

Research note

Mafia Practices and Italian Entrepreneurial Activities in the Belgian Food Sector. Research Objectives

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Abstract: This research aims to study the social and economic processes which encourage the spread of mafia practices among some Italian entrepreneurs in the Belgian food sector. My working hypothesis is that mafia practices are violent and predatory strategies to monopolize the economic market, which rely on the use of heterogeneous and cross-class social networks. In this view, these activities of old and new Italian entrepreneurs in Belgium are not the result of the exportation of mafia methods through migratory or cultural ties, but rather the outcome of a complex economic system of production in which certain Italian entrepreneurs have established profitable enterprises in the legal market using violent modalities of accumulation and specific strategies of relation. This research is developed through an ethnographic approach grounded on biographical collection and on participant observation, which is carried out through direct involvement in commercial activities in the sectors of interest.

Keywords: Ethnographic Research, Participant Observation, Belgium, Mafia Practices, Capitalistic Accumulation

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The European Review of Organised Crime 1(2), 2014, 81-96

ISSN: 2312-1653

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There are two kind of people in this world my friend.
Those with loaded guns and those who dig. You dig.

(Sergio Leone – *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*)

You can get much farther with a kind word and a gun
than you can with a kind word alone.

(Al Capone)

If money comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one cheek,
capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt’.

(Karl Marx – *Capital*)

In recent decades, many criminological and journalistic works have studied the relationship between society and criminal powers and, more specifically, between mafia practices and international mobility (Fijnaut and Paoli, 2004). Conversely, socio-anthropological research have shown little interest in this topic due to the difficulty to conduct in-depth investigations on a social phenomenon that takes its roots in the “anti-market zone” at the borders between legality and illegality (Braudel, 1979).

This research is inscribed in a socio-anthropological and ethnographic perspective (Whyte, 1943; Trasher, 1927; Becker, 1963; Bourgois, 2003; Venkatesh, 2013) and aims to understand the relationship between some Italian entrepreneurs, certain economic activities and violent practices of accumulation in the Belgian food market. In these research notes predatory economic practices are defined as mafia practices meaning the use of force, violence and a wide network of relations as tools of wealth accumulation on the economic market.

The research questions guiding this study focus on the relationship between the role of some Italian migrants in Belgium and the proliferation of mafia practices within capitalistic economic processes: Is there a relationship between Italian immigration and the establishment of economic and mafia practices in Belgium? Are mafia practices exported through migratory flows and cultural ties, as the official discourse seems to suggest? Is there a relationship between the economic processes of capitalism – in which legal and illegal economies are inextricably intertwined - and economic practices that are based on the exercise of violence and heterogeneous groups of interest? Could these mafia practices be analysed as endogenous forms of capitalist accumulation of wealth?

The research hypothesis is that mafia practices are violent and predatory strategies to monopolize the economic market, which rely on the use of heterogeneous and cross-

class social networks. In this view, these activities of old and new Italian entrepreneurs in Belgium are not the result of the exportation of mafia methods through migratory or cultural ties, but rather the outcome of a complex economic system of production in which certain Italian entrepreneurs have established profitable enterprises in the legal market using violent modalities of accumulation and specific strategies of relation (Sanfilippo and Palidda 2012; Santino, 1994; 2007; Vercellone and Lebert, 2001; Ruggiero, 1996). Accordingly, the diffusion of mafia practices can be read as the result of a complex process of adaptation to the Belgian economic market and society, where these activities are not controlled by structured and vertical organizations, but are rather rooted in a system of relations that goes beyond Italian communities, involving a range of legal and illegal actors who aim to accumulate capital and power (Briquet and Favarel-Garrigues 2008; Sciarrone and Storti 2014). Hence, these mafia practices, which appear to be nothing but targeted strategies to compete on the food market, might be rooted in certain mechanisms of capitalism and in certain effects that those mechanisms produce on the society.

In this study¹, I examine the different types of relationships between economic activities, entrepreneurial careers, mafia practices and international mobility in the Belgian food sector, which is characterized by the presence of several Italian enterprises. Here I propose a theoretical framework that aims to go beyond traditional paradigms of interpretation to investigate the dynamics of the capitalistic economy and the relational system in which these practices are rooted and flourish (Vercellone and Lebert, 2001; Vanketesh and Levitt, 2000; Venkatesh, 2008; Santino, 2007; Sciarrone, 2009; Briquet and Favarel-Garrigues, 2008).

This socio-anthropological approach, based on the ethnographic technique of participant observation (Malinowski, 1929), aims to contribute to the scientific literature on this topic providing new data and knowledge about the relationship between migrant communities, economic activities and mafia practices in the era of global capitalism.

Contemporary mafia practices and international mobility:

Brief excursus through the literature

In recent decades, there have been two major schools of thought which have dominated the academic and public debate about the relationship between mafia practices and

¹ Everyone quoted or named in this article is to be considered innocent and never incriminated for the facts reported below. All the names used in this article have been changed to protect the real identity.

international mobility and on the ability of criminal organizations to move from their places of origin to different immigration contexts. The first one has developed the concept of “transnational globalised crime” (Sterling, 1995; Shelley, 1999; Williams, 2001; Castells, 2001) and the second one has focused on the “demand for extra-legal protection” (Reuter, 1987; Gambetta, 1993; Varese, 2011). In spite of the fact that they stem from very different perspectives, both these schools have linked the proliferation of mafia economic practices to the presence of structured mafia organizations.

The scientific assumptions of the first group of researchers analyse the spread of organized criminality in relation with the advent of globalization and the rise in migration flows (Sterling, 1995). According to these scholars, mafias are real multinational corporations of crime, increasingly independent from a specific territory and detached from the sovereignty on which the modern State system is based. Therefore, the international activity of criminal organizations is facilitated by the demolition of language barriers and the increased mobility. Criminal organizations move around the world as big corporations aiming to expand in new economic markets and benefit from cheap labour and abundance of raw materials in certain areas of the world (Shelley, 2003).

According to Phil Williams (2001), current criminal organizations are able to migrate easily. Castells (2001) agrees with this interpretation and identifies a series of places where, in his opinion, mafias have recently established: for instance, *Cosa Nostra* (Sicilian mafia) in Germany, the Chinese triads in the Netherlands, etc.. This approach – drawing from the concept of “liquid modernity” of Zygmunt Bauman (2000) – is based on the idea that mafias are “liquid” and autonomous organizations, which make business all over the world. This “liquidity” is not connected to the availability of monetary resources, but is directly linked to a specific interpretation of the modernity in which the control of the territory has been replaced by a fluidity that is not well specified. Consequently, mafias are conceived as sorts of “universal octopuses” (Sterling, 1990), who create networks or engage in conflicts on the basis of changing core interests. This interpretation of mafias is dominant in several Western political and institutional environments.

Differently, the hypothesis of the second group of researchers argues that the transplantation of mafias is not a simple process. Moreover, the advent of globalization and the intensification of international economic flows help criminal organizations to expand their businesses without physically moving from a country to another (Varese, 2011). Hence, the presence of mafias away from their places of origin is not the product of globalization, but the consequence of the repressive action carried out by the State in a specific country (Varese, 2011).

According to what is argued by Reuter (1987) and Gambetta (1993), mafias do not move from their places of origin in conditions of normality, but, when they are pushed to move (because of changes in the legal, economic or political system), they tend to privilege locations where they already have contacts (relatives, friends etc.). The presence of some mafia criminals abroad does not automatically lead to the establishment of mafias in these contexts (Varese, 2011). Indeed, a mixture of factors is needed for mafias to take roots in a context that is far from their societies of origin. First of all, the absence of competing criminal groups that offer illegal protection is fundamental. The entrenchment of a foreign criminal organization is more likely to take place when its presence in the new context is related to the opening of new markets that are not effectively regulated by local authorities (Gambetta, 1993). Hence, where the transplantation of mafias occurs in more or less distant territories, it is related to a demand for “criminal protection” (Varese, 2011); in other words, the presence of large illegal markets, widespread real estate speculation, the absence of commercial barriers and the inability of the State to efficiently solve local conflicts tend to generate this type of demand.

According to Varese (2011) and Gambetta (1993), mafias do not move easily because their strong conflict mediation function is rooted in the context of origin. However, the presence of former members of mafia groups, who migrated as a consequence of stricter policies or to improve their social condition, can enhance the transplantation of criminal organizations in more or less developed countries where governments are weak (Gambetta, 1993). In these contexts, institutions may be unable to protect “property rights” (private property), favouring a growth in the demand for extra legal protection. Mafias can provide services to companies and play a central role in the regulation of and access to certain sectors of the economy, exercising a dispute resolution function, which is prevalently achieved through the use of violence (Gambetta, 1993).

Hence, according to the Oxford school, mafias flourish in contexts where institutions do not govern the economy and fail elsewhere (Varese 2011, Gambetta 1993). This literature has often failed to fully understand the complex link between mafia practices and the relational contexts in which they take place. Moreover, these studies have not considered mafia practices in certain economic, social and political contexts that are completely different from those where they originally developed. Indeed, if the first approach to the study of “transnational crime” makes a rough analogy between migration and mafia practices in the context of the globalization, the second group (the Oxford school) tends to reproduce a series of stereotypes, which are largely based on the old “deficit theories” and used to interpret mafia phenomena. In addition,

they highlight the absence of the State where mafias are primary actors in economic regulation, which exclusively appears to be a relevant factor in some specific contexts.

However, the emphasis the two schools of thought put on mafia practices as the product of structured organizations, does not allow to focus on the relationship between predatory practices of wealth accumulation, capitalist processes of dispossession and the action of a wide range of legal and illegal actors which might include some *mafiosi* (Vercellone and Lebert, 2001; Sciarrone and Storti, 2014).

On this topic, the recent studies of Sciarrone and Storti (2014) on the diffusion of mafia practices in non-traditional territories are extremely interesting. Their work analyses official documents and judiciary sources on the spread of mafia activities from their places of origin (South of Italy) to Northern Italy and Germany. The two scholars argue that the displacement of mafias in non-traditional territories cannot be interpreted as a process of transplantation or exportation, but results from complex mechanisms of adaptation, which reshape mafia activities making them deeply different from those conducted in their places of origin. (Sciarrone and Storti, 2014; Sciarrone, 2014). Consequently, in those new contexts mafias are not interested in the control of territory and affiliation ties, but would rather focus on legal and illegal entrepreneurial activities of different natures (Sciarrone and Storti 2014). Hence, the spread of mafia practices would be inscribed in a social, political and economic fabric which is already marked by illicit practices, corruption and other forms of illegal accumulation (Sciarrone, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the works of Sciarrone and Storti (2014) provide a sharp interpretation, but they tend to circumscribe the use of some violent modalities of capital accumulation to the action mafia organizations, detaching the study of those latter from a more in-depth analyses of the dynamics of capitalism and the effects they produce on the society.

Embedded in the Belgian food sector: extracts of my fieldwork diary.

An exemplary story

Before introducing some of my preliminary considerations, it is worth clarifying some elements of the methodological approach and strategies of access to the fieldwork used in this study.

Given the delicate nature of the object of the study and the difficulty of gathering information from outside, I decided to use the technique of participant observation. Hence, I entered the field as an “informal” seller of Italian products such as truffles and

wine with the aim of establishing trust relationships with a series of Italian entrepreneurs in the Belgian food market.

This approach allowed me to interact and make exchanges with a wide range of legal and illegal actors such as Italian producers, import-export brokers, chef of restaurants, professionals, police and public officers, politicians, criminals, *mafiosi*, etc. I conducted this activity for about ten months, during which I became very close to some of these actors and particularly with a commercial broker of Italian origins who has subsequently become my major informer. Jonathan – as I will call him in these research notes – is, among the other things, a criminal broker who provides logistic support from abroad to Italian mafia and criminal groups. Not only did Jonathan facilitate my access to the field by sharing with me part of his contacts, he also provided a certain degree of protection as he was aware of my position of researcher and he was informed about the aims of my study.

For instance, it is only thanks to Jonathan that I met Mr. Umberto, an Italian entrepreneur and a very powerful man who emigrated from Sicily about forty years ago and is currently living in Flanders. According to many Italo-Belgian entrepreneurs, Mr. Umberto is the “King” of the Belgian food sector as far as *Made in Italy* products are concerned. Mr. Umberto is indeed one of the most famous Italian entrepreneurs abroad, he stood for Italian general election on the lists abroad in 2013 and he is one of the leaders of the old Italian community in Flanders.

In the following extracts of my fieldwork diary I give a short account of my first meeting with Mr. Umberto.

Friday 14 March 2014:

Salvatore, one of my informers, was arrested again two weeks ago. During this time, my relationship with Jonathan became closer. He has invited me several times to his house for dinner and I have decided to tell him more about my research in order to protect myself, especially after a careful reflection about the arrest of Salvatore and the time we spent together.

We have talked about my research and Jonathan has offered to introduce me to some of his contacts who work in the Belgian food sector. In particular, he wants me to meet Mr. Umberto, who is apparently one of the most important characters in the local food sector.

[...] I called Mr. Umberto one week ago and I made an appointment for today at 9:30 in Flanders, in a village where he owns an Italian food products import/export company. I asked Jonathan to come with me, and I will pick him up later, so we can go together. I really want Jonathan to come with me because he is in business with Mr. Umberto and this would give me the opportunity to listen to very interesting conversations.

We arrive on time at Mr. Umberto's hangar (Jonathan told me that Mr Umberto is a very punctual man). When we arrive, Mr. Umberto is alone in the office of his hangar. He has a number of offices in Brussels, Antwerp and Charleroi, but he has decided to directly manage his business from home. Indeed, he lives not far from the office, in a huge villa surrounded by about ten acres of woods.

We knock at the door of his office and he immediately replies: "Come on guys, I was waiting for you". Jonathan introduces me and Mr. Umberto smiles and says in a very polite way: "Marco, my friend, welcome to my home". Then he continues: "First of all, let's have a cappuccino at an Italian café near here and then we can discuss anything about your research and my personal story".

Mr. Umberto is almost seventy years old, he is not a broad man, he has white hair, a bushy moustache and a really big nose. He is dressed in an elegant fashion, slightly old style. We go across the hangar and we reach Mr. Umberto's car to go to the Italian café.

During the trip, Mr. Umberto tells me that he is one of the leaders of the Italian community in that area. When we arrive at the Italian café, the situation becomes strange and extremely embarrassing for me. Indeed, as we go through the entrance the people we meet greet Mr. Umberto with respect and great reverence. Some of them, Italian or Turkish men even kiss Mr. Umberto's hands. People who kiss Mr. Umberto's hands are very nice to me and show me great respect because I am with him.

Once we are in the café, the owner and his wife come to say hello to Mr. Umberto: "Hello Zio Umberto, what a nice surprise is your visit this morning. The table over there is always free for you. I will immediately be back to your table to take your order". We are not yet at the table that the lady is ready to note the order and she moves our chairs to make us more comfortable.

After that, as I had imagined, Jonathan and Mr. Umberto start to discuss about their business. They talk about a certain Luigi, an Italo-Belgian entrepreneur who does not pay producers in time and is causing troubles to Mr. Umberto.

On this, Mr. Umberto says: "we need to understand that if Luigi does not stop, we will make him very unhappy. I think that with people like him we should use the old methods. We go to him in his restaurant, and while he is eating we push his head four times against the plate and if he does not understand, we shoot a bullet in his leg". I do my best not to show my astonishment, but I cannot talk and I remain silent until Mr. Umberto, concerned about my silence, turns his eyes to me and says: "Marco my friend, there are many people without dignity in the business world that we must keep out of the market because they do not keep the promises they made. A few years ago, I had the same kind of problem with the owner of a renowned Italian restaurant in Brussels. He owed me ten thousand euros, but for six months he kept delaying the payment. One day, I got very angry and I decided to go directly to his restaurant. He was having lunch with some very important Italian politicians. I went to his table, I politely said hello to his guests, took him by his ear and dragged him out of the restaurant. Then, still holding his ear, I brought him to the bank while everyone was watching. When we arrived to the bank, I gave him a kick in the ass and forced him to withdraw the money he owed me" Mr. Umberto stops for a moment, then he says laughing:

“As you can understand, one has to use bad manners with this kind of people, otherwise it is very easy to go bankrupt”.

I nod my head, pretending to understand. After about thirty minutes, we leave the café to return to Mr. Umberto's hangar and during the short trip, while Jonathan continues to talk about business and competitors in the Belgian food sector, I try to make a small search on Mr. Umberto online.

According to what I read online, Mr. Umberto is one of the most famous Italian entrepreneurs abroad. Many Italian politicians have made reference to his successful story and his activities in their public speeches on Italian emigration. Artists and renowned athletes at international level have dedicated books to Mr. Umberto. In summary, he has very powerful friends, including Italian ambassadors, Italian and Belgian members of parliament, and even prime ministers.

The things I read online are confirmed by the pictures hanging on the wall behind his desk: they portray Mr. Umberto socializing with one of the former presidents of the Italian Republic, some politicians and many Belgian artists and athletes.

From what he told me in our previous conversation, I can say that he is in constant touch with many of the characters who appear in the photos and he is even involved in economic activities with some of them. But there is one picture that really catches my attention, a shot of Mr. Umberto and Frank Sinatra hugging each other.

I immediately ask him when that picture was taken and with a serious and almost proud tone in his voice he replies: “Frank was a friend of my family. I am from Corleone (the most famous Sicilian mafia village) and my mother was the niece of Joe Bonanno, the most powerful mafia leader in the history of New York. Over the years I have spent a lot of time in New York and I have had the chance to meet a lot of famous people such as Frank Sinatra, and even Francis Ford Coppola. The reason why I live in Belgium as opposed to the United States is that, during the 1960s, a big Italian agro-alimentary corporation hired me as the Commercial Executive Director for Europe and its headquarter was in Belgium”.

Those last confessions leave me truly astonished, especially the discovery that some branches of the Bonanno family have settled in Belgium.

Then the topic of the conversations shifts again and he starts speaking about how a good entrepreneur should run his businesses in today's world, he explains that it is extremely important to struggle without hesitation to survive on the market, as there are only a few men of honour, while the majority of businessmen do not respect the agreements.

While our conversation becomes more and more interesting, the phone constantly rings and I have the opportunity to observe Mr. Umberto at work and to listen to his phone calls with lawyers, Italian producers and other entrepreneurs.

When our meeting is close to the end, Mr. Umberto shows all his interest for my research, but the phone rings again. This time it is the daughter of a powerful Italian politician.

This girl, who speaks Italian without a regional accent like all high-class ex-pats who live in

Brussels, is a parliamentary assistant of two Italian MEPs. During the conversation, she reminds Mr. Umberto that the next day there would be her son's baptism at 1pm.

The call ends with warm farewells and afterwards Mr. Umberto tells me that he has been asked to be the Godfather of the baby of one of his oldest and most devoted friends, Senator Sabatini. Before leaving, he insistently asks me to give him my book on the Neapolitan mafia, as he would like to read it.

Indeed, Mr. Umberto is often invited by ambassadors, politicians and other institutional representations to talk about the mafia and to present some books on Italian criminal organizations. Indeed, he describes himself as a person who is very sensitive to social and cultural issues. He owns two charitable foundations and he organizes several charity events in partnership with the European institutions or private circles of the Belgian elite. Moreover, he shows me some documents which prove that he has financed several Belgian and Italian movie directors who produced very successful films.

When Mr. Umberto asks my book on the Neapolitan mafia, I look at him flattered and I say: "I think I have a copy in the car, I'll get it". He thanks me several times and says: "You are a loyal and honest guy who doesn't bury their head in the sand. For this reason, you deserve all my respect and I will help you during your research. As well as this, Jonathan has told me very good things about you and I trust him because he is like a son to me".

I shake Mr. Umberto's hands thanking him for his help and time. He says: "I will call you in the next weeks because I want to invite you and Jonathan for dinner together in an Italian restaurant near Liège. They always leave a free table for Zio Umberto and every Friday they get fresh fish from Sicily just for me. I would also like to invite Senator Sabatini; I think that you would enjoy a conversation with such a great intellectual and politician".

I thank him again, explaining that his help is precious to my research and his story is extremely interesting for me. I sit in my car, let out a huge sigh of relief, before almost immediately Jonathan jumps in and my respite is over.

Mafia practices, "mafia bourgeoisie" and processes of primitive accumulation. Some aspects of the theoretical framework

In light of these preliminary reflections, I would like to introduce a theoretical framework that thoroughly investigates the formation of mafia economic practices and their materialistic and relational nature. In particular, the concept of "mafia bourgeoisie" developed by Santino (2006) will be used in this article to examine a series of mechanisms of capitalist/mafia accumulation, which transcend the structural presence of criminal organizations but are directly inscribed in the functioning of the market (Santino, 2006; Vercellone and Lebert, 2001).

This perspective draws from on a series of studies which theorize the presence of a complex “social bloc” which aims at accumulating capital and profit on the economic market (Santino, 2006; 2007; 1994). In this “social bloc” the value of the various components is not equivalent, but it is characterized by the same power and class relations that are generally present in the society. Indeed, the dominant function is exercised by the legal/illegal actors (entrepreneurs, politicians, heads of institutions, members of government, professionals, police officers, criminals, *mafiosi* etc..) that Santino describes as “mafia bourgeoisie” (Santino, 2006).

This concept is at the origins of mafia power and it had already been analysed by Leopoldo Franchetti (an important politician of the Italian historical right) after the Unification of Italy in his work on Sicily. He stated that mafia leaders were the troublemakers of the middle class or upper class, who played the role of capitalists and entrepreneurs in the mafia system (Franchetti, 1877). Other authors, such as Lenonardo Sciascia (1970) and Mario Mineo (1970), defined this social composition as “mafia bourgeoisie”, “capitalistic-mafia bourgeoisie” or a “social class that can be generally defined as bourgeoisie, more accurately mafia bourgeoisie” (Sciascia, 1970:77) which is profoundly rooted in the economic and social context. However, this concept, which is useful to analyse the most important aspect of criminal organizations – i.e. the economic and relational dimension of mafias - has rarely been used in the studies on mafia activities.

The concept of “mafia bourgeoisie” aims at explaining two distinct and fundamental dimensions of mafia practices that I am examining in the Belgian food market:

- 1) The relational system in which mafia practices are rooted and that constitutes the necessary basis to their reproduction (Santino, 2006);
- 2) The role of private violence and illegality in the economic process of capitalist accumulation.

Violence and illegality, as noted by Marx (1967) in the first volume of *The Capital*, have played a fundamental role in the accumulation process of capitalism during the historical phases that led to the transition from feudalism to capitalism (Marx, 1967, Wallerstein, 1984).

This assumption explains the latest socio-economic shifts from Fordism to post-Fordism until the advent of the neoliberal globalization, in which, as stated by Harvey (2005), new capitalistic mechanisms of reproduction and accumulation are reinforced through a violent process of “accumulation by dispossession” (privatization of public

services, expropriation of “common goods” etc.) (De Angelis, 2001; Sanchez, 2012; Glassman, 2006).

These phases, in certain areas, have prompted the development of mafias, which during the years have gained a great ability to adapt to different social scenarios and to accumulate wealth (Santino, 2006; Sciarrone, 2011; Saint-Victor, 2012).

Hence, this dynamic of primitive accumulation (based on expropriation and exercise of violence) has marked both the history of the mafia and that of capitalism (Vercellone and Lebert, 2001; De Angelis, 2001).

For this reason, building on the work of Vercellone and Lebert (2001), I propose to analyse mafia practices as endogenous forms of capital accumulation.

This theoretical approach contradicts the liberal paradigm on which the majority of mafia studies are based. Indeed, the fundamental postulates of liberal political economy and liberal political philosophy rely on the notion that the welfare state and the market are the institutions which separate economic activities from the exercise of the violence, legitimizing and guaranteeing property rights due to individual work (Smith, 1776; Weber, 1922). In this view, primitive accumulation processes take place in primordial stages of capitalism when market forces are not yet established.

In this context, mafia economic activities would be considered as products of the violation of the market laws or the result of certain societies remained at the margins of capitalist development.

Hence, on the base of these liberal postulates, mafia organizations - that is to say a series of heterogeneous groups who conduct economic activities aimed at the accumulation of capital through the exercise of force - tend to be analysed as the product of socio-economic forces and cultural models that are incompatible with the values and the ethic of capitalism and democracy (Vercellone and Lebert, 2001).

In this way, mafia activities and mafia's colonization of a part of the economic market through criminal practices are presented as an exogenous shock that is brought about by the revival of certain practices that belong to the initial stage of the “social contract”, which is at the origin of the foundation of the welfare state and the capitalistic market (Arlacchi, 1983). For these reasons, Arlacchi (1983) considers mafia phenomena as the result of the weakening of the State that has lost the legitimate monopoly of violence, or as the product of the degeneration of the civil society, which betrays the values and ethic of capitalism (Vercellone and Lebert, 2001).

On the contrary, the history of capitalism, as noted by Marx (1967: 714) and Braudel (1979), has shown that this system has always been characterized by a systematic violation of the market laws as they have been theorized by the liberal political economy. In Braudel's (1979) words, the domain *par excellence* of capitalism is an

area of anti-market “where the great predators roam and the law of the jungle operates. This is the real home of capitalism” (Braudel, 1979, II: 197).

This point is particularly relevant, as these dynamics of capitalistic accumulation of wealth are at the heart of the entrepreneurial careers I am following in the Belgian food market, which seem to be characterized by the same effort to increase their capital and profit through a system of relation that involves a variety of social, economic and institutional actors.

This perspective, which focuses on primitive accumulation processes of capital, provides a better understanding of the relationship between “capitalist bourgeoisie” and “mafia bourgeoisie” and between “capitalist entrepreneurs” and “mafia entrepreneurs”, but, above all, it highlights the ambiguity of some capitalist mechanisms of accumulation and some economic practices which are defined licit or illicit on the base of an arbitrary political choice.

To make an example, the “mafia bourgeoisie” of the Gabelotti² in Sicily is similar to the bourgeoisie of the Enclosure Movement in England (Franchetti, 1877; Marx, 1872). The Sicilian agrarian bourgeoisie used the same predatory methods that the English enclosure bourgeoisie had adopted to promote the capitalistic transformation of the countryside, expropriating lands on the base of an essentially private and illegal initiative, with the support and encouragement of the State (Dockès and Rosier, 1983; Marx, 1967: 724-725). Therefore, in England, as in Southern Italy, the illegal expropriation of lands could be read as one of the main modalities of the primitive accumulation of capital. In these two cases the capitalist transformation of social relations in the countryside and the same capitalist processes of accumulation have generated in the British context the birth of the so-called “industrial bourgeoisie” and the birth of the so-called “mafia bourgeoisie” in the Sicilian context (Vercellone and Lebert, 2001).

These aspects of the dynamics of accumulation in the capitalistic process are particularly important because a great part of the literature on mafia activities seems to maintain that forms of mafia accumulation can be exclusively achieved through illegal trafficking, racketeering and other criminal practices. Contrarily, such activities only represent a share of mafia economic power, as the most significant mafia practices are profoundly rooted in the economic dynamics of capitalism (Vercellone and Lebert, 2001).

² The Gabelotti were the land manager of the Sicilian aristocracy during the process of the Italian Unification (1861) and they supported the action of northern Italian troops detaching themselves from the aristocracy who had remained loyal to the power of the Bourbons. At that point, they expropriated the lands of the local aristocracy by force and, with the support of the new Italian State, became the owner of wide land estates and created a new class of agrarian bourgeoisie.

Another example of what I want to demonstrate here can be found in the reconstruction processes that characterized Southern Italy during the Second post-war period. In this context, mafia organizations guided, after facilitating the military landing of Americans in Sicily, the development of a part of the country making enormous profits in the construction, industrial and agrarian sectors and repressing all those social movements which tried to oppose to their interests (Hobsbawm, 1959; Barbagallo, 2010; Santino, 2006; Zinn, 2008; Cassarubea and Cereghino 2013).

These dynamics have characterized the diffusion of mafia practices from the nineteenth century to date, not only in Italy but also in the United States, Canada, Germany, Belgium, etc. (Santino, 1994; Forgione, 2009).

Conclusion: preliminary considerations from fieldwork to text

In this final section, I shall briefly reflect on my first months of participant observation, which have been aimed to analyse the presence of mafia practices in the Belgian food sector. This fieldwork has allowed me to penetrate in a complex network of actors who conduct or manage legal activities, using illegal methods and strategies to impose themselves on the market.

The variety of actors, as I showed in the extract of my fieldwork diary, is the pillar of these groups of interest, which try to monopolise shares of the Belgian economic market mixing legal activities with mafia methods of accumulation such as the use of violence and force, although, in some cases, this latter is only symbolic.

During my participant observation, I identified some factors that seem to have a structural role in the trajectories of some entrepreneurs of Italian origin in the Belgian food sector. In particular, I refer to: a) the importance of using predatory, violent and illegal methods to accumulate profits on the legal market; b) the construction of relational strategies (involving institutional actors, professionals, police officers, politicians, businessmen, criminals, *mafiosi*, etc.) through which these groups promote and legitimize their accumulation.

Starting from these two considerations, I would like to highlight the points that should be further investigated and substantiated in my future study, consistently with the above-mentioned theoretical framework and assumptions:

- 1) So far, I have not observed the presence of a structured mafia organization as a sort of “mafia octopus” which is branched out into the Belgian food sector through international linkages (Sterling, 1995). On the contrary, the subjects involved in these activities seem to constitute a network that is composed of various kinds of social,

economic, political, institutional, criminal and mafia actors (Santino, 2007). These networks are fully installed in a globalized context, which is characterized by a close relationship between illegal/legal and formal/informal economies (Kokoreff, Peraldi and Weinberger, 2007).

2) For these reasons, I am trying to analyse these networks through the category of “mafia bourgeoisie” (Santino, 1994), which is a heterogeneous group composed by legal and illegal actors who work together sharing the common interest to accumulate wealth and profit. In this sense, “mafia bourgeoisie” appears as the most influential circle of a large cross-class social bloc in which there is a consistent group of criminals who belong to the working class and to the sub-proletariat that I have frequently met during my fieldwork. These heterogeneous actors seem to operate in what might be called an “anti-market zone”: an economic space where the violent mechanisms of capitalism intersect with the interests of social elites, entrepreneurs, criminal or *mafiosi*, giving origin to these kinds of networks (Blok, 1974; Briquet and Favarel-Garrigues, 2008; Braudel, 1979; Vercellone and Lebert, 2001). These networks are not structured in a pyramidal way but they have a more horizontal and fragmented strategy of power where everyone plays a different role, resulting from the position that he/she occupies in the society, and can develop an hegemony on the economic market through forms of complicity and collaboration in different activities (Sciarrone 2011; Briquet and Favarel-Garrigues, 2008; Sciarrone and Storti, 2014).

3) Moreover, despite a great deal of literature supports the idea that mafia accumulation can exclusively be achieved through illegal activities, during my fieldwork I observed a wide range of mafia practices of accumulation that are fully conducted in the legal market. This seems to suggest that mafia accumulation processes are the result of a close relationship between legal activities and illegal strategies of market colonization that are established within the same economic mechanisms (Vercellone and Lebert, 2001). On this point, it would be useful to study more in depth the scholarship on the relationship between formal/informal and legal/illegal economy at the time of the neoliberal globalization and on how the practices of “accumulation by dispossession” are increasingly connecting these two dimensions (Sanchez, 2012; Harvey, 2005; Glassman, 2006).

In conclusion, these practices are described in the literature as the result of socio-economic forces that are incompatible with the ethics and values of capitalism and democracy. On the contrary, I am analysing mafia practices as endogenous forms of capitalist accumulation in order to establish whether the violent and predatory traits that characterize these entrepreneurial activities in the Belgian food market can be inscribed in the same mechanisms of capitalism that seem to produce and reproduce them at the same time. At the heart of these mechanisms, as Vercellone and Lebert

(2001) wrote drawing on the theories of Marx and Braudel, there are many entrepreneurial activities operating in the formal economy, which use “extraordinary” means (threats, violence, and corruption) to compete on the economic market. From this perspective, “this structural and socially organized interpenetration of formal and informal, lawful and unlawful, legal and illegal represents the main feature of what we define as mafia capitalism” (Vercellone and Lebert, 2010).

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