



Original article

Taking Advantage of the Mafias: Economic Illegality, Business Networks and Criminal Groups in the Northeast of Italy

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Abstract: The Veneto is one of the regions least affected by the long-term presence of organised crime groups. Major surveys conducted by the judiciary in this region have highlighted the activities of mobile Camorra groups, whose relationship in the local context was limited to the field of economic and trade cooperation and revealed no connection with the political and institutional spheres. In their national and international trajectories, camorristi arrived in the Veneto in order to invest their capital into the economy of the region, exploiting the grey zone between the legal and illegal spheres, while also following the rules of the local economy. This article traces the characteristics of the activities carried out by Neapolitan organized crime groups in the Veneto. Due to recent economic crises, services provided by local liberal professions and other economic operators play a key role in facilitating illegal activities, while giving rise to protected circuits in which market rules and competition are adjusted to favours and illegal exchanges. This paper focuses on two main case studies that involve financial companies established by criminal organizations from Campania. These groups offered lending and illegal services to hundreds of companies located in different areas of the region and did so with the active cooperation of local entrepreneurs, professionals and business consultants. In illustrating the interaction between the Camorra and local entrepreneurs in the Veneto, we took into consideration the role played by the narratives of economic criminality/illegality in creating a convergence between illegal economic practices carried out by two apparently distant social worlds.

Keywords: Camorra, corruption, enterprise, economic illegality, Northeast Italy

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Introduction

In this article, we consider the relationships between the Venetian economic fabric and some alleged Camorra clans that operated in various areas of the Northeast of Italy and in particular in the Veneto. Studies focusing on the expansion of Italian mafias into new territories frequently use the same conceptual tools to analyse their various criminal traditions, because of their common legal recognition¹. Nevertheless, building abstract criminal typologies that emphasize the alleged specificities in the actions of generic mafia groups contributes to create a rigid social category—that of “mafia”—, which does not allow us to fully understand the actions of said groups or the characteristics of their contacts with the new contexts in which they operate. The Camorra clans operating out of Campania cannot be studied as mafia groups in the broader sense, as they have very peculiar modes of expansion: they are particularly skilled in controlling the areas where they are originally rooted, but they are used to investing their assets outside Campania, also at the international level (see Gribaudo 2009; Mattina 2011, Brancaccio and Castellano 2015).

Regarding their criminal features, these groups are characterized by: a) considerable mobility; b) strong willingness to pursue criminal logics mainly in the field of business (unlike the Sicilian Mafia clans and 'Ndrangheta groups, which attach greater importance to logics of membership); c) the tendency to prefer predatory criminal behaviour involving only partial control of market sectors or portions of the local political life.

Scholars who have studied migrating Camorra clans agree in underlining their poorly structured nature and their inclination to carry out heterogeneous activities, not necessarily connected with the criminal business managed in their original contexts (see, for instance, Allum 2016). Moreover, several researchers agree in attributing great importance to the economic, social, and political characteristics of the new contexts in which these groups operate (see, among others, Brancaccio 2011; Mattina 2011; Varese 2011; Sciarrone 2014; Allum 2016). However, very few studies have been devoted to describing the economic, political and social contexts which may favour the development of Camorra-like activities². Similarly, there is little analysis of the processes governing the activities of these criminal groups on the basis of their interrelationships with new social and economic environments. Generally, most studies on Italian criminal organizations have never completely abandoned the tendency to paint the mafia as an element, which is in itself able to explain various types of illegality:

¹ The crime of “mafia association”, Art. 416 bis, Italian penal code.

² In Italian social sciences, we have some exceptions: e.g. the collective work edited by Gribaudo (2009), as well as Brancaccio (2017) and Martone (2017).

It is a basic flaw that characterizes this field of study: the fact of considering the Mafia mainly an *explanans*, a variable that can explain some other phenomenon, rather than an *explanandum*, of which we can analyse the specific logics and mechanisms (Sciarrone 2014b, p. 21).

In general, we continue to over-emphasize the agency of criminal groups in the structuring of activities practiced by mafia-type groups in the areas of their new expansion. *Some of the criminals* described here become *mafiosi* because of the features of their meeting with specific, new local contexts. On the one hand, the relationships with their groups of origin, rooted in Campania, retain considerable importance with regard to the choices of the business sectors in which to work and the action strategies of these moving groups. On the other hand, it is always the context in which their actions are performed which forms the basis for the construction of actions which can be described as *mafia-like*.

Difficulties in defining the characteristics of Mafia clans active outside Campania particularly affect the judiciary: when judging the work of criminal groups linked to historical Italian Mafias, they must do without some elements characterizing traditional mafia action³. The struggle of the judicial front has clearly emerged in the Veneto, which – among the various regions of Northern Italy – has been the least affected by judicial operations shedding light on structured and rooted criminal realities⁴. In fact, only lacking and fragmented information is available on the nature and operating modalities of Mafia organizations in this region. According to documents provided by the judiciary and the police, it is possible to identify two phases in the activities of Mafia groups in the Veneto. In the first period, between the Sixties and the late Eighties, organized crime operated mainly within illicit markets (CPA 2006, p. 91)⁵. A second phase began in the early Nineties and was characterised by investments in the legal economy (Int. 5, scholar). In recent decades, the proliferation of new companies which have suddenly increased their capital would suggest that business fabric is very permeable to money laundering activities. In the last few years, the investigators have

³ A case that has been investigated by the Italian Mafia studies concerns the criminal groups active in Rome and involved in the recent investigation *Mondo di mezzo*. Cf. AA. VV. (2017); Martone (2017) and the article by the same author in this special issue.

⁴ Increasing public attention to the Mafia in the areas of Central and Northern Italy has influenced the attitude of law enforcement agencies. Recent judicial operations in Lombardy, Emilia Romagna, Piedmont and Lazio have led the Veneto anti-mafia front to place growing emphasis on the emergence of mafia in the region.

⁵ Two cases are particularly representative of this first phase: the attempt, in the early eighties, by some 'Ndrangheta groups to control the flourishing heroin market in Verona (e.g. Arlacchi and Lewis 1990; Varese 2011) and the work of the so-called *Mala del Brenta*, the first indigenous group coming from a non-traditional area of settlement and recognized as a mafia association by the judiciary. The contacts established with several members of Cosa Nostra residents in the Veneto allowed the members of the *Mala del Brenta* to make a *quantum leap* in its organization and to enter the international market of drugs.

found “an indissoluble link between organized crime and the economic fabric” (Prefettura di Venezia 2003, cit. in Cnel 2010: 89).

In the various documents cited, the presence of Mafia organizations is not inferred from the concrete assessment of *settlement* or activities in certain areas; rather, it is deduced from the detection of crimes or anomalies related to the economic system of the region. This approach proves to be recurrent even in the most recent interpretations by the various law enforcement agencies, who denounce “economic penetration that does not produce public insecurity”, excluding all forms of domination and control of the territory (DNA 2012: 737).

Due to the lack of documentary evidence, in the social construction of the Mafia phenomenon, the presence of criminal groups is invoked to explain different dynamics of lawlessness. Indeed, in recent major events involving groups (more or less) related to Camorra clans, what clearly emerges is the active attendance of local business networks in the illegal activities carried out by these criminal organizations. It is this meeting between entrepreneurs and criminal groups from Campania which we will try to investigate in this case study.

This article is the result of a research project that lasted about two years. It is based on the analysis of the documents produced by the judiciary and on interviews with about fifty qualified witnesses: academics, journalists, prosecutors, investigators, entrepreneurs, and members of voluntary associations.

Alleged Camorra Clans in the Veneto

We can identify two recurring elements in the activities of the so-called *Camorra system*⁶ in Veneto. First, the meeting between criminal organizations and the local context is limited to the economic and business sector, without links with politics and the institution. Second, the criminal actions of these groups appear to be de-territorialized: Veneto is a crossroads for their economic interests, but it is not a territory of actual *settlement*. Besides the two cases described in detail in this article, these characteristics can also be detected in other investigations which brought the presence of the Camorra in the Veneto to light. Among these, an investigation identified a criminal group in the Lake Garda area linked to the well-known Licciardi clan, involved money lending and extortion (cf. Tribunale di Verona 2011), while the so-called “*Operazione Titanic*” targeted members of the Casalesi clan and La Torre clan of Mondragone (Caserta),

⁶ The term “Camorra system” refers to a complex criminal universe whose boundaries are difficult to define. Several studies have underlined the heterogeneity in the behaviour of the clans coming from the area of Naples and Caserta (among others, Sales 1993; Barbagallo 2010; Marmo 2011), defining the Camorra as “that vast criminal network of differentiated activities, territorially rooted in Campania, which commonly, with a certain approximation, we define in this way” (Brancaccio 2009: 65).

involved in defrauding Veneto businesses, operating mainly in the food sector supported by a network of professionals mostly from the Veneto.

A review of criminal acts committed by mafia-type organizations in the region in the last five years reveals that in several cases they have been committed by criminal groups from Campania. However, as we will see, the main judicial operations targeting the Veneto have shed light on the activities of mobile, poorly structured criminal groups. In order to reflect on the controversial definition of the Camorra phenomenon in the region we will focus on criminal groups whose links to their reference clans established in Campania are not always clear and can be ascribed to variable logics. In the two main cases which we will discuss, the link between criminals active in the Veneto and the Camorra is not easy to establish.

After describing the so-called “*Aspide case*” in depth, we will illustrate the investigation involving the Catapano brothers, in which many of the elements that emerged are similar to those of the *Aspide case* and allow us to analyse the encounter between criminal groups from Campania and local economic networks. It was a meeting that allows us to shed light on the problematic definition of the *mafia-ness* of these groups, whose criminal action is strongly conditioned by the new context in which they operate.

Crisci’s boys

The first in-depth investigation into a mafia association operating in the Veneto after the one, which targeted the so-called *Mala del Brenta* is “*Operation Aspide*” (Tribunale di Venezia 2011). The case takes its name from a finance company officially operating in the field of supervision and debt collection on behalf of a third party. In fact, the company was the legal front for usury and other illegal financial operations carried out by people coming mainly from the province of Naples and from various areas of the Veneto. Based in Padua, the company had been founded by the Campania members of the criminal organization, who had temporarily settled in the outskirts of the city.

The *Aspide case* has been discussed at length in the media, mainly because of the alleged links between some of those arrested and the so-called *Casalesi clan*⁷. As we shall see, there is not sufficient evidence to support the assumption that the group’s activities were related to Camorra organizations from the Casal di Principe area. This hypothesis was considered by the magistrates mainly because some of those arrested claimed (in front of their victims) that they belonged to the “*Casalesi clan*”.

The investigation was initiated following a complaint lodged in September 2010 by R. R., a businessman from Padua. He told the investigators that he had been “the

⁷ Lamberti (2009) and Martone (2012) describe the varied composition of the clans settled in Casal di Principe.

victim, since the previous May, of extortion and usury at the hands of some individuals from Campania who operated in the Veneto under the cover of a financial company" (ibid., p. 42). After denouncing Aspide, R. R. kept a connection with the criminal organization—as an infiltrator—allowing the judges to gather a considerable amount of information on the activities of the group. The money lending relationship between Aspide and R. R. followed a procedure which was repeated with several other clients. The entrepreneurs came into contact with the company, accepted the conditions proposed and signed a series of debt securities. In many cases, the clients were unable to repay the loans and were forced to surrender a portion of their company shares to Aspide—and sometimes their entire corporate capital (Tribunale di Venezia 2011a, pp. 36-7).

Mario Crisci was at the head of the criminal organization. He was the “creator of the whole complex system that works [ed] under the cover of Aspide s.r.l.” (Tribunale di Venezia, 2013, p. 540). Among the members of the group, only Crisci had the skills needed for the wide array of economic crimes committed by the organization; and he was the only one who was able to manage the enterprises acquired during the months spent in Padua. But he was also a violent leader who ordered his men to commit acts of violence against his many victims. Under interrogation Crisci never denied having carried out illegal economic activities. He described in detail some of his criminal activities in the Veneto and defined himself “an expert in tax avoidance” (Int. 17, magistrate). The other Campanian members of the group (Antonio Parisi, Massimo Covino, and Christian Tavino) had previous convictions for minor offenses and they just performed acts of intimidation and beatings ordered by the boss, according to his instructions also concerning the management of debts accrued by entrepreneurs and economic activities gradually taken over (Tribunale di Venezia 2011a, 2013).

Several factors allowed Aspide to quickly enter the Veneto business networks. Before examining the features of the business environment which allowed Crisci and his accomplices to take control of a significant number of companies in a short time, we will focus on aspects related to the agency of the criminal group. A key element was Crisci’s remarkable ability in using his business skills for strategic purposes, allowing Aspide to effectively use the resources offered by the many companies which were now in its sphere of influence. In many cases, the organization used the services, labour and supplies provided by businesses indebted to Aspide. This was a recurring practice: the group headed by Crisci used the premises of the indebted companies to receive other clients or to execute beatings. Sometimes entire construction projects were completed using only the debtors’ resources. Aspide took over the management of a project commissioned to one of the hijacked companies and ran all the phases of the work, by imposing its supplies and, in some cases, labour. A significant episode was reported by

one of the entrepreneurs we interviewed who was the victim of repeated violence by the group:

Very clever these guys, huh! Criminals, but also smart ... They had a circle of suppliers, like a certain B., whom I met here in Padua, selling floors and tiles. And he gave the floors, another guy gave the plasterboard ... Basically they gave cash to companies, but in fact they then took possession of the business! (Int. 35, entrepreneur).

The consolidation of the relationships established with many entrepreneurs indicates that Aspide gradually penetrated the local economy. However, also in this case the organization appears rather *de-territorialized*: Aspide's range was not limited to the Northeast and the companies involved were located in most of the provinces of the Veneto as well as in several other Italian regions. Moreover, given the considerable heterogeneity of the economic sectors of the controlled companies, Crisci and his accomplices clearly did not have an organic – or long-term – plan to take over specific areas or particular market segments. Until the day when its members were arrested, the group had been operating following a predatory approach.

Crisci could also count on many individuals residing in the provinces of Naples, Caserta and Benevento, whom he used as *dummies* by formally assigning to them the shares taken from the entrepreneurs indebted to Aspide. He used to pay a monthly fee to every *front man*—a few hundred Euros—which the members of the group called a “*mesata*” (the notorious monthly remuneration practice adopted by the Camorra clans).

The *dummies* of the organization were often poor and unemployed people who lived solely on the salary paid by Aspide. These individuals are the only proven link between the criminal group and Campania residents. In addition, several members of the organization did not pursue specific criminal careers, but their involvement can be ascribed to the high density and stratification of the Camorra clans and to the vast criminal universe operating within the sphere of influence of the clans established in Casal di Principe. This is a universe consisting not only of entrepreneurs of the so-called grey zone, but also of subgroups which can be placed halfway between the actual criminal world – as was the case, for example, for some of the individuals recruited by Crisci to perform intimidation and beatings – and the middle class not normally involved in criminal activities (i.e. Crisci)⁸.

The complex integration between the Camorra and the common people has also been observed with reference to the clans settled in Naples:

⁸ Crisci was “sole director of ‘Crisci Alimentare S.p.A.’ (based in Campania, in the province of Benevento)”. Among the company's associates were people connected to the “Schiafone” clan of Casal di Principe (Tribunale di Venezia 2011a, p. 46).

The criminal world was born in a popular context and interacts with it every day. Acquaintances from the past, from childhood, relatives, friends from school or the parish, friends of friends are always there and living in proximity to this criminal environment, despite not being part of it. All this is exacerbated when you are in a tight social environment, like a neighbourhood or a village, also because of the ability of the Camorra to blend in with the local society, with the effect that it is not entirely perceived as a criminal system (Melillo, 2014). This is combined with the fact that there is a large part of the population living on the edge of illegality, conducting illegal activities or practicing common labor activities. People who are not integrated into the criminal world, but who are not extraneous to it (Starace 2014, p. 33).

The complexity of the Camorra criminal universe and the indefinite background of the members of *Aspide* are two key elements in this analysis. Beyond their actual links with the Camorra, the members of the group all came from a social environment close to that of the clans: the criminal practices that they followed in the Veneto are part of a symbolic realm which is typical of the Camorra crime. As we will try to show in greater detail, the typical Camorra behaviour detected by the *Aspide* investigation was reshaped around the Veneto context, interacting with the local entrepreneurial and illegal networks. The features of the Veneto's economic context will be described in the following paragraphs and have proven to be a crucial element to gain a better understanding of the activities of the Catapano group, whose encounter with the local economy displays similar characteristics.

The Catapano brothers

On 9 December 2010, the Prosecutor of Padua received a remand order from magistrates in Udine against a group of people coming mostly from Campania and the Veneto and accused, among other things, of having formed a criminal association in order to commit “an indefinite series of crimes of fraudulent bankruptcy on assets and documents in competition with the owners and / or directors of companies which had financial difficulties and / or were under liquidation” (Tribunale di Padova 2011, p. 2)⁹. The criminal association was led by two entrepreneurs and financial experts from Ottaviano (Naples), two brothers, Giuseppe and Carmine Catapano.

Differently from the *Aspide* investigation, the Catapano case does not concern a group of individuals carrying out *predatory* criminal activities. Indeed, all the crimes of which the magistrates accused them were presented to the targeted companies as actual

⁹ The Catapanos were definitively convicted for the financial crimes they had committed (Tribunale di Padova 2011). However, from a judicial point of view, their organization cannot be identified as a criminal association. In the second phase of the trial they were acquitted of the crime of Mafia association.

illegal financial services and were performed with the full consent of the owners of the said companies.

The system implemented by the group was rather complex and fundamentally consisted in

‘draining’ the assets of the struggling company, which were redirected to new businesses, mainly abroad, set up specifically for that purpose, selling off the company to non-operational enterprises, with fictitious headquarters and represented by ‘frontmen’, as well as committing document falsification crimes leading up to bankruptcy (Tribunale di Padova 2010: 2)

Once a company was drained of its capitals, ownership was transferred to frontmen, who took over the business, thus freeing the seller of any responsibility, however not before having ensured the safety of the company activities and of the entrepreneur’s personal assets as well as—where possible—“the continuation of the entrepreneurial activities shifting profits to new, specifically set up companies” (*ibidem*), i.e. after having depleted and fictitiously rebuilt the company’s capital stock.

As explained in greater detail below, the main members of the group led by the Catapanos were professionals operating in different sectors and with strong ties to the local area (consultants, certified public accountants, lawyers). Thanks to them, the group succeeded in its activities, i.e. the sale of business branches to new companies established specifically for that purpose.

The economic consequences to which their behaviour would lead were obviously of no importance to the Catapanos who had set up the organization in such a way as to make their intervention seem a mere intermediation activity. For this service, they demanded earnings varying between 12% and 15% of the total company liabilities.

Differently from Aspide, which abandoned its official profile as soon as it found its first clients, the Catapano group operated in plain sight, retaining the image of legitimate business activities throughout its existence. Since its establishment, the company structure made it possible to meet the different needs of its clients, presenting itself

in a captivating and reassuring way, thanks to Internet sites with which it was easy to interact, well-designed advertising and brochures, social commitment (including charity activities), and business cards boasting membership of the O.P.E. Association (whose name alluded to non-existing and yet evocative connections with the European Parliament) (Tribunale di Padova 2011: 20).

Ever since the first bankruptcy targeted by the investigation (involving the company ARES S.r.l., which later became ELETTRIO S.r.l.), it clearly appeared that the *modus*

operandi adopted by the group led, in most of the cases examined, to complete business failure.

There was then a second phase in the Catapano investigation led by the Public Prosecutors of the Court of Naples and aimed at uncovering the links between the Catapanos and portions of the Camorra organized crime. However, the trial ended with the defendants being acquitted of the charges of Mafia association. In a letter sent to the regional newspapers of the Veneto few days after his acquittal, Catapano made it known that he had asked for the amendment of all the news reports and articles associating him to crime organizations based in Campania, stating that he

never had any contact with organized crime. And yet, unbelievably, in some newspapers, among which “Il Corriere del Veneto” and “Il Mattino” of Padua, I was called a “*camorrista*”. [...] the unlawful pairing of my name with the words “camorra” and “mafia” is a deceiving strategy (possibly aimed at the sensationalizing the news) with no real evidence to support it...

Regardless of whether the Catapano brothers actually belonged to the Camorra – or were close to its criminal environment – or not, in this case, like in the Aspide case and several others involving criminal groups from Campania operating in the Veneto, it is not possible to conclude that the sphere of action of the organization was restricted to said region, since the headquarters of the numerous businesses involved (over one hundred) were located throughout the national territory.

Small Business and Corruption

In the space of just over a year, Aspide attracted more than one hundred and twenty entrepreneurs from small and medium enterprises operating in different sectors. This significant cross-section of the Veneto’s business community allows us to understand the dynamics of the encounter between business and organized crime in this territory.

First, the criminal group benefited from the domino effect, which involved a growing number of entrepreneurs serving as means to procure new clients among other entrepreneurs. Moreover, Crisci established relationships with a network of moneylenders, financial advisors, and professionals (mostly accountants and notaries), who, as we shall see, were able to make contact with a large number of entrepreneurs in different areas of the Veneto.

Aspide did not just offer credit to its clients. Many companies contacted Crisci to request illegal financial services, like issuing false invoices, violent collection of receivables, illegal import of goods, acquisition of new clients, labour-intensive, driven

failures. The range of services offered by Aspide clearly emerges when looking at the case of one of its clients, Donato Corso, an entrepreneur in the trucking industry:

In that context, they proposed to Corso the so-called “Crisci package”, or what Mario Crisci himself [...] defined as the “management of a bad company”. In short, they proposed to him to get rid of Trascorso s.r.l., his old trucking company which was in difficulty, and to open a new business, cleared of any liabilities, assigning it to one of their dummies (Tribunale di Venezia, 2013, p. 81).

From this point of view, the two cases described here seem entirely alike. Just like Crisci’s organization, the Catapano group was able to exploit the widespread acquiescence to illegal practices present among a non-negligible portion of the Veneto’s entrepreneurs.

The success of companies such as those managed by Crisci and Catapano is at least partially due to the combination of the strategies implemented by groups from Campania and a series of illegal practices – usury, tax avoidance and evasion, fraudulent bankruptcy – widespread throughout the Veneto’s economic system and radicalized by the long economic crisis. Like in other areas of Northern Italy, in the daily reality of many entrepreneurs these illegal practices become a true formal extension of legal economic activities (Dal Lago and Quadrelli 2003).

It is not an overstatement to say that the characteristics of the local context allowed companies managed by individuals from Campania (or people not rooted in the Veneto) to initiate relationships with hundreds of companies over a remarkably short period of time.

One of the main factors which can explain the success of Crisci and the Catapanos is the difficulty, for entrepreneurs, to obtain credit: “they gave you money without asking for any guarantee”, as one of the entrepreneurs in contact with Aspide told us (Int. 35, entrepreneur). Since the evolution of the Veneto’s economic system is guaranteed by a high turnover of business activities, the provision of credit becomes more important here than anywhere else (Int. 31, researcher). In these years marked by the economic downturn, the impossibility of gaining access to credit has been a real tragedy for thousands of small enterprises. This is even truer in the Veneto, where company turnover is higher, the economic structure of small enterprises is weaker, and the need for credit is stronger. The lack of capital has always been a fundamental feature of enterprises in the Veneto and it has heavily conditioned their development prospects (Brunetti 2015). Furthermore, in recent months, a scandal has emerged involving two co-operative banks, “*Banca Popolare*” of Vicenza and “*Veneto Banca*” of Montebelluna (Treviso). Although with different methods, over the years these two banks built a system through which credit was granted paying more attention to

relational aspects rather than on the basis of the actual qualities of the investors, and real estate investments were preferred over other types (Golo 2015). The crisis of the two banks has exposed a situation in which the granting of credit does not comply in any way with standard and transparent principles and procedures.

Moreover, according to many observers interviewed, the regional economy and society have suffered from progressive *embrittlement*. In such a context, for many entrepreneurs, “hidden exchanges and collusive agreements are conceived as a way to stay on the market, and sometimes the only way to survive economically” (Sciarrone 2011b: p.31). This *embrittlement* certainly relates to the economic crisis, during which there was an acceleration in the “process of selection of contractors”, caused by “a sudden drop in global demand” and by “a sharp contraction in domestic demand”. Hence, it may be concluded that the 2008 crisis occurred within a context of profound modifications of the Veneto’s economic model, which over the last decade seems to have lost most of its original momentum (Marini 2015).

However, the considerations relating to the economic crisis are not enough to explain the relationship between business and crime in the Veneto. In fact, this relationship started to emerge in the region in the eighties (see CPA 1994), at a time when the North-East business model was not in crisis but was growing and consolidating itself. The crisis caused an acceleration in the phenomenon but cannot be seen as the ultimate cause of illicit mechanisms, as these can be mostly ascribed to established modes of action by small and medium enterprises – although it is hard to determine how frequently illegal activities actually occurred.

Major investigations by the Veneto judiciary carried out in recent years (in particular those presented in this article) are important not only because they reveal the presence of supposed Camorra groups, but because they highlight the widespread willingness to accept illegal practices just to stay in the market. Even the judges from the Venice Anti-Mafia prosecutor’s office – whose main purpose is to prosecute Mafia groups – recognize that attention must primarily be paid to the context, which made it possible for a company like Aspide to achieve such great success:

The problem is not that the Veneto or Lombardy are infiltrated by the Mafia. The point is that what matters here is to invoice: in a period of crisis, the accountant is interested in working, the bank manager is interested in money being deposited in the bank. What matters is to invoice: not to lose, or gain. None of the bank directors reported suspect occurrences... (Int. 17, magistrate).

Focusing on entrepreneurship – especially in a context like that of the Veneto, where business is one of the pillars of the local society – allows us to interpret the actions of the Camorra-type criminal groups outside Campania. This approach ultimately helps us

to track the processes which govern the definition of *mafia-ness* of these criminal organizations in an area characterized by a system of advanced capitalism.

Entrepreneurs, Professionals, Camorristi: “A Common Investment Agency”

What kind of businessmen turned to companies like Aspide and Catapano’s? When reading the court papers, several rough entrepreneurial trajectories emerge, characterized by bad investments, failures, protests and convictions for bankruptcy. The companies involved in the investigations included not only businesses going through financial difficulties due to the economic crisis but also companies which had been in trouble in the past. In the investigation by magistrates in the Veneto who prepared the Aspide case, we can read:

In 2008, due to insolvent clients and denial of access to bank credit, linked to a previous bankruptcy, Cesarino Alsoni was in serious financial difficulties [...]. In this delicate situation his accountant told him that he knew people who were able to free him of the burden of Edil Kontract. Being interested in this opportunity, Alsoni requested an appointment and actually met with Mario Crisci (Tribunale di Venezia 2013, p. 323).

As well as several other entrepreneurs, Alsoni saw Aspide’s offer as a (risky) chance to survive economically.

Reading the records of the trial, a question arises: despite finding themselves face to face with people who explicitly mentioned the use of violence and their being members of a Camorra clan, why did dozens of entrepreneurs nonetheless decide to accept loans from Aspide? Beyond the influence of the economic crisis, what can lead entrepreneurs to take great risks in order to continue their activities? A further hypothesis focuses on the social representation of the role of entrepreneurs in relation to their social context.

In recent years a myth has emerged of the entrepreneur who creates a sense of belonging, but who also has a moral obligation [...] as an entrepreneur, you cannot say: “I cannot do more, I’m closing the company”. A new cultural phenomenon is spreading, a kind of nobility, with codes, with moral obligations, “we are the ones who made the Veneto. We are the ones who produce, who give jobs”. Unfortunately, anthropologically and culturally, we are faced with this narrative (Int. 31, scholar).

We are thus confronted with a new type of entrepreneurial middle class, a class of *hidalgos* who believe that they have led the transformation of an area, redeeming it from poverty, and that they represent, in their sharpest form, the values – credited to them by

much literature¹⁰ – which have characterized the economic and social development of the Veneto. One consequence of this social narrative is the full intertwining of personal identity and the multiple outcomes of a company, including its possible failure (see Costa 2012). In this perspective, we might understand the obstinacy of some businessmen involved in the Aspidi affair who asked several times for more credit in order to keep their business going despite its desperate condition. This *modus operandi* has important consequences with respect to the subject which we are addressing:

If we do not force entrepreneurs to act correctly ... the business may happen to fail, but at some point you have to say to the entrepreneur: “My friend, it's over, pull the plug”. If we do not create a system similar to the German one, then it is clear that we allow all these criminal infiltrations, because, in order not to fail, everyone feels entitled not to pay tax, to get money from the Mafia, and to do all sorts of things (Int. 17, magistrate).

This representation of the entrepreneur's professional identity has another consequence, i.e. the overlapping of social and business relations, reproducing over time the character of informality which has accompanied the economic development of the region. This aspect has been analysed since the seventies with reference to the territories of the so-called “Third Italy”, indicating that the persistence of local political subcultures (in the case of the Veneto, the Catholic one) constitutes a strategic element in creating a network based on trust, able to stem the social disruption caused by industrialization (Trigilia 1995). During the phase of economic growth, this informality represented an advantage in terms of lower transaction costs; today, in a context in which politics plays a marginal role in regulating the economy, it seems to have become a factor promoting mechanisms of discretion or opportunistic behaviour¹¹.

The payment system is the litmus test of the business culture of this territory [...] Now I pay you only if you are my friend, because I have worked with you for a long time and we have established a relationship of trust. I do not pay you because you have done a job, regardless of who you are. There is too little economy and too much society. It is too full of individual relationships (Int. 33, scholar).

These informal relationships facilitate the development of collusion among companies, which create cartels. Due to increasing market uncertainty and exacerbation in

¹⁰ See, among others, De Michelis 1999 and Bernardi 2005.

¹¹ Since the beginning of the economic crisis in 2011, the lack of political regulation in the business sector took on some peculiar characteristics in the Veneto. Sociologist Aldo Bonomi (2013: 110) has recently pointed out that “the malaise of the Northeast, its disenchantment, is born of the disruption of the old interplay between economy, society and politics and the inability to build a new one.”

economic competition, the networks of entrepreneurs become more compact (int. 31 scholar). Getting in touch with Aspide and the Catapanos through informal word of mouth among colleagues has the same function as joining the cartels just mentioned. The goal is to access an increasingly scarce resource such as credit through relationships that circumvent the law. Among the entrepreneurs who tried to solve their problems by accepting help from Aspide, there were people like Marzio Casarotto, a furniture maker with a business history full of failures. He tried (and failed) to set up a company in Romania and thanks to the “Crisci package” he cleaned up his liabilities. Then, he began to find customers for Aspide “getting 4 thousand Euros for each operation” (Tribunale di Venezia 2011a p. 525). This pattern was repeated with several other entrepreneurs.

The individuals dealing with potential clients and investors on behalf of Aspide were fully integrated into the business environment, as shown by the case of Ivano Corradin, a renowned tax advisor from Bassano del Grappa (Vicenza) and member of the criminal organization. Corradin was the accountant of the company and found new clients; at the same time, he assured “his interlocutors of the seriousness of the organization and that their investments were safe” (Tribunale di Venezia 2011a, p. 589).

The investigation reveals the fundamental contribution provided to Aspide by several other professionals and financial advisors. A paradigmatic case is that of Luca Arnone, a notary from Lendinara (Rovigo), who took on a strategic role preparing documents for the company and “caring very little about the legality of the deeds and the real will of the individuals who signed them” (Tribunale di Venezia, 2013, p. 526).

Several professionals prompted their clients to use the services offered by Aspide. In many cases, they acted like brokers and played a key role in connecting the enterprises with the criminal group¹². The importance of these figures in facilitating the adoption of illegal practices in the management of enterprises emerges even more clearly in the case of the Catapano brothers, whose services were designed to drive businesses to failure and yet obtained, in most cases, full consent from the consultants involved (Int. 16, magistrate).

Like in the Aspide case, the Catapanos also deemed it essential to avail themselves of individuals deeply rooted in the Veneto regional fabric, able to control the group’s business and relationships with clients. Contacts with struggling companies were managed by various “area collaborators”, whose role was to present the businesses to the Group’s sales manager, acting as mediators. Generally, these were individuals who

¹² Some emblematic cases: Umberto Pillon, an entrepreneur who came into contact with Crisci through his consultant (Tribunale di Venezia 2013: 61); Graziano Battistella, through his accountant (ibid.: 115); Cesarino Alsoni, advised by his tax expert (ibid: 323).

operated in the sector of “financial brokerage”, regularly registered with their professional association and receiving invoiced commission fee payments.

In order to understand the mechanisms through which the Catapanos’ business operated (and its far-reaching roots in the Veneto’s regional context), it may be useful to describe briefly the role of the key members of the organization. Bruno Rizzieri was a former police officer, suspended from duty due to a lawsuit brought against him. He was Giuseppe Catapano’s field lieutenant and dealt with recruiting suitable frontmen and helping them in their business operations. Moreover, Rizzieri managed the group’s relationships with the new company executives, who merely followed his instructions to the letter. This was a heavy task, “since frontmen are people of a medium-low social background who have been through a lot” (*ibid.*: 22). The frontmen all came from the area where Rizzieri lived and had quite long criminal records.

Another main figure in the group was Elio Buonaiuto, a lawyer with several pending criminal charges, who provided his professional contribution depending on the needs of the business. His duties also included reassuring clients and supporting frontmen used in business operations when they were summoned by the trustees to account for their financial operations.

Strictly economic matters were handled by Luca Montanino, a certified public accountant whose firm was located in the province of Naples. Montanino devised and prepared the transition from the failed companies to the new enterprises, from the “old” to the “new” (and fictitious) executives of the same company whose headquarters were however moved elsewhere (to non-existing places of business). In addition, he “drafted all the deeds needed to set up businesses, also domiciled abroad, which helped ensure that the companies in difficulty would be drained, to the detriment of their creditors. The company deeds which he prepared were then brought to a notary’s office where they were signed” (*ibid.*: 20).

Lastly, closer support to the Catapano brothers’ activities was offered by Alessandro Cassioli, a consultant who, according to the magistrates, was able to manage first-hand a wide “portfolio of clients”: “it was Cassioli who provided early feedback on the feasibility of the financial operations that the “group” would then carry out” (*ibid.*). Cassioli was an ex bank manager, already involved in criminal proceedings because of his banking activity. He found his rightful place within the organization being able to take full advantage of his experience, skills, and knowledge of the financial world, as well as his abilities in the sectors of communication and marketing: “once contact was made – directly or through the various “agents” operating throughout Italy – with the companies in financial difficulty or requiring structural changes, it was Cassioli who became the confidant of the entrepreneurs and their collaborators, with whom he interacted managing to convey a sense of trust and assurance” (*ibidem*).

The key role played by professionals and financial intermediaries found in the Veneto can be framed within the more general mode of action of the Camorra system. As has been pointed out, the businesses and investments of the Camorra clans are managed by “a common investments agency” which “makes use of the collaboration of very specific consultants: besides lawyers, who are prominent figures in the life of the clans, there are accountants, notaries, politicians, financial advisors and others” (Starace 2014: 68). The cases examined in this paper show how the close relationship between the business community and the criminal groups operating in the Veneto reproduces criminal structures and relationship patterns typical of Camorra operations taking place in Campania. Nevertheless, the Veneto’s economic context is characterised by specific modes of interaction between the Mafia organizations and the operators involved in their business dealings.

According to some scholars, Mafias can play a role in regulating collusive cartels: “entrepreneurs are happy to turn to an agency capable of ensuring compliance with the cartel agreements that serve to reduce competition” (cf. Varese 2011 p. 15). However, to date, this role has not emerged in the Veneto. Here the cartels usually have a different configuration and are created regardless of Mafia presence. An emblematic case emerged in 2007 and involved dozens of businesses in the provinces of Vicenza, Treviso and Venice, revealing a system of collusion among companies aimed at identifying the percentage of reduction on offers in public calls for tenders. “These are closed systems – as an entrepreneur from Mestre told a local newspaper – which it is impossible to enter: jobs go only to friends and friends of friends [...] It’s tragic to be excluded from the few jobs that are out there, and at that point it is better to pay, a small bribe is acceptable”¹³. Those described by the entrepreneur are protected networks within which the strict laws of market and competition are mitigated through the logic of favours and occult trade¹⁴.

We may conclude that the mafias in the Veneto do not fulfil this role and, in other words, do not serve the purpose of arranging occult agreements, because the indigenous networks are clearly able to self-regulate.

Conclusion

The Aspidi investigation is the first effective response to the widespread need to trace and pursue mafia-type organizations in the Veneto. Faced with the need to provide a strong reader to interpret the presence of Camorra clans in this area, the former

¹³ F. Furlan, *An entrepreneur confesses: “In order to work I would pay bribes”*, in “La Nuova Venezia”, March 21, 2012.

¹⁴ The negative consequences of such closed networks, in which competition is circumvented by collusion between more and less legal entities, are described by Trigilia (2001).

national anti-mafia deputy applied to the Veneto has interpreted this affair as a paradigm of the modalities that characterize Camorra's action in the region, interpreting it as a case of "offshoring" (CPA 2012: 4-5)¹⁵. This category identifies the purely entrepreneurial character of the activities carried out by the group led by Crisci and refers – at the same time--to the close relationship between its members and their areas of origin, recalling that the proceeds obtained were not "residing in the territory but were confluent in the territory where was headquartered the company that had delocalized part of its activity in the Veneto" (ibid.). The analysis proposed by the National Antimafia Directorate also dwells on the question of illegal financial services expressed by entrepreneurs in the Veneto, while maintaining a perspective that tends to perceive local entrepreneurs as *vulnerable*, that is *subject* to infiltration strategies which are considered the exclusive domain of the mafia groups that *relocate* their activities.

However, the Aspide case—as well as the Catapano case—confirms that criminal groups, on the one hand, and the economic, social and political environment in which they operate, on the other, constitute two components of a single criminal phenomenon: the obstinacy in keeping them separate—analytically and legally—could be considered as a true "paradox"¹⁶. As we have seen, the Aspide group can be considered as a Camorra clan not only on the basis of the origin of its members or because of their relations with their area of origin, but because of the relationships that they established in the Veneto and according to modalities that are necessarily influenced by the surrounding environment. The group's behaviours were modelled on the context in which it operated, by selecting—during the daily interaction with its main actors—norms, structures and modes of action that its affiliates considered relevant, plausible and effective. The case cannot be connected with the usual processes of "adaptation" (Sciarrone 2007) or "hybridization" (Lupo 2002, 2008) that usually accompany the establishment of a mafia group in new territories: with the Aspide case we are rather faced with the *genesis* of a Camorra group in a non-traditional area.

If the Aspide case allows us to reflect on the construction of *mafia-ness* in a non-traditional context, the Catapano case—although it does not involve a Camorra clan—has been useful to strengthen the elements that characterize the encounter between a criminal group from the South of Italy and the Veneto economic and social context. It is a meeting that takes place on in the marketplace.

The criminal organizations that we have focused on all encountered an economy where illegal practices are also the prerogative of other actors. Wear and driven failures,

¹⁵ In a recent contribution that takes into account this case the interpretation proposed by judges based on the category of "offshoring" is substantially endorsed (Lavorgna et al. 2013).

¹⁶ The jurist Alessandro Baratta (1994: 96) talked about *paradox* with reference to the widespread tendency to interpret the Sicilian Mafia as an entity that exists independently of its interrelations with the local society and local institutions of the State.

tax scams, the intermediation of labour and corruption, as well as the illicit trafficking of waste, are not the exclusive domain of Mafias, whose criminal activities in many cases can be identical to those practiced by the economic crime:

When the organized crime establishes connections with the official economy, it undergoes a learning process that will confuse the features of this crime with those typical of white-collar crime and economic crime. In the licit economy, criminal entrepreneurs will find similarities with their conventional criminal activities, and sometimes they will learn techniques that they can use if they intend to return to acting illegally (Ruggiero 1996: 76).

Mafias place the legal and illegal economy in contact with one another, generating increasing difficulties in distinguishing the two fields.

When they began to operate in the Veneto, the two groups analysed in this paper adhered to rules dictated by the local economic networks, taking advantage of any existing breaches and penetrating through them. The encounter occurred in the market arena, a market subject to an ever greater amount of “mis-regulations” (Donolo 2001). Camorra (and, in general, the groups linked to it) merely made the most of the opportunities offered by this market in a way that was consistent with their consolidated modes of action. Their objective, it seems, was not to gain recognition across the local society and pursue an enduring settlement strategy, but rather to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the local social context. This short-term strategy aimed to maximize earnings in the shortest time possible. As seen above, the entrepreneurial fabric of the Veneto offered several opportunities for this encounter, pointing to certain elements of fragility that had been developing over time. Indeed, no attempt had been made in the political sphere to regulate the processes of development of the regional economy, while the traditional social regulation rooted in a model of community management inherited from the Catholic political sub-culture underwent a deep crisis due to growing social individualization.

The lack of political regulation becomes evident if we look, for instance, at the local territory and at the construction chaos characterizing it. Sprawling buildings reflect the piling up of unregulated interests and the drive towards accumulation, which have contributed to fracturing the cohesion of the local society, giving way to a long series of conflicts that the regional political sphere failed to keep in check, until the largely uncontrolled phenomenon analysed here exploded. In the name of simplification and efficiency, urban regulations introduced planning procedures, which were increasingly de-regulatory¹⁷.

¹⁷ The new “negotiated planning” system is based on a public-private partnership model, which deprives public entities of the tools not only to control but also to steer strategic choices.

As underlined above, a context marked by an evident “deficit in the political regulation of the economy”, like the globalized context in general, offers the Mafias new opportunities “to move within and between the different institutional domains, taking advantage of the opportunities developing in between the rules, the lack of rules, and any ambiguities in the rules”, making the most of “the growing interdependence between more or less institutionalized forms of regulation, national and supra-national, public and private, formal and informal” (Sciarrone 2007: 154).

As explained by one of our interviewees, who is the manager of a well-known research institute studying labour in the Veneto, “politics is an ingredient, one of the things you mix into society [...] It is like a coat that you put on and take off when necessary” (Int. 33Ven, scholar), and what matters is the type of relationship which politics has with specific interests. An investigation, not into organized crime but into a fully-fledged system aimed at evading tax involving dozens of entrepreneurs in the leather tanning sector around Vicenza¹⁸, has shed light on an interesting occurrence: one of the key members of the *ring* requested an *ad hoc* parliamentary question – his request was actually put forward by some Members of Parliament – in order to keep the magistrates at bay. In this frayed context, politics seems to be reduced to a mere tool to facilitate business.

We started from the hypothesis that the current crisis has radicalized processes and cultures which already existed in the Veneto. We are faced with the violent emergence of features that have somehow been inherent in the development of the Veneto over the recent period. The lapsing of entrepreneurial creative tension into short-term opportunism – where the encounter with mafias may occur, to the parties’ mutual satisfaction – derives from the systematic disconnection of society, from its inability to bring together – also through conflict – its different components.

The mutual deafness of the parties into which society is breaking up – along complex and distorted fault lines –, the interruption of channels of institutional political communication, the failed coming together (even by means of conflict) of opposing interests and types of life have brought about [...] the atrophy of public morality, the law of survival of the fittest, the obsolescence of legality as the normal form of relationship in community life, the degeneration of the very idea that it can and must display a complex and articulate sense of collectivity, that it must form a citizenship freely determined by all the parties involved (Galli 2006).

This disconnection can be mended only by rebuilding a public sphere in which “disconnected” needs are allowed to come into contact, and into conflict, and politics can once again practice the art of choice and decision.

¹⁸ Cf. “Concia, maxi frode da 12 milioni. Tre arresti, sei persone indagate”, in *Giornale di Vicenza*, 15-07-2009.

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