January 1937 reads:

There have been a number of Calabrese and Sicilians, suspected to be members of the Black Hand Society, or at least active sympathisers. I noticed that these people held extreme views on working class problems and I have come to the

¹³ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 1*, Correspondence from L.R. Wex Detective Sergeant Relative to Activities of the ‘Black Hand Gang’ or ‘Mafia’ in this State, information concerning which is desired by the C.I. Branch Sydney [page 189 of 285 – 3/2/364 – 13618165]

conclusion that they are definitely Communist in outlook. Although I have no definite facts to go on, I have come to the conclusion there is a definite connection between members of the Black Hand Society and the Communist Party of Australia.¹⁴

However, by the 1950s the discourse was already changing. In January 1953, a memorandum from the Director General of ASIO the Regional Director of Western Australia reports on the report by the Security Liaison Officer (SLO) on the “security interest, which should be attached to Mafia activities”. The conclusion of SLO’s inquiries in that occasion was:

SLO has advised that the Mafia, whose origins are in Sicily, is of interest in a criminal connection, but has at present no intrinsic security interest as an organisation, although some of its members may on occasions serve several masters.¹⁵

Additionally, a report on the activities of the mafia in Melbourne by an officer of the CIB in Melbourne to his superintendent, in January 1958, confirms that “ASIO has been advised that nothing of a security nature is associated with the activities of this Society, same being purely a criminal and not a political organisation”¹⁶.

Finally, this was settled by the Brown report that concluded that “no evidence has been found, which confirms either a Communist Party approach to the Society for their support or any preparation whatsoever for subversive activities, espionage or sabotage by members of the Society.¹⁷”

At the same time, reports on criminal activities generally linked to Italian organised crime/mafia, with visible predominance of Calabrian connections generally included common criminality, violence and extortion, across Australia.

In Melbourne the portfolio of activities linked to Italian criminal groups are, however, more nuanced. Prior to the work carried out by Colin Brown between 1964

¹⁴ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 1*, Criminal Investigation Branch Townsville Relative to: Information required by the Commissioner as to the connection between the Communist party of Australia and the criminal organization known as the ‘Black Hand Society’, 6th of January 1937 [page 230 of 285 – 3/2/364 – 13618165]

¹⁵ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 1*, Memorandum for Regional Director, Western Australia by Director General Commonwealth of Australia ASIO, 13th January 1953 [page 163 of 285 – 3/2/364 – 13618165]

¹⁶ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 3*, Victoria Police Criminal Investigation Special Branch – Correspondence between Detective Sergeant in charge to Superintendent, Activities of “Black Hand” Society of Mafia in Melbourne, Early History of Society, Melbourne 22 January 1958 [page 266 of 287 – 3/2/364 – 32562328]

¹⁷ The Italian Criminal Society in Australia, Report by C.H. Brown, personal copy of the author, confidential, page 93

and 1965, the FBI had seconded John Cusack to the Victoria Police in 1964 to assist investigations into a series of murders involving Calabrians connected with the Queen Victoria Produce Market in Melbourne. The Brown report clearly acknowledges the contribution of the Cusack report as the first one to acknowledge that an “organisation known as the L’Onorata Società or Fibia or ‘N’dranghita is active in Australia”¹⁸. As we will see also later in this article, Cusack describes the difference between the Calabrian Honoured Society and the Sicilian mafia and the activities of “the Society” primarily in Victoria:

It is already engaged in extortion, prostitution, counterfeiting, sly grog, breaking and entering, illegal gambling and the smuggling of aliens and small arms. Its infiltration and effort to dominate and control the fruit and vegetable produce business has been exposed.¹⁹

This, incidentally, prompts a mild differentiation between the Australian ‘ndrangheta— apparently involved in prostitution—and the early manifestations of mafia power in Calabria, opposed to being involved in prostitution as a dishonourable activity instead (Dickie, 2016). A couple of years later, in August 1966, a memo to the Deputy Director General for NSW within the Attorney’s General Office in Sydney by the Commissioner’s Office, adds to the Society’s activities in NSW:

1) Obtaining a major control on the transportation and sales of produce emanating from Calabrian growers (this has been confirmed so far as the Sydney and Melbourne produce market and to a lesser extent the Adelaide market); 2) The migration of Calabrian families to Australia; 3) The alleged distribution of counterfeit Australian banknotes; 4) Extortion of monies from members of the Italian community.²⁰

Reacting to “the Mafia” across Australia

The acknowledgement of the “regional” (Calabrian more than Sicilian) ethnicity of the Italians involved in criminal activities often appears to be the reason why their activities

¹⁸ The Italian Criminal Society in Australia, Report by C.H. Brown, personal copy of the author, confidential, page 4.

¹⁹ National Archives of Australia, *Italian Criminal Society – complicity in the distribution of forged currency*, John Cusack Report to State of Victoria for Assisting the Criminal Investigation Branch Homicide Squad of the Victoria Police, 11 August 1964 [page 24 of 51 – 3190972]

²⁰ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 3*, Commissioner’s Office Phillip and Hunter Streets Sydney Correspondence between Commissioner of Police to Deputy Director General (NSW Operations) Attorney’s General Department Sydney, 31 August 1966 [page 193 of 287 – 3/2/364 – 32562328]

are labelled as “mafia”. This is again a circular argument that is reinforced by stereotyped and misinterpreted ideas of what “the mafia” was/is in Southern Italy. The ethnicity component of “the mafia” creates tension in the way policing is constructed in a number of ways. First, as authorities rely on foreign support to define “the mafia”, this support eventually becomes more and more invasive in local approaches, as the help asked to the FBI in the person of Cusack clearly shows. Second, Italian migrant communities are involved in the identification process as “mafiosi”, either by exclusion or through “guilt-by-association”. In the early days, notwithstanding having evidence that only a small portion of criminal activities was actually committed by Southern Europeans, calls for migrant communities’ integration to fight the mafia was also a reiterated concept across authorities.

As previously said, the differentiation between the Sicilian mafia and the Calabrian Honoured Society or ‘ndrangheta consolidates in mid-60s also thanks to the support of John Cusack, seconded by the FBI to Victoria Police in 1964, and one year later by the report by ASIO officer Colin Brown. As the Italian Antimafia Commission dedicated a standalone report to the ‘ndrangheta only in 2008 (Forgione, 2008), the Australian authorities did arrive earlier than the Italian ones in affirming how the ‘ndrangheta was a distinct and of equal power with the Sicilian mafia. Cusack with the Victoria Police in 1964 notices:

There is an Italian Secret Society (...) it is frequently referred to by its adherents as the Society. Some, particularly outsiders, call it Mafia. Actually it is not Mafia. (...) Since the Society in Australia is exclusively Calabrian, it is obviously a derivation of the ancient Calabrian Secret Criminal Society known as L’Onorata Società (The Honoured Society), N’Dranghita (Calabrian dialect for The Honoured Society).²¹

He also characterises its *modus operandi* and characteristics, including “well-planned programs of ingratiating themselves...for interest and activity in community and church affairs” and traits of Calabrianness as “primitive tribal-like society where loyalty outside the family is first to the Society whether the individual is in Calabria or abroad”. Its membership is made of:

Shrewd, hardened criminals with extensive records in Calabria or Australia or both for commercial crimes and violence. Significantly they are from the villages in Calabria mentioned in most books on the subjects as the strongholds

²¹ National Archives of Australia, *Italian Criminal Society – complicity in the distribution of forged currency*, John Cusack Report to State of Victoria for Assisting the Criminal Investigation Branch Homicide Squad of the Victoria Police, 11 August 1964 [page 24 of 51 – 3190972]

of the L’Onorata Società, such as Gioia Tauro, Delianova, Sinopoli, Seminara, Santa Cristina D’Aspromonte, Varapodio, Scido, Platì and Oppido Mamertina.²²

Ethnicity and place of birth become categories of identification of ‘ndrangheta members already in 1960s and lead to systemic suspicion that migrants from certain areas could be linked to the Society, the moment they are found committing crimes. One of Cusack’s recommendations—in addition to suggestions on how to best police organised crime by improving cooperation with Italy and the USA—embodies the alien conspiracy approach and consolidates the guilt-by-association mentality:

The Commonwealth Immigration Service should seek to improve its screening of prospective immigrants, particularly from Calabria, Sicily and the Naples area, to eliminate the criminal element.

This is echoed by the Brown report that, among the indicators to determine the degree of involvement in the Society of any individual who had come to notice to police forces, mentions that “any male person who originates from that area of Italy which is of criminal notoriety (i.e. the regions of Reggio Calabria, Catanzaro, Cosenza and Sicily (in particular the Sicilian provinces of Messina, Catania and Siracusa) has been recorded”²³ in the event of any one of the further indicators being noted.

The guilt-by-association mentality, to some extent, does not come unexpected in investigations and in the policing of ethnic organised crime more generally. The relationship between migrant communities and criminals within those communities is undeniable both in terms of victimisations of the communities and in terms of criminal associations. Various documents, among which an ASIO memo from Brisbane in April 1969, show both sides of this problematic connubium:

There are no specifically Sicilian, Calabrian or Campanian organisations in Brisbane, but Sicilians do congregate around the Cortina Bar, Wickham Street, Fortitude Valley. (...) Four girls engaged in prostitution “work out of” the Cortina Bar and the Piccola Roma, Fortitude Valley. (...) No knowledge is held of any person involved in lending to migrants at high rates of interests.²⁴

²² National Archives of Australia, *Italian Criminal Society – complicity in the distribution of forged currency*, John Cusack Report to State of Victoria for Assisting the Criminal Investigation Branch Homicide Squad of the Victoria Police, 11 August 1964 [page 24 of 51 – 3190972]

²³ The Italian Criminal Society in Australia, Report by C.H. Brown, personal copy of the author, confidential, page 6

²⁴ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 1*, Commonwealth of Australia ASIO Senior Section Officer, Brisbane 9th April 1969, [page 163 of 285 – 3/2/364 – 13618165]

Also showing the difficult to approach migrant communities, their integration and their criminality, is a resolution passed in March 1956 by the City Council of Subiaco, in Western Australia, communicated to ASIO and the Prime Minister’s Office in Canberra, to solve the city’s “crisis” with “the mafia”. The Council had agreed:

That both the State and the Commonwealth Government be asked to take drastic steps to eliminate any organisations such as the “Mafia”, which advocates the taking of the law into its own hands, and further urges that every effort be taken to ensure that Migrants learn English so that they can take part in the community and work as members of a team with their fellow Australian citizens.²⁵

To this, the Department for Immigration responds by distancing itself from the claims and expectations of the resolution and also by pointing out how:

- a) The incidence of crime amongst aliens is considerably less than the incidence rate for the whole population;
- b) In view of frequent uninformed statements to the contrary, particular attention is drawn to low incidence rate (of crime) among Southern Europeans, which is in all cases less than one quarter of the overall Australian rate.²⁶

Many more examples can be found in the documents highlighting the tension between investigating mafia through ethnicity and countering it through the integration of migrant communities. It appears that, while preserving the need not to judge people’s inclination to criminality over their origin, nevertheless mafia crimes do carry an expectation of ethnic solidarity and guilt-by-association, which are difficult to ignore in policing approach.

Discussion and Conclusion

The article has presented various profiles that help comprehend the Australian journey in the detection and affirmation of an Italian mafia problem, later on conceptualised almost exclusively as the Calabrian ‘ndrangheta. As the ‘ndrangheta remains a primary

²⁵ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 1*, City of Subiaco Municipal Offices Correspondence with the Prime Ministers Department and the Director General ASIO, Canberra ACT [page 150 and 151 of 285 – 3/2/364 – 13618165]

²⁶ National Archives of Australia, *Camorra, Black Hand, Mafia, Mano Nero Society Volume 1*, City of Extract from Memorandum from Department of Immigration, Canberra [page 152 of 285 – 3/2/364 – 13618165]

policing and policy concern in today’s Australia (Sergi, 2017b), this journey is an important one to understand.

From the analysis in this article we can draw a number of items for discussion and we can identify some ways in which also the peculiar geographical conditions of Australia have impacted upon the construction of the mafia phenomenon in the country.

First and foremost, the general Australian tendency to look up to others, from Anglo-Saxon countries such as the UK and the USA to old Europe, for policy advice and confrontation (Moran, 2005) is clearly visible in this study. Australia’s peculiar geography, the enormous distances from both Europe and America, as well as the relatively young history of the country are all factors shaping this tendency (Perera, 2009). The vastness of the territory that is this island-country has had a double effect for what concerns the matters of this work. On the one side, communication across Australian authorities has tended to centralise around the Commonwealth offices; different authorities experiencing similar issues across territories intuitively asked for the support of the federal government as bridging actor. On the other side, the Commonwealth’s capability to connect with foreign authorities has not always been paired with an ability to collect and process information arriving from all over the country.

What these documents show is that Australian authorities have always somehow expressed the need to have a federal response to the mafia problem. This was linked to the intuition that the problem was not only widespread across the vast territory, but also that it was linked to migrant communities, thus involving social policy deliberations. The frustration of most Australian law enforcement agencies is specifically linked to the difficulty in mapping the networks and in understanding what exactly constitutes an “organisation” that they could call or identify as “mafia” or later on “organised crime group” in more neutral terms. It eludes early reports the consideration that mafias are best understood as methods and behaviours (La Spina, 2014; Sergi and Lavorgna, 2016), especially abroad where their fluidity often does allow identifying membership clearly. A federal response to mafia crimes intended as sets of social behaviours (from intimidation to instrumental friendships, etc.) present across different communities in Australia—notwithstanding the hybridisation of the phenomenon and its poly-crime reach (Sergi, 2018a) is still lacking (Sergi, 2017a), a sign that this need for federalisation has not been met.

The fact that this need has gone unmet for such a long time also had another consequence, which is the crystallisation of the mafia phenomenon. In brief, the isolation of law enforcement agencies across Australia, the distance of Australia from the rest of the West—which also led to a more static type of migration (less returns to

European motherlands)—paired with the difficulty to police such a vast territory (Hufnagel, 2013), has all contributed to the longevity of mafia structures. These mafia structures, which are mostly connected to the Calabrian ‘ndrangheta’s modus operandi and ethnic origins, rely on very old codes and norms that were valid at the time of migration and are often quite different from those practiced in Calabria. As studies have demonstrated, insularity both protects and defends, defining distinctive local cultures (Marshall, 1999). In Australia, the ‘ndrangheta has been preserved also because of the insularity of both Australian law enforcement and their difficulties to coordinate the centre and the periphery. Also, insularity led to the *otherness* of Italian migrant communities in the country—as history teaches (Ricatti, 2018)—as the Australian identity was built on a sense of continuity of race and length of residence that excluded people from “far away”.

It is a well-documented fact that racial and crime-related xenophobia informed much of the debate around Italians in the late nineteenth century (Bennetts, 2016; Ricatti, 2018). The discrimination endured by certain migrant groups, among which Southern Europeans, including Italians, and especially Southern Italians, is the consequence of a settler colonial nature of the Australian nation, where whiteness was turned into a core aspect of the country’s democracy, identity, and class structure (Ricatti, 2018). The discrimination endured by Italian migrant communities led, to a certain degree, to insularity of migrant cultures and this also has facilitated the preservation of certain mafia behaviours and norms within migrant communities. This, in turn, has led to the reinforcement of the “otherness” of these communities.

When it comes to organised crime linked to Southern Italian ethnicity, otherness also means “alien conspiracy theories”, which have clearly flourished in Australia also thanks to the confusion over the meaning of the mafia “label” and the mismatched interpretations coming from abroad. However, we know today that shared ethnic attributes alone do not suffice to explain the evolution of the ‘ndrangheta in Australia. The phenomenon, as it is today, has benefitted both from the crystallisation of very old mafia codes embedded in mass migration from Calabria, as well as from the fruitful interaction (or lack of it) with Australian society at large (Sergi, 2018a).

In conclusion, this article has approached themes of mafia mobility from an historical perspective rooted in the documents collected in the country of arrival. Limitations of this study are obvious, as the documents available are the ones that have been collected and kept throughout the years by archives, thus they surely are incomplete. However, these documents confirm both the difficulty of Australian law enforcement to differentiate mafia organisations and mafia behaviours within ethnic

organised crime paradigms, and the need for a response that is federal and more coordinated across the territory.

This article contributes to the argument that a current focus on mafia mobility needs to be framed within local and cultural specificities to avoid falling into the conceptual trap of transnational organised crime policing. Indeed, the phenomenon of the 'ndrangheta has a long history and an independent and local status in Australia, most of which detected by law enforcement since its inception. The current risks posed by the 'ndrangheta in Australia cannot be properly assessed and countered without an understanding of the history of both the Australian 'ndrangheta and the evolution of institutional interpretations of its nature, activities and organisations.

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