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Protection and Obedience Deviant Masonry, Corruption, and Mafia in Italy

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ABSTRACT

The historical connection between Italian masonry and opaque interests of white-collar and institutional actors populates common representations of power in Italy. The P2 case contributed to shape an Italian collective representation of the role of the masonry as a locus where almost everything can be informally or illegally obtained by affiliates through the right connections, bribery, and blackmailing. Using a variety of resources, including case law, public inquiries, interviews, and media analysis, this paper will investigate the pathological dimension of potential interplays among deviant masons and political-institutional actors in a variety of cases from the P2 onwards. Marginally mafia organizations have also emerged in this interplay. We outline the actors, their resources, activities, and opportunities. We conclude by discussing how and why the willingness and the need of several powerful actors (including mafiosi) to find a “protected space” of extra-legal exchange, led them to create, seek, or enter masonic or para-masonic structures, able to provide governance of reciprocal needs and expectations.

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1 Introduction

The historical connection between Italian masonry and opaque interests of powerful white-collar actors – i.e., “the bourgeoisie” – was affirmed in a heated parliamentary debate occurring on 16 May 1925 between the Communist leader – and political philosopher – Antonio Gramsci, and the prime minister of the fascist regime Benito Mussolini. In a brave confrontation – alone among fascist deputies interrupting and mocking him – Gramsci argues in favor of freedom of association, and therefore against the proposal to outlaw masonry:

Given the way Italy was formed into unity, given the initial weakness of the Italian capitalist bourgeoisie, masonry was the only real and efficient party the bourgeois class had for a long time . . . [Fascists] propose today the so-called law against masonry; they say they want to conquer the State this way. In reality, fascism is fighting against the only efficiently organized force the bourgeoisie ever had in Italy, in order to supplant it in the occupation of the roles the state gives to its functionaries.¹

Half a century after Gramsci’s fierce speech, a persisting demand for an effective “organization” of hidden interests of the “bourgeois class” still seemed to characterize Italy and it led to a huge scandal centered around the activity of the masonic lodge Propaganda 2 or P2. The P2 was ruled by the venerable master Licio Gelli and in 1981 it heavily hit the Italian political-institutional system. The P2 was a secret lodge within the main Italian masonic obedience (The Grand Orient of Italy – hereinafter GOI); it included hundreds of members of the Italian political and economic elite covertly connected

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¹Camera dei Deputati, Atti Parlamentari, XXVII Legislatura – I Sessione, Discussioni, May 16 1925, pp. 2658–60.

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by unobservable links. Evidence was provided of the network's involvement in corruption schemes with secret services, and subversive plans with mafia clans and fascist terrorists (see section 4).

No other case, but the P2 case, contributed to shape an Italian collective representation of the role of the masonry as a locus where almost everything can be informally or illegally obtained by affiliates through the right connections, bribery, and blackmailing. A popular bias against alleged masons' invisible and unaccountable power was strengthened thereafter (Sergi and Vannucci 2023).

In general terms, we refer to masonry (or freemasonry) as a set of centuries-old brotherhoods, which are based on rituals and ceremonies aimed at promoting esoteric and fraternal self-improvement values. Masonry's activities are managed around a basic, local organizational unit, the lodge. Each lodge is supervised at regional or national levels by the "obedience." The obedience, while autonomous in their operational capacity, refers, ideally, to the main masonic rites abroad. At the top of any lodge is a venerable master; at the top of the obedience is the grand master (Bogdan and Snoek 2014; Jacob 2007).

The P2 case made it clear that there was, in Italy, an organizational form of *deviant* masonry, not embracing the masonic journey as it developed for centuries (Dickie 2020), but where masonic values and resources were *misused* for other particularistic, at times delinquent, interests. After the P2 scandal, law n. 17/1982, so-called "Anselmi law," was passed in Italy to punish "unlawful secret association," i.e., any attempt to constitute *secret societies* which exploit undisclosed brotherhoods to interfere with public functions. In the Anselmi law we find a specific legislative definition of "masonic deviance" in Italy: secret societies which misuse brotherhoods to interfere with public functions (and for private interests). The first and only case of conviction for violation of the Anselmi law so far happened in the Sicilian city of Trapani and related to the lodge Iside2, in 1993.

For our analytical purposes, therefore, we define *deviant* masons as actors who adopt systematic strategies aimed at converting – misusing – masonic resources at their disposal (e.g., official roles, authority and influence within a masonic lodge, personal contacts, confidential information, symbols, rituals, etc.) into assets useful to pursue private and/or illicit purposes. Therefore, they deliberately depart from the institutional scope and aims of the legitimate/regular masonic organization they are member of. In line with mainstream criminological theory of labeling (Becker, 1963), masons' deviant conducts can be characterized by being socially and/or institutionally recognized as violating norms, values, organizational regulations, or laws in relation to the masonry. We use deviance to indicate a label of rule-breaking attitude and disregard for social norms of individuals labeled as such (in this case by other masons or by law enforcement), following Becker's definition: "*Deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender.'* The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied: deviant behavior is behavior that people so label" (Becker 1963: 9). Operating outside the perimeter of institutionalized and socially legitimized use of masonic resources, undetected deviant masons can still act embedded in ordinary masonic structures that they instrumentally and covertly manipulate for their personalistic purposes and benefits. They may also operate within irregular, unrecognized, unauthorized, spurious, or fake masonic structures – often indicated by official masonry as para-masonic structures – which they create or exploit to better coordinate the activities of several actors. The testimony of a mason in a mafia trial explains how deviation from official masonic appearances can feed on itself, in a self-justifying process:

What drove me was my masonic mentality that had become a sort of delirium of omnipotence that made me think as a mason nothing or almost nothing was precluded to me (. . .). I was justifying to myself immoral actions that I had never done in my life simply because of my position of all-mighty in masonry.²

This paper will investigate the relational structure and potential interplays among deviant masons and political-institutional actors – with the occasional interaction with mafia organizations – in Italy. It will do so by focusing on the case of the P2 case and onwards, particularly dwelling on the only judicial

²Hiram trial, hearing October 12 2010, in <https://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/312912/processo-hiram-accomando-ed-altri>.

case in which there was a conviction for the crime of “unlawful secret association.” Due to the case-study nature of our analysis there is no general research question beyond the exploratory nature of a broad theme, which is: what have been the historical interplays of deviant masons and political-institutional actors in Italy, from the P2 case onward? Additionally, we can single out emerging research questions from our case studies: (i) what are the main roles and strategies played by deviant masons when interacting with other actors within political-institutional arenas; (ii) in which (formal, informal, extra-legal) arenas of interaction and exchange with other powerful actors – and occasionally criminal organizations – can they successfully operate; (iii) what are the main resources that deviant masons use to pursue their private and/or illicit purposes; (iv) which informal institutions tend to emerge regulating informal and extra-legal interactions among deviant masons and other powerful actors?

2 Theoretical background

The topic of extra-legal interactions between deviant masons, white-collars and criminal actors has been almost completely neglected in scientific research, presumably due to the lack of reliable empirical data, to practical obstacles in obtaining them, and to methodological difficulties in their generalization (Dickie 2020; Sergi and Vannucci 2023). Not surprisingly, the vacuum of academic contributions has been filled by thousands of books and millions of web pages with conspiratorial hypotheses and theories on masonic universal plots and mafias’ overarching and unstoppable reach.

To explore this arena of hidden interconnections it can be fruitful to contextualize the literature on extra-legal governance and private ordering by looking at the various roles deviant masons can play as potential propitiators, fixers or protectors of informal interactions and exchanges (Della Porta and Vannucci 2012; Dixit 2004). Not enforceable in courts of law, in fact, transactions enabled within masonic networks – when involving extra-legal deals – are more vulnerable to the risk of opportunistic behavior and defection. Moreover, in case of illegal commodities, assets can be seized by law enforcement agencies and participants risk imprisonment (Reuter 1985). Credible commitments to bind potential partners to such informal or illicit arrangements will require stronger trust bonds, whose source may rely on a variety of different social mechanisms (Aoki 2001; Keefer and Knack 2008). As shown by a growing literature on the “dark side of social capital,” cooperation among members of restricted groups or cliques of individuals – within criminal organizations, networks of corrupt agents, etc. – requires a shared and selective observance to “narrow radius” rules of reciprocity and trustworthiness (Fukuyama 2000). The impact of these rules is detrimental to outsiders and to the society (Baycan and Oner 2022; Uribe 2012). Drawing from neo-institutionalism, we can distinguish different types of governance structures, which may generate both rules of behavior – i.e., delineation of property rights on resources at stake – and their enforcement mechanisms (North 1990).

Social actors may impose rules on themselves through *internal sanctions*, i.e., psychological suffering, guilt, shame, etc., as a *first-party governance mechanism* (Ellickson 1991). The shared adoption of self-enforced norms, often assuming some moral content, typically derives from socialization processes: significantly, rituals, ceremonies, indoctrination, are a constitutive element of both masonic lodges’ affiliation and mafia families’ association, but also of a political parties’ membership, or other elitist groups (Catino 2019; Ciconte 2015; Paoli 2003).³

Informal interactions can be regulated and sanctioned also through other spontaneous extra-legal governance structures, like in the prevailing observance of social norms, which “*specify what actions are regarded by a set of persons as proper or correct, improper or incorrect*” (Coleman 1990: 243). These have no legal or formal basis per se, and they can even conflict with the law. The sanctioning mechanism in these cases can rely on the ability of “the person acted upon” to administer “*rewards*

³As Schelling (1978: 128) puts it: “*More selective groupings (. . .) can organize incentive systems or regulations to try to help people do what individually they wouldn’t but collectively they may wish to do. Our morals can substitute for markets and regulations, in getting us sometimes to do from conscience the things that in the long run we might elect to do only if assured of reciprocation.*”

and punishment depending on whether the promisor adheres to the promised course of behavior” (Ellickson 1991: 127). When actors expect to be involved in repeated interactions, for instance, they may punish untrustworthy counterparts simply by interrupting the relationship, i.e., by banning them from future profitable opportunities, therefore spontaneously generating a contract-enforcement institution (Dixit 2004: 11; Greif 2008: 732).

The venerable master of a masonic association, a high-level politician or bureaucrat, a mafia boss, they all can exercise such self-protection capability with partners, by using resources under their control: expulsion or de facto exclusion from a lodge’s activities; trashing others’ reputation by reporting wrongdoings; abusing public authority; recurring to violence; threatening retaliation. When relevant information selectively circulates within networks of individuals interacting on a regular basis – as it typically occurs within masonic lodges or in political and economic organizations – the enforcement power of “social forces” can effectively operate through ostracism, peer pressure, gossip, reputational damage (Keefer and Knack 2008). The relative homogeneity of socio-economic status of masonic affiliates – due to an admission process based on cooptation – strengthen the effectiveness of these sanctioning mechanisms; in turn, this increases reciprocal trustworthiness in potential transactions (Zak and Knack 2001).

Finally, third party enforcers may assume the role of guarantor for the fulfillment and sanctioning of non-written rules and deals. While the selling of private protection is identified as a characterizing activity of mafia groups involved in extra-legal and illegal activities (Gambetta 1993; Reuter 1983; Schelling 1971; Varese 2013), this can be exercised also by other willing and “powerful” actors – such as politicians, high-level bureaucrats, or masons (Della Porta and Vannucci 2012; Sergi and Vannucci 2022). As Barzel (2002: 38) observes: “*the essence of enforcement power is in the enforcer’s ability to punish (i.e., to impose costs). Those costs can be imposed both by using violence and by other means.*” A third-party guarantor, in fact, can convert various resources at his disposal (violence, information, social capital, etc.) – usually deriving from his role within an organization – to enforce informal deals and rules under his informal “jurisdiction” both among members, and among people interacting with them.⁴

This explanation assumes that there are severe limitations and significative ambiguities in the definition of “rights” on resources at stake in relevant arenas of social exchange (Alston and Mueller 2008; Barzel 2002; Putnam 1993). This is true especially in illegal markets and “muddled” arenas where demand and supply of private protection can emerge, but also in political transactions, bureaucratic careers, as well as in other informal interactions where legally binding agreements are not available, non-written negotiations and agreements are common. In these settings, social norms may emerge through repeated interactions (Moe 1990; Ostrom 2000; Vannucci 2019). Negotiating deals and exchanging resources in unofficial interactions, deferred exchanges, illicit or criminal deals, i.e., when trust tends to be more fragile, actors demand protection to reduce uncertainty against the risks of opportunism, predatory strategies, theft, fraud, etc. (Gambetta 1993).⁵ In diverse domains of interaction different guarantors may offer protection services on various “property rights” at stake (Barzel 2002; Della Porta and Vannucci 2021; Fazekas, Sberna, and Vannucci 2021). A variety of third-party guarantors co-exist and guarantee property rights on a variety of resources, while capable and willing to prevent or compose disputes, even by enforcing their decisions through sanctions and through redefinition of social meanings.⁶ Each of them can specialize in those arenas where their

⁴Focusing on informal or illegal exchanges and interactions, we do not consider in this scheme the crucial role of governments and legal systems (i.e., state hierarchies) as enforcers of *legal* property rights (Ellickson 1991: 127 Keefer and Knack 2008: 712). However, state’s recognition of legal rights – as in anti-prohibitionist policies – or the effectiveness of judicial repression obviously negatively influence the value of *economic* property right on resources at stake in illegal deals (Barzel 2002).

⁵As Hess observes: “A number of disputes cannot be brought before an official court anyway. These are the cases in which one party demands from another a course of action in line with their subcultural norms, a course of action not covered by formal laws. Unless one of two parties resorts to direct self- help, the only arbitrator who also has the power of enforcement is the mafioso. (Hess [1973] 1998: 153).

⁶Around 1910 American La Cosa Nostra groups successful entry as protectors in several U.S. illegal markets was, according to Varese, the unintended consequence of police reforms and prohibitionist policies: “*Until then, illegal markets were protected by a combination of local politicians and corrupt police officers.*” (Varese 2013: 9). According to mafia collaborator Antonino Calderone, self-protection in corruption deals autonomously set up by the great entrepreneurs of Catania – the “Knights of Labor” - made the illegal market impenetrable to Cosa nostra intervention: “*In Catania, not even in the 1970s and beyond did the men of honor manage to enter the world of public contracts in a significant way. The Knights of Labor were already there, who controlled everything. They knew how to do their business well. They were much better and smarter than us when it came to money*” (Arlacchi 1992: 115).

supply of protection has a competitive advantage. A court manager or an influential politician can protect a mafioso in his conflictual dealings with the justice system, assuring him long-term impunity (Della Porta and Vannucci 2012). A mafia boss, thanks to his reputation for credible threats of violence, can enforce the collusive agreement among entrepreneurs who share public contracts, by shielding them from the risk of being ripped off by partners (Reuter 1987). The venerable master of a lodge can propitiate the corrupt exchange between a politician and an entrepreneur – both affiliated to his lodge – and safeguard from the risk of cheating. A similar balance of enforcing powers, however, may generate areas of overlapping or ambiguity. As reminded by Barzel (2002: 235–236).

There is no single ultimate enforcer within that grey area. The jurisdictions of different enforcers are likely to overlap in part, and disputes can be expected there. The greater the area over which the two organizations dispute each other's power, the greater the weakening of rights resulting from the existence of more than one power-backed third-party enforcer in the same area.

A relatively stable network of individuals repeatedly intermingling within a masonic lodge, or autonomously managed by influential (deviant) masons, share expectations, information on past actions, trustworthiness and reputation, solidarity values, and informal rules deriving from socialization and rituals, i.e., factors facilitating the emergence private-order institutions regulating their interactions (Platteau 1993). Indeed, (deviant) masons misusing and exploiting their role within the organization, besides enacting other spontaneous and decentralized governance mechanisms, may have the power to exercise a third-party enforcement role within arenas of extra-legal deals and clandestine transactions.

3 Data and methods

In an increasingly confused scenario Italian media and public commentators have been feeding in the past decades, about a so-called “massomafia” (“masonmafia”) which assumes a presumed and unproven “melting” of the two organizations into a third, omnipotent, invisible, corrupting entity that is responsible for much of the malaise of Italian politics and economics (Cordova 2019; Leccese 2018). Aiming at a systematization of the scarce, yet rich, data available, we pursue a first attempt to categorize and operationalize the (known) arenas of interactions among the (deviant) masons and political-institutional actors, where mafias are also occasionally involved.

We collected primary data focusing on the Italian case crossing several sources of information, for a larger project. For this case study, we collected primarily judicial acts on criminal proceedings and institutional documents and reports by Antimafia Parliamentary Commissions. Particularly significant were the reports of the Parliamentary Commission of inquiry on the P2 (so called “Anselmi Commission”), and the huge number of enclosed materials (auditions transcripts, seized documents, related acts, etc.); they are available in 9 volumes subdivided in 115 tomes of overall 93,776 pages. Part of the document data collected were available in the Freemasonry Library and Archives in London. Additionally, audio hearings from trials involving mafia and masonry, available on the online archive of Radio Radicale, have been used as well. We also carried out 18 interviews with prosecutors, police officials, and journalists, plus two interviews with lawyers who defend individuals who also fall in that “deviant mason” category and mafiosi in Calabria. Data was collected between the spring of 2019 and the summer of 2022, with trips and fieldwork made to Italy specifically in April 2019 and in August 2021 and 2022. The analysis was thematic, and content based.

4 The actors: P2, *Iside2*, and other ‘Institutional’ deviant masons

The affair of the secret P2 masonic lodge came to light on March 17th, 1981. Judges confiscated documents in a Tuscan factory belonging to the venerable master, Licio Gelli, while investigating on the fake kidnapping of the bankrupted banker, P2 affiliate and mafia money launderer Michele Sindona, organized by Cosa nostra in Sicily, and on the murder of Giorgio Ambrosoli, incorruptible

bankruptcy administrator of Sindona's failed bank (Cecchi 1985; Flamigni 2005; Galli 2007; Stajano 1991). Gelli's entrepreneurial ability was to "imagine" the P2, a preexistent "covered lodge" within the GOI, specifically oriented to guarantee a *selective, covert, and elite* proselytizing on a national scale, with higher standards of privacy and secrecy to prestigious figures.⁷ As Dickie (2020) explains:

The Venerable Master would recruit an individual who was eager to use P2 connections to gain an unfair advantage in his career, or the like. That recruit would then recommend to Gelli one or two others they knew who had a similar outlook. (...) In return, Gelli found ever larger numbers of people who, unlike most Masons, had important favors to trade, and could be relied upon not to raise any quibbles if he asked them to perform a service for a P2 member they did not know.

In 1970 as venerable master, Gelli assumed the extraordinary role of "organizational secretary" in the P2; the secret lodge became his personal domain and the springboard for his leading "behind-the-scene" role in politics, finance, legal and illegal markets.

In a learning and imitation process of Gelli's initially successful scheme, other wannabe deviant masons started their personal enterprise as enablers or third-party enforcers, even if only at a local or lower level, all over Italy. As a Cosa nostra collaborator explains: "*in the period following the P2 affair, alongside the masonic lodges, there may have been an increase in membership of certain Orders of Chivalry with characteristics similar to those of certain masonic organizations.*" Additionally, he does not remember if a mafia boss "*was a member of a masonic lodge or of one of those para-masonic associations flourishing around Palermo then*".⁸ The case of lodge Iside2 and his venerable master Giovanni Grimaudo, in the Sicilian city of Trapani in 1993, is the best example of such imitation process. Iside2 existed behind the semblance of the Scontrino Club in Trapani – a cultural center organizing talks with prestigious guests.

The cultural liveliness of the Scontrino Club also served to increase the personal prestige of Giovanni Grimaudo (...) at the same time, it provided favorable opportunities to establish contacts or links with influential figures of the local establishment, or to proselytize in favor of the masonic "brotherhood."⁹

In both P2 and Iside2, boundaries were blurred between the affiliation to a recognized masonic obedience, the participation to the activities of some secret or covert subunit of it, or the association to another less official para-masonic entity. The real arena of interaction depended on the strategic inputs of their venerable masters and on the resources and interests of the actors involved.

Enlightenment, transformation, and re-identification are the goals officially associated with the masonic experience, with members sharing solidarity bonds which may operate as a first-party enforcement mechanism. The more these goals are supplemented by an informal "transactional" and pragmatic approach, the more these "market oriented" economic and political interactions generate a demand for other forms of regulation and extra-legal governance. The venerable master of the lodge Iside2 pointed out how most "laymen" joined the masonry thinking of obtaining concrete benefits:

90% of them come to the masonry because they think that the masonry – not only ours, all masonic lodges – ... there's the Prefect, there's the Chief of Police, there's... in short, all these stories. That's why people are always looking for, and everyone has their own issue, welfare problem, pension, social housing, even stupid things. 70% or 80% percent of these brothers entered masonry not with the aim of studying or elevating their cultural and therefore spiritual position. They came exclusively because each one had his own problem... continuous, inexorable streams of requests of every kind and genre, from birth certificates to criminal trials... There is the conviction that by entering masonry, masonry can solve problems.¹⁰

⁷In the words of Armando Corona, former grand master of the GOI: "*The P2 lodge was founded (...) in 1877 with a very precise aim, to keep under cover all those members of masonry who had a certain position in civil society (high magistrates, high army officers, university professors). All those who, because of their activities, could not sit among the brothers in the lodges without being forced to find themselves in the embarrassing situation of having to refuse some courtesy that was asked of them.*" Parliamentary commission of inquiry on P2 (from now on: Commissione Anselmi, from the name of its President), Enclosed documents, series I, N. 2-ter – vol. III: 827.

⁸Consulenza al Tribunale di Palermo su: "I rapporti di Mandalari con le organizzazioni massoniche," 1995: 14.

⁹Tribunale di Trapani, Sentenza n.2/2014: 684–5.

¹⁰Tribunale di Trapani, Sentenza n.110/1993: 45.

Widespread expectations by wannabe masonic members that affiliation is key to obtain protection in case of troubles and to create opportunities for fruitful contacts may also generate a sort of “self-fulfilling prophecy.” On the one side, expectations foster a demand for benefits and guarantees, which can be profitably satisfied within the masonic association. These will match mutual or indirect willingness to perform each other favors within an enlarged circle of reciprocity. Moreover, relative homogeneity of members and repeated interactions create an infrastructure of relationships in which credible commitments and trustworthiness in deferred exchanges can be assessed: reputational assets therefore become crucial, through the operation of social norms and private-order institutions. When this is combined with the process of selective – occasionally even secretive – strategic co-optation of new willing and valuable members, a deviant mason with a leading role in a formal lodge – or in a hidden branch of it, like Gelli and Grimaudo – gets the power to offer also third-party guarantor services, i.e., intentionally “solve problems” among actors within the perimeter of membership, but also with disposable outsiders. Lodges have a vertical authority structure, based on formal roles and occasionally on the availability of further enforcing resources, as for instance blackmailing information (as we will see later in this paper). Such protection services have a price, usually cashed by the deviant venerable master in terms of money, due credit, subjection, confidential information.

However extreme, the cases of Gelli and Grimaudo remain isolated. In the past 20 years, deviant masonic entities and their masters when interacting with powerful political or institutional actors, at most acted as providers of informal and occasionally illicit favors. Salvatore Spinello, for example, is another recurring figure in the Italian chronicles of judicial operations on corruption involving deviant masons. According to a former grand master of the GOI, he later became “*the head of a self-proclaimed obedience, we call it spurious . . . we consider it an irregular masonry.*”¹¹ During an audition to the Parliamentary Commission of inquiry on the P2, Spinello provided an illuminating outline on the differences between his and Gelli’s approaches to the expected relationship between masonry, political/institutional actors, and criminal power. To use his own metaphor, Gelli’s aspiration and self-representation was the role of a *puppeteer* – i.e., to be recognized as the leading, regulating and enforcing figure in the interplay of different powers. Spinello’s aspirations were more modest. He wished to be the robust, reliable, and far-reaching *string* linking powerful politicians, bureaucrats, and others who could benefit from selective exercise of their own power.¹² As a broker strongly committed to nourish privileged connections with public agents, he offered his brothers access to a patiently crafted network of relationships and acquaintances within other professional and societal arenas. While covertly procuring opportunities for hidden and corrupt exchanges, he visibly proclaimed a fierce adherence to the “real values” of the masonry, instrumentally using its bonding value. As he stated in a press release:

If masonry wants to present itself to citizens as a moral compass, it must be made clear that there is not only the masonry of scandals (. . .). Masonry can be a compass that makes wise and enlightened men exercise a heartfelt and decisive moral magisterium, free from the preconceptions of power groups.¹³

Leading roles in masonic and institutional worlds may co-exist within the same person, i.e., the lodge’s formal or informal chief being also a high-profile politician or functionary. According to judges of the Tribunal of Palermo in Operation Artemisia in 2019, a high-profile political figure – a former Regional Councilor in Sicily – had a leading role in a para-masonic entity, which only had a partial membership within an official lodge: the existence of this para-masonic entity was ignored by its own venerable master:

It has clearly emerged how the “occult group” took decisions regardless of the directives coming from the overt lodge, allowing members to aid each other, rather than official masons, in case of need.

¹¹Spinello Trial, hearings, hearing May 24, 2004, in <https://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/278755/processo-spinello-ed-altri-inchiesta-su-massoneria>.

¹²See for instance Spinello’s testimony referring to his connections with “interlocutors with the gown” (i.e. judges) and with the former Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti. Commissione Anselmi – Enclosed documents, series II, N. 2-quater – vol.III, tome XVII: 124.

¹³Ibid., 752–3.

On the other hand, some of the persons involved were not only not apparent masons but not even occult: in these secret agreements, these were powerful individuals who decided the fate of public bodies in the Province of Trapani.¹⁴

In networks involving (deviant) masons, politicians and other actors operating in institutional arenas, mafia organizations, if present, are usually confined to a marginal role, as irregular and sporadic *customers*. As mafia's involvement carries a higher risk of being severely prosecuted, masons will tend to keep mafiosi outside, or at the periphery of their relational arena – especially when they (masons) can regulate autonomously their informal deals. The presence of mafiosi within a lodge, in fact, exposes all brothers to the risk of being compromised – in their reputation, but also in their eventual practices of informal exchanges of favors – by judicial inquiries. A high-profile mason remembers the complaint of another mason suspected of being contiguous to a mafia clan – his brother had been killed by Cosa nostra. He – the other mason – was marginalized (“put to sleep”) because the venerable master opted for a more “respectable” composition of the lodge: *“He told me that he [the venerable master] had to ‘put him to sleep’ for a real reason, because he wanted professionals to enter into the lodge, but these professionals were put off by his presence.”*¹⁵

5 The resources of deviant masons

To reduce uncertainty in extra-legal deals, that is to create expectations of mutual trustworthiness in potential deals, deviant masons rely upon *enabling* and *enforcing* resources. Enabling resources are used to select and expand the set of actors involved in deals and interactions they facilitate, therefore strengthening identification and solidarity (i.e., the effectiveness of internal sanctions) as well as reiteration of contacts and reciprocity (i.e., factors facilitating spontaneous compliance to extra-legal deals): these include networking ability, influence, trust, and reputation. Enforcing resources can be more specifically used to impose costs as third-party guarantor, and therefore protect economic rights, prevent or compose disputes, and so on; these include blackmailing power and ostracism.

5.1 Enabling resources: networking ability, influence, trust, and reputation

Various types of intermediaries – both individual and corporate actors – facilitate activities that would otherwise not have been carried out. However, the kind and amount of trust placed in each of them differ significantly (Coleman 1990: 180–1). At a basic level, to “stay in business” as enabler of extra-legal deals – whatever business – any deviant mason must have at their disposal a network of personal contacts and relations with selected partners. Moreover, they must secure a certain degree of confidence in their capability, reliability, and willingness to furnish the expected performances. The successful practice of these activities, in turn, requires the collection and use of a set of information – on other people's role, character, and availability, for instance. Information must be shared with others, for example those inducing trust, by emphasizing the relevance of connections and influence and generating positive expectations.

The networking ability of deviant masons shapes a plastic infrastructure of relationships with selected partners. Moreover, their ability to generate trust facilitates further connections and exchanges among individuals in the network.¹⁶ Personal connections were one the crucial resources which Licio Gelli was able to use in his personal and professional trajectory. In 1976, Gelli publicly mentioned an exaggerated amount of 2,400 members in the P2: *“To describe my friendships you need*

¹⁴Operation Artemisia – Tribunale di Trapani, Ordinanza applicativa di misure cautelari, March 16, 2019: 934.

¹⁵Tribunale di Catania, trascrizione interrogatorio, January 22, 2002:107.

¹⁶We may consider as a distinctive feature of masonic experience the creation and strengthening of *social capital*. Deviant masons, particularly, tend to finalize personal bonds and relations they built into opportunities for further business interactions and personal goals achievement. Following Coleman's (1990: 304) definition: *“social capital, in turn, is created when the relations among persons change in ways that facilitate action.”*

*the telephone directories of at least three countries. Is that bad?*¹⁷ A valuable resource, indeed, which he was able to convert into a negotiating chip leading to his rapid ascent to official roles of authority within the P2: “Gelli had endorsed his own entry into the masonry and his subsequent leadership of the P2 lodge proving to be capable of approaching and recruiting ‘qualified’ people”.¹⁸

In a similar fashion, but at the local level, the venerable master of the lodge Iside2 Giovanni Grimaudo created a relational architecture to increase both his prestige and the network of affiliates. In the words of testimonies, the venerable master of the Iside2 in Trapani:

He flaunted his influential friendships, to be able to solve the problems of all ‘brothers’ . . . He demanded to be the only reference point for everyone who gravitated around the lodges. . . everything had to happen only through his direct involvement and mediation. . . He was the central figure of the organization, to whom people turned for the solution of the most important problems. . . the number one of all the lodges in Trapani. . .¹⁹

In masonic arenas of interaction – when partly overlapping with institutional roles – a key networking resource is the actual exercise of – or a presumed influence on – public power; this resource generates opportunities for further profitable interactions and exchanges. The capability to get access to, or to address, political-institutional actors is a key resource for a deviant – or wannabe deviant – mason. In a conversation tapped in Naples in the office of a high-profile accountant, grand master Spinello explains the scheme he had successfully pursued in the past – becoming a friend of the former socialist leader Bettino Craxi and other powerful politicians: “Let’s return to the past and start again. We must go back to being the courtly advisors of the established power. To get into the great political game, it is not necessary to become a parliamentarian, but to pilot parliamentarians”.²⁰

In Operation Artemisia, a regional councilor overtly points out in a taped conversation his effort to create and sustain a web of relationship based on conditional cooperation with the leading figure of another masonic obedience. He discusses the expectation of benefitting from diffused reciprocity with an enlarged network of powerful masons – as a “member of a caste” – when it came to a complex transaction of heterogeneous resources – appointments in public bodies, candidacies, electoral support²¹

He needs to come up with a candidate, even his wife, even if he doesn’t make a deal with you, he must come up with a candidate. He has to campaign and when it is my turn he’ll have to commit. . . [he] is part of a caste of people. . . at this moment we can give some answers, we can help him, he can find a point of reference because now we are in power for certain things that interest him and you, and you find him, like him, like thousands of others, as soon as the wind changes, all these are gone, oh! But at this moment they are there . . . we must exploit it in our favor, they think they are exploiting us . . . but we are exploiting them in the knowledge that our contribution is the match-point. . . because at the next match point, we no longer find them.

As shown in our analytical framework, informal, hidden, illicit exchanges, and interactions which are non-legally enforceable, imply asymmetries – in the form of non-simultaneity of actions – and transfers of resources whose value cannot be easily calculated (Greif 2008). To arrange and manage such situations requires trust, which is a characteristic of social interactions where both cognitive and emotional processes come into play (Lewis and Weigert 1985).²² The importance and value of trustworthiness increase in more opaque, shifty, and potentially troublesome environments, such as those where deviant masons operate. A primary resource for leaders of a masonic or para-masonic

¹⁷L’Espresso, July 10, 1976.

¹⁸Commissione Anselmi – Enclosed documents, series I, N. 2-ter – vol. I; 15. The then deputy grand master asked the grand master to entrust Gelli for the secretariat – i.e., the unofficial leadership – of the P2 lodge with these enthusiastic words: “Gelli is a technician of scientific work organization. He presented me with 13 applications for initiation from extremely qualified people. He also told me he had another 40 applications ready.” Commissione Anselmi, vol. III, tome I: 395–396.

¹⁹Tribunale di Trapani, Sentenza n.110/1993: 46–7.

²⁰Il Fatto Quotidiano, July 27, 2010.

²¹Operation Artemisia, cit. 1082–3.

²²As a type of belief, trust (and conversely, distrust), can be considered as “a particular level of the subjective probability with which an agent assesses that another agent or group of agents will perform a particular action, both before he can monitor such action (or independently of his capacity ever to be able to monitor it) and in a context in which it affects his own action” (Gambetta 2000: 217).

entity involved in informal or criminal activity is precisely their ability to generate and handle trust relationships, enabling them to expand the domain of deals arranged and individuals connected. Gelli himself describes his “entrepreneurial” brokerage activity in international markets:

Once a judge in Switzerland asked me why and how I had accumulated so much money. I explained to him that I am an unlicensed banker. In the sense that if Egypt needs 500 million dollars, the Minister calls me and instructs me to find the money. Believe me, it is not an easy task. (. . .) It's an intermediation based on trust. Naturally, once the money is collected, I take a commission.²³

Trust might be dependent on reputation, an impalpable yet valuable resource which publicly conveys information on one's personal qualities and past performances (Gambetta 2009). Reputation may attract partners and discourage competition; it shapes partners' expectations and actions. When other impalpable resources come into play – such as connections and trust for an intermediary, protection for a guarantor, power for a politician, etc. – reputation tends to overlap with, and partly substitute, its object (Gambetta 1993: 44). Take for instance a venerable master of a lodge in Palermo – convicted for being money launderer of Cosa nostra boss Totò Riina – who, according to another mason: “*boasted of the existence of a reserved lodge, speaking about it in masonic meetings in the presence of all the brothers, referring to the affiliations of important persons (. . .). He let it be understood that he was the head of this covert lodge. Most probably, he aimed at increasing his charisma*”.²⁴

The effort of deviant masons to feed an image of themselves as a mix of material and supernatural power, can generate a sort of cognitive short circuit and lead to almost farcical outcomes, rather than feed their reputation. In the description of a Sicilian high-level mason, the venerable master of a lodge in Catania adopted an exorbitant approach to prospect the potentialities of his intervention:

He used masonry to make all those who met him believe that the masonic institution was above everything and was capable of fixing trials, of guaranteeing the pax mafiosa between opposing clans. He had told an incredible tale about his membership of the Priory of Sion, a super-masonry, since there is a legend that Christ did not die on the cross but married Magdalene and had carnal descendants, and he with these people, he said he was as a carnal descendant of Jesus Christ.²⁵

5.2 Enforcing resources: blackmailing power and ostracism

A deviant mason acting as an intermediary can be able to convert key enabling resources into an enforcement mechanism. As Dixit puts it: “*long-term relationships and arbitration are the most common modes of private ordering*” (Dixit 2004: 11). The menace of being cut off from a profitable network of relations crafted by a venerable master within an official or unofficial lodge may be enough to deter and discourage defections of partners. Additionally, deviant masons may capitalize on resources specifically finalized to regulate deals and induce compliance, such as blackmail, information sharing, and ostracism.

The exercise of blackmail power relies on the availability of confidential information that – if selectively disclosed – cause a cost to the victim. Owning compromising information gives the potential blackmailer an asymmetric capability to obtain others' compliance: “*The victim takes no action to bring the blackmailer to justice because to do so would lead to disclose what he was anxious to avoid*” (Coase 1988: 8). Moreover, “*in the ordinary blackmail there is no end. The victim, once he succumbs to the blackmailer, remains in his grip for an indefinite period*” (Ibid.: 22).

The extensive use of classified information for blackmailing purposes was one of the cornerstones of Gelli's authority on P2 affiliates, since he received confidential files from the head of the dismantled Italian secret service SIFAR, himself a P2 member.²⁶ According to Francesco Siniscalchi, expelled from

²³La Repubblica, December 28, 1993, 2.

²⁴Consulenza, cit. 79–80.

²⁵Tribunale di Catania, trascrizione interrogatorio, January 22, 2002: 111–2.

²⁶Commissione Anselmi, relazione finale: 53.

the masonry due to a conflict with Gelli, blackmailing was quintessential to Gelli's enforcement power in various arenas:

I would say that I do not recognize a special intelligence to Gelli, but he was cunning, he had the genius of blackmail. Mr. Licio Gelli, neither colonel, nor doctor, nor accountant. . . He exercised the power to blackmail, be it of an economic, political, personal, or other nature. This was normal practice for Gelli. . . (. . .) by means of information he had at his disposal and information he could acquire, Gelli could blackmail anybody (. . .) Blackmail can take place on any subject. I repeat: there are those who give in once and from that moment on they are subjugated.²⁷

At the very moment of joining, Gelli demanded from adepts an “information fee” regarding “*eventual injustices suffered in one's career, abuses, damage suffered, and the persons, institutions or settings which can be held responsible for it*”.²⁸ Knowledge of misdeeds was a powerful resource to keep them under control. The P2 system then became akin to a peculiar *bank*. “Deposits” and “loans,” meaning credits and debts, were not simultaneous nor reciprocal – but generally deferred and indirect. Moreover, the “value” subjectively attributed to resources, demanded, or supplied, was often vague and uncertain. A strong trust in the venerable master's networking and enforcing power, corroborated by his reputation, allowed expectations and demands to remain relatively stable.

In a restricted arena of interactions where information on masonic belongings and past actions can easily circulate and be shared, defections, or unwillingness to return what agreed upon and expected, can be punished also through ostracism and reputational damage. In Operation Artemisia, the former regional councilor – chief of a spurious para-masonic entity – expresses to an interlocutor his intention not to cooperate anymore with a mason-public servant he had previously sponsored:

He's behaving. . . he's behaving badly, objectively. Because he shouldn't forget that he's there because of you. Besides, you're not a pain in the ass. On the contrary, you give too much away, and maybe that's the mistake too. [. . .] I don't make mistakes because I want to deal with people like me. So I don't make mistakes, because I am like that and. . . Eh, eh. . . and you think that people are like you. [. . .] Of course, he says, . . . when he has problems, he calls me.²⁹

As the chief Procurator of Messina³⁰ explains:

In all social circles the masonry is present. In the world of healthcare, university, lawyers . . . There is a masonic management of businesses in the city. For instance, there is a civil suit: you do the summons, then the two mason-lawyers meet outside the court and there is a masonic ruling over the case. In other words, they can decide who will win the case, as in an arbitration chamber where masonic relationships determine the outcome, not the law (. . .). Corruption is their strategy – where corruption is not the bribe, but exchange of favors, e.g., you place my son in this public office, I place your wife in that university chair. (. . .) The mafia here is mainly manpower.

Within a masonic or para-masonic structure the fulfillment of pacts and extra-legal deals can ultimately rely also on the deterrence power of formal ruling and sanctions. For instance, deterrence can be imposed through a ban, i.e., the formal expulsion or forced “put to sleep” of brothers who do not comply or satisfy masons' expectations. According to the Parliamentary Antimafia Commission (2017: 98), in a municipality close to Catania, in Sicily, a mason “*was requested by the highest-level figures in his obedience to quit running for major in the Municipality of San Giovanni La Punta, which has been dissolved two times due to mafia infiltration. (...) When he refused to abandon the electoral competition, he was 'put to sleep' by the obedience (...). The request for him to abandon the election had come from a masonic 'superior,' referent for the obedience in Calabria*”.³¹

²⁷Commissione Anselmi – Enclosed documents series I, N. 2-ter – vol. I: 457; 477–8.

²⁸Commissione Anselmi, relazione finale: 53.

²⁹Operation Artemisia, cit. 1080–1.

³⁰Interview – 6 August 2021.

³¹Commissione Parlamentare antimafia (2017). Relazione sulle infiltrazioni di Cosa nostra e della 'ndrangheta nella massoneria in Sicilia e in Calabria, Rome, December 21.

6 Activities and interactions

6.1 Institutionalized corruption: exchanges of favors and political support

Institutionalized corruption is intertwined with the creation (or reinforcement) of informal rules of behavior and (semi) occult aggregations where the real decisions are taken and exchanged, safe from prying eyes (Della Porta and Vannucci 2012). We are in the realm of corrupt practices to be intended not merely as bribery, but as a larger set of interconnected malfeasances and abuses involving public decision-making (Bardhan 1997; Fisman and Golden 2017). Politicians, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, professionals, or mafiosi who are interested in participating in corrupt exchanges must seek reliable and willing partners: “*direct inquiry can be dangerous, since potential counterparts who are not inclined to corruption may prefer to denounce the request*” (Lambsdorff 2007: 139). Such risks, however, are reduced when they can meet each other in a confidential and selective setting, “shielding” them from indiscreet attention (Nuijten and Anders 2007). One of the conditions facilitating corrupt exchanges, in fact, is the removal of *effective* decision-making from public institutional sites, where opposition parties or the public opinion could supervise and control (Pizzorno 1992). Within masonic lodges, especially in secret branches under the supervision of deviant masons, they can come to know each other, learn about reciprocal trustworthiness and availability, negotiate, and exchange promises and paybacks, acquiring the information needed to identify occasions for corruption and “corruptible” people. A venerable master may provide selective affiliation of reliable brothers; favor repeated interactions, development of solidarity and complicity bonds among members; act as enabler and third-party enforcer of their corrupt deals (Della Porta and Vannucci 1999: 165).

In 1975 a reserved internal masonic trial for corruption assured Gelli the booster to his undisputed rise in the P2. Gelli provided evidence that a brother induced him to report against the grand master of his obedience, the GOI, Lino Salvini:

When, in the name of masonry, he obtains licenses and building permits after negotiating and collecting large sums of money from both laymen and brothers (. . .); when, as a result of his involvement with the ministries of industry and agriculture and banks, he collects substantial bribes for the granting of loans.³²

After an agreement between Gelli and Salvini, the latter was acquitted, thus becoming “at disposal” and vulnerable to blackmail by the former – while the accusing brother was induced to resign.

Corrupt exchanges often provide the most direct and lucrative opportunities to convert into profit or power the network of connections, and the activities promoted by public decision-makers, within a masonic association. There are several examples – both in Italy and in other countries – of corruption schemes where official or irregular masonic networks are deemed by judges as covert and “protected” relational spaces where corrupt deals can be planned, proposed, negotiated and self-enforced (Bezlov and Gounev 2012; Della Porta and Vannucci 1999; Lalam 2012).

In the narrative about the contribution of masonry to corrupt deals it is often difficult to disentangle facts from imagination, bargaining chips, and innuendos. In other words, narratives – instrumental to processual strategies and self-legitimization processes – impact on (and construct) other’s perceived reality. For instance, a public manager evoked the alleged almighty power of masonry to convince a colleague – operating in the health system – to accept a bribe as compensation for being complacent. According to the colleague, the manager reportedly told him that “*important members of freemasonry were interested in favoring such enterprises and, through their intervention, he himself could obtain valuable support for his career*”.³³

A high-profile masonic figure can then convert personal gratitude for nominations or promotions into a “credit” or bargaining chip to be exacted and traded on different arenas, with a variety of actors. Affiliation allows entering in an arena of close-knit material and spiritual connections (a “cult”) where reciprocation of extra-legal – and occasionally illegal – favors can be normally expected, as

³²Commissione Anselmi – Enclosed documents, series II, N. 2-quarter – vol. III, tome VII-bis: 634.

³³La Repubblica, November 10, 2006.

“brotherhood” creates both personal obligation and social pressure toward compliance. As the Sicilian regional councilor involved in Operation Artemisia states:

What do brothers say? Are they favorable to this? It means that anyone would do a favor to him, first he will take care of his brothers [...] So now if there is something wrong, is it normal? Is that right? He says there’s something wrong. They’re a cult, aren’t they? Of course, a cult ... And that’s why they have the judiciary upstairs, understand? Because they favor each other. You’re not saying it’s illegal? No, but there’s something...³⁴

Reciprocity ties were also observed in the Trapani case of Iside2. In Grimaudo’s agenda were “*an impressive amount*” of notes identifying asked favors, requesting personal and institutional targets, and strategies to obtain support.³⁵ Any request was managerially “*coupled with qualified referees – members of commission, army officials, university professors, politician, judges. . .*”³⁶ Iside’s affiliates were “*often high-ranking members of public administrations (. . .) and politicians*”.³⁷ The venerable master had:

Stable and very frequent contact with public administration having different objectives: participation to public competitions in national or local administrations; transfers or promotions of civil and military public servants; university exams; judicial proceedings; applications for weapons licenses and driving licenses; subsidized loans and financing; public contracts and welfare contributions; disability pensions (. . .); medical certificates; allocation of council houses and deferment of military service; legal proceedings (civil and criminal) with indication of the person concerned, the subject, the offices, and the judges in charge.³⁸

Similarly, an entrepreneur connected to Sicilian Cosa nostra, according to the prosecutors in Operation Hiram, used “*a network of relationships and attendances*” with functionaries in the Supreme Court to monitor the progress of specific criminal procedures – and to strategically delay them: “*such relational strategy highlights an underlying and robust existing link due to the common affiliation to masonic lodges operating in the Provinces of Trapani and Agrigento*”.³⁹ A middleman had a close link with a functionary able to obtain favors from other public officials; bribes were paid to get reserved information and put criminal procedures on hold. The terms of the “corruption contract” is vividly described by the fixer in a taped conversation: “*They should delay in exchange for a payment, we agreed on this, we agreed on their remuneration and fix the timing*”⁴⁰; “*it wouldn’t be bad if he gives us some money, since we have halted [this procedure] for all this time*”.⁴¹

6.2 Dangerous liaisons: mafia connections and criminal interactions

It does not surprise that in Italy the discourse on masonic extra-legal and corrupt exchanges often intertwines with that of mafias, which are the archetype of the secret (and criminal) organization. In their century-old tradition mafia and masonry in Italy share several distinguishing features, resembling a process of organizational isomorphism: covert affiliation; esoteric and mysterious rituals; life-long bonds of mutual brotherhood (Ciconte 2015). Significantly, mafiosi were among the many actors that interacted in the P2. As Gelli’s secretary and lover explained to judges:

Gelli told me, around 1978–1979, that he often went to Sicily to meet with various people. He also told me that in Sicily he also met with mafia members. He did not name any mafiosi (. . .). He did not explain the reasons for these meetings. . . . Gelli told me that his Palermo friends protected him and Sindona. He said: ‘If I go to Sicily, my friends will protect me.’⁴²

³⁴Operation Artemisia, cit. 1083.

³⁵Tribunale di Trapani, Sentenza n.110/1993: 48–9.

³⁶Ibid., 4.

³⁷Ibid., 8–9.

³⁸Ibid., 11–12.

³⁹Operation Hiram – Tribunale di Palermo, Ordinanza di custodia cautelare, June 12, 2008: 8.

⁴⁰Ibid., 33.

⁴¹Ibid., 46.

⁴²Consulenza cit. 109–110.

Since then, numerous other judicial inquiries have shown evidence of the existence of areas of interaction, with occasional membership overlapping, between mafiosi, masons, political-institutional actors, and other white-collars, primarily entrepreneurs and lawyers (Guarino 2004; Jamieson 1994; Paoli 2003; Sergi and Sergi 2021). In 2017 the Antimafia Parliamentary Commission confirmed the nebulous nature of the Italian masonic galaxy and its persisting connections or overlapping with mafia organizations: “overall, it has been reported that approximately 150–200 associations that define themselves as having masonic nature would be active in Italy.”⁴³ In this context, 193 out of the 17,067 masons listed in the four obediences in the regions of Sicily and Calabria had judicial records for mafia-type criminal involvement:

There are numerous civil servants. The prevailing categories are those of professionals, such as lawyers, accountants, doctors, and engineers. Also present in significant numbers are people employed in the banking, pharmaceutical and health sectors, as well as entrepreneurs in various sectors, primarily construction. Likewise, there are several politicians (mayors or councilors).⁴⁴

Initiation ceremonies, rituals, and symbolic apparatuses associated with masonic affiliation can craft and fortify personal identification and solidarity bonds among members, as well reinforcing the ideal prospects and esoteric significance they are looking for. Masonic ceremonies may assume instead an altered meaning when somehow associated with an entity capable of evoking subjugation and ferocity, i.e., mafia groups. The notorious affiliation of mafiosi to masonic lodges, allowing for partial membership overlapping between the two organizations, can encourage the venerable master to adopt an effective – yet virtually costless – enforcing strategy: the symbolic appropriation of mafia rituals. The deliberate imitation of mafia rituals strengthens the expectation of obedience and compliance, since breaking the oath can be felt as particularly fearsome.

When it comes to Iside2, the mafia connection is ingrained as an “original sin” in the foundation of the lodge in Trapani. In fact, Iside2 had an “*original masonic investiture from Giuseppe Mandalari*”,⁴⁵ who had been until the 1970s the venerable master of a schismatic occult lodge in Palermo, formerly affiliated to, and then expelled from, the GOI. Mandalari was also the accountant, and the financial advisor for money laundering of Cosa nostra’s boss Totò Riina and his mafia group from Corleone. According to a collaborator, Mandalari was also “*the person to get in touch with to obtain favors in sophisticated social contexts and also for intermediation to obtain an intervention on trials, since he was friend of many judges*”.⁴⁶

In the Sicilian cities of Palermo and Trapani two venerable masters, Mandalari and Grimaudo, carried out peculiar initiations, adopting an abnormal ritual akin to the Cosa nostra one – an appropriation, which could clearly be recognized in that territory. In Iside2: “*Certain initiations started with an unusual ritual, consisting in the incision of the wrists – then superimposed to one another – and in the consequent kiss on the lips between the celebrant and the initiate. Such ritual recalls mafia initiations*”.⁴⁷ The venerable master of Iside2: “*made a small cut on his wrist and, having done the same with the wrist of the person being promoted, joined the two wrists to bring the blood of one and the other into contact, calling them ‘blood brothers’*”.⁴⁸

In masonic networks mafiosi can act as service providers or customers. As natural carriers of a reputation as “tough guys,” mafia affiliates can unintentionally generate spontaneous compliance in counterparts or intimidation. In Operation Hiram, a mason middleman bribed several functionaries of the Ministry of Justice in Rome to obtain confidential information and strategic delays of their ongoing criminal procedures – as demanded by several actors linked by masonic or Cosa nostra

⁴³See Commissione Parlamentare Antimafia, cit. 2017: 9.

⁴⁴See Commissione Parlamentare Antimafia, cit. 2017: 36–38.

⁴⁵Tribunale di Trapani, Sentenza n.110/1993: 143.

⁴⁶Commissione parlamentare antimafia, Comunicazioni del Presidente, January 17, 1995: 809–810.

⁴⁷Tribunale di Trapani, Sentenza n.110/1993: 10.

⁴⁸Consulenza cit. 80–1.

affiliations. He expresses concern in a conversation with a public servant operating in the Supreme Court in Rome:

He is the son of the “number one” in Sicily . . . no checks, they must bring cash . . . maybe they will come from Sicily . . . I must indicate the date on the checks otherwise they kill me. On Monday you cash it and I don’t bother you, maybe these guys come today from Sicily and they give me cash and I give you money back, since these are your brothers.⁴⁹

In another conversation in the same operation, the venerable master is worried for an unexpected anticipation of a judicial hearing, after the mafia boss had already paid a bribe for its delay. He then evaluates how to exploit Cosa nostra’s reputation through a “signal of dangerousness” to force reluctant functionaries to comply:

This procedure should have been extinguished, we announced a hearing on August 30 and it’s on March 29 instead. There are no saints in heaven, these are from Calstelvetro and we promised August . . . insist every day, we have to send them [the corrupt functionaries] a signal of dangerousness.⁵⁰

In Operation Halycon-Assedio, a Cosa nostra boss is looking for a link with the venerable master of a lodge in Palermo and is talking to a professional, affiliated to masonry. Pressure for compliance and cooperation is not the result of a threat of violent enforcement, but comes from the adhesion to a mechanism of selective reciprocity:

If I’m your friend, I’m your friend for better or worse, it’s not that now we’re eating I’m your friend, tomorrow when we have to go clean the toilet, I’m no longer your friend. . . no, I have to come with you to clean the toilet. . . I told him you can’t expect me to. . . If we stay together, we work together. I can add this. Gino can be useful to me for this thing. . . Giovanni can be useful for that. . . Giovanni has fun with me, because if he asks me for something, in five minutes it’s already done. . . always available.⁵¹

The mafia boss’s attempt to enter the relational arena of exchanges of favors set up and managed by the high-profile deviant mason was eventually successful. The deviant mason combined two sources of power: his public authority as bureaucrat in the energy unit in the Sicilian Region administration and the relational capital deriving – according to judges – from

A privileged network of interactions as venerable master of the lodge “Pensiero e Azione” in Palermo. He was at disposal of the mafia clan through the acquisition and transmission of confidential information on ongoing inquiries and getting members of the Cosa nostra clan of Licata in touch with professionals and public functionaries, most of them masons, to satisfy the most disparate requests concerning businesses and other patrimonial issues.⁵²

Notwithstanding the ability of mafiosi to offer services, rarely mafiosi and other criminal actors can be organically introduced into masonic-institutional arenas. As above noticed, their mere presence would in fact exponentially increase the risks of exposure for all actors involved. Sometimes they can camouflage their criminal identity, thanks to indulgent gatekeepers or figureheads. However, even at the margin of the network, mafiosi can obtain stable access to specific transactions, as providers of valuable resources – bribes, financing, electoral consent, power of intimidation etc. The search for “judicial protection,” i.e., impunity, is an existential challenge for mafiosi in troublesome illegal markets. According to an entrepreneur affiliated to Cosa nostra, during a meeting with a mason (also entrepreneur):

to show me that he knows people of a certain weight, he tells me that he belongs to the masonry in the province of Agrigento and is someone of a certain importance. (. . .) He knew from people of a certain relevance in the judiciary that we did not have to fear any raids . . . He told me that magistrates, lawyers, businessmen were

⁴⁹Operation Hiram, cit. 93.

⁵⁰Ibid.: 96.

⁵¹Operation Halycon-Assedio, Operation Halycon-Assedio Tribunale di Palermo, Sentenza n.762/21, August 24, 2021, n. 3314/20 R.G. N.R., N.4492/20 R.G.G.I.P, p. 64–65.

⁵²Ibid., 81.

participating, he didn't give me any names, he told me that he was let's say a name of prominence in that consortium... it is the intertwining of the mafia, businessmen, politicians.⁵³

Obviously, corruption may also provide them opportunities for lucrative contacts able to influence public decision-making processes – such as public contracts, concessions, licenses.

A balance of bargaining power between the mafia and the masonic entities emerged in Operation Halycon-Assedio. The venerable master “to assure his influence by favoring the *Cosa nostra* clan – expecting in exchange gifts and favors – increased respect and relational power”.⁵⁴ The mafia family, in turn, provided him with specific services, for instance an intermediation with another mafia clan he had to get in touch with for business purposes.⁵⁵ Not all mafia bosses can be taken into consideration as reliable counterparts in such “dangerous liaisons” with the “upper-world” of masons and other white-collar powerful actors. Operating as a gatekeeper, the deviant mason must be confident in the mafioso's personal qualities and trustworthiness.

7 Discussion and conclusion

The Chief Procurator of Messina⁵⁶ noticed:

We believe that something like the P2 lodge will never be found again inside [Italian] masonry. Today it is within the official lodges that covert structures are hidden. That is, you create a normal lodge, inside which you also create a deviant core. They are all freemasons, all freemasons in the daylight, but then the criminal masonic business is done in a restricted nucleus of affiliates indistinguishable from the others.

The frailty in the operation of a masonic-centralized apparatus like the P2 in the enforcement of illegal deals becomes a “lesson” for Italian wannabe deviant masons, also for the approval of the Anselmi law. Notwithstanding the legislative turn, the willingness, and the need of several powerful actors (including mafiosi) to find a “protected space” of extra-legal exchange did not fade, as shown by the case-studies examined. Depending on contextual conditions, masonic (or para-masonic) structures provided a fertile relational infrastructure for political-institutional actors where various governance structures regulating the interplay of reciprocal demands and expectations spontaneously emerged or were deliberately enabled and enforced by deviant masons.

Masonic-institutional networks, in their ideal-typical connotation, can be conceived as a structured arena for extra-legal deals, centered around resources allocated through political or bureaucratic roles. The leading figure – often a politician or a bureaucrat himself, or a venerable master with strong institutional protection – is the gatekeeper, socializing agent, often also the guarantor and enforcer. Such figure ensures the application of self-enforcing norms of widened and deferred reciprocity in extra-legal (or illegal) deals observed by a series of white-collar and powerful actors. In the masonic networks we examined the corresponding enforcement mechanisms provided a stratified and geometry-variable configuration of informal institutions, regulating extra-legal deals through “internal sanctions,” self-protection, social pressure and ostracism, information sharing and reputational costs, third party enforcement.

Various actors interact under the umbrella of masonic or para-masonic entities, committing to a variety of fruitful exchanges. From generic exchanges of favors to appointments and careers in the public sector, from votes (i.e., electoral corruption) to other forms of bribery – exchanges are the most varied. Selectiveness of recruitment among white collars is a direct consequence of the considerable fees required for access and upgrade: “*Membership had a high cost. Every step up in rank had a cost*”.⁵⁷ Such payments, however, are not a mere charge; more realistically they are conceived as an investment with expected medium and long-term returns. This is the synthetic description provided by a high-profile

⁵³Hiram trial, hearing October 24, 2009, cit.

⁵⁴Operation Halycon-Assedio, cit.16.

⁵⁵Ibid., 41.

⁵⁶Interview, 6 August 2021.

⁵⁷Spinello Trial, hearings, in <https://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/278755/processo-spinello-ed-altri-inchiesta-su-massoneria>.

mason of the activity of a venerable master in Catania: *“he used the Athena lodge as a chamber of compensation to create hidden opportunities of connection among mafia, institutions, business, and the judiciary as well, if we can consider true the efforts he made to introduce in the masonry two judges”*.⁵⁸

To conclude, a masonic network overlapping with political-institutional roles can provide an adaptable and evolving social architecture of interactions: inclusion is selective and uncertainty in the participation to informal or illegal deals is reduced. In other words, it can be conceived as a specific and contingent configuration of the so-called *gray area*, as Sciarrone (2012: 60) describes it:

The opaque space between the legal and the illegal sphere, where (. . .) there are several actors with heterogeneous roles and interests, like politicians, businessmen, professionals, civil servants and so on. The mafia does not always nor necessarily occupy a dominant position, but among the different actors it establishes mutually beneficial exchanges. These agreements, based on positive-sum games, give rise to various forms of alliance and networks of relationships.

The shifting and permeable boundaries of the gray area of extra-legal deals here tend to overlap with the formal organizational perimeter of a masonic association, or with the shadier relational texture of a spurious para-masonic entity. It is social arena regulated by informal institutions, where shared values and norms of expanded reciprocity emerge and are socially enforced to sustain mutually beneficial interactions (Sciarrone 2011; Sciarrone and Storti, 2016). Mutual recognition of actors' involvement – also codified in the masonry rituals – guarantees the generation and reproduction of trustworthiness in deferred and indirect transactions. This social infrastructure is then capable to sustain circularity of the exchanges of resources and the reciprocation of obligations, allowing powerful white-collar actors to pursue their distinct, but often complementary, goals. In this arena of relations and businesses potentially enabling crimes of the powerful (Ruggiero 2021), mafiosi can enter with different roles, but not always and not necessarily in a dominant position; for sure, they are not the only ones who can exhibit skills of illegality.

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⁵⁸Tribunale di Catania, trascrizione interrogatorio, cit. 116.

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