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ORIGINAL PAPER

Intergenerational and technological changes in mafia-type groups: a transcultural research agenda to study the 'ndrangheta and its mobility

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Abstract

Mafia-type groups are increasingly mobile in their structures and in their activities. We propose here to revive cultural studies on mafias and organised crime by critically introducing insights from research on transculturation into mafia mobility studies. Transculturation helps understand how cultures stratify and engage with existing power imbalances in the host countries, within migration setting. We argue that transcultural transformations—primarily in the field of technology and intergenerational changes—have the potential to influence the resilience of mafia groups abroad. With the case of the 'ndrangheta in mind—and using preliminary data from Operation Eureka (2023) to support our argument—we set a research agenda for three sub-themes of critical social science research into transculturation and mobility of mafia-type organised crime. This research agenda is adequate to study the mobility of mafia-groups, but will have the potential to influence research on mafias more generally.

Introduction

Mafia groups are forms of organised crime whose aim is not only to accumulate money, but also to engage with the political, economic, and social institutions of the communities in which they live (Gambetta 1993; Sergi 2017). The 'ndrangheta—the mafia-type organisation originally from Calabria, in the South of Italy—has engaged for decades in control of territory, political influence and even relationships with elites and institutions (Sergi and Vannucci 2023). This has

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been facilitated by its organisational setting, made of dynasties on the one hand—multi-generational families where family business overlaps with criminal business (Sergi 2021)—and horizontal power sharing modus operandi, on the other hand (Catino 2019). At the local level, the 'ndrangheta's intergenerational transformations have been analysed from perspectives that often assess the impact of social policy on children and on career criminal families (Di Bella 2016; Sergi 2018). But the aspect of intergenerational crime is significant also when the mafia 'moves' as mafia groups also exploit family lineages and ties with the diaspora (Sciarrone 2021; Sergi 2022a). As the case of the 'ndrangheta has evidenced, mafia groups outside their places of origin can disrupt the lives of ethnic and minority groups that often end up being 'labelled' as part of the organised crime problem (Luconi 2007; Lupo 2009).

It is thus crucial not to forget that criminal groups are a product of both local and global complexity and are indeed a product of globalised capitalism (Ruggiero 2013); they adapt to rapid changes in the economy and governance mechanisms around the world, as much as they exploit their roots, culture, and personal connections. Among the rapid changes that transnational organised crime groups had to adapt to is technological change. For organised crime groups, including mafias, technology has meant diversification of activities, for example in the field of cybercrime (Lavorgna 2015; Nicaso and Danesi 2023) as well as amplification of frequency and reach of their activities (Lavorgna 2020; Di Nicola 2022), which have enabled, among other things, continuance and resilience of the groups.

The first objective of this paper is to reflect upon the impacts and manifestation of transformation on mobile, intergenerational, and transnational 'ndrangheta dynasties. Among these transformations we wish to focus primarily on technological communication, such as Internet-based chat or telephony, mobile phones, and interactive online social networks. Technological communication has a crucial role in the way we experience global mobility and processes of cultural change (Banerjee and German 2010). The second objective of this paper, in fact, is to frame this reflection within a *(trans)cultural* approach rooted in migration studies to complement mafia mobility studies. The relationship between migration, the construct of transculturation, and technology is in fact well established in cultural studies (German and Banerjee 2011). In this paper we are engaging in a theoretical exercise to set a research agenda, thus we are not driven by empirical research questions, but we aim to offer insights to build new research puzzles. We will, however, refer to a small selection of documentary data—from the judicial data of Italian authorities for Operation Eureka[1]—, analysed for content, to sustain our arguments via some exploratory empirical examples.

[1] Tribunale di Reggio Calabria N. 5208/2022 N. 3223/2022 N. 42/2022 R.G.N.R. D.D.A. R. G.I.P. D.D.A. R. O.C.C. + Tribunale di Reggio Calabria N. 4837/2022 R.G.N.R. D.D.A. N. 304 Y2022 R.G.I.P. D~D.A. N. 39+45/2022 R. O.C.C+Tribunale di Reggio Calabria Proc. n. 4612/2022 R.G.N.R. l Mod. 21 D.D.A Proc. n. 285,712,022 R. GIP DDA N. 37/2022 OCC DDA+Tribunale di Reggio Calabria Proc. n. 3886/2022 R. G. N. R. DDA Proc. n. 2520/2022 Reg. G. L P. DDA/2022 R. O. C. C. 44/2022 R. O. C. C. 4/202S R. O. C. C. + Tribunale di Milano N. 3t253/2020 mod 2t N. t9220/2020 RG GIP.

Rationale and methods

As said, the main objective of this paper is to frame mafia mobility studies within transculturation approaches. The proposal of a research agenda is the core element of this paper. To facilitate this exploration, we chose to focus specifically on intergenerational and technological changes occurring within diasporas, as these are themes that transcultural approaches have focused on specifically. With this contribution, we will advance several avenues to design new research questions within our proposed framework. To do so, we use data extracted from a recent, major international law enforcement operation purposedly selected as a useful example to illustrate our main argument.

In 2023, Operation Eureka[2] was carried out by Europol and Eurojust in coordination and cooperation with ten EU member states. From the investigations, it emerged how encrypted communication was crucial for the international drug-trafficking activities carried out by criminal groups both in countries with large Calabrian diasporas and in others. These groups were clans of the 'ndrangheta and they were not like other criminal groups engaged in drug trade: they were indeed 'ndrangheta *dynasties*, in some cases very prominent ones. We conducted a preliminary thematic analysis of five documents for a total of 3786 pages. This involved reading the documents through searches of keywords related to technology, internet, online, use of cryptophones. These documents contain transcripts of intercepted conversation and surveillance tapes; they offer several snapshots of real-life into the 'ndrangheta clans, which can help us exemplify our theoretical standpoints. This preliminary analysis is not aiming at providing empirical evidence for this paper based on the traditional format of academic empirical contributions: rather, this paper offers a theoretical contribution.

The rationale for proposing such a study this way is the realisation that despite emerging empirical evidence on the use of technology as a crime facilitator by mafia-type organised crime, the study of how technological communication changes intergenerational 'ndrangheta clans, especially the dynasties, has not yet been approached. On the contrary, scholarly literature has noted how mafias—notoriously conservative actors—are not always engaging with sophisticated technologies directly (Lavorgna and Sergi 2014; Lavorgna 2020; Musotto and Wall 2022).

As we will argue in this paper, a focus on the use of technology by 'ndrangheta clans needs to consider intergenerational and cultural changes both home and abroad: technology has effectively changed global mobility and processes of cultural change across diasporas; this means that any cultural change across intergenerational migrant families involves technological changes (Banerjee and German 2010). 'Ndrangheta groups—like other criminal networks working cross border—are not just mobile, they are ubiquitous, thus their changes in one place might affect the groups else-

[2] See https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/132-ndrangheta-mafia-members-arrested-after-investigation-belgium-italy-and-germany. Operation Eureka was a coordinated effort across ten European countries: Italy, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, France, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, and also Brazil and Panama. The coordination between Europol and Eurojust brought to the arrest of 132 people believed to be associated to the 'ndrangheta clans from the town of San Luca, in the province of Reggio Calabria. It was described as the 'largest-ever coordinated hit against Italian organised crime'.

where too. Notwithstanding the obvious relevance of transnational cultural changes for mobility of people and goods, and for rethinking of mobility and migration studies (Boccagni 2012), organised crime or mafia groups that cross borders or settle abroad are virtually never studied in their complex (trans)cultural dimensions. Indeed, although in the public sphere institutions and law enforcement agencies are quick to link the existence of 'ethnic' organised crime with migrant communities, the relationships between these groups and their cultures (including migrant cultures) are seldom explored. This is due to the conceptual complexity associated with the study of mafias and organised crime within cultural contexts (Sergi 2022a). When organised crime is approached as a (sub)culture, there is a risk of discriminating against entire communities (Santoro 2000; Eski and Sergi 2023). However, it is impossible to deny that cultural transformations are taking place also in cross-border organised crime, and especially in the phenomenon of 'ndrangheta—Italy's most transnational and glocal mafia (Sergi and Lavorgna 2016). Consequently, it is necessary to engage with cultural studies that impact both migration flows and intergenerational relations, especially within families who are/were part of the diaspora.

Intergenerational changes, technological evolution and the actions of law enforcement agencies all influence the ways in which criminal groups, including 'ndrangheta clans, pursue their business across borders, as well as their resilience abroad (Sergi 2024a, b). At the same time, these variables have contributed to cultural transformations within (Italian/Calabrian) communities, both at home and when 'travelling'. These cultural transformations could also influence the resilience of mafia groups.

This study, therefore, proposes a transcultural framework to approach to mafia mobility, specifically focusing on the Calabrian 'ndrangheta as the most mobile of Italian mafias, and the impact that technological advancement has on its structures home and abroad, as well as on its cross-border activities. This approach—based on the idea that cultures stratify and coexist within individuals and collectives (Ortiz 2004)—helps us to study social changes (and specifically intergenerational and technological transformations) as an integral part of the changes within the 'ndrangheta dynasties at home and cross-border.

This paper will now turn to sketch our theoretical background that derives insights from—and contributes to—mafia studies and mafia mobility studies, specifically centred on the 'ndrangheta; and studies on the interlink between technology, organised crime, and mafias. This background will be the basis for advancing our theoretical framework and research agenda for a transcultural approach to mafias and their mobility; the research agenda will allow us to propose some guidance for possible research questions, to be further refined and methodologically designed in further empirical research.

Theoretical background

Mafia and 'ndrangheta

The term 'mafia' is used by social scientists to indicate a qualified form of organised crime. Besides committing serious, violent, and otherwise 'organised' crimi-

nal activities, mafia groups are typically backed by social prestige and are usually accepted and/or tolerated by their own communities while they try to consolidate some form of economic or political power (Gambetta 1993; Sergi 2017). Certainly, mafia groups represent the prototypical criminal structures that enters the legal world of politics and finance from the illegal world (Paoli 2008). On the other hand, mafia clans are also social forces, with the capacity to manage social capital and realise strategic objectives (Sciarrone 1998). The conceptualisation of mafias is constantly evolving. For instance, in Italy, current debates on mafias have related to contemporary manifestations of mafia power in territories far from Southern Italy (Sciarrone 2021; Dagnes et al. 2020).

Three main aspects can be identified for a contemporary conceptualisation of mafias in consideration of their intergenerational evolution, which are also relevant for foreign scenarios. Above all, it should be made clear that groups with these traits do not necessarily have to be Italian. In fact, since mafia is (also) a method, criminal groups anywhere in the world can behave as mafia groups according to these canons (Sergi 2017); culture, including criminal or deviant culture, is not linked to ethnic traits, and it is certainly not deterministic.

1. Mafias are illicit associations with their own criminal identity. Through this identity they seek to gain power by infiltrating the legal world (Paoli 2004).
2. The identity of mafias is based on the reputation of clans and affiliates, i.e. on the actual or potential use of intimidation and violence, the ability to interact with political and financial elites, and the ability to effectively participate in criminal markets. Reputation is built and maintained through the exploitation of a set of behaviours of the culture of origin (Sergi and Vannucci 2023) and can be also linked to family 'names/surnames' (Sergi 2018).
3. The more clans enjoy the reputation of their 'brand', the more the brand generates intimidation. By relying on the power of their brand, clans can establish themselves as 'trustworthy' criminal actors and at the same time instil fear and *omertà* in the communities in which they live (Gambetta 2000).

The origins of the Calabrian mafia, the 'ndrangheta, are lost in the history of Calabria, one of the most historically complex Italian regions from a socio-evolutionary point of view. From an analytical point of view, today the term 'ndrangheta has two meanings (Sergi and Sergi 2021). The first meaning refers to the mafia-type organisation present in the southern part of Calabria, which originated and developed in the province of Reggio Calabria. This criminal organisation has a tendency towards a unitary structure strengthened both by coordination mechanisms between family clans ('ndrine) and by hierarchies of members, as judicially established by Operation Crime in 2011 and its trial concluded in 2016 (Sergi 2023). The 'ndrangheta bases its power and influence on the control of the territory (Ciconte 2019). It is Calabria, and the link with Calabria, even from abroad, that is considered the essence, the core, and the strength of the group (Sergi and Lavorgna 2016).

A second way to look at the 'ndrangheta is more nuanced than the organisational perspective and refers to a 'way of being' of the clans in general (in Calabria as elsewhere) that concerns the structure of the families and the attitudes and values that

most clans share in the Calabria region. For instance, all 'ndrangheta groups have a clan structure, based on family lines and surnames rather than territories (Ciconte 2019). The clans sustain their criminal activities by exploiting the customs and cultural values shared by Calabria using arrogance, intimidation, violence and submission, while engaging in illegal activities for profit. In this second meaning, therefore, the word 'ndrangheta refers to the series of conducts that characterise the Calabrian mafia (so-called '*ndranghetism*) (Sergi and Lavorgna 2016). The word 'mafia' refers to a set of behaviours of criminal groups in Sicily that led to the interpretation of the Sicilian Cosa nostra as a subculture (Hess 1998). In contrast to purely cultural approaches, however, we wish to emphasise that not only do the two meanings of the word 'ndrangheta go together, but certainly the spread and evolution of any mafia phenomenon also depend largely on the ability of mafia groups to build and exploit social capital (Sciarrone 1998); the structural vulnerabilities and weaknesses in capitalist societies (Mattina 2011; Ruggiero 2013); and the impact of these weaknesses on the social and cultural values of communities (Sergi 2022a).

Mafia mobility

The presence of 'ndrangheta clans today has been ascertained and reported in northern Italy, in European countries as well as in the USA, Latin America, Australia, and Canada (Calderoni et al. 2016; Dagnes et al. 2019; Sergi 2022a; Sergi and Rizzuti 2023). A process of *'ndranghetisation* sees convergence of behaviour, isomorphism as well as imitation, observed for Calabrian criminal groups or with which Calabrian associates collaborate (Sergi 2022a). Outside Calabria, criminal groups with Calabrian links can benefit from the growing reputation of the 'ndrangheta (as a brand) and the oligopolistic control in which 'ndrangheta clans participate, especially for cocaine trafficking in Europe (Rizzuti and Sergi 2021).

'Ndrangheta clans do not behave in the same way in all these countries: for example, in Australia the activities of the 'ndrangheta have ranged from cannabis production and cocaine importation to money laundering and real estate infiltration (Sergi 2024a, b). In Canada, new and old clans of the 'ndrangheta have engaged with both drug importation and money laundering (Sergi 2022a). Germany and Switzerland, the two European countries where the 'ndrangheta's presence is considered more stable, are largely countries where cocaine trade as well as infiltration in various economic sectors is connected to the clans (Rizzuti and Sergi 2021; Sciarrone and Storti 2014). All these manifestations of 'ndrangheta mobility have different historical stratifications. Indeed, whilst Australian and Canadian Calabrian/Italian diasporas (including mafias') have reached the third or fourth generations, the European ones are less 'advanced' in terms of their intergenerational evolution. This poses interesting questions for transcultural studies too. On the one hand, the intent of this paper is to suggest a transcultural framework to mafia-type organisations in countries where diasporas (in our case of Calabrians) have settled. On the other hand, as said, 'ndrangheta clans are criminally active (in a paradigm of delocalised activities such as, mainly, drugs and money laundering) in countries without much engagement with their 'original' diaspora (e.g., Argentina) or where a diaspora is not present (e.g., the UK) (Varese 2011a, b; Rizzuti and Sergi 2021). These cases are also interesting for a

perspective that wishes to look at intergenerational evolution of the 'ndrangheta and what such evolution shares with the original communities at home, in addition to the migrant communities.

Studies on mafia mobility have focused on the activities and structures of criminal groups and networks, following what is essentially a spectrum of manifestations ranging from the *delocalisation of* criminal activities (where groups carry out all or part of their criminal activities elsewhere/abroad/cross-border) to the *colonisation of* territories (where groups replicate abroad criminal structures like those of origin) and their variants in between (Sciarrone and Storti 2014).

Recent studies have looked at mafia mobility in different territories as the result of a complex interaction of different dynamics, which has been termed 'conditioned opportunism' (Rizzuti and Sergi 2021). Mobility is in fact conditioned by *push* and *pull* factors (Morselli et al. 2011), of repulsion and attraction. Among the factors that can incentivise mafia mobility surely there are criminal policies and procedures from both host and destination countries, which will lead to functional diversification of mafias abroad depending on what factors contributed to the mobility in the first place (Campana 2011).

Fundamental to the critical development of mafia mobility research is, on the one hand, the analysis of the heterogeneity of groups, that is the differential capacity of actors within structural social factors, which obviously also complicate opportunistic dynamics. On the other hand, mafia mobility can be studied in consideration of the proximity of the territory (Varese 2011a). Certainly, a contiguous and therefore easily accessible territory poses very different characteristics, opportunities and risks compared to a non-contiguous territory. Therefore, both the characteristics of the groups and the characteristics and contexts of the places of origin and destination countries must be considered, including policing approaches to 'ethnic' organised crime (Sergi 2017). Indeed, '*behind all different perceptions lies the social reaction of the police*, *whose investigations have framed the Italian mafias*' (Savona 2013: 8): there is a correspondence between the institutional perception of organised crime and its criminalisation, and thus its counteraction (Sergi 2017).

In this regard, some scholars have pointed out how attributing organised crime to an immigrant group can trigger the so-called 'ethnic trap', the belief that 'ethnic' origin and belonging is a determining factor in organised crime (Morselli et al. 2011; Eski and Sergi 2023). This often represents an attempt by the host society to preserve an ideal of itself as virtuous and not 'polluted' by crime (Luconi 2007). The ethnic (mis)character of 'Italian' mafias is obvious, as an Italian mafia does not exist, but rather various regional mafias do. The confusion between ethnicity and nationality mirrors in the confusion between ethnicity and culture as well (Sergi 2022a, b). In this sense, a critical cultural approach to criminal groups that looks at their intergenerational and technological transformations also facilitates the understanding of mobility, and the use groups might do of 'culture', if any.

In a recent study on the 'ndrangheta in Australia, Sergi (2024a, b) explores a typology with four case studies of ideal-typical mafia families to investigate the interlink between their diversification, and their 'criminal' recognition and reputation down under. Among other things, that paper interrogates whether 'ndrangheta families in Australia have evolved in line or in deviance from common Calabrian migration

experiences. Despite a cultural approach not being the main aim of this paper, Sergi (2024a, b) refers to *transcultural* practices and trends in Calabrian migrants today in Australia to frame migrant mafia families' diversification, and 'ndrangheta families among them, with specific reference to intergenerational changes. This is done precisely to move beyond sterile and static discourses on ethnicity and to account for external factors, such as technological advancements.

Technology, organised crime and mafias

The nexus between organised crime and technological change has received limited, yet increasing, attention since the early 2000s, especially after the commercialization of the internet and the emergence of the Web 2.0. In this context, there was a general assumption by scholars, practitioners, and policy makers alike that new information and communication technologies were offering novel and exciting criminogenic opportunities to organised crime, including mafias (Bequai 2001; Britz 2008). Indeed, both in professional and academic literature, forms of co-offending at the basis of serious cybercrimes started to be described as new manifestations of organised crime, by embracing a very broad definition of what 'organised crime' is (Choo and Smith 2007; McGuire 2012) or even by explicitly recognising that the organised crime label should be used in a more fluid way in this context to account for the specificities of technology-enabled or facilitated crime (Di Nicola 2022). For instance, the emerging concept of 'cyber organised crime' entered the professional jargon to stress certain security threats as they 'ought to be' organised crime (Lavorgna 2016; Lavorgna and Sergi 2016).

Existing empirical evidence suggests that most criminal groups operating online are formed of relatively loose and transient networks of relationships (Wall 2014; Lavorgna 2020; Lusthaus and Varese 2021). Hence, we should be careful in assuming a general presence of organised crime groups in the cyberspace, and in conflating distinct phenomena (i.e., non-organised actors carrying out serious forms of online crimes, new forms of organised crime groups operating online, and 'traditional' organised crime groups, such as mafias, that are also engaging in forms of cybercrime). Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that technological advancement has played and still plays an important role in the organisation and activities of organised crime groups, including mafia-type groups.

For the scope of this contribution, it is important to note how mafias use new and emerging technologies with both enabling and performative functions, even if to different extents (Lavorgna 2015). Unsurprisingly, many benefits of new information and communication technologies are not lost on mafias, as they provide them with enhanced communication tools that can better operate internationally and (apparently) provide more security and anonymity. Consider, for instance, the *enabling* function of encrypted apps that, at surface level, would provide protection against law enforcement surveillance and detection. The ANOM sting operation offers an exemplar case: after other encrypted platforms were taken down by law enforcement, leaving criminal networks in need of new secure ways of communications, the FBI set up in 2018 an encrypted device company (ANOM) and advertised it among the criminal underworld. More than 12,000 ANOM encrypted devices and services were sold to more than 300 criminal syndicates (including mafia groups) operating in

more than 100 countries. In 2021, during a worldwide two-day takedown more than 800 suspected criminals were arrested, and eight tonnes of cocaine and over $48 million in several currencies and cryptocurrencies were seized (US Department of Justice 2021; see also Soudijn et al. 2022). Interestingly, while the older generations of mafia associates seemed to be generally suspicious of these uses of new technologies, reportedly being sensitive to their risks and comfortable with the more traditional ways, as new generations are taking power the situation is slowly changing also in those criminal organisations, such as 'ndrangheta clans, that still heavily cling to traditions (Lavorgna 2015; Nicaso and Danesi 2023).

Technological innovations also offer *performative* opportunities, which are mainly linked to mafia members' presence on social media—primarily with reference with Italian camorra groups (Ravveduto 2019). This online presence can serve various purposes, ranging from being an act of vainglory to the careful curation of a personal identity, from being an instrument for growing a criminal brand to serve as a recruitment tool targeting the younger generations. As such, lavish lifestyles and bravado messages alongside ominous threats are displayed on a range of social media platforms (Garcia 2020; Nicaso and Danesi 2023; Serhal et al. 2023). While social media presence of mafia members is generally referred to digital natives, it is worth noting that, depending on the platform used, the performative use of social media can cut across generations, as exemplified in the cases of middle-aged 'ndrangheta bosses Vincenzo Torcasio and Pasquale Manfredi, whose extensive presence on Facebook eased law enforcement monitoring, leading to their arrest in recent years (Nicaso and Danesi 2023).

Overall, technological advancements do affect mostly mafia *activities* but to a certain extent, also mafia *structures*: this means that understanding the interlocking nature between intergenerational and technological changes for mafia activities can shed light on structures, nationally and cross-border.

Theoretical framework: for a transcultural approach to mafia mobility

As mentioned, law enforcement agencies around the world consider the 'ndrangheta the richest and most internationalised mafia from Italy, with a strong presence throughout Europe and beyond, particularly in North America and Australia (Sergi and Lavorgna 2016; Sergi 2022a). Research to date has confirmed how the success of the 'ndrangheta—apart from structural factors of economic policy—depends on two factors: the exploitation of social and cultural ties with the Calabrian diaspora (Sergi 2022a, 2024a, b; Moxon 2024); and the use of business models based on family dynasties that are adapted to various international and cross-border contexts (Sergi 2021). This organisational conformation creates quite a few problems from a contrasting point of view, especially abroad (Paoli 2020).

Law enforcement agencies and politicians, especially abroad, are often erroneously led to conclude that migrants from Calabria may be forced to take part, or take part voluntarily, in the activities of the 'ndrangheta, precisely because of the value of family ties in the criminal organisation (Sergi and Lavorgna 2016). Research on the

links between 'ethnic' minorities, migration and crime has already partially refuted these claims (Morselli et al. 2011; Sergi 2024a). Indeed, although most 'ndrangheta clans operate within Calabrian (family) ties, their success is linked to their activities and networks outside their families, including technological support as well as collusion capacities with white collars. However, it is not enough to state that there are also other reasons for the success and longevity of criminal organisations, and especially of mafia groups such as the 'ndrangheta. Research must explore how and to what extent Calabrian ties and values can be exploited to serve the interests of 'ndrangheta clans abroad, and to what extent technology plays a role in bridging generations as well as criminal activities. It is necessary to distinguish between culture, 'migrant' culture, and any deviation from (these) cultures in specific contexts, to confirm that migration, crime, culture and 'ethnicity' are not deterministically connected, and yet they create interesting social phenomena to observe.

Intergenerational changes (e.g., education, professionalisation), consolidated also through technological transformations and, obviously, the actions of law enforcement agencies, can all influence the way 'ndrangheta clans pursue their business at home and abroad, and their resilience in communities abroad. Moreover, these variables contribute to cultural transformations within communities and trigger processes of *transculturation* abroad. Transculturation, therefore, could also influence the resilience of the mafia, understood as yet another form of 'deviance' from traditional (transcultural and migrant) identities.

Transculturation scrutinises migrant culture by considering cultural change beyond the rigid assumption of migrants' gradual acculturation into the host society. Transcultural studies originated from the work of Ortiz (2004) in Cuba and evolved into a set of theories and methodologies that help us understand two fundamental characteristics of culture. The first is that every culture is itself transcultural: it results from intimate and public encounters, clashes, negotiations, and mutual influences with other cultures; there is no such thing as a 'fixed' or 'pure' culture. The second is the centrality of power in processes of deculturation and acculturation, but also in processes of cultural and linguistic resistance and negotiation. In this latter meaning, the process of transculturation highlights power asymmetries, specifically how power relations among cultures are a primary basis for categorising acts of cultural appropriation, change, and resistance (Rogers 2006).

Individuals negotiate transcultural processes and practices through which, over time, they transform their culture of origin (if they migrated) and the cultures with which they interact. In this sense, research on Italians in Australia (Ricatti 2018) has already shown how transculturation processes in Australia are in line with both characteristics of transculturation. The focus on power relations and the tension between cultural *resistance* and cultural *negotiation* make transcultural approaches particularly relevant to the study of organised crime and mafias in multicultural contexts and specifically for the perspective of intergenerational changes linked to technology. In fact, diasporas are heavily affected by transformations in technology (Banerjee and German 2010): technology changes the lived experience of interconnected and digital diasporas thus directly affecting their intergenerational changes across countries.

These considerations do not just apply to the 'ndrangheta as a mobile mafia. In fact, we can also refer to other mafia-type groups when their social groups of origin

are able to migrate. For instance, this is the case of certain groups of Albanian origin, from the Balkans to the United States (Arsovska 2016), when we consider the difficulties of law enforcement agencies in understanding how the new generations abroad use certain codes of behaviour typical of the culture of origin but adapted to the culture of 'arrival' and to new technological tools. Furthermore, in research carried out in Germany on the so-called 'Arab clans', we see how marginalisation, exclusion, and prejudice are substantially linked to the intergenerational evolution of the migrant communities that are stereotypically associated with 'clan crime' (Jaraba 2023). Whilst public debate and policing actors tend to see these groups as criminal 'families', the reality of their operations, including their engagement in crime, is far less homogenous and organised than widely believed. Critical social research on these issues can argue that to understand why crime remains a trait of these social groups, and why these groups generation after generation still engage in some form of deviant activities, one must confront their cultural elements. Transculturation, in this respect, can shed light on the aspects of migration that usually do not make it into the mainstream discourse: by focusing on power imbalances and on social asymmetries as key drivers of cultural change and resistance, we can see not just the continuity in these criminal groups, but also understand how conflicts, rivalries and eventually even desistance within these groups can bring about intergenerational changes, as already observed, for example, in the so-called 'Arab clans' in Germany (Jaraba 2023).

We move now to explore different ways in which the transculturation construct and related research approaches can be used to research the 'ndrangheta in its mobility. Crucially, transculturation is a versatile and dynamic construct, which cannot be easily operationalised. It can be assessed in different contexts with attention to its qualifying criteria of how cross-cultural adaptation and hybridisation take place when two or more culture meet (Ortiz 2004). The research agenda below will introduce some generic questions that can be teased out from applying our transcultural framework to the 'ndrangheta mobility: these questions, for anyone who wants to pursue them, will need to be incorporated in a carefully planned research design.

A transcultural research agenda on intergenerational and technological transformations in the 'ndrangheta cross-border

Critical social research can question the transcultural nature of mafia groups and especially families, as embedded in migrant cultures and diasporic communities and within multicultural societies. Critical social research pivoting on transculturation can investigate how 'ndrangheta dynasties negotiate and perpetuate their behaviours and values, also thanks to technological transformations. Interesting would also to see to what extent technology is ubiquitous in 'ndrangheta's intergenerational changes in different markets of choices.

For example, when 'ndrangheta families are involved in large-scale international illicit trades, such as cocaine, their use of technology is necessary to 'keep up' with the rules of the market and to navigate the uncertainty of the cross-border trade (Moyle et al. 2019). At the same time, technology, for the same families, is relevant to keep in

contact with relatives abroad and to maintain their power structure. Nevertheless, we are here talking about two different kinds of technological usage: the former, which is specific to the market and thus specialist (e.g., the use of encrypted apps), and the latter, which is part of the normal migrant experience of creating transnational bridges between homeland and diasporas (Panagakos and Horst 2006).

Within transculturation studies, we can identify (at least) three themes that could help us explore intergenerational and technological evolution in mafia-type organised crime groups: how tradition can be maintained while embracing innovation; how global and local dynamics change groups' structures and behaviours; and how struggles for power and drives of informality create room for flexibility and deviance from mainstream (Ricatti 2018; German and Banerjee 2011; Bhattacharjee 2015). Clearly, we are here in the domain of risk: mafia organisations, in their mobility, face several risks, oftentimes decisive for the survival of the organisation itself (Varese 2011b; Catino 2019): a transcultural lens to these aspects can help us understand some of these risks and possible outcomes.

We now turn to explore these three themes, developed below with (possible) research questions related to the 'ndrangheta mobility and their intergenerational changes through technology.

Maintaining tradition while embracing innovation

Research questions, to be empirically investigated through a carefully designed methodology, could be:

a. Is transculturation a risk for mafia organisations as they balance both secretive and conservative drives while also striving to be innovative in different territories?
b. How do mafia organisations recognise and manage the risks of their affiliates engaging with new technologies when that may compromise both their secretive and conservative tendencies, and their needs for ad-hoc visibility and innovation?

The 'ndrangheta is known for its attachment to traditional values and rituals and its conservative mannerism, but at the same time for its innovative approaches to 'corporate' (criminal) strategies, maintaining social and territorial control and creating cross-border networks and opportunities (Sergi 2021). The process of transculturation implies a regenerative use of deeply rooted cultural and linguistic characteristics through encounters and clashes with other cultures and languages (Ricatti 2018). In this sense, transculturation allows us to explore how cultural innovation is possible while maintaining one's own culture; or more specifically, as already theorised (Ricatti 2018), how a relative degree of cultural rigidity within migrant and mobile communities can facilitate, rather than hinder, effective processes of cultural negotiation with the wider, external society. Indeed, in a dogmatic a culture or subculture milieu, some individuals might choose to 'escape' and deviate finding connections with other cultures. This may help to explain both entrepreneurial choices and intergenerational transformations in the 'ndrangheta in correspondence with changes such as those brought by technology.

Many 'ndrangheta families, when they trade or move abroad, maintain their connections to the homeland, exploiting what anthropologists have called 'double villages' (Teti 2015) or 'Alter Ego villages' (Marino 2020)—i.e., communities that exist in synchrony, connecting those who stayed back with those who migrated from the same place, both unable to survive without the other. These phenomena are typically interpreted by scholars as resistance to *acculturation* into the wider foreign society; they can also be understood as means of *negotiation* with an otherwise dominant culture—that is, informing more balanced and reciprocal cultural and social exchanges with the dominant culture, within a social system that would otherwise marginalise and exploit them (Le Brun-Ricalens 2019).

Younger members of the 'ndrangheta can embrace technology as a necessary tool for innovation to remain in business. To exemplify, in operation Eureka we see how F. Giorgi (born in 1997), talking to an associate in Germany, reveals how he oversees buying and selling of cryptophones (running on Sky ECC platform), as a functional way to manage drug trafficking activities:

> Bro', listen to me, not just because I sell the Sky phones, but figure it out, with what phones have we carried out the job? How did we move all the stuff until this morning? All those who came to pick up, did you do that? All of them with Sky…so what does that mean? I say that Sky has been tested and I only see business[3]

Not only Giorgi embraces the technology, but he is the one running it, showing not a passive adaptation to the rules of the game but rather a proactive, innovative, stance, which at the same time shows how to maintain tradition, in the form of leadership (known to other members of his criminal family) whilst embracing innovation.

Conversely, apical and older 'ndranghetisti are aware of the risks of technology and while overall endorsing and using it, they would like to resist to it. In the following snippet, for instance, C. Morabito (born in 1983) is explaining to an associate, back in Calabria, how it's best to use the Sky ECC phone. In particular he advises: '*you have to take off the sim card and use the Wi-Fi*' especially if you are in Italy and not abroad, otherwise '*in one second*, *they [law enforcement] know everything*, *the more we use the technology to run our tickets [shipments*, *jobs]*, *the more they will know about it… they have the technology too now. We should go back to how we used to do it before*, *everything last minute*'.[4] In this case, technology is approached with suspicion and innovation; for the part of the family not abroad, it seems less welcome.

Research into how technological transformations support or drive cultural changes in different 'ndrangheta generations home and abroad, and the way these impacts mafia-led activities, goes also in the direction of analysing the language used. Any slang the new generations pick up from other cultures, any way to discuss certain

[3] Tribunale di Reggio Calabria Proc. n. 3886/2022 R. G. N. R. DDA Proc. n. 2520/2022 Reg. G. L P. DDA/2022 R. O. C. C. 44/2022 R. O. C. C. 4/202S R. O. C. C.—p. 2139.

[4] Tribunale di Reggio Calabria N. 4837/2022 R.G.N.R. D.D.A. N. 304 Y2022 R.G.I.P. D~D.A. N. 39+45/2022 R. O.C.C, p. 87.

decisions that excludes their older relatives from the conversation, can all become part of a transcultural assessment of tradition and innovation in intergenerational mafia-type families in their diaspora countries.

Global and local dynamics influence structures and behaviours

Research questions, to be empirically investigated through a carefully designed methodology, could be:

a. Can mafia organisations be transcultural themselves, in their being able to acculturate, deculturate and integrate cultures in their extremely local and extremely global mobility?
b. How does transculturation help mafia organisations and affiliates move beyond their ethnic identifications and negotiate cross-cultural challenges, considering diverse intergenerational understanding of criminal activities and technological advancements?

The concept of transculturation challenges the centrality of the nation as it promotes a more fluid and dynamic concept of 'ethnicity', minorities, and culture beyond nationalism (Mignolo and Schiwy 2003). This leads to the consideration of a transcultural framework to deepen our understanding of migration and crime, moving away from rigid conceptions of what constitutes a local (ethnic minority) community and placing such communities within the global contexts of a diverse society (in which almost everyone goes to school, makes friends, works, or falls in love outside of rigid 'ethnic' boundaries). In this sense, the 'ndrangheta is not different from other forms of transnational organised crime and will be changed and challenged by multicultural environments in the same way as most social phenomena.

This is where the different activities that 'ndrangheta clans engage in might make a difference in different countries: the deeper the relationships of the 'ndrangheta clans with a specific country or place and the diaspora there, the more one is forced to look at their relationships with local communities. In some places in Australia, for example, there will be links with people who are indifferent, hostile, or suspicious when they encounter (even inadvertently) the 'ndrangheta; their voices are also part of the same context and cultural environment in which the criminal organisation operates there (Sergi 2024b). This process is destined to replicate itself in various other contexts as well, since global drives tend to standardise transcultural processes across groups and behaviours (Um 2015).

In terms of intergenerational transformations, we can expect newer technology to amplify the processes of global and cultural exchanges across younger generations and across ethnicities to improve mafias' capabilities as global actors, as well as problematise local attempts to resist cultural change. In operation Eureka we find a subject, S. Romeo, who talks to an associate (in Italian) about problems in getting the cocaine through various ports. They both lament that the difficulties are also linked, according to their perception, to intercepted phones and communication. One of the two confirms: '*just in case*, *we must not share all the details in these phones… not until we are sure… I am going to meet an Albanian guy who says he is selling new*

phones, *better than this Sky! I don't know him*, *but I'll go and check him out and I'll let you know*'. To which the other replies that he knows about these new phones sold by the Albanians, and he would want one too.[5] Indeed, the global needs of the organisation—to communicate safely—are met by the local opportunities of cultural interchanges with others, outside of their ethnic group, in the criminal business.

When we look at the local, from a transcultural perspective, we encounter new forms of networking and trust built using technology. Trust is something that needs to be explored both in terms of technology use and organised crime, but also in terms of intergenerational skillset that goes hand in hand with reputation and recognition in the underworld (Sergi 2024a). In transcultural approaches, we find that digital tools don't only connect migrants but also entice new generations to follow and trust the diasporas, with different forms of interconnectivity (Banerjee and German 2010). Always in Eureka, we find that in Germany, a source of trust, for a man from San Luca (in Calabria) who wants to buy an ice-cream parlour (apparently through reinvesting proceeds of crime), is found in his Facebook friendships, and discussed through Sky ECC: *'I've looked at his profile and he is a friend of Maicol's nephew– the guy you had an accident with… (…) we can do a lot*, *it's not about being associates*, *it's basically family!*',[6] always referring to the possibility—because of confirmed trustworthiness of the subject—of concluding the ice-cream parlour business. This mechanism might also be linked to the fact that in that specific German town, clans from San Luca have been present for a few decades and not just for the drug trade (Sciarrone and Storti 2014), thus creating forms of local trust confirmed by the offline diaspora too.

Struggles for power and drives of informality create room for flexible structures

Research questions, to be empirically investigated through a carefully designed methodology, could be:

a. How can the tools of transculturation give us insight on both formal and informal processes in 'ndrangheta behaviour?
b. How do mobile mafia-type organisations define and redefine their identities and authenticity amid intergenerational and technological transformations as they renew and renegotiate their ties with their own and other communities?

As part of a mafia-type organisation, with semi-(un)known structures and resilient behaviours, 'ndrangheta clans display key elements of *power*: money, use of violence, political influence, status, reputation (Sciarrone 1998; Sergi 2022a). However, the clans are not hegemonic, especially abroad, neither in relations with other criminal groups nor in relations with Italian migrant communities (Sergi 2024b). The 'ndrangheta appears to operate through a semi-formalised modus operandi, often described as almost institutionalised (mafias are often described as parallel systems of govern-

[5] Tribunale di Reggio Calabria Proc. n. 3886/2022 R. G. N. R. DDA Proc. n. 2520/2022 Reg. G. L P. DDA/2022 R. O. C. C. 44/2022 R. O. C. C. 4/202S R. O. C. C.– p. 185.

[6] Ibid. p. 826.

ment, or 'states within a state'), but their illegal activities inevitably take place in an 'informal' environment. Central to the concept of transculturation is the redefinition of power asymmetries and their 'side effects', such as processes of deculturation, de-institutionalisation, and subsequent transculturation through solidarity between marginalised groups. Research suggests that transculturation is particularly effective in informal contexts that escape rigid rules and challenge institutionalised power (Ricatti 2018). We can explore whether the fact that the 'ndrangheta necessarily operates in informal contexts with strong power imbalances may facilitate processes of mutual transculturation with other groups, fostering the development of more open and free communities (including criminal ones). On the one hand, this would imply opportunities for social and economic exchanges outside rigid institutional and legal barriers that impose boundaries, bureaucracy, and limited financial resources. On the other hand, this might also mean resistance and desistance from criminal activities, as new generations make different use of this informality and are differently affected by power imbalances in the host countries.

We can imagine that technological transformations bring disruption to the clans' operations as well as interfering with their power structure in informal as well as uncertain contexts. In the following example, two 'ndranghetisti (one born in 1971 and one in 1988) are discussing new 'orders' from above. The oldest says: '*I was with his father in law in Platì*,[7] *when I sent you the message I was with him… they don't want to lower the price but they want us to buy those fucking phones*, *the ones that in two months will be an extra 3300 euros… those bastards… they also have those phones*, *and he showed me [the cocaine] on the phones…'*.[8] Crucially, in this example, the physical proximity to the 'father' (someone in an apical position in the 'ndrangheta structure in Platì) is meant to counterbalance the ethereal presence of the information through the phones: technology expectations might expose the power imbalances between the offline traditions and the online innovation faster. Such power imbalances might change the organisations and the self-perceptions of the affiliates, and transculturation might help capture these dynamics.

Taking a transcultural perspective on technological and intergenerational changes in the 'ndrangheta with its mobility and cross-border activities can therefore allow us to consider how minoritarian positions of power might emerge in the organisation. Within usually hierarchical and rigid organisations, roles are negotiated, maintained, or silenced more informally than what is immediately visible.

Conclusion

Transcultural transformations—primarily looking at intergenerational changes around technology—do influence the resilience of mafia groups abroad. With the case of the 'ndrangheta in mind, we have set a research agenda for three possible

[7] Platì, in the province of Reggio Calabria, is a small village home of some of the most historical 'ndrangheta dynasties.

[8] Tribunale di Reggio Calabria N. 4837/2022 R.G.N.R. D.D.A. N. 304 Y2022 R.G.I.P. D~D.A. N. 39+45/2022 R. O.C.C, p. 153.

themes of critical social science research into transculturation and mobility of mafia-type organised crime. This research agenda will be adequate to study the mobility of mafia-groups because transculturation helps us understand how cultures stratify and engage with existing power imbalances in the host countries, within migration settings. However, while the focus here is on mobility, we do expect for a transcultural approach to have the potential to influence research on mafias more generally, in as much as these organisations manifest as intergenerational crime families.

As said, mafias are organisations that do not solely pursue a criminal agenda for profit, but also—and more crucially—build their reputation to engage with institutions and power (economic, social, and political) through control of territory, but also violence, threat of violence, and corruption (Gambetta 1993; Sciarrone 1998; Sergi and Vannucci 2023). Any cultural change can impact both sides of this double dimension (profit and power).

A transcultural approach to intergenerational mafias, not only in their mobility, can identify how reputation, recognition, and trust are built and kept in secretive societies while managing risk when technological revolutions change the (illicit or licit) markets, and can directly impact reputation, recognition, and trust themselves (Lusthaus 2012; Bakken 2021; Munksgaard 2023; Sergi 2024a). Reputation and recognition are keys both for economic activities and for other mafia-led services (primarily protection), as well as for the identity of the organisation and the trust from inside and outside alike (Gambetta 1993). Mafia groups gain external recognition also when capable to provide extra-legal governance as well as engaging in various illegal activities (Smith and Varese 2001; Sciarrone 2006). Reputation is certainly linked to visibility (Pizzorno 2007), as a specific strategy of social actors to augment their recognition by exposure, but there exists also 'reputation by invisibility' (Sergi and Vannucci 2023), whereby groups benefit from the lack of exposure to fuel narratives about their power. Reputation can also follow different strategies to face risks and risk-taking on the side of mafia organisations: in particular, mafias' ability to engage successfully in social capital accumulation, by investing in both strong and weak links, is inherently linked to choices that can be risky and can lead to unsuccess (Sciarrone 1998). We generally see that in the balance between visibility and invisibility—which technology, as seen, directly affects—the *performance* of mafia groups can become culturally relevant for the recognition, the reputation, and the trust the group projects. Ultimately, for mafia groups, recognition, reputation, and trust are also linked to *branding* (Gambetta 2009). As technology affects branding for organised crime groups, a transcultural lens to intergenerational use of such branding through technology can yield some interesting results also on issues of trust, visibility, and reputation. In this contribution, we drew from examples based on specific technology (encryption apps and social media) in a context of cyber-facilitated crime, but we can expect issues of trust, visibility, and reputation to be impacted also by technology more in general—consider for instance the potential impact on many forms of criminal activities, and on crime control, of breakthroughs in AI (Caldwell et al. 2020).

Another aspect to consider within this research agenda is that transculturation gives a new quality to globalisation studies, as it considers interpenetration of cultures and hybridisation as the norm (Vranes and Markovic 2017). Transculturation roots

global drives in the local. Transculturation is an everyday practice (Guerra 2020) and as such it involves constant deculturation (abandonment of previous uprooting) in favour of re-acculturation while forming new hybrid identities as they move from one social site to another. The everyday practice of transculturation echoes the everyday practice of technological evolution and, like the latter, leads to increasing enabling of other social practices in the everyday. This implies that also mafia groups, in their mobility or otherwise, will adopt hybrid identities that cannot be reversed and will necessarily be studied in conjunction with changes within both migrant and host communities, while engaging with diaspora studies. In fact, on the one hand it is important to remember how migrant communities do engage with their host societies, thus promoting exchange and hybridisation also 'at home' (Teti 2015). On the other hand, hybridisation and transculturation as everyday practices appear to be necessary for survival of mafia groups in specific contexts where integration of cultures is key to economic, political, and social identities (Sergi 2024a). A certain nostalgia of cultural practices and norms of mafia groups at the borderland can become part of the survival skills and the identity-seeking exercise of mafia groups as much as nationalism and integration discourses (Sergi 2022b). We can therefore expect, through a transcultural approach to mafias and their mobility, to be able to capture those survival skills and identity-seeking exercises that mafia members develop, abroad as 'at home', and in general within cross-border ventures. These will be linked, for example, to the impact that technological evolution has on both individual and collective identities of mafia members, who are both migrants and global citizens, as well as engaging in criminal activities and extra-legal governance. This, in turn, will allow a more critical understanding of both mainstream positions in transculturation of mafias as well as marginalised positions, that emerge naturally within different transcultural puzzles.

It is imperative for mafia studies and studies of mafia mobility to re-engage with cultural studies when looking at intergenerational and technological changes. A transcultural research agenda on mafia mobility does not wish to re-ash culturalist views that attribute to a very vague and determinist idea of culture any decisive role in the way mafias form and proliferate. Quite the opposite, a transcultural research agenda on mafia mobility considers how intergenerational challenges, including technological usage and engagement across generations, hold an important role in capturing change. Capturing this change, even in its non-mainstream forms, allows us to depart from deterministic and reified ideas of how organised crime and technology ought to interact.

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Declarations

Ethical approval The paper is theoretical and only analyses documents, thus not requiring ethical approval.

Informed consent This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Conflict of interest Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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