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# The Reputation of the Invisibles: The Society of Santa as a Para-Masonic Criminal Entity Above the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta

Anna Sergi<sup>a</sup> and Alberto Vannucci<sup>b</sup> 

<sup>a</sup>University of Essex, Colchester, UK; <sup>b</sup>University of Pisa, Pisa, Italy

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how mafia-type and semi-secret organizations construct and preserve their reputation through a calibrated equilibrium between visibility and invisibility. We unpack the case study of the Society of Santa, in Calabria, which was a semi-secret entity, presented as a para-masonic deviant lodge, born within the local mafia clans ('ndrangheta). Through a narrative approach to investigating files, surveillance tapes, and trial documentation and conducting interviews, we posit a new theoretical framework to explore reputation by *invisibility*. This kind of reputation can be effective when individuals wish to act both in criminal arenas and in political-institutional ones. We argue that reputation by invisibility can effectively amplify deviance and criminality, such as corruption, by building narratives around specific individual skills and their organizational yet secretive abilities.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Here is mysecret. . . What is essential is invisible to the eye.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince

## Introduction

When . . . let's say . . . it happened, the aim was to restrict the amount of trustworthy persons. Because, when *the Santa* was born . . . when a . . . let's say, a 'ndranghetista [a Calabrian mafia member] knows a rule, social rule, if he has no stain and asks for it, the ranking should be accorded. . . It was a rule of pacification to close that cluster . . . since there were too many bosses.<sup>1</sup>

As this testimony of a collaborator of justice exemplifies, there is a convergence of declarations about the existence of a semi-secret entity called the *Società di Santa* – the Society of Santa – since the mid-1970s in the province and city of Reggio Calabria, Italy. It populates investigations and trials against the local mafia clans, the 'ndrangheta, the Calabrian mafia (Sergi 2022) as the formation of the Santa was conceived as a metamorphosis from within the 'ndrangheta. The Santa was supposed to be a (criminal/secret) organization modeled on a covert, deviant<sup>2</sup> masonic lodge, bound together both by traditional 'ndrangheta codes and by oaths of secrecy and brotherhood (Sergi and Vannucci 2023a). Since the Olimpia trial in the 1990s, a narrative consolidated around the birth of the Santa, its many

**CONTACT** Anna Sergi  [asergi@essex.ac.uk](mailto:asergi@essex.ac.uk)  Department of Sociology, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester CO43SQ, UK

<sup>1</sup>'ndrangheta collaborator Paolo Iannò - testimony in March 2010 as reported in Tribunale di Reggio Calabria, Sez. GIP-GUP, Ordinanza su Richiesta di Applicazione di Misure Cautelari, Proc. Pen. 9339/2009 RGNR DDA; No. 5448/2010 RGIP DDA; no.50/2015 OCC DDA; "Operation Mammasantissima" p.138.

<sup>2</sup>*Deviant masonry* is often used in Italy to describe "a form of masonry, which was (still is) considered as deviant from the official/regular masonic journey, in the sense that it not only did not embrace the masonic journey as it developed for centuries (Dickie 2020) but also manipulated it for other, at times delinquent, interests" (Sergi and Vannucci 2023a: xxi-xxii)

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mutations (including the name), its protagonists, and its relations with both the 'ndrangheta and the political-institutional actors in the area. Our leading research questions in this paper are as follows:

- (a) How is the reputation of the members of a semi-secret entity built?
- (b) How do narratives circulate in specific social circles concerning members' degrees of visibility and invisibility in extra-legal and criminal arenas?
- (c) To what extent and through which mechanisms does a "reputation for invisibility" affect or amplify deviance or criminal behavior in semi-secret organizations?

Through the case study of the Santa, we argue that a *reputation by invisibility* can be built through the reiterated circulation of relatively coherent information – i.e., a *narrative* – on the capability of individuals to effectively *conceal* their deals and illegal activities within certain hidden arenas. We wish to establish the concept "reputation by invisibility" as a new theoretical framework in as much as it merges theoretical standpoints from studies on reputation together with narrative criminological approaches, to understand how that reputation is formed. A *reputation by invisibility* can become an *amplifier* of deviance and crime, especially when paired with symbolic elements related to secrecy, occult brotherhood, and shady deals, typical of para-masonic or masonic circles (Sergi and Vannucci 2022, 2023a, 2023b). *Reputation by invisibility* is fueled within selected "circles of recognition" where judgments are shared and echoed (Pizzorno 2007). The Society of Santa leads to *reputation by invisibility* at least across two circles of recognition: the "Ndrangheta on the one side and the political, bureaucratic, economic, and professional elites – the upperworld – on the other. Crucially, the reputation by invisibility can manifest as actors' actual privileged access to the upperworld, but also as a narrative about secrecy and power, which can fuel expectations even beyond the actual capability of actors, therefore potentially generating frictions.

## Theoretical background: reputation, (in)visibility, and secrecy

This study is situated within criminological research on the links between deviant masonry and mafias, including explorations that look at both entities as semi-secret organizations sharing various traits. Our theoretical innovation sits at the crossroad of reflections on reputation, its relationship with visibility and invisibility, and the role of secrecy.

Mafias have been studied from several different perspectives, ranging from a focus on trade and extra-legal governance of markets (Campana and Varese 2018; Varese 2020) to a focus on their organizational status (Cappellaro, Compagni, and Vaara 2021; Catino 2019) and a focus on harms and impacts (Pinotti 2015; Sergi 2022). One of the most successful paradigms to the study of mafia-type organizations focuses on the capability of mafiosi to act as guarantors and become providers of private protection (Gambetta 1993). Research has further established that other actors, even together with mafias, can exercise such functions akin to mafias, and among these are institutional actors, politicians, and other powerful elites, including the masonry (Sergi and Vannucci 2023a).

In Italy, research has exposed a master narrative among mafia members and other powerful actors, according to which existent, spurious, irregular, or even only *imagined* masonic links can be effective in activating opportunities for informal or illegal deals and to "make things happen," in a *deviance amplification* process (Dickie 2020; Sergi and Vannucci 2022, 2023a, 2023b). Considering the hidden nature of both mafia groups and masonic entities, the combination between reputation, visibility, and (or, conversely) secrecy can be key to understanding their interaction and constitution and to shaping reciprocal recognition of skills, roles, and identities. Research has long debated the challenges that mafia-type organizations, not only those from Italy, face with visibility that challenges their endurance and reputation (Baradel and Bortolussi 2021). As Gambetta observes:

The structure of the mafia is an extraordinary array of nested reputations, ranging from the whole to the individual member, via the mafia 'family' and natural kin. This provides a close-knit network of names but also shared features, experiences, and knowledge that make that world very hard for non-members to penetrate. (2009: 228)

This mix of factors impacts also the *external* recognition that is given to mafiosi as affiliates to a group capable of providing extra-legal governance as well as engaging in various illegal activities (Sciarrone 2006; Smith and Varese 2001). External recognition depends on reputation, which is a key resource of organized crime actors and mafias.

Reputation is a vital asset for organized crime actors. Décary-Héту and Dupont (2013) outline its role in (online) illicit markets as a blend of personal characteristics (who you are), behavior (what you do), and social connections (who you know). A strong reputation correlates with higher profitability and earnings for criminal enterprises (Reuter 1984). Thus, criminal success and reputation often align, making reputation-building advantageous for offenders (Goode and Cruise 2006).

Moreover, reputation influences the external recognition mafiosi receive as members of groups capable of providing extra-legal governance, often through displays of authority or violence (Sciarrone 2006; Smith and Varese 2001). Pizzorno (1987) notes that mafiosi, like corrupt politicians, can create a vicious circle of arrogance, where their overconfidence enhances their authority, leading to compliance and fulfilling client expectations. Consequently, a negative reputation can also serve as a significant form of recognition for mafiosi (Ruggiero 2021; Sciarrone 2006).

Following Pizzorno (2007), individual reputation is the outcome of judgments, formulated in small or large "circles of recognition," on previous actions or qualities of certain actors: reputation "by visibility" can be gained for various skills, but it is reached mainly through "word of mouth" and exposure to a certain "audience." Moreover, maintaining ambiguity is crucial for reputation for certain actors, including mafia-type groups (Sergi 2024); external actors must constantly reinterpret a group's activities, which allows mafia groups to manage perceptions effectively (Cappellaro, Compagni, and Vaara 2021). Importantly, in certain contexts, such as the criminal one, ambiguity does not lead to a loss of reputation or legitimacy (Fombrun and Rindova 2000).

In contrast to visibility and beyond ambiguity, there's *secrecy*. According to the classical Simmel's (1906:466) analysis:

Secrecy sets barriers between men, but at the same time offers the seductive temptation to break through the barriers by gossip or confession. This temptation accompanies the psychical life of the secret like an overtone. Hence the sociological significance of the secret, its practical measure, and the mode of its workings must be found in the capacity or the inclination of the initiated to keep the secret to himself, or in his resistance or weakness relative to the temptation to betrayal.

Secrecy is normally taken as a necessary condition for deviant and criminal activities to be successfully performed (Adler and Adler 1980; Paoli 2002). Since such acts are exposed to the risk of censorship, stigma, and prosecution, they must be kept hidden: deviance leads to secrecy (van de Bunt 2010). The crucial role of secrecy has in fact been considered for mafia-type organizations (Catino 2014; Siegel 2011) and for deviant masonry (Sergi and Vannucci, 2023a). In the study of mafia-type organizations secrecy appears to be a puzzle, in as much as affiliates understand that their longevity is attached to their visibility (Baradel and Bortolussi 2021). Covertness, in fact, can characterize the operation of different "organisations for social relations" and informal networks, which are not always nor necessarily involved in criminal activities (Fielding 2017). Semi-secret associations, like mafia-type groups and masonic entities, face trade-offs and organizational dilemmas to simultaneously pursue their goals, including selective recruitment, communication with external actors or large-scale illicit business, and maintain secrecy. Among the trade-offs and dilemmas, there are choices on how to maintain social consensus while being effective by using violence and whether to centralize information and activities, increasing both operational control and risks of being prosecuted (Catino 2014).

As will be argued in our case study, there is another function that secrecy can play, specifically in risky extra-legal arenas characterized by high levels of uncertainty about the resources at stake and

actors' personal qualities (Walters 2015). The reputation of deviant actors, in fact, can be affirmed and strengthened also by a regular circulation of coherent information – a *narrative* – on a specific skill, i.e., their capability to effectively *conceal* their profitable connections, deals and illegal activities within hidden arenas, eventually framed as membership within some kind of secret network or nebulous structure (Sergi and Vannucci, 2023a). We call it – in an apparent paradox – *reputation by invisibility*. On the one hand, the circulation of information on the existence of secret arenas and their affiliation must be *selective*, thus limited in its content and range. It can refer to the mere, and preferably nebulous, existence of certain secret “chambers” where only powerful individuals are admitted, and not to the content of specific decisions or of actors' precise roles (Pozen 2010). On the other hand, the perimeter of actors sharing such narratives needs to be strictly constrained within “circles of recognition” including “trustworthy” individuals who value or benefit from it – since subjugated, embedded in the criminal network, or colluding with deviant actors (Scott 2013).

### Theoretical framework: reputation by invisibility

There are three steps to recognize and unpack what we call *reputation by invisibility*.

First, *reputation by invisibility* is built on narratives about far-reaching ties and influence within a secret or semi-secret association that *could* or *ought to be* amplified by the preexisting reputational capital of other entities, as masonry or mafia-like organizations. In turn, this nurtures expectations that such links *are* indeed far-reaching.

We borrow the concept of narratives from the field of narrative criminology (Presser 2020), the study of the constitutive effect of stories, rather than what stories report on. From this perspective, narratives are the events of a story that give the story its meaning and that are characterized by specific temporality, causality, and a limited set of roles (Sandberg 2022). For the purposes of this study, narratives are socially reverberated beliefs, which help constitute a semi-secret organization, by way of defining it, making it consistent with expectations, and by telling others about it (Sergi 2023). Crucially, counter-narratives and resistance strategies also shape reputational dynamics and intersect with criminal governance (Poppi 2023): here, we consider that, in the context of semi-secret organizations, we might find less effective counter-narratives and or narratives of resistance.

Socially reverberated beliefs circulate within selected “circles of recognition” including individuals potentially interested or already involved in extra-legal deals. Akin to a self-fulfilling prophecy mechanism, this may encourage a demand from more individuals, including mafiosi, to use ties with those secret associations, or with individuals (allegedly) involved in them, to access profitable exchange opportunities and to assess partners' power and trustworthiness in their extra-legal interactions. Narratives of resistance intersect with organized crime governance. *Reputation by invisibility*, in fact, is built upon shared assessment of others' otherwise impalpable qualities, as influence or networking capabilities, connecting actual and imagined social interactions to “powerful” secret entities. Both narratives and symbolic elements keep fueling such processes within selected circles of recognition, beyond ambiguity as a strategic asset (Cappellaro, Compagni, and Vaara 2021). In our case study on the Society of Santa, circles of recognition include the 'ndrangheta on the one side and segments of the political, bureaucratic, economic, and professional elite on the other. In the perspective of a 'ndrangheta collaborator of justice: “*The most important people in the 'ndrangheta are masons. . . the invisible people let's say those are higher up still, who have contacts with the political world. . . with any kind of. . . with the other parts of society, they are the masons*”.<sup>3</sup>

Second, *reputation by invisibility* can become a valuable resource in specific arenas of informal or illegal interaction, where trust is fragile, and a demand for protection emerges. Indeed, mafias – and the “'ndrangheta as well – are entities driven not only by a profit-seeking logic but also ‘governance structures’ exercising (and seeking) power in their informal regulation of social interactions, extra-legal and illegal deals (Catino 2019; Gambetta 1993). While other organized

<sup>3</sup>Trial Gotha – Tribunale di Reggio Calabria, Sezione GIP-GUP, Giudizio Abbreviato Araniti Antonino + 37, Sentenza No.80/2018: 317.

crime groups can mainly *trade* on illicit markets and *produce* and/or *sell* illegal goods and services, mafias' distinguishing feature is their capability to regulate and control "*the production and distribution of a given commodity or service unlawfully*" (Campana and Varese 2018:1383). Mafias can in fact establish a de facto authority in areas and economic markets where public structures are weak, corrupt, or colluded, providing governance to nonmembers while still operating within the formal domain of the state (Della Porta and Vannucci 2012; Lessing 2020). The interaction between criminal governance and state's political representatives can lead to complex relationships, ranging from conflict to symbiosis (Briquet and Garrigues 2010; Della Porta and Vannucci 2013). Mafiosi guarantee observance of extra-legal agreements, control of social order, and the settlement of disputes, eventually sanctioning noncompliance and defining access or barriers to markets (Varese 2020). In their supply of protection, the threat or use of violence, which has also a symbolic value, can be used by mafiosi as an "input" to induce compliance in extra-legal deals (Sciarrone and Storti 2014). Reputation, as intertemporal recognition of mafiosi's role and power to act as guarantors, is a crucial resource, which allows them to minimize the costly and risky recourse to violence. As Gambetta (2009):204-5) notices: "*once one has a reputation as a reliable protector, one can cash in on it and does not need to do much else (. . .). The more robust the reputation, the lower the chances that anyone will challenge a mafioso's rulings and that he will need to back up his threats by actual force.*"

Third, since *reputation by invisibility* may limit or exclude the use of violence, it can be profitably built, preserved, and capitalized on, thus differing from other forms of reputation-building linked to criminal governance (Reuter 1984). As our case study will show, narratives "travel:" an elusive structure is said to be born in the occult out of the intertwining between 'ndrangheta and (deviant) masonry, where powerful institutional and economic individuals are also involved in addition to mafiosi. As Varese (2011):23) observes, the supply of private protection "*may be welcomed by sectors of the population because it provides an advantage in a given market.*" The private protection mafiosi provide may in fact meet the demand for order and reduction of violence of powerful individuals (Ruggiero 2021), especially in extra-legal arenas where resources at stake are relevant and trust is scarce – e.g., in corrupt exchanges, bid-rigging, vote-buying, etc. (Gambetta 1993; Sciarrone 2008; Smith and Varese 2001). In the emerging narratives, the reach of power and influence of the elite of those who are informally recognized and labeled as *invisibles* can be deemed virtually unbounded within the corresponding social circles.

Once established, *reputation by invisibility* can then assume a twofold function:

- (a) To assert the emblematic and evocative valence of secrecy as such, which takes a symbolic value, by also affecting individual's beliefs (Urban 2001).

Anheier (2010):1356) observes, "*secret societies prevent or restrict communication and distribute information and knowledge in ways that create nuanced structures of knowing and not knowing, of awareness and ignorance.*" Selective spreading and sharing, by "word of mouth," vague and indefinite information about one's affiliation or involvement in secret entities may in fact evoke valuable personal traits, skills, and attributes, which are otherwise difficult or impossible to ascertain: influential social connections, invisible – and therefore unaccountable and potentially far-reaching – influence, invulnerability to exposure, immunity from prosecution.

- (b) To enhance reputation as recognition of those publicly "untouchable" (nor overtly identifiable), but informally recognizable actors who are expected or believed to operate within such "invisible" structures.

As Gambetta (2009):209) puts it for the study of mafia-type organizations: "*those believed to be members of the entity connoted by that name have a tremendous advantage over those who cannot induce that belief*". Various actors can exploit informal authority and status attribution to increase



their bargaining power and, more generally, the value of impalpable resources (political and administrative decision-making, confidential and blackmailing information, protection, etc.) at stake in extra-legal deals. In a self-propelling process, secrecy becomes not only a *precondition* but also an *amplifier* for deviant behavior.

## Notes on methods

In Calabria, investigations and trials since the early 1990s have attempted to put on the stand a series of individuals with proximity or affiliation to the 'ndrangheta in a gray area of interaction with political, institutional actors and professional elites also belonging to masonic and para-masonic groups. Historical and contemporary knowledge on the interlocking between 'ndrangheta clans and white-collar elites in para-masonic and official masonic circles, especially between the 1970s and the 2000s, relates to a structure called *Società di Santa* (Society of Santa, hereinafter Santa), whose members were initially called “Santisti,” later “Invisibles.” Aside from judicial complexities, some confusion is palpable on the nature of the associative entity under scrutiny. Based on our new theoretical framework – which combines studies on reputation and secrecy with an analytical outlook at narratives – we will try to give some coordinates, which can explain both the elusive characteristics of the Santa and the role played by its alleged members, thanks to their reputation by invisibility.

This paper is an output within a larger research project. For this paper, we analyzed five main trials and connected criminal proceedings as well as interviews (10). The findings of this paper advance considerably already published outputs from the same research project. The criminal proceedings analyzed targeted the 'ndrangheta and various external and internal collaborators. These proceedings are Olimpia (mid-1990s); Meta (2012-2014); Sistema Reggio (2014-2016); Gotha (including investigation Mammasantissima, 2015-ongoing); 'ndrangheta Stragista (2017-ongoing). They amount to approximately 32,000 pages between sentences and arrest warrants and appendixes (such as transcripts of intercepted materials) redacted by local authorities, on specific actors of interest for our research. As per methods in narrative criminology, analysis can be into thematic, structural, dialogic, and visual (Riessman 2008). In our case, we privileged a thematic approach followed by a structural approach: first, we asked *what* the stories contained in our sample say, and second, we looked at *how* they say it, to construct the reality that eventually emerges. We operated, therefore, a dual layer analysis. Narrative content analysis was aimed to understand the case and the main actors, their aims, and activities – and then moved to critical narrative analysis for what concerns the actors and activities linked to our object of study: the Santa, its reputation, and the precarious balance between visibility and invisibility of its members. Coding for this step included signposting in the text segments that discussed facts and/or opinions linked to people mentioned as “invisible.” We then investigated how individuals interpret their lives and their knowledge through narratives they give and how their knowledge is affected by social interactions and repetition. The narratives emerged within macro-categories like reputation, recognition, visibility, invisibility, criminality, and politics. The second step therefore was a coding for these macro-categories, which helped us understand the discourse and the structures of our narratives and the *form* that the constructed reality takes within its societal context.

Additionally, we interviewed four Antimafia prosecutors in the Antimafia District Directorate of Reggio Calabria, four journalists covering related news in Calabria, and two lawyers involved in the defense at these trials – to further clarify the scope of the narratives emerging from trials. The interviews were meant to enrich the narratives and clarify them. The anti-mafia prosecutors interviewed all dealt with the cases we analyzed and therefore could advice on what, in their perceptions, changed the (judicial) narratives of the Santa within the scope of their mafia investigations. The journalists had all, at different times, reported on the issues at hand, and could also help us situate the narratives from the files within the wider context of the city's elites. On the one hand, these interviews generated more narratives, in as much as interviews are stories themselves (Sandberg 2022); on the other side, these participants were purposefully approached for additional data clarification. Their contribution was not free from bias coming from their work on this topic, but their contribution was helpful in guiding us to understand the master narrative.

Overall, this is a study of the social constructionism of a secret organization; it is made through an analysis of how reputation by invisibility of its members is built through the narratives that circulate about them and about the organization itself.

## Case study: society of Santa and Invisibles

### *The birth of the Santa and the relationship with the 'ndrangheta*

The “Santa” (literally, the Saint, female), is one of the rankings, a “*dote*”, of the Calabrian mafia, the ‘ndrangheta. Whoever is “given” the dote of the Santa belongs to the *major society*, a local coordination structure of the ‘ndrangheta where apical members in the so-called *locale*<sup>4</sup> gather. The Santa as a promotion *dote* first appeared in the mid-1970s. As one of the interviewed lawyers puts it:

All the collaborators of justice, hundreds of them, tell of the Santa, constituted in the 70’s as an instrument that would have allowed the ‘ndranghetisti to enter the State. But the ‘ndranghetisti have always entered and been in dialogue with the state . . . the Santa has institutionalised this; . . . Everyone describes the abstract contents of the *dote* of the Santa, but the concrete content is: who did what? How did they use their *dote*, what did they get in return? . . . The Santa is an archaic model within a modern system.

In the same years when the Santa appeared as a *dote*, an imagined transformation of the ‘ndrangheta was underway, and the two things converged, between the 1970s and 1980s, in the birth of the “*Società di Santa*”. Crucially, it was called *Società di Santa* because the ranking of the Santa was the highest possible at that time – something that has changed drastically in the past decades (there are now several *doti* higher than the Santa). Gaetano Costa, a collaborator of justice, in a deposition of March 1994<sup>5</sup> noted how the birth of the Society of Santa was not welcomed by the “old guard” of the ‘ndrangheta but was meant as a protection mechanism for the ‘ndrangheta elite:

The ranking of the “Santa” could be given initially only to 33 people; new ones could be only granted in case of death of a “santista” . . . to them [old guard] it was a bastard organisation. Among the rules of this new society there was the expectation of betrayal [by a ‘ndranghetista] to protect a santista. This brought to internal conflicts but Mommo Piromalli, together with Santo Araniti and his closest ally Paolo De Stefano, prevailed and were among the first to get the ranking of santista.

The formation of the *Società di Santa* as a new entity was therefore linked to the “victory” of a group of clans, namely those from the town of Gioia Tauro (Piromalli) and from Reggio di Calabria (De Stefano), which were at the time considered the “innovative wing” of the ‘ndrangheta. These leaders imagined and formed the Santa to step up from the so-called “*sgarro*” (crime) – the organizational branch involved in low-profile illegal activities and extortion – and promote more lucrative (criminal) opportunities deriving from economic and political connections. This echoes Simmel (1906):462): “*Secrecy secures the possibility of a second world alongside of the obvious world, and the latter is most strenuously affected by the former.*” In the trial Olimpia,<sup>6</sup> collaborator Giovanni Gullà described the Santa:

The Santa can be explained like a “secret sect.” They wanted to create a “structure of power” unknown to other [‘ndrangheta] affiliates to obtain more benefits. The santista doesn’t need to have military power; he doesn’t have to be, for example, a *capo-società* [the boss of a locale of the ‘ndrangheta]. The important thing is that the santista has his own strength, economic or political, so that he can contribute to the whole structure.

The reference to the “secret sect” and to the “unknown structure of power” intentionally echoed the world of masonry<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup>The locale is the territorial unit, grouping various clans, ‘ndrine, in a specific place (Sergi and Lavorgna 2016). The Santa was, and still is, given to members of the criminal organization who gain the privilege, or have the capacity, to act as interface of the clan with the world of institutions and politics (Sergi 2022).

<sup>5</sup>Trial Gotha – Abbreviato: 202.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, p. 204.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.:



I can affirm that the Santa, as a secret sect, is the mirror image of the covert masonry when compared to the official masonry. I know of interpersonal relations between santisti and masons in covert lodges and often the two roles referred to the same person.

As collaborator Costa explains, the links between masonry and the 'ndrangheta were already there:

Given the enormous interests that existed at the time around Reggio Calabria (the railway, the iron and steel plant and the port of Gioia Tauro), Mommo Piromalli - to impose his greater authority, and thus directly manage the realisation of public works - boasted the rank of 'santista' ... Since he was notoriously a mason, to qualify and differentiate the 'Società di Santa' from minor ones, he introduced or publicised the rule that members of the Società di Santa could be masons."<sup>8</sup>

This investiture allowed these individuals to craft and manage valuable opportunities for potential cooperation with institutional actors. Their recognized activity became the catalyzer for a push toward an attempted organizational change of the 'ndrangheta. As one collaborator puts it: "*The 'ndrangheta' was undergoing a metamorphosis. . . it didn't want to be publicised. . . a substantially more masonic situation was being created, with the rules remaining the same, but making them higher-level.*"<sup>9</sup> The Santa, in the words of a collaborator, was "*an extremely secret organisation. . . Every santista did not know everything the Santa did, but only what he was interested in.*"<sup>10</sup> The authority of some *santisti* was believed to be a consequence of their mere belonging to the Santa. Many testimonies describe the impulse toward an organizational adaptation of the 'ndrangheta to its redefined wider political and entrepreneurial objectives, beyond traditional illegal markets. Such aims could be better fostered thanks to the brand-new Società di Santa's battleground. As one *santista* clarifies:

With the rank of santista I became part of the elite of the 'ndrangheta, acquiring a secret ranking that gave me the possibility of having relations with freemasons. . . in Calabria, a covered masonic lodge existed since 1979, which included professionals, politicians, institutional representatives and 'ndranghetisti. . . A structure constituted by excellent persons with the firm understanding of mutual assistance already existed, the Santa . . .<sup>11</sup>

The reputation deriving from a presumed affiliation to the Santa was, in fact, that of belonging to a niche – reserved – system of power where white collars, politicians, and proactive 'Ndranghetisti, in the city of Reggio Calabria, could actively and successfully coordinate in the pursuit of a variety of individual aims (most of whom illegal) loosely based on brotherhoods, kinships, clientelism, corruption, and favoritism.

### ***The evolution of the Santa: visibility and invisibility***

The *name* of the Santa – and its attached organizational reputation – did not stick. The name disappears from testimonies from the 2000s, even when the same individuals were still active and involved in hidden exchanges. The Santa failed to establish its name as an autonomous brand in the long term: its collective reputational capital faded through the years. The name changed (*Provinciale* or *Reserved* or *The Invisibles*) or got lost altogether in recent history. Nevertheless, it started a narrative on the existence of a secret structure of power in Reggio Calabria, which survives any name change and loss, so powerful that it can conceal its own designation. This narrative was and is mostly linked to the circularity of information and the individual recognizability of the "invisible" protagonists named as its members. We will keep referring to it as "Santa" mindful of the "branding" variations as we observe continuity in this phenomenon.

It appears quite clearly that the *invisibility* of the Santa, in its evolution, is always opposed to the relative *visibility* of the 'ndrangheta's criminal activities. The separation from, and yet the perceptible bond with, the 'ndrangheta clans, has contributed to bridge various "circles of recognition" and

<sup>8</sup>Ibid: 202.

<sup>9</sup>Trial Gotha – Abbreviato: 276.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid: 210.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid: 250–1.

augment its influence in the city. The *santisti* ought to remain “invisible” in their shady dealing with politics, institutions, and business, diverging from the lower level ‘Ndranghetisti who are doomed to be more detectable in their pursuit of purely criminal aims, at the time quite violent. The former are wrapped by the silence of secret power, and the latter are exposed to the clamour of overt crime. The two structures don’t have necessarily to intersect, but their existences are functional to one another.

The narrative about the invisibility of those who *really* but *secretly* rule the ‘ndrangheta is found in a trial, dubbed Bellu Lavuru (dialect for “good job”), in 2009, which referred to a structure, after the Santa, operating in the shadows. Sebastiano Altomonte was condemned in this trial for his role as “zipper,” connecting the link, between the apical members of ‘ndrangheta clans in the eastern part of the province of Reggio Calabria and representatives of the political-administrative machine of the area. Crucially, he was intercepted describing the system of visibility and invisibility of criminal organizations on the territory. He associates the purpose of the invisibility to the need to be protected from outside “attacks”<sup>12</sup> *“there is the visible and the invisible that has been active for a few of years . . . There is one that is known and one that nobody knows, only they know it . . . otherwise, today the world would end; everyone would talk. . .”* He references a few people in his area and in the city of Reggio Calabria who would qualify as “the invisibles” or “the reserved ones” and who are more important, more impactful of the visible ones. He calls this structure *la Provinciale* (the Provincial), which leads prosecutors to conclude that the visible part of the ‘ndrangheta’s apical directorate (known as the Provincia) had consolidated its *invisible* part (the Provinciale) in continuity with the Santa, as a governance mechanism capable to assure political protection through institutional connections. Altomonte emphasizes that the dichotomy visible/invisible characterizes both his membership to the ‘ndrangheta elite – the *invisibles* – and to his masonic brotherhood: *“brothers all visible and invisible who adorn the Orient”*. He even provides a detailed description of the masonic ceremonial: *“you have to wear a black tie . . . you wear it like that because you know it’s the triangle the symbol, then there’s the milestone, it’s squared let’s say and it’s a pyramidal organism.”*<sup>13</sup> In these excerpts, we find the paradoxical visibility, or rather knowledge, of the invisibles: even when people think they know them, or about them, the belief that they are able to hide in plain sight or are able to do (unknown) things in secret is what amplifies their reputation by invisibility.

The reputation of the Santa as an invisible structure *above* the ‘ndrangheta is paired with the reputation of the masonry as an arena enabling and enforcing extra-legal affairs. Collaborator Villani declared: *“the real power of the ‘ndrangheta, the head of the ‘ndrangheta, is the ‘ndranghetista-mason. If one is only ‘Ndranghetista he only has half of the power.”*<sup>14</sup> And when he is asked who these ‘ndranghetisti-masons are, he adds:

Paolo Romeo, a mason by excellence, and Giorgio De Stefano, these are the ‘ndranghetisti-masons recognised to be above all others, who manage the ‘ndrangheta in general. And then there are other politicians, I don’t remember their names . . . also masons ( . . . ) and lawyers ( . . . ) a group of *invisible* people, the invisibles, who can’t be seen, can’t be heard, you don’t know anything about them, but they are ‘ndranghetisti-masons.

In another interception, more recently, a “ndranghetista interested in the local masonic lodge asked another: *“Tell me one thing, Enzo, are the invisibles here with us or not? I mean, in the lodge where you are . . . do you know whether there are the invisibles?”* And Enzo replied in the affirmative: *“It is known, it is known that there are invisibles”*.<sup>15</sup> As it is often the case with semi-secret or clandestine organisations, their materiality or the proof of their very existence is fragmented, partial, and sometimes quite questionable (Sergi 2023; Stohl and Stohl 2011). Indeed, for each of the ‘invisibles’ and the narrated occult aims, there are also visible and overt roles that involve criminal activities, such as money laundering, corruption, or other associative or financial crimes, as well as tampering with the electoral

<sup>12</sup>Trial Bellu Lavuru, Sentence no. 766/09 G.u.p. - Tribunale di Reggio.

Calabria 23.09.2009:

<sup>13</sup>Op. Mammasantissima, 311.

<sup>14</sup>Trial ‘ndrangheta stragista, first degree, p. 276.

<sup>15</sup>Transcript of 22/11/2016 for audio of 20-13-11-18 - 09 37 06) p.724 della sentenza enorme.

system. A lot is lost and found in the corresponding narratives, but when the presumed (or imagined) aims and activities of the secret structure are recognized and described as such, that's when its alleged members' *reputation by invisibility* appears most significant.

### **The "invisibles" from the Santa onwards**

The recognition of the Santa is linked to its mixed composition: on the one hand, the 'ndrangheta, its violence, intimidation, and protection services and, on the other hand, the world of political exchanges, business, political violence, and institutional equilibria. Gambetta (2009):199) observes that except for the market for protection: *"the names that count in the underworld are those of individuals. At best, reputation extends only to family members"*. In line with this interpretation, the reputation of the Santa is first and foremost linked to individuals, to its protagonists, both from the 'ndrangheta and from the side of white collars (professionals and politicians). However, at the organizational level, the reputation of the 'ndrangheta and of the (deviant) masonry overflows onto the *santisti* too.

As hinted above, the two main protagonists of the Santa are lawyers Giorgio De Stefano and Paolo Romeo, who are dubbed as the most important "invisibles" by collaborators of justice and prosecutors; their invisibility is linked to their (alleged) affiliation to the masonry, and to their proximity to the 'ndrangheta for which they act as "reserved" protectors.

Their role as "behind the scenes" puppeteers consolidates the reputation of the whole nebulous structure originating with the Santa. Collaborator Consolato Villani declared that *"in the hierarchy of the 'ndrangheta, there are . . . invisible people . . . those who are higher up . . . who have contacts with the political world. . . with other parts of society . . . they are masons"*.<sup>16</sup> Collaborator Cosimo Virgiglio, talking about De Stefano and Romeo, confirms: *"I reiterate that their function is to enable relations, by making them invisible; between the typical mafia component and the other components of mafia power circuit"*.

Giorgio De Stefano is a cousin of Paolo De Stefano, a well-known patriarch of the De Stefano clan, a ruling 'ndrangheta clan in Reggio Calabria. Paolo De Stefano's son, Giuseppe, became the leader of the Reggio-based 'ndrangheta, but lawyer Giorgio De Stefano was considered as the real mind of the family. A collaborator of justice describes him as: *"the most powerful person there is in that borderland between 'ndrangheta and those occult centres of power in the masonry;"* he is also said in the 1980s to have *"fixed several trials relating to his family, as he was a mason and had connections in Rome"*.<sup>17</sup> Giorgio De Stefano also had institutional and political roles in the city of Reggio Calabria – he was elected as city counselor with the Christian Democrats in the 1980s and was convicted in the past.<sup>18</sup> His conduct was linked to key moments of the political and social history of the city.

Paolo Romeo, also a lawyer and former member of Parliament in the 1990s – was sentenced for subversive actions with the right-wing groups and external support to mafia association in mid-2000s for his proximity to the Tegano and De Stefano clans. He is portrayed as one of the leading – behind the scenes – protagonists of the political life of the city of Reggio Calabria. Romeo has been associated with different deviant and subversive groups, including *Gladio*<sup>19</sup> and a covert component of the "La Fenice" lodge, around which various collaborators of justice seemed to gravitate.<sup>20</sup> Romeo is presented at different time as "sleeping" mason and/or accused to be part of a covert lodge born out of Licio

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.369.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid. 1610.

<sup>18</sup>He was arrested at the end of the 1980s and convicted as an external associate to the 'ndrangheta in the early 1990s; he was then acquitted for the charge of being a member of the apical structure of power of the 'ndrangheta and an external collaborator to it in more recent years.

<sup>19</sup>The Italian branch of Operation Gladio was the first one to be discovered. It was set up under Minister of Defence (from 1953 to 1958) Prime minister Giulio Andreotti publicly recognized it on 24 October 1990, speaking of an anticommunist intelligence, response, and safeguard structure, with arms caches and reserve officers. Gladio was involved in the "strategy of tension" (strategia della tensione) during the "lead years," which started with Piazza Fontana bombing in December 1969 (Nuti 2007).

<sup>20</sup>Corte di Cassazione – Ricorso di Romeo Paolo.

Gelli's P2<sup>21</sup> with subversive and terrorist aims (for which he was acquitted during the Olimpia trial). Romeo's reputation is linked to his political and networking capabilities. According to collaborator Giacomo Ubaldo Lauro<sup>22</sup>

Paolo Romeo was part of the Avanguardia Nazionale<sup>23</sup> (...) Several times the 'ndrangheta was asked to support subversive plans promoted by the extra-parliamentary far-right, such as Junio Valerio Borghese.<sup>24</sup> The link for these proposals was always Paolo Romeo . . . .

Paolo Romeo was widely recognized by several collaborators of justice as a mediator and arbitrator in disputes – calling people to smooth conflicts, by “*becoming the trait-d’union*” and by “*making everyone feel important*”,<sup>25</sup> as said by a collaborator of justice. Giorgio De Stefano, instead, is defined as “*a piece of history of Reggio Calabria*”.<sup>26</sup>

A common past political activism and a friendship born out of shared ideological beliefs promoted trust and solidarity between the two individuals. Moreover, they were entrusted because of their *known/narrated* capacity to intercede and protect: their friendship is long-standing, their charisma resilient, and their reputation linked to their selectively *known and discernible “invisibility.”* Alongside them, a plethora of lawyers, politicians, entrepreneurs, all “become” invisible. As collaborator Lauro explains, other 'ndrangheta members who were *santisti* banked on the reputation of both Paolo Romeo and Giorgio De Stefano:

We realised that if we joined that masonic family, we would be able to speak directly and be represented in the institutions. . . . This is how the idea came to select Giorgio De Stefano and Paolo Romeo for the Reggio Calabria municipal elections. It is evident that 'ndrangheta families had direct representation within the institutions. By taking advantage of the masonic role themselves, they managed public affairs with force.”<sup>27</sup>

As we will see, in fact, occasionally *santisti* internalized political representation winning seats in municipal, regional, or national elections.

### ***Aims and strategies of the “invisibles”***

As shown in the previous sections, the creation of the Santa activated a process of organizational transformation of the “Ndrangheta, favoring both the *external* projection of its influence in the political-institutional and economic systems and the *internal* protection of clans” criminal activities. Such evolution augmented the perimeter of “invisible” connections with powerful institutional actors; it also expanded criminal activities involving bureaucratic and judicial processes, as well as political and electoral ones. Collaborator Michele Ierardo describes the *santisti*'s role in these terms: “*they must foster relations with politicians, public officials, masons, professionals . . . one of the main tasks of the santisti is that of seizing or infiltrating public bodies by making use of electoral consensus*”.<sup>28</sup> Collaborator Villani specifies<sup>29</sup>

This is how it must work within the 'ndrangheta, when a politician is protected, and becomes a man let's say *invisible* to the other affiliates. Someone is in charge or a referent who manages these relations, because you must not divulge and you must not know, you must not get to this connection . . . especially for law enforcement . . .

<sup>21</sup>The Propaganda 2 (P2) was a covert lodge created within the Grand Orient of Italy masonic obedience and exploited by its Venerable Master Licio Gelli to promote illicit deals, corruption, and subversive plots (Cecchi 1985; Sergi and Vannucci 2023b).

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.: 15.

<sup>23</sup>Avanguardia Nazionale (AN) was a neo-fascist and subversive organization funded in 1960 by Stefano delle Chiaie.

<sup>24</sup>Junio Valerio Borghese was Navy commander during the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini and a prominent hard-line Fascist politician in postwar Italy.

<sup>25</sup>Operation Mammasantissima.: 472.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid. p1860.

<sup>27</sup>Trial Gotha – Abbreviato: 207.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid: 208.

<sup>29</sup>Trial Gotha, Corte d'Appello di Reggio Calabria, Rito Ordinario, p. 3201.:

The few actors recognized as “invisibles” (initially *santisti*) – through the additional pseudo-masonic “occult” blend – played the role of “zippers:” they are said to link the leading figures of the ‘ndrangheta looking for profitable business and judicial impunity with white collars demanding protection, bribes, and votes. Their role can be described as the bottleneck of an hourglass that can be tipped both ways, allowing selective communication and transactions between the two separate worlds of the “street-level” ‘ndrangheta on the one side and the high-profile powerful political-administrative, entrepreneurial, and professional figures on the other.

The “invisibles” aimed, first and foremost, at facilitating “Ndrangheta members” interactions with institutions, to launder illicit proceeds and to access new sources of profit (i.e., public procurement), which were not usual for the ‘ndrangheta clans until the 1970s-80s. A prosecutor in Reggio Calabria explains this relationship as the enabler of a systemic governance structure of informal and illicit deals:

What matters is a higher sphere than what they called masonry, another decision-making level. How to generate spin-offs in an area poor in private initiative? Through the public sector, which means politics and procurement. And how do you introduce yourself as a ‘ndranghetista to the politician, by knocking? You must already be part of a system that doesn’t require introductions. ‘Ndranghetisti have identified indispensable figures that allow the system here and elsewhere to generate mechanisms that do not need constant adjustments, daily indications. The big bosses intervene little quantitatively, but heavily qualitatively, as individuals who do not get their hands dirty every day.

As recalled by Cosimo Virgiglio – an entrepreneur, also a mason, close to the clan Piromalli, and who turned collaborator of justice<sup>30</sup> – next to the criminal aims arrived political gains:

It [the Santa] was meant to ensure political power. So, the ‘ndrangheta gives the money, the reserved component [the Santa] invests the money, puts it in a safe place. Then, the reserved component asks to the ‘ndrangheta electoral consensus, right or left it doesn’t matter. When those in the reserved component decide where to channel their votes, then things follow. This was the basic system: political power – economic power.

For Virgiglio it was a *quid pro quo*: votes on the one hand and money laundering on the other.<sup>31</sup> The white-collars and professionals involved with this structure were and are still called “masons” – their membership indeterminate and unconfirmed – to evoke their elitist role and their occult practices:

The system which was made by masons and ‘ndranghetisti, had as final objective for those masons – who were very involved in politics – to manage the flow of votes. The ‘ndrangheta aimed at consolidating their wealth, as proceeds of crime needed to be re-allocated on the market, also abroad, through advanced financial mechanisms that the masons could offer.

### ***Secrecy and invisibility as amplifiers of corruption***

Resources at stake in hidden arenas for exchanges – where the invisibles’ reputation is recognized – include the allocation of public resources (public contracts, appointments, influence, and information on police and judicial acts, etc.) and ‘ndrangheta-manipulated electoral consent. The latter is a crucial asset for politicians in the Calabrian fragmented and de-structured party system, where even small percentages of votes “on the market” at the local level can allow candidates to get a seat. The promise of votes can be used as a “bargaining chip” to negotiate with future decision-makers, but also bought in cash. In both cases, the “invisibles” can play a role of *connectors* of such web of transactions. Their recognized name and reputation of having strong and stable connections with a presumably all-mighty amalgam of ‘ndrangheta and para-masonic structures creates shared beliefs that the content of their agreements will be honored.

In public contracting, the combination of high potential profits and vulnerability of decision-making to corruption generates robust incentives for colluded entrepreneurs to obtain ‘ndrangheta protection: this becomes a prerequisite to bar competition from outsiders. In Reggio Calabria they

<sup>30</sup>Trial ‘ndrangheta stragista – Memoria del Pubblico Ministero – Proc. pen. n. 3798/15 RGNR/mod. 21DDA – Procura della Repubblica presso il Tribunale Ordinario di Reggio Calabria Direzione Distrettuale Antimafia – p.669.

<sup>31</sup>Trial ‘ndrangheta stragista – Integrazione della Richiesta per l’applicazione di Misure Cautelari, cit.: 98 a.

move very carefully, due to the high density of clans which may disagree on a certain agreed-upon allocation of tenders. First, entrepreneurs try to look for the endorsement of the “invisibles.” This is the case of an entrepreneur (A.), who aims at winning a contract for waste disposal with a mixed public-private company. This taped dialogue with one “invisible” (L.) confirms previous contacts with a mafia boss (Pasquale) and exposes the terms of the deal which he (A.) proposes, and the boss accepts. Terms encompass also future hiring and subcontracting:

L.: This is the conversation with this person who can manage in the municipality, and it's the same reasoning that he did. He says: “I will find the company.” Wait... “We find the company as the leader of the situation in Reggio... you'll deal with this”... I have a chance at the municipality... I have to go with my face or send someone with my face and tell him: “You have to do this or you can leave.” I can do so because I have nothing to lose [...]

A.: The commitment I have with Compare Pasquale is in these terms: let's try to win the job, to be clear, the job is not won by me, it is won by a company... we are interested in nailing a little money from the state... Then, as soon as we start, we select everything that there is, there we put... what do we need, five people? Five of us. We need a workshop? The workshop is ours. Do we need to buy certain things? We reason about how to carry them out. But it's not like an operation that can be done in a day, I need the peace of mind to manage it and that I don't... I don't create problems to manage it behind you and Pasquale... Because if I take a commitment, man to man, I have to carry it on, but in order to carry it on, I have to do it with... How do you say? ... tranquility.

L.: I tell you one thing. For what concerns me, I'm 100% sure that's what he tells you too, you have *carte blanche*...<sup>32</sup>

Entrepreneurs paying for their protection fee to the 'ndrangheta could then participate in a collusive ring for tenders allocated through corrupt exchanges. The mafia boss Giuseppe De Stefano – according to a collaborator – could impose rules and enforce them in this layered and strictly regulated corruption system:

... the bribe to be paid for the execution of the works was 5% to be divided among all [ndrangheta clans in Reggio]; it was understood as a rule known to the contractors, who automatically themselves turned “hat in hand” to the “people in charge” [ndranghetisti], thus avoiding upstream extortion demands and the emergence of any disputes in the collection and distribution of tenders; and the rule of a 10% bribe to politicians, guaranteeing the smooth advancement of procedures.<sup>33</sup>

In an intercepted conversation between the already quoted Altomonte and his daughter, the former refers to the sanctioning power of the “invisibles” in the regulation of corrupt exchanges, while stigmatizing the conduct of a municipal functionary in the municipality of Bova, who is autonomously pocketing bribes on public works: *“This person must be careful because there are people in Bova who can harm him, and these are the invisibles.”*<sup>34</sup>

There is a direct interplay between the allocation of votes and public contracts. In both markets, unstable hidden transactions may be regulated under 'ndrangheta's governance; resources (political power or money) obtained in one market can be profitably reinvested in the other. In a dialog on local elections in a municipality of the Province of Reggio Calabria between a *santista* (M.) and a 'ndrangheta boss (B.), their influence over a determinant quote of electoral consent is correlated with the future management of public contracts.

B.: If you want to be Mayor, then stay and be a surveyor...

M.:because Pietro has the votes to give to people who need them... who are up to it and puts them in a position... if you can do it for the friend, you do the impossible to favor him as well... these are the commitments you have to take, you don't arrive there to be the mayor and you think that the story is over... no. The story begins... [...]: but I mean... are the votes yours?

<sup>32</sup>Trial Meta: 743–4.

<sup>33</sup>Trial Gotha – Abbreviato 282.

<sup>34</sup>Op. Mammasantissima, 312.



B.; and Then, this one wins and M.C. says “the public works must be given to me, the ones I don’t want, they have to give them to others;” for now, I’ll go and bust my ass. . . then, tomorrow you go and get the contracts. . .

M.; Then, we’ll see who gets the contracts!<sup>35</sup>

Since votes are a prized resource, strategic calculation influences their allocation to politicians asking for electoral consent to ‘ndrangheta bosses. In an intercepted dialogue, “invisible” Giorgio De Stefano expresses a realistic view on the weight of ‘ndrangheta electoral mobilization:

Once we went looking for votes to give him . . . and then we told about him to a politician in Plati [village in the province, known mafia stronghold]. . . because, it’s true. . . I’ve never gone into these circles, let’s say. . . because the politician should bring the votes, not the [‘ndrangheta] family. . . the family brings them, but they’re nothing. . . At the end of the day, you win elections with politics, you don’t win them with these.”<sup>36</sup>

Since ‘ndrangheta votes can influence, but do not determine the outcome, whoever is considered more likely to win and is reliable will be an ideal partner. As a collaborator describes it, there is a rule of “*false politics*”: simultaneous negotiation with several politicians, with pacts, which ‘ndranghetisti can revoke whenever convenient – to always keep their choices a “mystery.”

The ‘ndrangheta, at times, hides their vote. . . there is false politics in politics. They pretend to vote for someone, then in the last two weeks, they decide who to vote for. . . you vote for this one, you vote for that one, then in the end you . . . you understand. . . there is always something hidden.<sup>37</sup>

Besides broad electoral pacts generating future obligations for elected politicians, also short-term vote-buying deals are a profitable business for ‘ndrangheta clans. Apart from the monetary profit, connections are also created with upcoming decision-makers. A ‘ndrangheta collaborator recounted his involvement in vote-buying as a leading figure of the Tegano clan in several local elections in Reggio Calabria. He remembered when they had to “honestly” refuse the proposal of politicians, since the votes had already been sold at a higher price:

Once with Peppe Tegano, I brought him some money, but he refused because there was another politician that he had to . . . practically had already taken on . . . not maybe, surely, because I brought him the money in cash, but he had already taken more than what I was bringing him . . . . We didn’t use tariffs. I don’t know: 50 votes to say. 100 votes. . . 50 votes, 5.000 euro.”<sup>38</sup>

In an uncertain political arena, the connecting function of the “invisibles” provides trust in the existence of an enduring and recognized center of influence over public decision-making on the one side and electoral consent on the other. Masonic connection and the (alleged) relationships with secret services strengthen their reputational capital, as explained by a collaborator, enacting a mechanism of reciprocity:

Although ‘pacts had expired,’ the clan continued to cultivate friendships with these people . . . who were linked to freemasonry, who were friends of Paolo De Stefano, and who consequently respected his sons and if they could help them, they helped them – as they have always helped each other on certain things: they are cliques.”<sup>39</sup>

## Discussion and conclusion

The empirical focus of this paper is the process of institutionalization of the Società di Santa, via narrative analysis. This provided analytical insight into how *reputation by invisibility* can be consolidated in an elusive criminal entity. Despite failing to gain an autonomous and enduring organizational structure and name, the supposed merger of ‘ndrangheta and (pseudo/para) masonry generated

<sup>35</sup>Trial Meta, 1338–9.

<sup>36</sup>Trial Gotha -Abbreviato: 479.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid: 292–3.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid: 297.

<sup>39</sup>Trial Gotha -Abbreviato: 172.

narratives, which reverberated onto its “invisible” (albeit vaguely recognizable) members, their identifiability, reputation, and, subsequently, deviant activities.

Starting in the 1970s a demand emerged among the leading figures of the main 'ndrangheta clans in the Reggio Calabria province for the establishment of more stable and enduring channels of communication, connection, and cooperative interaction with the sphere of politics, bureaucracy, and entrepreneurship. Approaching powerful white-collar counterparts through the adoption of corruption, electoral influence, and collusion reflected a rebalancing of criminal strategies by the 'ndrangheta elites, diminishing their recourse to violence and intimidation. Consequently, old and new criminal actors were entrusted with a new role of *santisti*, which is formally higher, but *de facto* diverges sideways from the traditional 'ndrangheta hierarchical ladder. The Santa seems to be, at least in certain phases, the mere result of a fragile and unstable bargaining equilibrium between high-profile mafiosi ('ndranghetisti), institutional, and economic actors, sharing a para-masonic connection and a valuable social recognition as affiliates.

As said, some *santisti* did not belong to the 'ndrangheta, allowing a diversification of resources and exchanges by also using the world of masonry to cement the references to secrecy and mystique. We can observe how narratives surrounding the Santa reverberated thanks to its “whispered” fame among associates and because of the reputation of invisibility of its alleged members. In particular, the paradoxical visibility of some of the invisibles does not deny their reputation by invisibility, but it shows us how such reputation can be fueled through ambiguity and selective secrecy (Cappellaro, Compagni, and Vaara 2021). This *reputation by invisibility* has two main drivers: the umbilical link to the 'ndrangheta as a reputable criminal organization and the embracing of a masonic allure in its symbolism.

However, whereas the outcome for the Santa as an organization is unclear, the outcome for its “invisible” members is not. While evoked by many as a threatening autonomous reality, the Santa's structure, actions, internal rules, and roles remained only vaguely defined. As said, this ambiguity, can be an effective strategy for any clandestine or mafia-like organization with protective purposes (Cappellaro, Compagni, and Vaara 2021) and has facilitated the reputation by invisibility of the *santisti*, later “*the invisibles*.” Indeed, it's the invisibles who promoted, and benefitted from, a *reputation by invisibility* of the Santa. There is a reputational halo surrounding the invisibles, which changes attitudes and beliefs of any potential counterparts, inducing requests, subjugation, respect, and compliance: as in a positive feedback mechanism, their authority, negotiation, and enforcement power are correspondingly increased. As Simmel (1906:465) notices: “*secrecy involves a tension which, at the moment of revelation, finds its release*”.

The *santisti* display a strong commitment to secrecy and reciprocal support, which, as seen, could also imply disloyalty against lower level 'ndranghetisti. Their role is, therefore, hierarchically above the 'ndrangheta, “invisible” to the lower levels. A former neofascist terrorist, Concutelli, in 2020 during the trial Gotha declared to have heard about the existence of the Santa in Sicily, where they called it “Mamma” (Mother) instead; according to him the Santa was “*the charismatic reference to the hierarchy of the clans . . . a secret society*”.<sup>40</sup> Arguably, it is because of this hierarchy within the 'ndrangheta that the reputation of invisibility takes off. As a 'ndrangheta collaborator puts it: “*The 'ndrangheta constitutes a sort of “company name” and “brand” that, for other criminal contexts, gives reliability to its members in Italy and abroad*”.<sup>41</sup> The 'ndrangheta's reputation – accrued thanks to violence and resilience in criminal markets – acts as propellant for the reputation of the Santa. The evocative valence of secrecy that the Santa embraces, also thanks to the masonic repertoire, takes a symbolic value and strengthens the initial reputation capital granted by the 'ndrangheta. This, in turn, affects individual beliefs about the capabilities of the *santisti*, whose reputation is *enhanced* by their *double* recognition as being “invisible” to the 'ndranghetisti and “untouchable” because operating in secret structures well-connected with powerful institutional actors.

<sup>40</sup>Trial Gotha – Ordinario: 385.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid. 467.

The game between visibility and invisibility for the santisti is clearly strategic. In an intercepted conversation between Antonio Marra [another lawyer-“invisible” convicted in the first degree of the Gotha trial] and Paolo Romeo in 2011,<sup>42</sup> the former discusses the roles that both Giorgio De Stefano and Paolo Romeo have and the reasons why, according to him, Romeo needs to be cautious as he is over-exposed, in comparison to Giorgio De Stefano who is more “invisible” and thus authoritative, thanks to its strategic invisibility:

You, in the mind of many, are above tough criminal powers, robust political powers, strong judiciary powers ... who can believe you when you make such a speech, come on ... in common knowledge (...) you are doing just cinema ... Giorgio [De Stefano] has the opposite effect as he doesn't appear anywhere, he stays hidden right? He rules from behind the walls ... I swear! So, you do this cinema, he doesn't, but you are both there ... nothing moves if you two don't want to!

Crucially, narratives about the *reputation* of the *invisibles* as *powerful* persist and circulate beyond the Santa: their *reputation by invisibility* “makes history.” In the sentence of the first ordinary trial for Gotha, in a surveillance tape in 2011 – thus much later than the birth of the Santa – Marra is surprised when a man doesn't know who Giorgio De Stefano is. He says to this man: “*Giorgio De Stefano is part of the history of Reggio Calabria like lawyer Paolo Romeo.*” The man inquires how so, to which Marra responds: “*It's a long story ... He's done the politics of Reggio during the First Republic, together with Paolo [Romeo]*” and then, addressed to a third person “*Giorgio De Stefano ... in Reggio Calabria ... only he doesn't know him!*”.<sup>43</sup> This echoes Simmel (1906:442) when he notes how we “*should inquire how our objectively psychological picture of others is influenced by the real relationships of practice and of sentiment between us*”. In fact, the reputation by invisibility of many of the santisti – most of them convicted for their support (internal or external) to the 'ndrangheta – has consolidated to the point of becoming “history,” difficult to lose. In practice, this means that the reputation by invisibility of the santisti-invisibles is what characterizes their capability to exercise both political influence and criminal power in the city of Reggio Calabria, thanks to the double recognition of both the 'ndrangheta and the masonic symbolism. Reputation of invisibility, when consolidated, is difficult to deny or ignore. Future research can perhaps focus on the applicability of the concept of “reputation by invisibility” in other mafia-like or semi-secret organizations by, for instance, drawing parallels with other criminal organizations leveraging different formulas for secrecy, ambiguity, and visibility, for power consolidation.

What Gambetta (2009:215) affirms with reference to mafias applies even more when referring to an occult entity as the Santa: “*How does one detect the disappearance of an entity supposed to be secret and whose main product – protection by intimidation – is intangible? If God died, how would we know? No one has enough authority to stand up and proclaim convincingly that the mafia is gone forever.*” The strongest status of secrecy of the Santa, its nebulous nature within and above the 'ndrangheta, and the derived reputation of invisibility of its members can similarly explain – in line with our theoretical framework – the resilient and long-lasting nature of the narratives surrounding power in Reggio Calabria, without any moral grounding.

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<sup>42</sup>Trial Gotha – Abbreviato: 680.

<sup>43</sup>Trial Gotha – Ordinario: 5519.

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## Notes on contributors

**Anna Sergi** is Professor of Criminology at the University of Essex. She has conducted extensive research in comparative criminology in the fields of mafia and organized crime studies, international policing, drug trafficking, and security through seaports, as well as power and crime. Among his latest publications are *"Mafia, Deviant Masons and Corruption"* (2023, with Alberto Vannucci), and *"Chasing the Mafia"* (Sergi). 2022

**Alberto Vannucci** is Professor of Political Science at the University of Pisa. He is the director of the Master Programme in Analysis, Prevention and Fight against organized crime and corruption. Among his latest publications are *"Mafia, Deviant Masons and Corruption"* (2023, with Anna Sergi); *"La corruzione come sistema"* (2021, with Donatella della Porta).

## ORCID

Alberto Vannucci  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0434-1323>

## Ethical

Ethical approval for research with human participants has been sought within the guidelines of the University of Pisa, IT

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