

# The Secret Nexus. A Case Study of Deviant Masons, Mafia and Corruption in Italy

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This paper wishes to explore some characteristics of the relevant interconnections between mafias/mafiosi and masonic lodges/masons in the Italian context. The paper sets out to study these interconnections from a social science perspective rooted in sociological and neo-institutional studies of organised crime and mafias, but also in criminological approaches to social constructionism, in the form of symbols and narratives. We will present a case study to reflect on the roles that (deviant) masons can assume in contexts where both mafias’ and personal, political, or economic interests are at play. The case study shows how masonic alliances can augment networking and enforcing capabilities: we call this process masonic deviance amplification. Additionally, the case study confirms the constitutive power that narratives around the masonic world hold today in the Italian context.

**KEY WORDS:** masonry, mafia, ‘ndrangheta, corruption, Italy

## INTRODUCTION

The 1977 Italian movie ‘An average little man’<sup>1</sup> is universally considered a masterpiece by director Mario Monicelli and the closing act of the so called ‘Comedy Italian style’. Initially amusing, with a dramatic turn the movie exposes the irredeemable involution of Italian society towards familism, corruption and violence. Significantly, when the leading character needs the solution to a test for his son to access a public office, he is asked by his superior, a mason, to comply to a farcical masonic affiliation ritual. The popular representation of masonry that emerges in the movie is noteworthy: a clique of medium-level public functionaries seeking opportunities to provide and reciprocate each other with support, informal help and illicit favours.

1 ‘Un borghese piccolo piccolo’ would be the original title in Italian.

Just four years after the release of the movie a huge scandal centred around the activity of the masonic lodge P2 (Propaganda 2), ruled by venerable master Licio Gelli, heavily hit the Italian political-institutional system (Lollo 2016). Masonry appeared in the Italian public debate as something more worrying than a compensation chamber for informal arrangements of medium class affiliates. Under the umbrella of a secret lodge within the main Italian masonic obedience (the Great Orient of Italy), a covert network had developed including hundreds of members of the Italian political and economic elite. Affiliates felt comfortable in an environment where extra-legal and illicit arrangements were reciprocated with favours and immunity (Della Porta and Vannucci 1999). The P2 scandal drastically altered Italian public view on the nature of masonry (Dickie 2020); it contributed to shape a collective representation of masonry as a place where almost everything can be informally or illegally obtained through connections, bribery and blackmailing. After the P2 scandal, law n. 17/1982, 'Anselmi law', was passed to punish any attempt to constitute any secret society which exploits brotherhood to interfere with public functions. This scandal made it clear that there are, in Italy, masonic organizations which can be considered as *deviant* from official/regular masonic journeys: not only they don't embrace the masonic journey as it developed for centuries, but they manipulate it for private gain.

Mafiosi were among the many actors in the P2. In fact, the deep-rooted presence of mafia-type criminal organizations in most Italian regions and especially in the South, and the expansion of mafias' activities into the legal and public markets, made it almost unavoidable for masonic entities to meet mafias: 'since the 1970s a powerful means to stabilise relationships between mafia and politics and at the same time to cope with the decline in mafia legitimization has been the Freemasonry' (Paoli 2003: 50).

Since 1981 judicial inquiries have shown evidence of relational networks where masonic organizations – with the 'original sin', the reputational burden, of the P2 scandal – coexist with powerful mafia-type organizations within a political-institutional system characterised by an anomalous level of endemic corruption (Jamieson 1994; Della Porta and Vannucci 2012; Sergi and Lavorgna 2016; Sergi and Sergi 2021). However, the topic of masonic-mafia interactions has been almost completely neglected in scientific research, presumably due to the lack of reliable empirical data, to practical obstacles in obtaining them and to methodological difficulties in their generalization. The relevant research that is available (Dickie 2020) is rooted more in historical analysis than social sciences.

This paper wishes to explore some characteristics of the relevant interconnections between mafiosi and masons in the Italian context. The paper sets out to study these interconnections from a social science perspective rooted in sociological and neo-institutional studies of organized crime and mafias, but also in criminological approaches to social constructionism, in the form of symbols and narratives. This paper will focus on one case study, which is particularly telling of the mafia-masonic nexus and masonic deviance in the region of Calabria, Southern Italy. The case study will show how networking and enforcing capabilities – for legal and illegal deals - of the main character (here called Joe) are indeed augmented by his masonic alliance: we call this process 'masonic deviance amplification'. The case study will help us reflect on the constitutive power that narratives around the masonic world hold today in the Italian context. There is an 'imagined' masonry that populates most narratives when it comes to the interconnections between mafias and masonic worlds. Not only this imagined masonry has nothing to do with 'official' and traditional masonic rites, but it also does not always fully realise the imagined benefits in terms of extra-legal governance expected by both mafia members and/or other actors.

A specialist academic literature on masonic deviance or the mafia-masons nexus is not existent; below we sketch our theoretical standpoints to approach this study, prior to engaging with the case study and its analysis.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Masonic rites and mafias

Both mafias and masonic rites have long histories, which cannot be fully presented here. We can identify, for the purposes of this work, mafias as criminal organizations which aim at the profit driven accumulation of capitals via illicit means (from drug trade to infiltration in the legal economy) but are also interested in a power-driven territorial governance and protection supply (Sciarrone 1998; Gambetta 1993; Paoli 2002; Sergi 2017). Varese (2010; 2020) emphasizes the crucial distinction between criminal groups that simply trade on the markets, by producing and/or selling illegal goods and services, and mafia-type groups that, instead, aim at governing such markets by providing services of dispute settlement, cartel enforcement, governance of illegal or informal deals.

In Italy, mafia-type organizations have been extensively studied, especially the main ones – Sicilian Cosa nostra, Calabrian *ndrangheta*, Campanian *camorra* – whose organizational structure, histories and current reach vary (Catino 2019; 2020). Mafias are distinguishable in Italian criminal law because they use intimidation, fear and subjugation of communities to gain benefits and profits of various nature. Literature refers to the multiple interconnections between the criminal side of mafia organizations, the legal economy and the political-institutional realm (Della Porta and Vannucci 2012; Sciarrone and Storti 2019).

As for the masonry, we refer to a set of centuries-old brotherhood organizations, which are based on fraternal and self-improvement values and organised around a basic, local organizational unit, the lodge. Each lodge is supervised at regional or national levels by the ‘obedience’, which in turn refers, ideally, to the main masonic rites also abroad, but without interdependence in operational capacity (Jacob 2007; Bogdan and Snoeck 2014).

Within a neo-institutional perspective, mafias and masonic rites/lodges are distinct, yet occasionally interacting, organizational entities, which in exceptional contexts may exhibit a partial membership overlap, operational interaction and isomorphic adaptation (Della Porta and Vannucci 2012; Ciconte 2015). In areas of Italy where mafia presence has been particularly proactive and where the clustering of certain elites or professions around masonic lodges has been successful, we indeed find such overlapping also with criminal intent (Sergi 2022). Double affiliates can profit from networking activities with influential politicians, functionaries and other ‘white-collars’, whose services can be useful for other actors involved in the same arenas of extra-legal dealings (Della Porta and Vannucci 2021). There is, however, an irreducible detachment between the criminal objectives of power and profit pursued by mafia-type organizations and the intimate spiritual improvement of individuals and humanity which (should) animate masonic activities and the daily experience of many of its well-intentioned affiliates (Dickie 2020).

To explore this area of hidden interconnections and the illegal activities that this case study presents, such as (political) corruption, exchanges of favours, abuses of power, it can be fruitful to combine neo-institutional perspectives on extra-legal governance – looking at both mafias and masonic associations as potential guarantors of resources at stake in informal interactions – and at the literature on social constructionism, primarily through symbols and narratives.

### Mafias, extra-legal governance and resources

To analytically approach the intersections between mafia-type groups and deviant masons, it is useful to consider extra-legal governance as a characterising activity of mafia groups, which can however be exercised also by other willing and ‘powerful’ actors – such as masons or politicians. According to a well-established paradigm, the specificity of mafias consists in their ability to ‘regulate’ and provide order and predictability to a range of economic and social activities,

particularly in the illegal markets (Reuter 1983; Schelling 1984). According to the most coherent systematization of this approach: ‘the main market for mafia services is to be found in unstable transactions in which trust is scarce and fragile. Such is the case, for instance, with illegal transactions in which no legitimate enforcement agency—in other words, the state—is available’ (Gambetta 1993:17).

Mafiosi use of a set of heterogeneous resources at their disposal - violence and intimidation, but also reputation, intelligence, networks of relationships, internal bonds of trust and identification (Sciarrone 2019) - as inputs to provide a guarantee of property rights and the fulfilment of informal rules and contractual agreements. Historically, the demand for mafia’s private protection emerges in social and economic contexts lacking trust in the effectiveness of alternative structures of regulation and governance of such relationships (Bandiera 2003). Mafia’s private protection consists in the prevention, settlement and eventual sanctioning of non-compliance in disputes; it relates both to specific agreements or to informal rules guaranteeing individual expectations regarding the exercise of certain rights – whether legally exercisable or not (i.e., illegal/criminal deals) (Varese 2013).

Focusing on protection implies an understanding of the combination between ‘market’ dynamics – where property rights and transaction costs are relevant – and the social dimension of power, implicit in the regulating function of social norms, contractual constraints, institutions (North 2005). Sources of uncertainty in social interactions are mitigated by governance mechanisms, including a plurality of ‘third-party’ guarantors, whose services may be crucial in extra-legal interactions and deals (Ellickson, 1991): ‘criminal organizations’ comparative advantage arises from the fact that they do not face competition from the enforcement power of the state’ (Barzel 2002: 229).

The capability to enforce the fulfilment of deals, contractual agreements, codes of behaviour in extra-legal interactions explains the pivotal role of mafias as third-party guarantor in illegal trades and informal transactions. The latter, in fact, cannot be legally sanctioned and the ‘rights’ on resources at stake are felt as contested or unsecure (Gambetta 1993). The range of mafias’ activity as providers of private protection can thus expand or reduce; this depends on the size of extra-legal arenas, and on the effectiveness (and integrity) of state institutional actors, in their specular functions of guarantors of legality and suppressors of illegality. Extensive state presence and regulation can in fact coexist with – or even enhance – mafias’ activity as providers of trust in the interstices or in the shadows of formally law-controlled social interactions, particularly when key public actors – as corrupted judges in our case study – contribute to dismantle confidence in state’s protection (Della Porta and Vannucci 2012; 2021).

Mafias are not the sole potential enforcers, however, since they may interact in different arenas and local contexts with competing wannabe ‘third-party’ guarantors. Among them, political and bureaucratic actors, as well as fixers/middlemen, can convert their role of authority or their networking ability into a ‘protection service’, to regulate and enforce informal or illegal transactions (Fazekas *et al.* 2021). Masons and masonic organizations, besides enacting other decentralised governance mechanisms, also have the capability to exercise a third-party enforcement role. High-profile deviant masons are particularly reliable within arenas of secretive deals and reserved interactions: their power to selectively include or ban from hidden networks of exchange – partly overlapping with masonic organizations – to use blackmailing information; inflict reputational damage or ‘ideological’ excommunication are among the most effective enforcing resources they can use to provide ‘fixing’ and protection services.

To analytically ‘unpack’ the complex net of relationships connecting mafia organizations and powerful actors – including masons – it is useful to refer to the nature of ‘commodities’ they can provide to each other. Such resources determine bargaining and enforcing powers, i.e., the kind of repay actors can obtain pursuing their goals in the interaction with others, in a process

which can symbiotically fortify their authority in different arenas (Ruggiero 2021). As noticed by Coleman (1990:63):

‘Those resources involved in economic, social, and political exchange have one attribute in common: they all consist of rights to act, or in some cases bundles of rights to act in several ways. The essential quality of a right lies in its social base. Rights come into existence, vanish, and are taken from one actor and given to another by social recognition. Yet rights are dependent on power for their enforcement, either the power of the holder of the right to protect his claim or the power of actors other than the holder to enforce their allocation of rights.’

Indeed, among these commodities, complementing material benefits and political support, we also find other more nuanced resources, as social status, information, protection, reputational assets, which are deeply rooted, recognised and ‘socially constructed’ in local contexts.

### Social Constructionism: symbols and narratives

To understand functions and roles of complex and semi-secret organizations like mafia clans and (deviant) masonic lodges, in their opaque interplay of power, it is important to focus on their capability to socialise members – and, to a certain extent, also external actors – to shared principles and rules, having ideological, sub-cultural or even exoteric nature. As both mafia clans and masonic lodges are semi-secret societies, their symbolism is conducive to *engineering* their identity: symbols and shared practice do construct and can reveal parts of secret organizations to outsiders (Simmel 1906; Paoli 2003). Rituals and ceremonials are not merely folkloristic manifestations of these organizations: they contribute to experiences, by associating strong symbolic values to expectations and preferences, which make such organizations – and their leaders – more effective in their domains of activity, including governance of extra-legal deals (Ciconte 2015).

As per symbolic interactionist approaches to crime (Ulmer and Spencer 1999) the study of symbols, rituals and ceremonies helps us understand continuity and changes in social settings. Symbolic interactionism is an approach developed by George Herbert Mead (1934), concerned with the construction of society and social meanings through repeated interactions and face-to-face contacts (Carter and Fuller 2016). Symbolic interaction requires not just a consciousness of self, but also the evaluation of various courses of action based on shared meanings derived from ‘taking the role of the other’. Role-taking allows us to stand outside ourselves and view what surrounds us as ‘objects’ of analysis (Blumer 2004). Social constraints and opportunities surely influence interactions, but socialization can also contribute to choices made at the individual and collective levels. Crucially, symbolic interactionism approaches are concerned with detailed understanding of the micro-level aspects of social life, but they cannot neglect studies on power structures; power (as already argued by Foucault) is constructed as a ubiquitous feature of human activities (Dennis and Martin 2005).

In a social constructionist and symbolic interactionist perspective (Carter and Fuller 2016) ‘rights to act’ (and their protection), similarly to Coleman’s (1990) interpretations, are part of what we determine, construct and learn as social meanings. We learn about a behaviour from our interactions with others in our society and we attribute meaning to that behaviour according to both individual and collective values and agency. We behave as actors on the stage, in what Goffman (1959) called ‘dramaturgical performance’: social interaction is, in fact, a process of constant identity negotiation and exposure to others. Reality is ‘constructed’ on the basis on what we subjectively trust to be true when taking the role of others and performing for others. It is not about what is objectively true: rationality is not the only force at play in the attribution of social and symbolic meanings to actions and interactions (Snow 2001). Our beliefs are usually

objects of further interactions and performances, constantly eliciting the emergence of new or revitalised meanings.

In this process, definitions of individual or collective rights, including ‘rights to act’ in economic, social and political exchanges, can sediment as much as they can be modified – voluntarily or compulsorily – for an individual or a group. As reminded, ‘the impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by minor mishaps’ (Griffin 2012:61). With sedimentation or change also come new social interactions, establishing new values, and attributing new meanings to them. Still, as reminded by Goffman (1959), although social organization and dynamics do influence individual behaviour, the individual still has the agency to determine their behaviour. This is also true for the perceived effectiveness of private protection in specific arenas, as posed before.

In general terms, a demand for extra-legal governance is fuelled by the fragility of social trust, which can be a by-product of obstructed channels of interpersonal communication; weakness of social norms of reciprocity and solidarity; lack of alignment of collective and individual, symbolic meanings and values (Gambetta 1993). Conversely, for protection supply to be credible, third party’s ‘valuable’ enforcing resources must be recognised as such. Recognition is also about reputation, which in turn, yields power (e.g., through brokerage) in legal and illegal markets (Diekmann and Przepiorka 2019). This would be where cultural specificities emerge, where symbolic social meanings become part of the recognition process. For extra-legal favours to be ‘exchanged’ and the protection market to exist, those resources and extra-legal governance services must assume social meaning and value recognised by others. Concretely, ‘rights to act’ assume value, and therefore can be used and exchanged only in certain social interactions, and not others (Pizzorno 2007). For example, one can value their public image in the community, in a village, more than they value their possessions according to market price. This individual will therefore strive and eventually demand protection for their public image – e.g., social prestige – not only for their material resources; in turn, they might offer money or other ‘benefit’, if they enter a transactional relation with others.

Another powerful tool for social constructionism of semi-secret organizations, including those involved in criminal activities, are narratives, to reinforce the idea that norms and values and perceptions remain subjective. Narrative theory has been a particularly successful framework in recent critical criminological advancements (Fleetwood *et al.* 2019; Presser and Sandberg 2019). It was anticipated by the work of Henry and Milovanovic (1996) about ‘constitutive’ criminology, which posits that crime is not caused but ‘discursively’ constructed. Narrative criminology was developed by Presser (2009) who highlighted how stories are constitutive of both crime and harm. Narrative criminology acknowledges that self-reported data, stories that are shared in a specific context, independently of their being true or not, are valuable data anyway (Sandberg 2014). In fact, when it comes to mafia-type groups and other covert organizations, like masonic lodges, we often rely on self-reported declarations of insiders, witnesses and even interceptions. Narratives help create expectations, circulate and amplify beliefs and perceptions, which contribute to strengthening or even socially constructing the structure of unlawful or secret organizations. They affect the reputational assets of both secretive organizations and their affiliates; consequently, also their capability to provide extra-legal governance is influenced by the content of the stories that circulate about them.

We frame our case study along these theoretical contributions, stressing the relevance that symbols and narratives have on the constructionism of power dynamics and related governance mechanisms operating in extra-legal deals.

## DATA AND METHODS

This paper is an output of a larger research project that focuses entirely on the pathological dimension of potential interplay among mafias and masonry. We refer solely to the *deviant* side of the masonic world, defining deviant masons or deviant lodges as the individual and

organizational-level manifestations of a deliberate and systematic abuse, as well as a spurious or fake use of masonic resources (e.g., official roles, contacts, confidential information, authority, symbols, etc.), for private or illicit purposes, departing from formal and accepted intents of the legitimate/regular masonry. In line with criminological theory (Goode 2014), deviance is socially constructed and occurs when someone engages in conduct that is against social norms, values, organizational regulations, or laws. The testimony of a deviant mason in a mafia trial explains how deviation from official masonic appearances can feed on itself, in a self-justifying process:

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

In the past decades Italian media and public commentators have been feeding an increasingly confused picture about a so-called ‘massomafia’ (‘masonmafia’) which assumes a presumed ‘melting’ of the two organizations into a third, omnipotent and invisible, entity that is responsible for much of the malaise of Italian politics and economics (Leccese 2018; Cordova 2019). With critical minds, we recognise the need for a systematization of the scarce, yet rich, data available, and therefore we pursue a first attempt to categorise and operationalise the (known) interactions across the two worlds of mafia and deviant masons in Italy.

For this paper specifically we focused on two criminal proceedings with their interconnected news and media data and connected interviews (7) in the same context. The criminal proceedings which constitute our case study, dubbed ‘Rinascita-Scott’ and ‘Mala Pigna’, one from 2019 and one from 2020, and both currently before the courts in Calabria, are interconnected and brought forward by District Antimafia Prosecutors in Catanzaro and in Reggio Calabria, targeting the Calabrian mafia, the ‘ndrangheta. They amount to over 16,000 pages between arrest warrants and appendixes redacted by local authorities, on specific actors of interest for our research. We approached these proceedings through content analysis first – to understand the overall case and the main actors and activities overall – and then narrative analysis for what concerns the actors and activities linked to our object of study: the mafia-mason nexus. Particular attention was paid to understand how individuals – masons or mafiosi or both – construct stories and narratives from their own personal experience or from hearsay. We operated a dual layer analysis. First, we coded how individuals interpret their own lives through narratives – how their ‘dramaturgical performance’ is affected by social interactions via language; second, we analysed the construction of narratives via symbols, behaviours, norms. The result of our analysis informed our interviews (7), with three Antimafia prosecutors, active in both investigations and/or in the context of reference, three journalists covering related news in Calabria and two lawyers involved in the defence at these trials.

Every effort will be made to relate the discussion closely and solely to the criminal proceedings we chose as case study. However, the reader can expect that, in the discussion and conclusion of this paper, we will push the analysis further to embrace concepts and interpretations that are also valid for, and originating from, the larger project.

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

## CASE STUDY

### Background

The two cases dubbed ‘Rinascita-Scott’ and ‘Mala Pigna’ – dated respectively 2019 and 2020 (when arrests were made, and investigations concluded) – are lengthy and complex. Arrest warrants include hundreds of pages of interceptions’ transcripts – that is telephone tapping – and surveillance transcripts, and an impressive number of declarations from former ‘ndrangheta members (now collaborating with law enforcement) and former entrepreneurs who had interactions with both mafias and the local masonry. These two investigations are about a network of clans of the ‘ndrangheta in the province of Vibo Valentia, in the region of Calabria. These clans are poly-crime and active in a range of illegal activities, ranging from drug trade to murder, extortion, intimidation, money laundering, corruption, bid-rigging (Sergi and Sergi 2021). The specific focus of interest for this paper is the relationship that apical members of the clans have developed with lawyers and other professionals, also within masonic circles in Calabria. While judgement on the alleged criminal conducts of such professionals is still before the courts, we are here concerned with the interactions between the two worlds – mafias and masonry – to identify where and how masonic deviance emerges, intersecting with criminal activities and powerful white-collars actors.

In the two operations a pivotal role is played by Joe. Joe’s actual job as a lawyer amplifies his capacity of networking as a mason, having known links with local mafia clans, and with white-collar actors and public institutions, primarily in the judiciary. With just a few exceptions, no mason is just a mason; they will still have a profession, as a lawyer, a doctor, a professor, a politician, etc. Joe’s connections multiply with the many faces and roles he can assume in different arenas, as a mason, a lawyer, a consultant entrepreneur and a prominent regional politician. Joe was charged for external mafia association (which includes substantial support to and from different mafia clans in a variety of ways, like business facilitation, votes, corruption) and for judicial corruption.

### Actors and connections

One of the main issues in proceedings concerned with the mafia-masonry nexus is about the *actual* membership of individuals to a masonic lodge or obedience or rite. Despite not being overtly disclosed, everyone around Joe recognises his masonic belonging, which constitutes an amplifier of his capacity to have clients as a lawyer, to get votes as a politician and to even commit unethical or criminal acts in the process. A prominent ‘ndrangheta affiliate, collaborating with antimafia prosecutors, declared<sup>3</sup>:

‘I know for sure that lawyer Joe is a mason who used to do favours for his clients and others who weren’t his clients; I heard this from Sam (a known ‘ndrangheta boss) who told me that Joe was a ‘friend’ and ‘one of ours’; but I already knew it before Sam told me anyway, I have no doubt about it’.

That Joe is *known to be* a mason is confirmed by other sources, even though most people seem not to know his ‘official’ masonic ranking and status. For example, a former judge in Catanzaro, Mark, who is also awaiting trial for corruption in a spin-off investigation, declares.<sup>4</sup>

‘I participated to a meeting in the office of lawyer Joe in Catanzaro; (...) I don’t remember the name of the Lodge. I was the new guy; the others were already associated. Joe starts talking

3 Raggruppamento Operativo Speciale (ROS) Carabinieri – Servizio Centrale II Reparto Investigativo N. 66/16 di Prot. 2021. Proc. Pen. Nr. 2102/2020 RGNR MOD 21. Nota Riepilogativa delle Dichiarazioni di Alcuni Collaboratori di Giustizia sulla Persona di Joe. Roma, 07.01.2022 – p. 38.

4 Ibid. p. 134–35.

and introduces me to others; he announces I was interested in joining this secret organisation. (...) The master of ceremonies was lawyer Joe (...) he clearly had the highest ranking there’

Mark later retracted these claims saying that he was confused and must have *imagined* it. But another lawyer, Frank, who also has been involved in a spin-off investigation on judiciary corruption, declared in 2020<sup>5</sup>:

“Joe was described to me as someone who had started his political activity thanks to the votes of the ‘ndrangheta. Moreover, someone told me that he had a role of ‘venerable’ in the GOI [Great Orient of Italy], but I don’t know the exact rank; eventually, he had intense relations with judges among whom Mark. For a long time in Calabria, Joe had in his hands the political power, the masonic power and the ‘ndranghetist power”.

Notwithstanding imprecisions and hearsay statements around his masonic belonging, Joe is an ‘official’ mason. He was taped saying that he was trying to move from the lodge in Catanzaro to a lodge in Rome, within the GOI and, while in conversations about masonic rankings, he admitted being a ‘thirty-three’<sup>6</sup> and negotiated his ‘new’ ranking, probably a ‘thirty’ or a ‘thirty-two’ within the next obedience in Rome.<sup>7</sup> While attempting this move, Joe was intercepted talking with a university professor who was then (2018) the President of the del College of Venerable Masters of the Lazio region (where Rome is) for the GOI. Joe’s standing in the official masonry is not kept a secret, as he himself declares to be ‘*very tight*’ with Stefano Bisi – the (current) Great Master of GOI<sup>8</sup> – as well as other public and influential figures including the most prominent mason in Vibo Valentia, Calabria. Thanks to his regional and national political connections he can discuss electoral strategies with high-profile Italian politicians, including parties’ leaders like the Secretary of the Union of the Centre (UDC), as revealed at trial.

According to Cosimo, a mason-entrepreneur<sup>9</sup> who turned collaborator and gave evidence in an important ‘ndrangheta clan:

“Lawyer Joe had a dual membership, a ‘clean’ one with the GOI of the Catanzaro district, and then a covert, ‘whispered’ lodge; he had relations with the Lodge of Vibo. (...) The covert lodge included lawyer Joe, Joseph - a magistrate who later became Governor of the Region - and Ed, the Chief of the Fiscal Police (*Guardia di Finanza*) in Vibo.”

Cosimo explained how the relationship between official and covert/deviant lodges worked in the region since the early 2000s.

“The members of the regular lodges were all professionals, lawyers, doctors etc., while the covert lodges were made up of two strands: the first was that of the ‘*whispered at the ear*’, that is people who held institutional positions and for this reason could not be included in the lists reported to the Prefecture; the second strand was that of the ‘*sacred on the sword*’, that is subjects with criminal records of various kinds, including ‘ndranghetisti, or the ‘*respecters of the Gospel of Joe*’, they in fact thought to be Angels of God.”

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 88.

<sup>6</sup> This is one of the highest ranks of the Scottish Masonic Rituals - <https://www.ritoscozzese.it/rsaa/supremo-consiglio/> (accessed July 7, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Operation ‘Rinascita-Scott’. Procura della Repubblica presso il Tribunale di Catanzaro – Direzione Distrettuale Antimafia – N. 2239/14 RGNR/MOD.21/DDA N. 25/18 RMC – Al Giudice per le indagini preliminari presso il Tribunale di Catanzaro. Richiesta di Applicazione di Misura Cautelare Personale – Sequestro Preventivo – pp. 869 onwards.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.grandeoriente.it/chi-siamo/gran-maestro-e-giunta/stefano-bisi/> (accessed July 7, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Operation Rinascita-Scott – p.860.

While Joe's profile as an official mason emerges thanks to his contacts with other known brothers, it appears that the reputation of Joe as a *deviant* mason – involved in a variety of criminal activities also because of his mason links – is also a well-known fact, even if to some extent it is only *narrated*. This reputation is anchored to two main elements: Joe's political career and his work as a lawyer. In both arenas, Joe is considered to provide 'corrupted' legal services to a variety of mafia clans and to act as business facilitators for the benefit of mafia clans thanks to his masonic network and political standing.

In 2001 Joe started his political career as an elected member of parliament, later regional coordinator of Forza Italia (Silvio Berlusconi's party at that time first party) and then senator (MP). Some collaborators, including former 'ndranghetisti, have declared that he was elected also thanks to the support of 'ndrangheta members, specifically the Mancuso clan. Besides 'ndrangheta backing, according to Cosimo's testimony in 2020: 'the political career of Joe was decided in the masonry, including the parallel system, because he was particularly good in his personal relations'.<sup>10</sup>

According to another collaborator,<sup>11</sup> Joe could '*guarantee communication with members of the Mancuso clan and of the Grande Aracri clan*' while at the same time '*exploiting his masonic ties with key individuals in public institutions, to receive funds or somehow facilitate money laundering activities of proceeds of crime, this way*'. Joe was the lawyer of the Mancuso clan for years; someone of the calibre of Nicolino Grande Aracri (considered the head of the 'ndrangheta in the province of Crotone) also sought Joe as a lawyer, with an understanding that he would do for his clan what he was already doing for the Mancusos and - according to operation Mala Pigna - also for the Piromalli clan (prominent mafia family in Gioia Tauro), also via his masonic links (as we will see in the next section). This included fixing trials, by corrupting judges and/or accessing privileged documents, but also the introduction to powerful people he knew in case of problems. Additionally, various collaborators indicate that Joe was also active as a legal-business consultant on a variety of projects, for the Grande Aracri as well as other clans and for non-mafiosi.

"X told me that Joe – as member of a covert masonic lodge – acted as a mediator between the two clans and together with D. Grande Aracri, he curated entrepreneurial initiatives around Crotone - such as the construction of a touristic village; the management of a wind park; works around the airport of Crotone. As the initiative around the tourist and hotel sector in Crotone was also linked to a similar project in the coast of the Vibo Valentia area [where the Mancuso clan are mostly based], Joe had this dual function".<sup>12</sup>

Of course, these narratives by collaborators have a constitutive power independent from their contextual truth. Joe's overlapping roles (lawyer, politicians, mason) construct a 'dark' reputational profile as someone who, thanks to both his official and his deviant masonic links, successfully managed to get elected, to boost his professional career, to network with both mafiosi and institutional actors, to promote various businesses.

### Activities and resources

Cosimo and other collaborators portrayed judiciary corruption as the main illegal market for Joe's services, the activity that made him 'valuable', 'recognised' and 'recognizable' both in the underworld and in the upperworld. According to the dominant narrative Joe can be trusted to

10 ROS Carabinieri – p. 92 – Verbale di Interrogatorio reso da Virgiglio Cosimo, 12.06.2020 alla Procura della Repubblica di Salerno.

11 Ibid. – p.101 – Verbale di Interrogatorio reso da Fondacaro Marcello, 28.04.2021 alla Procura della Repubblica di Catanzaro.

12 Ibid – p. 102.

manipulate trials, since is able to act as fixer for himself and others: his social interactions and dramaturgy seems to revolve around these beliefs.

The constitutive and self-propelling power of such narrative emerges clearly. According to a collaborator's declaration, it was known that, back in 2007, if a defendant paid Joe – at times 50,000 at times even 90,000 euros – that money was going to be used to corrupt a judge to have a positive trial outcome.<sup>13</sup> A collaborator of the Mancuso clan also confirmed that 'Joe was nominated [as our lawyer] because he had the possibility to access judges and had influence over them'. He continues 'A month before the sentence was passed, he knew the outcome, and that I would have been sent to house arrest 100%'.<sup>14</sup> As another collaborator recalls<sup>15</sup> 'Joe could have confidential files directly from the offices' [meaning Tribunal and prosecutors' offices].

Different examples are given by former 'ndranghetisti or people close to the clans who have experienced, or crucially *were told*, that Joe was able to get in touch with corruptible judges to ensure lower or milder sentences for his clients. Yet another collaborator notices that this was a matter of Joe's *behaviour* and his way of *interacting*. Joe knew how to act, and his acts assumed meaning<sup>16</sup>: 'Joe introduced himself as someone who had some "entries" with the judges. He acted always with deference towards them, as he had with them a relationship that went beyond the professions'.

The ability of Joe of accessing prosecutors' and tribunals' confidential files was also beneficiary for his lawyer colleagues: he was said to act also on other lawyers' behalf. Through black-mail power, confidential information and mafia connections, Joe was also considered capable of guaranteeing enforcement of corrupt deals he had fixed. A collaborator declared in 2020<sup>17</sup>:

"Our lawyers in Cosenza [a different city from where Joe works] knew, and they told us too, that Joe was the person able to get to necessary information. Our lawyers gave him great credit. We didn't know what his channels were, but through our lawyers it was evident that he was the one who could get some news. (...) Lawyers in Cosenza did refer to him, especially when there were investigations from the Antimafia prosecutors in Catanzaro [where Joe works] or in case our appeal was in Catanzaro (...) Another lawyer in Cosenza, Matt, was the person through whom Joe was able to send us news".

He added: 'When I say that Joe had other ways to get results at trial and that for us he was a person of reference for appeal trials, I mean that we knew he could fix procedures in ways that went beyond his professional abilities'.

The collaborator and former judge mentioned above, Mark, confessed that he accepted to fix a trial in favour of Joe's client, but that after the favourable judgment, Joe did not give him the promised kickback.<sup>18</sup> However, this alleged missed payment did not exclude Joe from subsequent 'games', presumably because his established reputation was stronger than a one-shot defection, also due to his known links to both mafia clans and masonry. Another collaborator, colleague lawyer of Joe, declared in 2020<sup>19</sup>:

"As far as I could attest, there is a system in Calabria where lawyers, always the same lawyers, who offer themselves as recipients of certain proceedings and solvers of problems thanks to corruptive agreements with judges. (...) I was told about Joe, a very well-known lawyer in

13 Ibid – p. 30.

14 Ibid – p. 36.

15 Ibid – p. 44.

16 Ibid – p. 46.

17 Ibid – p. 68.

18 Ibid – p. 83.

19 Ibid – p. 88.

Catanzaro and senator too. (...) I was told that he had been elected thanks to 'ndrangheta votes, and that through him, one could access the system of corrupting judges”.

Such *system* works for judges and lawyers in the same circles across the region; realization and enforcement of their extra-legal deals seem to be realised endogenously on a need basis, autonomously from any mafiosi's interference as guarantors, since in this arena they are mere 'customers'.

Surely, from Joe's previous successes and from his ability to present himself as an effective fixer and guarantor further opportunities for networking emerge. As said, another activity for which Joe is also known for - and for which he is also been charged with external participation in mafia association - would be his role as middleman with 'ruling' mafia clans in business ventures. According to the prosecutors, he facilitated the entry of Mancuso, Piromalli and Grande Aracri clans in key investments. For example, on one occasion, Joe was discussing with managers of a company from Milan, expert in asset management, credit servicing and real estate, about the possibility of a business in his area:

“It's not that easy...in Nicotera you can sell this if you have a budget, if not you can't. If you have the authorisation to sell, that is ... Nicotera responds to... Luigi Mancuso [the chief of the 'ndrangheta Mancuso clan] ...you ask, 'can we?' ...if not... (...) this afternoon I'll go there and ask 'they gave me to sell... is there any entrepreneur in the area interested first?' We have to respect this, we can't be stupid!”

And he adds later “Tomorrow, I asked the boss to come to my office to tell him “Don't get involved ... I am handling this”<sup>20</sup>

A similar involvement of Joe with the Grande Aracri clan could confirm the ability of Joe to network and activate his contacts for the benefits of various parties and again, for the finalization of investments. In a court testimony in November 2022,<sup>21</sup> collaborator Fondacaro, talking about his dealings with the Grande Aracri clan over 10 years before, confirmed:

“He [a member of the Grande Aracri family in jail] told me that Lawyer Dom [within the family as well] was handling some business with his other mason-colleagues, masons, and lawyers (...) He mentioned the name of Joe. (...) He said that Joe was the political mason of reference in the areas of Catanzaro and Vibo (...) in reference to an investment made around Vibo specifically, referring again to the role of Mancuso family and of the Piromalli (...)”

According to prosecutors, Joe's connection with boss Nicolino Grande Aracri was also strengthened by masonic ties. In fact, the boss Grande Aracri declared to have been initiated into masonry within the Knights of Malta. He revealed in 2012 that in one of the lodges near Crotona which he attended: 'we have the highest institutional levels and the highest 'ndrangheta levels too.'<sup>22</sup>

The projected effectiveness of Joe's role as a business consultant seems to have been augmented and amplified by his masonic ties; conversely, his masonic ties were multiplied and strengthened by his job as a lawyer. Joe's political 'hat' and consequent influence is, on the one hand, influenced and sustained by his masonic obedience, but also perceived as directly connected to mafia links and their political support. Mafiosi, in fact, can translate their informal

20 Operation Rinascita-Scott, p. 282.

21 Processo d'appello 'Ndrangheta stragista' – lunedì 14 novembre 2022. Reggio Calabria.<https://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/681551/processo-dappello-ndrangheta-stragista>

22 Ibid, p. 866.

authority in certain territories into direct electoral support to specific politicians, especially prospective ones; they can also provide intermediation and protection services in the exchange of ‘packages of votes’, obtaining money or benefits in political decision-making, and/or privileged access to public contracts, subsidies, concessions (Gambetta 1993; Della Porta and Vannucci 2012). Indeed, politics remained always on Joe’s agenda: he was municipal councillor since the 1980s, MP from 2001 until 2013 and regional coordinator of the ruling Forza Italia party in the early 2000s. Joe’s political roles, both at national and local level, seems to be instrumental for his links to masonic brothers, politicians and even mafiosi. This circularity of relations results in the ‘pouring’ of the availability of each set of relationship from one cohort to the other, from the judiciary to masonry, from mafia to politics. For example, Joe expressed ambitions to be elected at the Superior Council of the Judiciary (Consiglio Superiore della Magistratura) in Rome, and he was apparently looking for political backing. He offered selective support in political election aiming at obtaining the same support back – in reciprocity – for his own personal and professional agenda. The access to the network he moulded and expanded through his political and professional roles, and his masonic ties, was valuable for the various actors he interacted with. In addition, his masonic and mafia ‘reputation’ increased the effectiveness of his extra-legal fixing activities.

Figure 1 provides a representation of Joe’s main interactions and activities in both legal and extra-legal deals. It highlights the network of trust-based connections which allowed him to become a gatekeeper, guaranteeing access to a circuit of informal exchanges of valuable resources in economic and political-institutional markets. Well-known mafia links enhanced the expectation of his networking and enforcing power; the power of his narrated high masonic status – both in official and irregular, self-serving, brotherhoods – amplified his capability to attract demands and ‘fix problems’.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### Masonic deviance amplification process

The Chief Prosecutor of Vibo Valentia, interviewed in August 2021, was in the investigative team for the Rinascita-Scott operation. He noticed:

“Vibo Valentia seems to be the epicentre of the deviant masonry – even the investigations that I carried out in Messina (Sicily) led me to Vibo Valentia. (...) In some investigations, we did manage to map the masonry in Vibo, whether deviant or not, but it’s difficult to differentiate here. Think about this: even collaborators, when I asked about the links between mafias and masonry or about deviant masonry, told me ‘do you really want to do it?’, or ‘they won’t let you do it’”.

The narrative about the deviant masonry is clearly powerful in the province of Vibo Valentia, as also the investigations seem to convey. The difficulty lies, still, in understanding the boundaries and the identities of this ‘deviant’ masonic reality. As noticed by one of Joe’s lawyers, interviewed in August 2022:

“Joe is narrated almost as a monster. (...) Various collaborators are affirming that he is a mason, but this should not mean anything much, as masonry is allowed by the law... there is a torsion, that this means he is a *deviant* mason. But we don’t really understand what this means in practice, that he is deviant; what does a deviant mason do? What is Joe supposed to do as a deviant mason?”

Joe is a lawyer and a politician, whose official masonic brotherhood and deriving networking capacity are real. However, in practice, Joe does not really participate to his own lodge's activities, nor he does invest in the path of growth nor rise within the organization for any other reason but expanding masonic ties, to merge with his other connections. In this sense he could be already considered 'deviant' as a mason. But narratives show that there is more to it.

That masonic circles can activate informal or illegal activities is a recurrent narrative among mafia members, as well as other wilful actors. The effective capacity to activate such networks remains, however, at times only projected, never fully proved nor realised. That masonic links are indeed one of the most effective ways in which some individuals can 'make things happen' is the primary narrative when there is any delinquent/criminal activity involved. We call this the *masonic deviance amplification* process: belonging to a lodge – official, occult, deviant, even only *imagined* – can indeed amplify, through networking power, the deviance capability of certain actors, including mafia actors but also others, like lawyer Joe, who do business with mafias. Through the masonic deviance amplification process Joe also increased his projected reliability as a fixer and guarantor for the various actors involved in shared extra-legal activities. As said, it's not just mafias that can sell private protection and 'trust', when demanded in extra-legal deals; other actors – like Joe – can also dispose of the sanctioning and reputational resources needed to enforce informal and illegal deals in certain institutional arenas, thus promoting also external trust.

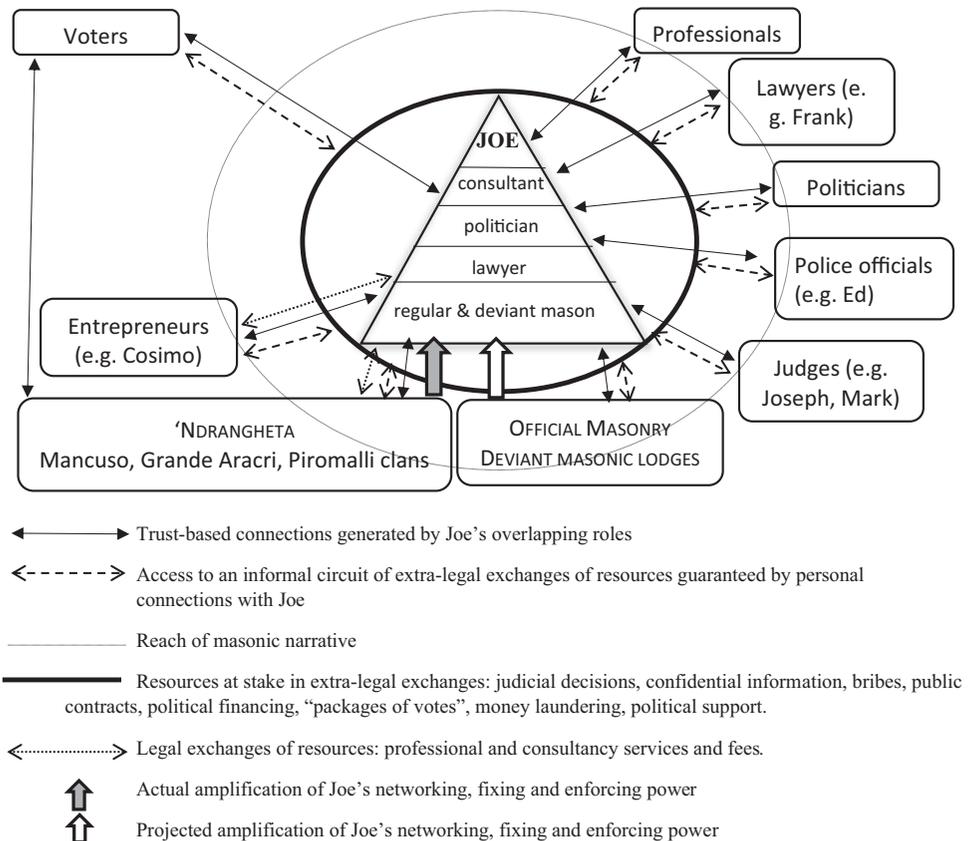


Fig. 1 Joe's network between masonry and mafia: interactions and activities

Narratives on how far-reaching masonic ties *can be*, eventually construct the expectation that masonic links *are* indeed far-reaching, supporting the masonic deviance amplification process. This resembles a self-fulfilling prophecy, through socially reverberated meanings and expectations which encourage more and more individuals, including mafiosi, to seek such masonic ties (or what they perceive as such) when they look for informal or other type of (occult) deals. As per symbolic interactionism, shared meanings of social realities emerge out of a process of constant identity negotiation and exposure to others. Masonic deviance amplification happens with both actual and imagined social realities connected to ‘powerful’ deviant or regular lodges. Both narratives and symbolic elements keep fuelling such constructed masonic representation, even when the lodge is not official, spurious, or covert.

In our case study, symbols and rituals are crucial and necessary when ‘creating’ or nourishing a masonic-like brotherhood. Mark, the former judge who got initiated into a lodge headed by Joe, revealed further details<sup>23</sup> of his initiation in front of other lawyers and judges, which he also later retracted declaring he had ‘imagined’ them:

“After everyone’s introduction, I declared my acceptance and I entered the brotherhood; I read the oath for entering the lodge, pledging for respect of those already inside it and with rules related to the bond of brotherhood and secrecy. I read this formula out loud so that other could hear it, including my judges-colleagues. At the end of the oath, Joe declared that I was formally admitted in the brotherhood and called me ‘brother’. That meeting was indeed just about my initiation”.

Keeping the oaths and the rituals – even when the space of the lodge is purely a self-serving structure based on instrumental interactions (or ‘imagined’ as Mark argues) – still confirms the narrative of the masonic world as an arena for various networking (oftentimes shady) activities. Oaths and rituals can also be used to maintain the balance between an ‘accessible’ masonry and an inaccessible mysterious institution that allows inscrutable deals to take places. This symbolic and narrative construction of the masonry, as already/always deviant, continues to appeal to a variety of willing powerful actors and this amplifies the narrative of deviance again and again.

### Identifying contributing factors

One might indeed ask why the masonic deviance amplification process occurs in the first place. Our paper, due to its narrow focus, cannot provide answers to macro-level questions, yet some interpretative hypotheses emerged. Some factors may have encouraged a conversion of the actions of deviant masons or the operation of certain masonic lodges into a catalyser, an enduring relational architecture, regulating and enforcing extra-legal deals, like the one we have seen in the case of Joe.

Endogenous factors contributed to establishing a narrative around masonic deviance weakening internal control which could have deterred distortions and abuses in Italian masonry more generally. The generalised atmosphere of suspect and hostility towards the masonry, which characterised the two main catholic and communist Italian parties – and corresponding ideologies – led to banning secret societies in the art. 18 of the Constitution: ‘Without a law to clarify exactly what counted as a secret society, the Brotherhood was left in a constitutional no-man’s land Post-war. Italian Freemasonry also had to contend with a host of internal problems. Because it looked out of step with the times, it struggled to recruit.’ (Dickie 2020). Consequently, there has been a strong inclination towards hiding one’s own masonic affiliation followed by the assumption that with a covert affiliation comes something ‘shifty’ and ‘shady’.

Contextual factors relevant in the Italian political and social system, and exogenous to the masonic association, might have nourished these dynamics. Informality, involving powerful white-collar actors, is a crucial element of Italian institutions and society (Capussela 2018; Gambetta 2018). Italian post-war history recorded numerous cases of active involvement of the political-institutional and economic-professional elite in corruption, mafia collusion, financial and tax-evasion crimes schemes, benefitting of an almost complete level of impunity; dominant political and economic trajectories have often included criminal activities. Such a pervasive exhibition of ‘the crimes of the powerful’ cannot be taken as an occasional output; it is the outcome of several drives which emerge within – and at same time are enhanced by – the exercise of power itself, as posited by Ruggiero (2021:8):

“Secrecy does play a role in this process, but so does ostentation, as the crimes of the powerful consist of signals, marks of omnipotence that lend themselves to imitation and, at times, admiration. Hegemony, therefore, can be achieved through crime. Domination, in its turn, is expressed through the pursuit of crude interest and the simultaneous shaping of moral authority”.

The demand for underground cooperative interactions with ‘powerful’ counterparts in the institutional sphere – to whom even mafiosi can also offer protection in different extra-legal arenas – arguably has only increased in the last decades (Dagnes *et al.* 2020). Our case study shows an individual like Joe, who served in an institutional capacity (former politician) and has a highly recognised networking ability, thanks, but not limited to, the masonry: Joe fits the profile of a ‘powerful’. When he engages in the provision of informal or illegal provision of trust (through mafia connections or through illicit activities, such as corruption) he nourishes the narrative of the masonry as a secret ‘shifty’ and ‘shady’ world. His dramaturgical performance, his constructed persona via social interactions also with mafias, feeds the narrative around the mafia-masonry link.

A demand of interactions with powerful actors is also a consequence of the harshening of the repressive activity of Antimafia apparatus after the Cosa nostra massacres of the early 1990s (Balsamo 2016): it is beneficial for mafiosi too to connect with power. As violence has become costly for organised crime groups, alternative strategies are needed, and they often involve interaction and exchange with influential decision-makers in the public and private realms (Della Porta and Vannucci 2021). As the Parliamentary Antimafia Commission observes in 2018:

“Mafiosi can obtain monopolistic positions and privileged access to public resources through pressure and agreements with public administrations, using corruption extensively to facilitate their infiltration into public contracts and sub-contracts or offering themselves as guarantors of the transactions that realise in circuits of ‘systemic corruption’. In these cases, their rooting in the local political and administrative system transforms mafiosi into players in the governance of the territory, giving them the possibility of formulating policies precisely through the relational network built in and around public administrations.”<sup>24</sup>

In Italy, the focus on countering mafias is indeed predominant when it comes to investigations on complex criminality; it is not by chance that we learn of masonic deviance during investigations on mafias. Mafia investigations are far-reaching and meant to understand the relations

24 See Commissione Parlamentare d’inchiesta sul fenomeno delle mafie, Final Report, February 7 2018, p. 22, in <https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/1066861.pdf>.

of the clans with wider parts of society, thus attracting other actors in antimafia investigations (Sergi 2017).

As we have seen in our case study, deviant masons can occasionally activate a shielded, concealed and adaptable relational structure where demands for reciprocal recognition and protection of powerful white-collar actors and mafiosi could meet in a 'safe context. Deviant masons and their lodges can proactively enter informal or criminal pacts, aligning to national trends seen with crimes of the powerful: Italy is a country customarily deficient both in vertical trust towards the State and in horizontal bridging linkages of mutual trust (Putnam 1993). The strong bonding connections generated by masonic alliances or provided by overlapping memberships and connections of individual deviant masons with other organizations (including mafias) can guarantee an alternative 'glue', i.e., different source of trust – where informal, extra-legal, and criminal deals are positively agreed upon and enforced. Like in the case of Joe, the generalised perception of 'how things worked' around a specific class of lawyers and judges in Calabria, became the proof of the stickiness of such 'glue': he is recognised – his character is symbolically constructed - as a provider of trust and third-party enforcer in licit and illicit contexts.

### Final observations

Masonic lodges in the context we analysed are not *solid* and steady organizational infrastructures, nor *fluid* and insubstantial webs of connection. They could be more accurately described as 'clay' of elastic, resistant and adaptable set of relations whose shape is modelled according to the different characteristics, demands, expectations and constraints of individuals who are included and operate in it. Accordingly, also their functioning adapts to contingent equilibria, reflecting the capability – and willingness – of masons, at time with other actors, including mafiosi, to provide enforcement of extra-legal arrangements, thus creating or contributing to narratives and symbolic recognition of their role within all-mighty 'imagined' masonic entities.

As shown in our case study, several actors may contribute to the moulding of the relational masonic or pseudo-masonic setting where powerful institutional actors and mafia organizations encounter each other. Individual masons, as we have seen, may exploit the reputational value of their belonging to some more or less recognised 'brotherhood', as well as their influential overlapping role in diverse realms – as politicians, professionals, entrepreneurs, etc. – to become the mastermind of a 'socially constructed' masonic network. Adopting a shifting profile, as fixers, enablers, guarantors in the shady encounters between powerful institutional and professional actors and mafiosi, they can interchange their mutual access to power arenas otherwise out of their reach, where boundaries are blurred in the multiplicative effects of their bonding and prospected opportunities. Further research needs to explore these mechanisms at play in other contexts, with or without the 'mafia variable' and with various levels of trust and networking capabilities of the (deviant) masons with other institutions.

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