

Mafias, memory and citizenship

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Abstract

This article develops an analysis of mafia-type organizations, conceptualizing mafia power as a system of domination sustained by violence, social control, and the erosion of rights. Using the 'ndrangheta as a case, it combines legal analysis with qualitative methods. It shows how the threat of violence is normalized in everyday life and how mafias act on the frameworks of memory through intimidation, silence, and selective remembrance. The article argues that recognition of innocent victims and their families links memory to justice as a right to truth and to substantive—not merely formal—justice. Drawing on Halbwachs, Alexander's cultural trauma approach, Todorov's exemplary memory, Bourdieu's symbolic violence, and Rodotà's "right to have rights," it frames antimafia remembrance as critical memory: a democratic practice that converts private grief into public claims and reactivates citizenship in mafia-affected territories through encounters, testimony, and education.

Keywords: Mafia power, justice, antimafia remembrance

1. Introduction

This article is embedded within a broader theoretical reflection on mafia-type criminal organizations and on the construction of democratic pathways as strategies of resistance, prevention, and social transformation. Moving beyond approaches that frame mafias solely as criminal or economic phenomena, the study adopts a socio-political perspective that conceptualizes mafia power as a system of domination rooted in violence, social control, and the systematic erosion of rights and freedoms. Within this framework, the article focuses on the role of memory as a critical analytical category, examining how the remembrance of mafia violence operates not merely as a symbolic or commemorative practice, but as a political resource capable of activating processes of collective change at the territorial level. In this sense, memory is understood as a contested social field in which relations of power are negotiated, challenged, and potentially reconfigured through political and civic practices. Through an in-depth analysis of the mafia organization known as 'ndrangheta, this contribution explores how the memory of innocent victims of the mafias has contributed to the public recognition of mafia power as a structural negation of fundamental rights and liberties. At the same time, it investigates how the act of "remembering" has been transformed into a deliberate practice of democratic construction, through which private suffering is translated into collective meaning, and individual loss is rearticulated as a demand for justice, citizenship, and social accountability.

2. **Mafias, Violence and Power: the case of the ‘ndrangheta**

This study is situated within a consolidated theoretical framework and established lines of research on mafia-type organizations, with a specific focus on the ‘ndrangheta, here conceptualized as a structured and dynamic form of power organization. Like other mafia groups, the ‘ndrangheta is characterized by the systematic use of violence in its multiple configurations, ranging from latent and symbolic forms to overt and physical manifestations. Such violence operates across different scales, from the control of territory to the domination of economic resources and bodies. The threat of violence constitutes a central mechanism through which mafia power asserts itself without the need for continuous explicit enforcement. It is precisely through this latent dimension that violence becomes embedded in everyday life, entering common sense as a concrete and ever-present possibility and persistently evoking the horizon of death. In this way, mafia power operates as a form of normalized domination, shaping social relations and expectations without necessarily resorting to direct coercion. Once internalized as a constitutive element of common sense, the mafia presence produces a social condition in which individuals and communities are compelled to negotiate their existence within a framework structured by fear, constraint, and asymmetrical power relations. The mafias can thus be understood not merely as criminal actors, but as systems of power that impose a continuous symbolic and material negotiation between life and death, autonomy and subjugation, rights and their systematic denial. At the legal level, the ‘ndrangheta is formally recognized as a mafia-type criminal organization under Article 416-bis of the Italian Criminal Code, introduced through successive legislative reforms and consistently applied through judicial interpretation. Within this framework, the ‘ndrangheta qualifies as a mafia-type association, namely a structured criminal organization that systematically employs intimidation, enforces bonds of omertà, and exercises coercive power in order to pursue economic profit and social control, including through infiltration of the legal economy and the conditioning of public institutions³. Taken together, the jurisprudence establishes that the ‘ndrangheta

³ A consolidated body of case law of the Corte di Cassazione has repeatedly affirmed that the ‘ndrangheta fully meets the constitutive elements of the mafia-type association. As early as Cass. pen., Sez. I, 30 January 1996, no. 588, the Court recognized the ‘ndrangheta as an organization characterized by a stable associative structure, ritualized affiliation, and systematic recourse to intimidation capable of generating *assoggettamento* and *omertà* within the social environment. This orientation was further consolidated by Cass. pen., Sez. VI, 21 June 2000, no. 24356, which emphasized that the mafia-type nature of the ‘ndrangheta derives not solely from acts of explicit violence, but from its capacity to project an enduring intimidating force capable of conditioning individual freedoms and economic activities. The Court clarified that the effectiveness of the mafioso method lies precisely in its latent and anticipatory dimension, whereby violence need not be continuously exercised in order to produce social control. More recently, the Supreme Court has reaffirmed these principles in relation to territorially delocalized articulations of the ‘ndrangheta. In Cass. pen., Sez. II, 27 March 2015, no. 16353, the Court held that the existence of a local ‘ndrangheta cell operating outside Calabria may be inferred from its organic

constitutes a paradigmatic form of mafia-type organization, distinguished by the stability of its associative bonds, the centrality of omertà, and a pervasive capacity to condition social, economic, and institutional life in a durable and adaptive manner. The analysis of investigative and judicial findings relating to the period under consideration delineates a clear picture of a protean ‘ndrangheta, characterized by a persistent business-oriented and entrepreneurial vocation, as well as by a leading role in international drug trafficking. Compared to other traditional mafia organizations, the ‘ndrangheta displays an extraordinary degree of tactical versatility, which enables it to adapt effectively to the diverse social, economic, and institutional contexts in which it operates. This adaptive capacity is reflected in its ability to strategically engage a wide range of interlocutors—from local political actors to economic and business operators—by offering what initially appear to be opportunities for mutual benefit and short-term advantage. Such interactions, however, function as mechanisms of progressive incorporation, through which the ‘ndrangheta ultimately consolidates control over the sectors it penetrates. In this sense, its power is exercised less through immediate coercion than through gradual processes of economic entanglement, dependency, and normalization, which allow criminal influence to become structurally embedded within legal markets and institutional settings (Semiannual Report to Parliament, 2024; Direzione Investigativa Antimafia).

Definitions of mafia organizations are most commonly situated within legislative, legal, and judicial frameworks. In this study, however, a broader analytical definition is adopted—one capable of capturing the multiple and interconnected dimensions through which mafia phenomena can be understood. Mafias are thus conceptualized as *“a set of criminal organizations [...] operating within a broad and highly ramified relational context, configuring a system of violence aimed at capital accumulation and at the acquisition and management of positions of power, grounded in a shared cultural code and enjoying a certain degree of social consensus”* (Puglisi & Santino, 2005, p. 94).

This definition allows mafia organizations to be examined not merely as illicit enterprises or criminal associations, but as complex systems of power embedded in social relations, cultural norms, and mechanisms of consent, thereby extending the analytical focus beyond strictly legal or repressive perspectives. Within this definition, which explicitly draws on a paradigm of complexity, it is essential to emphasize the dimension of power as articulated through multiple forms of legitimation and consent. Particularly useful for understanding the phenomenon is an analysis of mafia power as

connection with the parent organization and from the transferability of its criminal reputation, even in the absence of frequent overt acts of intimidation. This interpretation was confirmed by Cass. pen., Sez. II, 12 March 2020, no. 10255, which underscored the ‘ndrangheta’s exceptional capacity to infiltrate the legal economy and public institutions through a combination of intimidation, collusion, and social embeddedness.

territorially embedded, operating through the total control of resources within a capillary and pervasive form of domination. In territories characterized by a strong presence of the 'ndrangheta, this configuration produces a condition of territorial hegemony that facilitates the criminal organization's monopoly over violence. In such contexts, the exercise of power generates what Renate Siebert has defined as an "anguish of death", continuously produced and reproduced through the persistent threat of violence (Siebert, 1991). The power of the 'ndrangheta thus manifests itself through forms of domination that are constantly reiterated across different modalities of violence: explicit violence, latent violence, and symbolic violence. By explicit violence we refer to all manifestations that can be directly experienced, such as physical assaults against individuals or attacks on places and property—acts immediately recognizable as criminal offenses. However, it is equally important to foreground the dimension of non-explicit or latent violence, which operates through fear, intimidation, and omertà, sustaining both personal and territorial subjugation without the continuous use of overt coercion. Finally, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, it is possible to identify forms of invisible and non-physical violence exercised primarily through symbolic mechanisms—such as language, cognitive categories, social norms, and social representations—which are accepted as legitimate by those subjected to them because they are internalized as natural (Bourdieu, 1998). Symbolic violence thus operates with the tacit complicity of the dominated, insofar as they share the very schemes of perception and evaluation through which domination is exercised. Rather than relying on direct coercion, it functions through the imposition of meanings, classifications, and worldviews that acquire the status of social normality and legitimacy. From this perspective, mafias display feudal characteristics, marked by a strong attachment to territory and by a personalized, capillary form of power in which the boundary between the public and the private sphere is effectively erased. This dynamic often manifests itself in the renunciation or systematic suspension of rights, a dimension that constitutes the central focus of the analysis proposed here. Mafias can thus be understood in relation to denied freedoms and violated rights, establishing a strong and constitutive link with the political and democratic dimension. Interpreting mafias as a problem of democracy makes it possible to foreground the intrinsic relationship between power and the negation of democratic principles, as well as the structural violation of human rights produced by mafia domination. In this sense, mafia power does not merely coexist with democratic institutions, but actively undermines the conditions of their effective realization. A central theoretical reference in this regard is Stefano Rodotà (2012), who speaks of an "undeniable need for rights" that "manifests itself everywhere, challenges every form of repression, and permeates politics itself". By framing the "right to have rights" as a key terrain in the struggle against the mafias, it becomes essential to re-centre the subjectivities involved in everyday practices, where domination and resistance are concretely experienced. As Rodotà writes, "It is in this

way, through everyday action, that different subjects enact an uninterrupted declaration of rights, which draws its strength not from formal codification but from the profound conviction of women and men that only in this way can they achieve recognition and respect for their dignity and for their very humanity. What emerges is an unprecedented connection between the abstraction of rights and the concreteness of needs, one that activates real subjects” (Rodotà, 2012, p. 6). Within this framework, the struggle against the mafias is not confined to the judicial or repressive sphere, but unfolds as a daily political practice in which the affirmation of rights becomes both a form of resistance to mafia power and a concrete process of democratic construction. Within this perspective lies the assumption that mafias constitute a direct aggression against the democratic system, insofar as mafia power penetrates “our way of perceiving rights and small and large freedoms as obvious and almost natural” (Siebert, 1994). The ‘ndrangheta can therefore be understood as a form of criminal power that infiltrates everyday life and interpersonal relations, shaping social practices and expectations from within. This process unfolds because coexistence and collusion with ‘ndrangheta power—grounded in violence, or more precisely in the possibility of violence—profoundly alter individuals’ perceptions of their own rights, gradually transforming citizens into subjects. In this sense, mafia domination does not operate solely through repression, but through the reconfiguration of subjectivities and the normalization of subordination. For this reason, it is possible to argue that in territorially hegemonized contexts—where mafia organizations exercise pervasive control—there is a systematic prevalence of the public dimension over the private sphere, accompanied by a suspension or erosion of both individual and collective rights. Empirical analysis of social groups and families reveals a marked conformism within the private sphere and a corresponding renunciation of rights in the public sphere, reinforcing the reproduction of domination. Mafia power thus extends deeply into the private domain, to the point that even intimate and familial relationships become functional to the accumulation of wealth and the exercise of criminal power. In this configuration, the boundary between private life and public power is effectively dissolved, further consolidating mafia control. Linking the issue of mafias to democratic questions therefore requires a critical reflection on the political value of memory and on the practical implications that derive from it. Memory emerges not merely as a symbolic or retrospective dimension, but as a central terrain of political struggle through which domination can be contested and democratic agency reactivated.

3. Memory and Democracy

Theories of everyday life provide valuable analytical tools for examining common sense and the social construction of stereotypes and prejudices. Within this perspective, the study of memory enables a critical exploration of the relationship between cultural production and the formation of common sense, understood as a dynamic process that takes shape, stabilizes, and transforms across time and social space. In the field of mafia

studies, memory assumes a central political relevance, particularly when considered alongside its counterpart: forgetting. The absence of memory, or the systematic failure to recall and publicly elaborate collective traumatic events linked to mafia violence, hinders processes of social reworking and normalization of trauma. Such absence does not remain confined to the private sphere, but translates into a broader democratic deficit, insofar as unelaborated trauma cannot be transformed into shared meanings, civic awareness, or collective responsibility. In this sense, forgetting operates not merely as a passive loss of recollection, but as a social mechanism that inhibits the translation of experience into public practices of democracy and participation. Where memory is silenced, fragmented, or relegated to the private domain, the conditions for democratic engagement are weakened, and the reproduction of power relations—particularly those sustained by fear and intimidation—is facilitated. Conversely, practices of remembering can function as a form of political action, enabling the rearticulation of violence within the public sphere and fostering processes of democratic recognition and citizenship.

Remembering should not be understood as a purely physiological or individual act, but rather as the outcome of processes of social interaction and communication, whose continuity is ensured by groups that function as carriers of memory, as theorized by Maurice Halbwachs. Memory persists and is reproduced through concrete social actions shaped by selective mechanisms that depend on historical, cultural, and political contexts, rather than through spontaneous or neutral recollection. Collective events are therefore inseparable from specific representations of the past, which may operate as instruments of belonging by producing shared meanings, symbolic boundaries, and forms of collective identity. In this ongoing process of constructing memory and belonging, time assumes a non-linear and circular character: the past is continuously reinterpreted in the present and projected into the future through narrative practices, commemorative rituals, and institutionalized forms of remembrance. This dynamic makes it possible to speak of the transformative energy of memory, operating at both individual and collective levels and grounded in the subjectivities that actively produce it. Memory thus emerges not as a neutral repository of facts, but as a field of social and symbolic conflict, structured around struggles over recognition, visibility, and legitimacy. In this sense, memory is inherently relational, personal, and political. Processes of recognition—in the sense elaborated by Axel Honneth—become central both to experiences of victimization and to the construction of memory pathways. The objectification of memory through social practices—such as public testimonies, commemorations, and institutional acknowledgements—constitutes a crucial site in which claims for dignity, justice, and citizenship are articulated and contested.

With Maurice Halbwachs, the idea emerges that memory must be understood in relation to the social frameworks (*cadres sociaux*) within which it is produced and through which it operates. Memory is thus conceptualized as an eminently social process, structured by collective contexts that shape how individuals remember. From this perspective,

memory is never a purely individual act, but rather the outcome of shared practices, narratives, and representations that take form within specific social groups. When applied to the study of mafias, this framework makes it possible to analyse mafia power not only as a criminal or economic phenomenon, but also as a device for the production and control of collective memory. Mafia organizations actively intervene in the social frameworks of memory through practices of intimidation, silence, and selective remembrance, thereby contributing to the construction of social oblivion and to the normalization of violence.

In many territories characterized by a strong mafia presence, the control of memory translates into the removal or distortion of traumatic events—such as murders, extortion, or massacres—which are systematically excluded from the public sphere and relegated to the private domain. In Halbwachian terms, this process weakens alternative carriers of memory and undermines the possibility of collective elaboration, reinforcing the reproduction of mafia power through silence, fear, and the fragmentation of shared narratives.

In Halbwachsian terms, mafia power intervenes directly in the *cadres sociaux* that make remembering possible, weakening groups that act as carriers of alternative memories while reinforcing narratives functional to the reproduction of its own domination. At the same time, Maurice Halbwachs's perspective allows antimafia practices to be interpreted as counter-social frameworks of memory. Commemorations of innocent victims, the naming of public spaces, the testimonies of family members, and educational initiatives all represent attempts to reconstruct a collective memory capable of breaking the silence imposed by mafia violence and of restoring a public meaning to traumatic experience. In this sense, memory becomes a terrain of symbolic conflict between hegemonic narratives and civic counter-narratives, in which different interpretations of the past compete for legitimacy and visibility. Halbwachs's contribution is therefore central to understanding how the memory of mafias and their victims is never fixed or given once and for all, but is instead the product of social, institutional, and cultural power relations. The struggle against mafias thus also takes the form of a struggle over the definition of the social frameworks within which the past is remembered, forgotten, or re-elaborated, making memory a fundamental dimension of citizenship-building and the democratization of territories.

The study presented here seeks to examine processes of public recognition of victim status, alongside processes of self-recognition through which individuals re-situate their personal histories within a broader collective narrative on the mafias. What emerges is a heterogeneous constellation of experiences and biographies, in which dynamics of victimization intersect with the active construction of pathways of memory, recognition, and citizenship. These intertwined processes contribute to transforming private suffering into publicly meaningful narratives, thereby enabling forms of civic engagement and political agency. In this sense, memory practices grounded in

recognition become foundational to democratic life, fostering both the liberation of individuals from relations of domination and the reclamation of territories historically shaped by mafia power.

4. Memory, Denied Rights, and Justice

The analysis of the 'ndrangheta case has made it possible to connect the dimension of rights with the theme of memory, starting from the stories of the innocent victims of the mafias. This category refers to a specific normative foundation within Italian legislation concerning victims of terrorism and organized crime, which provides the legal framework for the recognition of victim status. Within the Italian legal system, an innocent victim of the mafia is defined as a person who has suffered death or permanent injury as a direct consequence of a mafia-related crime, without having in any way contributed to it, nor having been involved in criminal or mafia activities, nor having derived any benefit from the criminal context. This definition also extends to surviving family members, who are legally recognized as indirect victims and as holders of specific rights. From this perspective, the legal recognition of innocent victims and their families does not merely constitute a compensatory or reparative mechanism, but represents a crucial intersection between justice, memory, and citizenship. By grounding individual experiences of violence within a normative framework of rights, the recognition of victim status enables the transformation of private suffering into a public claim for justice, dignity, and democratic inclusion.

From the combined reading of the relevant legal provisions, the fundamental elements of this definition clearly emerge. First, there is the requirement of a direct causal nexus, whereby the harm suffered—death or permanent injury—must derive directly from an offense attributable to mafia-type organized crime. A second, equally essential element is the victim's complete extraneity to criminal activity: the victim must be entirely uninvolved in criminal or mafia-related conduct and must not have derived any benefit from the criminal context. When these conditions are met, the status of innocent victim of the mafia is subject to institutional recognition, which is formally established either through a final criminal judgment or through an administrative act issued by the competent ministerial authorities. This formal recognition confers legal status and access to specific rights, thereby situating individual experiences of violence within an institutional framework of justice and protection. The research adopts an intersectoral perspective and a qualitative methodological approach, drawing on semi-structured interviews, life histories, and the analysis of legal sources. The study is based on the reconstruction of 30 life histories through in-depth qualitative interviews with the family members of innocent mafia victims. The fieldwork was conducted over a five-year period, allowing for longitudinal insight into memory, recognition, and meaning-making processes. This methodological choice is grounded in the multidimensional and procedural nature of mafia phenomena, which are understood as highly mutable and flexible systems of power capable of adapting to social change. The ability of mafia

organizations to adjust to new forms of communication, to the evolution of state investigative tools, and to transformations in gender and generational relations has proven to be a crucial factor in the ongoing reproduction and resilience of mafia power. Revisiting the case of the 'ndrangheta, it is crucial to emphasize how, for many years, the phenomenon was subject to a significant underestimation, both at the social and investigative levels. This persistent misrecognition contributed to the organization's strategic expansion and facilitated its deep entrenchment not only within territories, but also within collective memory and the social frameworks of memory themselves. As a consequence, a central role has been played by civil society in undertaking the reconstruction of the histories of innocent victims of the mafias, starting from the events that led to their killings. Through this work of narrative reconstruction, it has been possible to reconnect individual biographies to broader issues of denied rights and freedoms, highlighting how the 'ndrangheta systematically eliminated those who, through their everyday lives, embodied the concrete possibility of weakening mafia power. In this perspective, victims are not targeted solely for their symbolic opposition, but because their daily practices—such as asserting a right, exercising a freedom, or refusing submission—represented a tangible threat to the reproduction of mafia domination. The recovery of these stories thus becomes a crucial political act, through which memory is mobilized to expose the structural relationship between mafia violence and the negation of democratic rights.

For example, this reconstruction revisits activities linked to the period commonly referred to as the “season of kidnappings for ransom”, one of the least discussed yet most traumatic chapters in the history of Italian organized crime. During this period, dozens of men, women, and children were held hostage by what was known as *Anonima sequestri*. This strategy constituted a deliberate and structured phase of action by the 'ndrangheta, situated at the intersection between the concrete possibility of obtaining financial gain through ransom and a powerful symbolic dimension. Beyond its economic objectives, kidnapping functioned as a demonstration of the organization's capacity to decide over the freedom and lives of individuals, while simultaneously challenging the authority of the state and asserting territorial sovereignty. In this sense, the practice of kidnapping embodied both material accumulation and symbolic domination, reinforcing mafia power through the public display of control over bodies and space. The study made it possible to recover the life stories of the women and men who were kidnapped, as well as to reconstruct the reactions of their family members. These responses—ranging from silence and fear to forms of collective mobilization—represented a profoundly novel element within the social landscape of the time. By breaking with established patterns of submission and isolation, families of the kidnapped contributed to the emergence of new forms of visibility, resistance, and collective memory, thereby challenging the social frameworks through which mafia violence had long been normalized.

Starting from the denial of the right to personal freedom, testimonies such as that of Angela Montagna, mother of Cesare Casella, who was kidnapped by Anonima sequestri, gave rise to a profoundly disruptive and transformative experience for that historical period and territorial context. This experience compelled public attention, at multiple levels, toward the stories of the kidnapped—stories that had long been marginalized or rendered invisible. Angela Montagna chained herself in a public square, declaring, “with a chain around my neck—perhaps my son has one too,” and established herself in a tent in the same square, adding, “perhaps my son does not even have this.” These were concrete, embodied actions that made visible what had previously been systematically concealed. Through the use of her own body, Montagna translated private suffering into a public and political claim, transforming individual pain into collective awareness. On 1 July 1989, together with women’s associations, more than three thousand students took to the streets in solidarity. Institutional responses followed shortly thereafter, marking a significant shift in public engagement with the issue of kidnappings and personal freedom. A few years later, the last kidnapping carried out by the ‘ndrangheta—that of Adolfo Cartisano, who was killed during captivity—became a further occasion for “doing memory.” Through sustained efforts of education and public awareness promoted by family members, this episode reaffirmed the centrality of personal freedom and fundamental liberties as a core dimension of the struggle against the mafias. In this sense, memory practices grounded in lived experience and civic action emerge as a crucial arena in which denied rights are reclaimed and rearticulated within democratic discourse. Building on the analytical insights developed by Stefano Rodotà, the history of the ‘ndrangheta can be read through the lens of the denial of the right to work. This dimension is central to the present analysis, insofar as the freedom of enterprise is systematically undermined by mafia power, which seeks to control economic activity through mechanisms of protection–extortion. The case of Vincenzo Grasso, one of the many entrepreneurs murdered by the ‘ndrangheta, is emblematic in this respect. Grasso was killed on 20 March 1989 precisely because he refused to pay extortion money to the local clan. His public struggle against mafia intimidation is encapsulated in his own words: “In our town we live under a blanket of fear, and I denounce in order to build change, a better life—not so much for myself, but for my children.” From this perspective, the denial of the right to work emerges as a fundamental mechanism through which mafia power reproduces itself, transforming economic dependence into political subjugation. Acts of resistance such as Grasso’s challenge this logic by exposing the intimate connection between economic freedom, dignity, and democratic citizenship. In this sense, the memory of entrepreneurs killed for asserting their right to work becomes a crucial site for rearticulating the struggle against mafias as a struggle for rights, recognition, and democracy.

A further example concerns the denial of the right to environmental health, understood—as defined by the World Health Organization—as comprising “those

aspects of human health, including quality of life, that are determined by physical, chemical, biological, social, and psychosocial factors in the environment,” as well as the assessment, control, and prevention of environmental factors that may adversely affect health (WHO, 1993).

Within this framework, the killing of Demetrio Quattrone stands as a paradigmatic case. Quattrone was murdered for publicly denouncing the illicit exploitation of environmental resources in the city of Reggio Calabria. A similar analytical lens can be applied to the case of Natale De Grazia, a naval captain who died while investigating the illegal trafficking of toxic and radioactive waste—an episode widely interpreted as emblematic of the lethal risks faced by those challenging entrenched criminal-environmental networks. What emerges from the examination of the life stories of innocent victims killed by the ‘ndrangheta is a broader pattern centered on the systematic violation of individual rights and personal freedoms. This dimension also encompasses the experiences of women who were killed for asserting their right to self-determination, acts that directly challenged the male-dominated and patriarchal power structures of the ‘ndrangheta. In these cases, the exercise of autonomy—over one’s body, choices, or life trajectories—was perceived as a threat to mafia authority and was violently suppressed. Taken together, these cases reveal how mafia violence operates across multiple domains—environmental, economic, and gendered—by denying fundamental rights and freedoms. The recovery and public articulation of these histories thus become central to reframing the struggle against mafias as a struggle for environmental justice, gender equality, and democratic citizenship, where memory functions as both a tool of recognition and a resource for political action.

The examples discussed above make it possible to interpret the mafia–antimafia dialectic through the lens of rights, thereby framing it explicitly as a problem of democracy. Reading mafia power in terms of denied rights and freedoms reveals how the struggle against mafias is inseparable from broader processes of democratic contestation, citizenship-building, and institutional accountability. When the originating event is death inflicted by mafia violence, all the elements outlined thus far must be reconsidered within the specific and constitutive relationship between memory and justice. Violent death represents a systematic exercise of power and violence that points to a form of injustice that is inherently public, political, and institutional. Moreover, it directly implicates bodies and the act of killing itself. As Dario Montana, brother of Peppe Montana, a police officer murdered by the mafia, has stated: “a change in vocabulary is necessary: we are not merely relatives of victims; we are relatives of people who have been killed.” This shift in language underscores the need to acknowledge the materiality of violence and its political implications. Since the symbolic years of 1992–1993⁴—marked by the most notorious mafia massacres, characterized by the terrorist

⁴ Capaci massacre – 23 May 1992 – Capaci (Palermo)- Via D’Amelio massacre – 19 July 1992 –

use of bombs against individuals, territories, and cultural heritage—Italy has experienced a profound transformation in the social processing of mafia violence. This period witnessed a shift from private suffering to public mourning, from individual pain to collective trauma. Such a transition conferred a totalizing character on violence and, simultaneously, endowed memory and mourning practices with a distinctly civil and political dimension. In the elaboration of grief, it is therefore essential to consider the intersection between individual memory, social memory, and the array of practices enacted through commemoration. The Italian case study on the memory of mafia victims shows that the link between memory and justice is articulated primarily through speech. This encompasses all practices of recognition that involve acknowledging personal histories, subjectivities, and the specific contexts in which violence occurred. Such processes of recognition require clearly defined spaces and temporal frameworks, spanning both the sphere of individual elaboration—where particular attention must be paid to the meanings of witnessing and testimony—and the judicial sphere, especially criminal trials before Italian courts. In this sense, memory operates as a mediating dimension between lived experience and institutional justice, enabling the transformation of private loss into public claims for truth, recognition, and democratic responsibility.

Practices of recognition can be further interpreted through the lens of cultural trauma theory, particularly by examining the relationship between memory, identity, and public discourse. The crucial analytical link lies between a traumatic past and the meanings attributed to it within the public sphere, where trauma becomes a symbolic resource for the construction and redefinition of collective identities.

By framing individual life stories as personal traumas that subsequently evolve into collective traumas, it becomes possible to understand how such events come to occupy a central place in public discourse and in the national symbolic space. As argued by Jeffrey C. Alexander, trauma is not an automatic consequence of an event, but a socially constructed process that unfolds in the space between the event itself and its public representation (Alexander, 2004; 2012). Trauma emerges when social actors succeed in defining suffering as a fundamental threat to shared values, collective identity, and social cohesion. From this perspective, the mafia massacres of 1992–1993—including the killings of magistrates, law enforcement officers, and civilians, as well as attacks on symbolic sites—can be interpreted as a paradigmatic case of cultural trauma in the Italian context. These events did not acquire traumatic significance solely because of their violence, but because they were progressively framed as an assault on democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights, thereby transcending the private suffering of

Palermo- Via dei Georgofili massacre – 27 May 1993 – Florence- Via Palestro massacre – 27 July 1993
– Milan- Rome bombings (1993) – 28 July 1993 – San Giovanni in Laterano and San Giorgio al Velabro

victims and their families. What may be defined as “mafia trauma” thus emerges as the outcome of a process carried out by specific social actors—most notably the families of victims, civil society organizations, journalists, and parts of the judiciary—who played a central role in constructing and circulating a shared narrative around these events. Through public testimonies, commemorations, trials, and educational initiatives, private experiences of loss were transformed into public and political claims, contributing to the stabilization of a collective memory of mafia violence. In Alexander’s terms, this process involved the successful articulation of a carrier group capable of speaking in the name of the injured collectivity, a narrative that identified responsibility, causes, and moral stakes, and an audience willing to recognize the events as constitutive of a shared trauma. The elaboration of the mafia massacres as cultural trauma entailed a progressive fusion of the private and collective dimensions of suffering, reshaping not only public discourse but also territorial identities and democratic practices. This transformation occurred insofar as experiences were translated from the private sphere into a public arena of meaning, generating collective memory and mobilizing demands for truth, justice, and institutional accountability. In this sense, the nexus between the private and public spheres in the construction of cultural trauma once again reveals a powerful and persistent demand for justice, which functions as the driving force behind recognition processes, memory practices, and the reactivation of democratic citizenship in territories historically marked by mafia domination. When understood as a public and institutional process, justice must be analytically distinguished between formal justice and substantive justice. Although approximately 75% of the more than 1,000 mafia victims in Italy have obtained judicial truth regarding the circumstances of their deaths, this achievement does not exhaust the broader and more complex demand for justice. Within public and institutional arenas, victims and their families must be involved in pathways centered on the recognition of the injustice suffered. Such a demand for recognition should not be conflated with revenge or with delegated forms of vengeance; rather, it should be understood as a search for meaning in the violent acts that ended the lives of loved ones—an effort to remember not death in itself, but the lived circumstances that confer significance upon that death. In this respect, the experiences of families of innocent mafia victims assume particular importance. In Italy, following the massacres of 1992, these families contributed to the creation and articulation of a public space and a collective narrative grounded in the need to restore dignity to individual histories, beginning with the public affirmation of victims’ names. Seeking justice in this sense—clearly distinct from revenge—introduced into the public sphere a reflection on recognition and on the political meaning of remembrance. Remembrance can take multiple forms and, accordingly, translate into diverse practices in both everyday life and political action. In its most literal sense, it involves acknowledging the singularity of events, their causes and consequences, and extending the impact of trauma across the full scope of individual and collective existence. At the same time, memory

must be understood as exemplary, that is, as a process through which remembrance can be opened to analogy and generalization. This is the perspective articulated by Tzvetan Todorov (1995), who defines exemplary memory as the capacity to mobilize the past in the service of the present—drawing lessons to confront the enduring causes of violence and moving beyond individual experience toward relational and collective engagement. This approach introduces a relational dimension that enables comparative reasoning and facilitates reflection on the transition from the particular to the general—a shift made possible by the de-individualizing function of law, which transforms singular experiences into publicly intelligible claims. The expression “families of innocent victims of the mafias” refers to individuals who maintain direct kinship ties with persons killed by mafia violence and who were themselves entirely uninvolved in criminal or mafia-related activities. The emergence of this community of memory can be traced back to the mid-1990s, in the aftermath of the mafia massacres in Capaci, Palermo, Florence, Rome, and Milan. This historical phase was marked by intense collective mobilization and civic resistance to mafia power, including the formation of anti-mafia associations such as Libera. Associations, Names and Numbers against the Mafias, founded in 1995. As several studies have shown, Libera has played a central role in transforming private grief into public action by fostering networks of families, promoting educational initiatives, and institutionalizing memory practices as tools of civic engagement and democratic participation (Dalla Chiesa, 2014; Sciarrone, 2019). The role of memory carriers has been crucial in the recognition of the political value of memory, particularly through the public articulation of victims’ families, which has contributed to transforming private grief into a collective claim for truth, justice, and citizenship. The research was conducted through an analysis of the “spaces of speech,” identifying three main categories: the space of politics, the space of civil society, and the space of justice. These ‘spaces of speech’ are understood as institutional and symbolic arenas in which recognition, legitimacy, and meaning are negotiated. These dynamics ultimately contributed to public recognition and to the institutionalization of memory through the enactment of the national law establishing the Day of Memory and Commitment in Remembrance of the Victims of the Mafias, observed annually on 21 March. However, there is another significant process that has contributed to the deconstruction of mafia power. This refers to the encounters between the families of innocent mafia victims and individuals engaged in pathways of detention and justice, particularly young people involved in juvenile justice systems. In these contexts, a process of reconfiguration of internalized categories takes place, leading to the elaboration of new frameworks of memory through an inward and reflexive process. Such encounters foster a transformation that operates from within, reshaping perceptions, moral horizons, and forms of self-recognition. Over the past three decades, practices of encounter, testimony, and education have thus become powerful instruments in both opposing the mafias and constructing democratic

pathways. At the core of this process lies the relationship between memory and justice, understood as the realization of the right to truth. From this perspective, individual life stories acquire broader significance when read through the normative and constitutional framework of rights, allowing mafia violence to be interpreted as a structural negation of democratic principles. In this sense, the mafias can be framed as a denial of the “right to have rights,” as articulated by Stefano Rodotà (2012). The collective elaboration of memory carried out by families of innocent victims thus functions not only as a form of moral reparation, but also as a political practice that reclaims citizenship, affirms constitutional values, and challenges the legitimacy of mafia power within the democratic order.

5. Conclusion

Engaging with the stories of innocent mafia victims through the voices of family members and witnesses constitutes a process in which the principles of citizenship and the foundational values of the Italian Constitution are not only recalled, but actively reactivated within the public sphere. Each story ultimately returns us to the issue of denied freedoms and violated rights, revealing mafia violence as a structural negation of democratic life rather than as an exceptional or episodic phenomenon.

From this perspective, memory assumes a renewed analytical and political significance. It is translated into political practice and functions as a critical tool for deconstructing the imaginaries, stereotypes, and forms of normalization upon which mafia power has historically relied. Working on the knowledge of these stories—and on memory itself—thus emerges not merely as an act of commemoration, but as a concrete pathway of resistance against the mafias, capable of challenging relations of domination both in Italy and in a broader global context.

The political dimension of memory, as this study has shown, calls for an understanding of memory as critical memory: a practice that introduces a deliberate interruption in the course of things, exposing injustice and, at times, producing a rupture in asymmetrical power relations sustained by violence, silence, and consent. In this sense, memory is not oriented toward reconciliation or closure, but toward denunciation, accountability, and transformation.

By foregrounding denied rights, silenced histories, and marginalized subjectivities, critical memory becomes a fundamental resource for democratic struggle. It enables the rearticulation of citizenship, the reclamation of public space, and the affirmation of justice as a lived and collective process. Ultimately, the memory of innocent mafia victims emerges not only as a moral imperative, but as a central dimension of the ongoing construction of democracy in territories historically marked by mafia domination.

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