

## CHAPTER ONE: CHILDREN



### 1. Background

... Once upon a time there was a Calabrian mother who had gone to find a man of the law in order to beseech him to change the path and life of her twelve-year-old child who, as a gift for first communion, instead of a bicycle had asked for “a Kalashnikov, to take out a bad judge.” This was not just any mother. She was a mother in an ‘Ndrangheta family. She, along with all her family members, was part of an ‘ndrina.<sup>1</sup> Had they discovered her visiting a man of the State, and even more so the judge who had sent her son away to live for a time in a rehab center, they would have made her pay very dearly. Her child was still young, he did not yet understand the world of adults, and he wanted to take out of the judge who had taken him away from his family full of murdered and incarcerated relatives, and from his mother, terrified and unable to protect him. But, little by little, the mother had discovered that the judge, and those who had cared for her child in her stead, were not really so bad. They were in fact generous and good people. Perhaps they wanted and truly were able to save her little boy from a destiny of crime and violence which, by hereditary tradition, the Mafia family into which he was born had reserved for him.

This is not a work of fiction. It is a factual account, based on the report narrated to the author by Roberto Di Bella,<sup>2</sup> the “judge” of these first few lines of a desperate mother’s recent story.<sup>3</sup> This reading immediately gives rise to some initial questions, the responses to which are always necessary in order to begin any story: When? Where? Who? What? How?

When? In 2016.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘*Ndrina* is synonymous with “crime syndicate” in the Calabrese slang of the ‘Ndrangheta. It is managed predominantly by one *family* – a term to be understood in its most natural form, meaning blood relatives – that controls a particular territory such as a town or a city neighborhood, and by other affiliated parties.

<sup>2</sup> There are only four magistrate judges in the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, and only two magistrates in the adjacent Juvenile District Attorney’s office (see footnote 11).

<sup>3</sup> This declaration was issued in May 2016, in a private first-hand conversation with Roberto Di Bella, President of the small Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria since September 15, 2011.

Where? In a chamber of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, a populous metropolitan city of the southern Italian region called Calabria, rich in forests, ocean, and mafia.<sup>4</sup>

Who? A distressed mother; an innocent child already on a bad path; a judge who, in the name of the law, is obliged to help this child escape from the 'Ndrangheta.<sup>5</sup>

What are we talking about? Of the poor upbringing imparted to children by their 'Ndrangheta families and of the necessity, on the part of the State, to guarantee these children a means of removal and redemption before they become indoctrinated and can no longer escape from the criminal vortex in which they had the misfortune to be born.

How? By intervening on the fine margin that exists between the rights of children (set forth in the UN *Declaration on the Rights of the Child*) and the child's right to family, and by adopting temporary civil proceedings for revocation or limitation of parental rights if there is a real risk to the physical or psychological integrity of the minor due to the mafia method of childrearing. An example would be when a minor is coerced by adult contacts into the illegal affairs of their criminal alliances. The risk is even more formidable in the case of hatred and

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<sup>4</sup> See Alessandro Tarsia, *Perché la 'ndrangheta? Antropologia dei calabresi*, Gioiosa Marea (Messina), Pungitopo, 2015. In the pamphlet the author begins from the fact that Calabria is an impoverished region with a disastrous level of unemployment, tax evasion and other negative factors, and which, simultaneously, is the homeland of one of the most powerful, extensive and dangerous criminal organizations in the world, equipped with wealthy, heavily armed, and violent gangs operating on almost every continent. Tarsia investigates the (possible) relationship between Calabrian popular culture and that peculiar type of mafia which is the 'Ndrangheta.

<sup>5</sup> The name of the Calabrian mob, also known as *Santa* and *Picciotteria*, which – following a historic judgment sanctioned by the Court of Appeals on June 17, 2016 – is now officially considered a unitary, tight-knit system, with a decision-making body at its summit and a territorial base, and no longer to be considered (as was done up to that date) a set of *monadic* gangs. On the nature and unity of the 'Ndrangheta we refer to the documents of the DIA (Antimafia Investigative Division): “It is in fact a structure with two different faces: one is modern, fluid and versatile, able to stay up to date and seize every opportunity for profit; the other is ancient, made of rules, hierarchies, practices, formulas, oaths, prayers and blood, which unites and strengthens the system. Based on this dichotomy – only outwardly contradictory – the 'Ndrangheta has solidified its path of affirmation and entrenchment. Its rapid rise now situates it among the most fearsome mafias on an international level. In this regard, the words expressed in the grounds of the judgment at first instance – summary judgment, of the trial *Crimine*: “The 'Ndrangheta, that same group which imports cocaine from South America and launders its considerable economic resources through the world financial markets, also has an essential underbelly of rituals and positions, hierarchies and relations founded in an ancestral subculture that stretches back in time, which the globalization of crime has not eliminated but which, most likely, constitutes the strength of that organization and its “added value”, (<http://direzioneeinvestigativaantimafia.interno.gov.it/semestrali/sem/2016/1sem2016.pdf>, p. 66).

murderous feuds between rival ‘*ndrine*, in which neither women nor children are spared.<sup>6</sup>

The children of the ‘Ndrangheta begin their criminal life very early: it is their only available life model. After childhood, the young *mafiosi* become criminals themselves within a larger system that has many features in common with totalitarianism. The ‘Ndrangheta is a mafia that does not conceive of anything beyond itself. It does not allow for comparisons or mediations. It is a dichotomous world based on strict oppositional qualities: us-them, good-bad, friend-enemy mafia-State, life-death. For those born into this world, it is very difficult to get out.

If you do, you are considered a rat, a traitor and, many times, you deserve death. Not because whoever kills you is evil – actually he feels quite justified – but because there was no other option. You didn’t get it that you can’t give up your membership in the Holy Family of the Mafia. The one that goes to Mass every Sunday.

And, to show off its own wealth and importance, the family finances processions, including the obsequious bow before the patron saint, celebrated right in front of their home. This is done in order to exhibit and perpetuate its own power, further legitimized by the use of wooden statues of the Madonna and Saints,<sup>7</sup> in order to guarantee “publicity which the mafia can’t get enough of” (Gratteri).<sup>8</sup> It is, however, a holy family where disobedience is forbidden. And if you do disobey?

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<sup>6</sup> See Rosella Marzullo, “Mafia Children: From Future to Past. Knowing Other Realities to Learn Freedom”, *Review of Social Studies (RoSS)* Vol.3, No.2, Autumn. 2016, <http://www.rossjournal.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/RoSS-Vol3-No2-2016-Marzullo-45-57.pdf>, pp. 45-57. On Calabrian feuds see Arcangelo Badolati, *Faide*, Cosenza, Klipper, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> On the relationship between the mafia and the Church see Nicola Gratteri and Antonio Nicaso, *Acqua santissima. La chiesa e la ‘Ndrangheta. Storie di potere, silenzi e assoluzioni*, Milano, Mondadori, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Nicola Gratteri, from a speech delivered on April 4, 2014 in Reggio Emilia, on the occasion of the conference *Us Against the Mafias*. Nicola Gratteri, born in 1958 in Gerace, in the Locride (Calabria), currently one of the most noted magistrates of the District Antimafia Directive (DDA) which, within the organization of the Italian government, is the state prosecutorial agency at the twenty-six district courthouses of the Court of Appeals, to which is entrusted jurisdiction on trials relating to mafia crimes. The DDA is coordinated at the national level by the National Antimafia Directive (DNA), in its turn under the jurisdiction of the Attorney General of the Supreme Court of Cassation. On the front lines of the fight against the ‘Ndrangheta, he has been living under security escort since April 1989. On June 21, 2005, the ROS (Special Operations Squad of the *carabinieri*, or military police) discovered in the plains of the Gioia Tauro municipality an arsenal of weapons (a kilo of plastic explosive with detonator, rocket launchers, Kalashnikovs, hand grenades) that could have been used for an assassination attempt against him. In 2009 he became the Deputy Public Prosecutor at the Court of Reggio Calabria. On April 21, 2016 the CSM (Superior Council of Magistrates), in all haste and by a large majority, appointed him Public Prosecutor of Catanzaro. From 2023 he is Public Prosecutor in Naples. Gratteri is also an essay

All the worse for you. You will pay dearly. We've sent you many different warning signs from the time you were born. You should have listened to us...We've told you again and again. And we made sure you understood. We, and We alone, are your family. We give you membership, protection, legitimacy and power. Without us you would be nothing, a nobody. No one would pay you any respect or attention. No one would go anywhere near you. You would be just another poor loser who makes no money and even pays unfair taxes to the filthy State. But look at what we do for you. What you can become thanks to us. How everyone respects you and makes way for you. You are a big shot. But unfortunately you didn't listen to us. You wanted to take matters into your own hands. You dissociated from us and you betrayed us: filthy rat! Poor you... where did you plan to go? What did you plan to do? Didn't you understand that you can never be free of us? That either you are ours or you're finished, dead? What else could we do? You are the one who forced us to kill you. We are at peace with ourselves. Even the Madonna of the Polsi Sanctuary protects us, you know? We'll invoke her name and pray to her while we kill you. We are in the right. Not you. Look how shameless you are. Without any respect or honor.

This rapid sequence gives an idea of the logic of someone who does evil believing it to be good. You enter into the 'Ndrangheta by blood (the customary cut on the finger in the rite of initiation) and you leave by blood (violence and death). The seeds of this way of thinking are implanted in the individual from childhood by parents into whom, in turn, they were implanted by their own parents, and so on.<sup>9</sup>

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writer and, along with Antonio Nicaso, is co-author of a large number of works, both scholarly and popular, on the Calabrian mafia.

<sup>9</sup> For these and other aspects see the considerations in Girolamo Lo Verso (a cura di), *La mafia dentro. Psicologia e psicopatologia di un fondamentalismo*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 1998 (2<sup>a</sup> ed. 2002, IV ristampa 2012). This is the first book to tackle the topic of the mafia with a predominantly psychotherapeutic eye. The product of academics, legal practitioners on the frontline, and psychotherapists, it provides a framework for what is (and has been) the mafia psyche and the crisis which it is now undergoing, with historical phenomena such as children of mafia families who enter into psychotherapy and the globalization of organized crime. The various scholars explore the means through which one becomes a *made man*. This and other research notes how the subjects examined, in the vast majority of cases, come from either a familial environment or from a broader context of primary socialization in which the typical values of the mafia mindset are present and proposed as the only matrix of meaning for events (Flower, 1997; Lo Coco, 1998). An anthropo-psychological world in which the "masculine" values of strength, courage, honor, manhood, and coldness are exalted in opposition to the world of "cops", judges, and the forces of law and order in general. This representation of an internal good world formed by "respectable" men and an evil external one is a fundamental characteristic of mafia thought. To play the rat, the informer, with the cops (to reveal anything to the police) is the worst accusation in the mafia world. In this psyche, as in all fundamentalist systems (Lo Verso, 1998, loc. cit.), reign monolithic dichotomies of thought, with the world of attachments cleaved in a punitive manner. The authors utilize the expression 'fundamentalism' for all those processes of the construction of personal identity in which the individual *I* fully coincides with the suprapersonal and transpersonal *Us*. The subject cannot be *different*, other, from the world that conceived him psychically (Napoletani, 1987). In fundamentalist systems the psychic identity can be linked to suprapersonal structures –

The pedagogy of dishonor is a socio-cultural instrument for raising generations of individuals subjected to the will of an authority construed as almighty and unquestionable, similar to that experienced by children with respect to their parents.

In the past three decades, the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria has conducted more than a hundred trials for mafia-related crimes, according to Article 416 bis of the current Italian Penal Code,<sup>10</sup> and over fifty trials for homicide or attempted homicide, all of these against minors (14-18 years of age).

In 2017, the same court, assisted by the District Attorney's Office, Juvenile Division,<sup>11</sup> finds itself having to "try the children or siblings of those who had

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Nation, Church, Party – and/or exist within a validation that does not allow for freedom of thought (e.g. the current homogenization of television and social networks). Phenomena such as religious wars, nationalism, racism, and inquisitions, are all psychologically founded on this notion.

<sup>10</sup> The crime of mafia association, an offense autonomous from criminal association, was introduced into the Italian Penal Code by the September 13, 1982 law, n. 646 (called *Rognoni-La Torre* after the names of its proponents). As Article 416 bis, "Codice Penale Associazioni di tipo mafioso anche straniere" (Penal Code Associations with mafia and mafia-like organizations): "Whosoever takes part in a mafia association formed of three or more people, shall be punished with imprisonment for a period of ten to fifteen years. Those who promote, direct or organize the association are punished, for this crime alone, with imprisonment for a period of twelve to eighteen years. The association is considered to be mafia when those who belong to it avail themselves of the force of intimidation of their associative ties and the condition of subjugation and of *omertà* [silencing] that ensues in order to commit crimes, to acquire in a direct or indirect manner the management or control of economic activities, concessions, authorizations, contracts and public services, or to gain profits or unfair advantages for themselves or for others, in order to prevent or hinder the free exercise of voting or to procure votes for oneself or others on the occasion of elections. If the association is considered armed, imprisonment increases from twelve to twenty years in the cases provided for in the first subparagraph and from fifteen to twenty-six years in the cases provided for in the second subparagraph. The association shall be deemed to be armed when the participants have at their disposal, for the achievement of the association's objectives, weapons or explosive materials, even if concealed or kept in storage. If the economic activities which associates use to take or maintain control are financed in whole or in part with the price, the product, or the profit of crimes, the penalties laid down in the preceding paragraphs shall be increased by a third to half. With respect to the convicted person it is compulsory to confiscate items that served or were intended to commit the offense and items which constitute the price, product or which are intended for an offense. The provisions of this Article shall also apply to the *Camorra* [Neapolitan mafia], to the *Ndrangheta*, and to other associations, whether they be locally known as foreign, which by utilizing the force of intimidation of associative ties pursues objectives corresponding to those of a mafia sort" (*Penal Code*, Book 2, *On particular crimes*, Title V, *Offenses against the public order*, articles 414-421, article 416 bis. Emphasis mine).

<sup>11</sup> This is part of the Public Prosecutor's Office, an agency distinct and separate from the Court (even though it falls under the umbrella of the Judiciary). It prosecutes minors who are charged with a criminal offense and can require civil measures for the protection of minors. In criminal proceedings it has the task of bringing charges and prosecuting offenses. In civil proceedings, on the other hand, it requires the Court to enact civil measures in order to protect minors. Often these requests arise from Social Services reports. If Social Services discovers offenses against minors, it must alert the regular Public Prosecutor's Office about the criminal offense and the Juvenile Division in order to enact civil measures (e.g. removal from the family home or revocation of guardianship). It is a magistrate, not a judge, who heads the Public Prosecutor's Office. The

been prosecuted in the 90s and the early 2000s, all belonging to the well-established mafia families of the area”.<sup>12</sup>

These families are well known throughout Italy: Alvaro, Aquino, Cataldo, Condello, Cordì, Cutro, De Stefano, Ficara, Gallico, Grande Aracri, Macrì, Mancuso, Mazzaferro, Morabito, Nirta, Papalia, Pelle, Pesce, Piromalli, Romeo, Serraino, Strangio, Vottari, Zappia, etc. The crime logs<sup>13</sup> are always full of their names as well as their places of origin: Africo, Bovalino, Capo Rizzuto, Gioia Tauro, Limbadi, Locri, Marina di Gioiosa Ionica, Platì, Reggio Calabria, Rosarno, San Luca, Siderno, Sinopoli, etc.<sup>14</sup> All one needs is to browse the internet and click on any of these names to be bowled over by an avalanche of information on their criminal activities, which the State attempts to counteract with anti-mafia operations with suggestive titles (Fehida, Eclissi, Cosa Mia, Mandamento, etc.). Unfortunately, the counteractions are not sufficient.

This book discusses a new strategy proposed by an Italian magistrate to combat organized crime. It is a strategy that, for the sake of the protection of minors who are mafia children and by virtue of its innovative cultural perspective, can provide concrete contributions. The issue of the children of the ‘Ndrangheta – a mafia based on blood ties and, therefore, subject to transmission from parents to

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magistrate’s position is partisan, albeit public and qualified. The Juvenile Prosecutor deals with offenses committed by minors and civil or administrative proceedings involving minors. The Public Prosecutor must always participate in juvenile civil proceedings, even when initiated by a private individual (<http://www.assistentsociali.org/minori/procura-della-repubblica.htm>). Specifically, in 2011-2020 the Juvenile Prosecutor’s Office of Reggio Calabria was composed of two magistrates: the Prosecutor, Dr. Giuseppina Latella, and the Deputy Prosecutor, Dr. Andrea Esposito.

<sup>12</sup> Roberto Di Bella, in his talk at the convention *Indottrinamento mafioso e responsabilità genitoriale: l’orientamento giurisprudenziale del Tribunale dei Minorenni di Reggio Calabria. Analisi e prospettive*, Palazzo Madama, Senato della Repubblica Italiana, Roma, 24 Novembre 2015 (see the recording produced on November 24, 2015: [www.radioradicale.it](http://www.radioradicale.it)). It should be noted that, here and elsewhere in the text, I cite from the typescript of his speech given to me by Di Bella himself (pp. 1-6).

<sup>13</sup> See the July 4, 2017 article by Alessio Candito and Fabio Tonacci in the newspaper *La Repubblica* online, titled: “Criminalità organizzata. Colpo alla ‘ndrangheta: 116 arresti in Calabria. Video: il boss intercettato: ‘Lo Stato sono io’. Blitz con mille cc [Carabinieri], sgominate le cosche del reggino. Tutti gli affari, dai fondi UE alle assunzioni forestali.” Immediately following is the related article: “Il vescovo di Locri: ‘Qui pezzi di Chiesa a braccetto con la ‘ndrangheta’”, [http://www.repubblica.it/index.html?refresh\\_ce](http://www.repubblica.it/index.html?refresh_ce). For the controversial relationship between the mafia and the Church, we refer to Gratteri and Nicaso, *Acqua santissima. La Chiesa e la ‘ndrangheta. Storie di potere, silenzi e assoluzioni*, cit., 2015

<sup>14</sup> This covers the entire region of Calabria which today is divided into the Ionic, Tyrrhenian, and central districts. At one time, in the slang of the ‘Ndrangheta, the region was divided between the mountains, the plains, and the “cathedral”.

children – is crucial.<sup>15</sup> Mafia children today are expected to be adult mafiosi tomorrow. The argument concerning families of fathers, mothers, and children, is so extremely delicate that, at first blush, it elicits an unquestionable NO, further entrenched by prejudices, misunderstandings, and exploitation by the media. But the children of the mafia, who are handled by the Court of Reggio Calabria, are not ‘normal’ children from families with ‘normal’ issues. Of the one hundred and fifty cases mentioned a few lines ago, many – now adults – were sentenced to do hard time according to Article 41 bis of the Penal Code;<sup>16</sup> many were killed in the course of family feuds; many others have attained leadership positions in their ‘*ndrina*’.

Today the Court has tried adolescent murderers responsible for the killing of law enforcement officers; young criminals who deal drugs; kids who have threatened and committed extortion against local business owners. These activities were often performed on behalf of their parents, imprisoned under Article 41 bis. There are also cases of very young girls who run the household during the absence of relatives, friends and acquaintances, or who have been fully involved, sometimes as murderers, in feuds and mafia-related dynamics.

Let us look at some examples.<sup>17</sup>

One of the minors tried was sentenced to thirty years in prison for the double homicide of police officers Antonino Fava and Giuseppe Garofalo, which took

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<sup>15</sup> On this topic see the richly detailed work of nonfiction by Nicola Gratteri and Antonio Nicaso, *Fratelli di sangue. Storie, boss e affari della 'ndrangheta la mafia più potente del mondo*, Milano, Mondadori, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Article 41 bis (commonly called ‘hard time’) is part of the 1975 Law n. 354 on penitentiary treatment, amended by the Law of December 23, 2002, n. 279, published in the *Official Journal* n. 300 on December 23, 2002. The text reads: “In exceptional cases of revolt or other serious emergency situations, the minister of justice has the right to suspend within the institution, or in any part of it, the application of the normal rules of treatment of prisoners. The suspension must be justified by the need to restore order and security and for the length of time as is strictly necessary for the attainment of this goal. In the case of serious issues of order and public security, including at the request of the Minister of the Interior, the Minister of Justice has also the right to suspend, in whole or in part, concerning prisoners or those interned for any of the crimes referred to in the first sentence of paragraph 1 of Article 4B, in relation to which there is some evidence to suggest the existence of links with a criminal, terrorist, or conspiratorial association, the application of the rules of treatment established under the present law as may arise in concrete opposition with the requirements of order and security. The suspension involves the restrictions necessary for the fulfilment of the abovementioned requirements and to prevent ties with the associations referred to in the previous sentence” (<http://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi/022791.htm>).

<sup>17</sup> Please be advised that in this monograph, for reasons of protection laid down by Italian law, actual names, surnames, and the places of birth of minors in question as well as their parents are omitted (to be replaced by fictional initials and by [...] indicating the omissions).



place on January 18, 1994.<sup>18</sup> Another minor, long reported on the list of the most dangerous fugitives in Italy compiled by the Ministry of the Interior, has been tried for six murders. Several minors were tried, following a Fehida operation, and sentenced for their involvement in the feud of San Luca (Calabria),<sup>19</sup> which resulted in the massacre of Duisburg (Germany) on August 15, 2007, leaving six young victims dead including a boy of sixteen years.<sup>20</sup>

All the children mentioned in this book are children, siblings, nephews, nieces, and cousins of the ‘ndranghetisti whose surnames appear among the historical families already listed, and they represent “the bitter confirmation that the ‘Ndrangheta is passed on” and is perpetuated through “the undisputed and persistent dominance of the same well-known ‘ndrine.”<sup>21</sup> Di Bella, to whose

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph Garofalo and Antonino Fava (31 and 36 years), both married and fathers of two and three children, respectively, were killed in an ambush by a mafia commando on January 18, 1994 in Scilla (Reggio Calabria) while in their *Gazzella* (standard issue police vehicle) on duty with the patrol unit of the *Compagnia di Palmi* (Carabinieri) and in the process of stopping a suspicious vehicle. They were shot multiple times with rifle and Beretta M12 machine gun fire. Dedicated to their memory is the headquarters of the Carabinieri Police Academy of Reggio: the *Fava e Garofalo* barracks. Today, at the time of writing on July 27, 2017, the whole of the Italian press is reporting the arrest, twenty years later, of the second principal suspect (the first, Giuseppe Graviano, affiliated with the Sicilian *Cosa Nostra*, also convicted for the 1993 massacres in Milan, Florence and Rome and the murder of Don Puglisi which took place in Palermo on September 15, 1993, has been incarcerated [41 bis] since 1994) in the double homicide. This newest suspect is Rocco Santo Filippone, affiliated with the ‘Ndrangheta of Melicuccio, the head of his ‘*ndrina*, connected to the powerful Piromalli crime family of Gioia Tauro. He was arrested on July 26, 2017. This arrest results from a broad investigation by the District Attorney of Reggio Calabria into the alliance between mafia groups in the 1990s when in Italy, between the end of the first government following the corruption scandal known as *Tangentopoli* and the beginning of the Berlusconi era, the groups executed massacres and destabilizing acts in order to play a role in the overall restructuring of the balance of power. See Giovanni Bianconi and Carlo Macri, “Mafia e ‘ndrangheta unite dalle stragi: ‘Così lo Stato scenderà a patti.’ L’uccisione nel ’94 di due Carabinieri collegata agli attentati decisi da Cosa Nostra”, *Corriere della sera*, 27 luglio 2017, p. 18; Arrigo Fierro, “Arrivò Forza Italia, i boss ordinarono: basta stragi. Il Pubblico Ministero Lombardo: ‘Siciliani, calabresi, Camorra e Servizi Segreti deviati erano Cosa sola,’” *Il Fatto quotidiano*, 27 luglio 2017, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Feud’ (Italian ‘*faida*’): a primitive, violent form of private justice that characterizes and distinguishes the ‘Ndrangheta from all other criminal associations active in Europe.

<sup>20</sup> The massacre of Duisburg, known as the “*strage di Ferragosto*”, which took place in Duisburg in front of the Italian restaurant-pizzeria *Da Bruno*, was carried out by exponents of the ‘Ndrangheta. The following is the list of persons killed (note the young age of all the victims): Tommaso Venturi, 18 years, from Corigliano Calabro (district of Cosenza); Francesco Giorgi, 16 years, from San Luca (district of Reggio Calabria); Francesco Pergola, 22 years, from Siderno (district of Reggio Calabria); Marco Pergola, 20 years, from Siderno (district of Reggio Calabria); Marco Marble, 25 years, from San Luca (district of Reggio Calabria); Sebastiano Strangio, 39 years, from San Luca (district of Reggio Calabria), chef and owner of the restaurant, member of the Pelle-Vottari ‘*ndrina* and not of the Strangio ‘*ndrina*, despite his last name (see “Duisburg, la strage di Ferragosto. Sei italiani vittime della faida di San Luca”, 15 Agosto 2007, [www.repubblica.it](http://www.repubblica.it)).

<sup>21</sup> Roberto Di Bella, speech to the Italian Republic Senate, cit., 2015, p. 1.



revolutionary legal action this book is dedicated, explains that the episodes concerning ‘Ndrangheta minors are always

extremely serious and practically unknown to the general public, [and] which, had they occurred elsewhere, would certainly have aroused greater amounts of alarm and attention. The statistical and historical data reported here is also based on my professional experience of more than twenty-five years in the juvenile court system, sixteen of which were spent at the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria.<sup>22</sup>

With regard to the marginalization of the ‘Ndrangheta, a very powerful mafia devoted to omertà and to non-visibility,<sup>23</sup> it is useful to recall that the abovementioned case concerning the massacre of Duisburg presents an important characteristic: it is the first recent criminal act committed by the Calabrian mafia to have achieved widespread coverage in the international press, not only for its (apparent) senselessness and terrible brutality,<sup>24</sup> but also because it was committed “away from home”, beyond the borders of Calabria and of Italy.<sup>25</sup>

This fact provides the opportunity for this book to reach a wider English-speaking audience: because mafias are a phenomenon of international scope and global distribution. The writer Roberto Saviano has rightly pointed out that the existence of the Sicilian-American mob, called Cosa Nostra, has become known worldwide (albeit in a fictional-fantasy version) thanks to the success of the film by Francis Ford Coppola, *The Godfather* (1972), while an absolute silence at the international level surrounds the other mafia groups. And if it is true that the global spotlight has finally been cast on the existence of the Neapolitan camorra,

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> On the nature of the ‘Ndrangheta and on its rules and codes see Nicola Gratteri and Antonio Nicaso, *Dire e non dire. I dieci comandamenti della ‘ndrangheta nelle parole degli affiliati*, Milano, Mondadori, 2012. This long essay is based on a vast amount of documentary sources (intercepted conversations, “pizzini” [small slips of paper used to send messages from prison], records of judicial rulings, and sentence hearings) from 1860 to today (a reminder to non-Italian readers that the political unification of Italy dates back to 1861). According to the golden rule of mafia *omertà*: “The less words you say the better, in any situation” (Ivi, p. 170).

<sup>24</sup> To fully understand the nature of the mafia world, it is useful to reflect on the words of Falcone, which are valid for all the mafia organizations: “Participation in a violent act generally responds to a strict logic [...]. I stress this concept because only by addressing the mafia for what it really is – a serious and perfectly organized criminal association – will we be able to combat it. The most repugnant reprisals, those that leave a foul taste and appear unnecessarily cruel to the average citizen, are never performed lightly, but only through a sense of duty” (Giovanni Falcone in collaboration with Marcelle Padovani, *Cose di Cosa Nostra*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1991, p. 32). Magistrate Falcone (class of 1939) was assassinated on May 23, 1992, together with his wife Francesca Morvillo and three body guards (Antonio Montinaro, Rocco Di Cillo and Vito Schifani), in the massacre of Capaci, in Sicily, by the *Cosa Nostra*.

<sup>25</sup> One should remember that the only previous acts of the ‘Ndrangheta to have made global news were: the July 10, 1973 kidnapping of John Paul Getty III; and the September 29, 1994 murder of Nicholas Green (see footnote 221).

in the wake of the global success of Saviano's book *Gomorra* (2006) and the film of the same title by Matteo Garrone (2008), it is equally true that today, in the age of the internet, the most powerful mafia is the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta. The undisputed leader of European cocaine trafficking has conquered the international limelight – after a long period in shadow and silence – in the wake of the events of Duisburg.<sup>26</sup>

It is evident that the problem of the children of 'Ndrangheta families is one of ongoing, high risk of individual (for the children themselves) and social (for civil society) peril, and can no longer be ignored, downplayed, or silenced, but must be tackled purposefully by the Italian government and the European Union through a necessary synergy in pursuing policies shared among institutions and competent authorities: the judiciary, social services, the school, and the family.

The relationship between parents and children in the world of the 'Ndrangheta is complex and contradictory. Much has been written about it and much more will be written in the future. However, calling to mind the most difficult and thorny cases, the great “jumble of the human heart” (Manzoni) is always striking. One may recall the mafiosi sentenced to 41 bis for heinous crimes who, empowered by their parenthood which they perceive as absolute at any cost, express hatred and resentment against the Court responsible for removing children from their family

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<sup>26</sup> On the global problem of cocaine trafficking in the hands of the mafia, see the recent investigative novel by Roberto Saviano, *Zero Zero Zero* (Milano, Feltrinelli, 2013); English translation edited by Virginia Jewiss, *Zero Zero Zero. Look at Cocaine and All You See Is Powder. Look Through Cocaine and You See the World* (London, Penguin Random House, 2015). More rigorous and based on accurate and unprecedented field research is the work of Nicola Gratteri and Antonio Nicaso, *Oro bianco. Storie di uomini, traffici e denaro dall'impero della cocaina* (Milano, Mondadori, 2015). The book tells the story of the immense power of cocaine trafficking starting from its origins in the fields of South America, where the plant grows and is collected by indigent *indios*. According to the estimates of the UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) in 2012, 243 million people worldwide between 15 and 64 years of age have consumed an illegal substance at least once. Among these, cocaine is the most in-demand and highest-selling drug of the 'Ndrangheta. For the Calabrian mob bosses, 'snow' is profit, gain, a steady stream of liquid assets – indeed, “drugs equal money laundering” (Falcone, 1991, loc. cit., p. 138) – that overturns classical economic thought, according to which crime does not ‘produce’ because it instead destroys, and it does not generate wealth. But, paradoxically, the poorest regions (including Calabria) are those with the highest rate of extremely wealthy and powerful *mafiosi* (on this point see Alessandro Tarsia, *Perché la 'ndrangheta*, cit., 2015). In the book the co-authors reconstruct the global cocaine trafficking route in a journey leading from Colombia to Calabria, following the stages of a global business that enriches drug traffickers, impoverishes and kills drug addicts, contaminates the banking system, and corrupts the ruling classes. They travelled to Bolivia, Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, the United States, Africa and Australia. And in Europe, they visited Germany, Austria, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Belgium, and Holland, in order to reconstruct the air, sea and land routes along which cocaine passes from the producer to the consumer. This is a book encompassing a veritable global scourge.

home,<sup>27</sup> thus showing a bond and a deep affection for their own offspring. These are the same individuals who – in their dedication to one of the most important activities of the 'Ndrangheta, i.e. cocaine trafficking, with a supply chain stemming from the South American fields where armies of malnourished children are exploited – have never shown compassion for those children of indigent and desperate parents on the other side of the globe. Crucial in this regard is the testimony of mafiologue Antonio Nicaso from the notebook of his 2015 journey, which he undertook with Nicola Gratteri along the cocaine trafficking route overseen by the 'Ndrangheta. This journey allowed him to visit the coca plantations in Colombia and the laboratories where the 'base paste' is obtained from the leaf of the plant.<sup>28</sup>

Forty-three percent of the desplazada population in Colombia is under fifteen years of age. They are the primary victims of a conflict that has bloodied Colombia for over fifty years. Children are also used by narcos in the laboratories installed in the Colombian jungle where cocaine is produced. Barefoot children stomp on the coca leaves together with various chemical precursors in order to make a mash, the so-called 'coca paste.'<sup>29</sup>

All in the name of coca (or other illegal dealings), from the chemically contaminated children of South America, to the children of rival Calabrian gangs, killed and made victims of feuds and violence, to their own children who are given no choice but to become mafiosi, one can imagine the extent of the problems concerning childhood and adolescence in the mafia world, and in the 'Ndrangheta in particular.

Considering the geographical and cultural territories in which the 'Ndrangheta thrives, survival and prosperity are not simple tasks. The present essay aims to describe a particular reality in order to see up close how we might present significant opposition to mafia culture. The modes in which this may occur are the corollary of Judge Giovanni Falcone's thesis, according to which, when battling the mafia:

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<sup>27</sup> As one may read in their letters from prison to the professionals (lawyers, psychologists) officially responsible for assisting them. In order to protect the minors involved, these correspondences shall remain confidential.

<sup>28</sup> In a private conversation (from June 20, 2017) with the author, Nicaso did not seem optimistic about substantial changes in the short term with regard to cocaine trafficking in Colombia, despite the official government reconciliation with the FARC and the Nobel Peace Prize awarded by the Royal Academy of Stockholm to the Colombian President Manuel Santos in October 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Nicaso, in a private correspondence with the author, from July 6, 2017. Bear in mind that the "chemical precursors" include: kerosene, cement, ether, and acetone. It is not difficult to imagine the resulting pathologies suffered, against their will, by the children of the *Indios*.

Laws do not serve if they are not supported by a strong and clear political will, if they cannot function for lack of adequate systems and especially if these systems are not equipped with professionally qualified personnel.<sup>30</sup>

These are words that embody the substance of the project, with its proactive title Free to Choose,<sup>31</sup> underlying the operation of “cultural infiltration” promoted by Di Bella, to which I shall return shortly. What we are speaking of is a revolutionary antiphon to the ‘Ndrangheta in the name of culture. In order to counteract with long-term effectiveness the mafia subculture which – constructed around a do-it-yourself, self-legitimizing, false and errant mythology<sup>32</sup> – deceives itself and others, conquering them with the fear of that consensus necessary to ensure power through the perpetuation of customs, principles, and rituals manufactured on the basis of a pharisaical concept of honor. In truth it is dishonor, rather, which has never respected or spared women, mothers, and children.<sup>33</sup>

## 2. The Path

### 2.1 First portrait. The case of V. (baby-collaborator)

... “The ‘Ndrangheta” is “the mafia! ... A mafioso is a drug dealer, he shoots.” The speaker shows that he is well aware that his own parent “took part as a member of the *cosca* of [...]” together with other associates, of whom he “demonstrated knowledge even of their legal history, making reference to the operations which had led to their arrest.” Moreover, in the ruling’s transcript we read that the speaker:

1) reported having seen on multiple occasions weapons (“pistols and a rifle”) and “drugs in the car wash office” of his father, specifying that it was “powdery stuff ... white”;

2) stated how his father “did whatever the *cosca* needed, even without orders” and was “the boss’s right hand man”, named N.C.;

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<sup>30</sup> Giovanni Falcone, cit., 1991, p. 154.

<sup>31</sup> The journalist Angela Iantosca was the first in Italy to dedicate a book to this topic. Its investigation contains information up to the year 2014: *Bambini a metà. I figli della ‘ndrangheta*, Roma, Perrone, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> In this respect see the fundamental text of Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK), 1983.

<sup>33</sup> On this point see Giuliana Adamo and Antonio Nicaso, “Contro la pedagogia del disonore”, in *L'intervento con gli adolescenti devianti. Teorie e strumenti*, a cura di Maria Claudia Biscione e Marco Pingitore, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2015, pp. 209-230.

3) recounted having witnessed the buying and selling of drugs on various occasions, in particular of “160 kg of marijuana that had to go ... to the members of [...]” and that “his [i.e. those under his father’s command] did nothing without being ordered, they wouldn’t even lift a finger”, to underline the absolute prominent role his parent played in the organization, again indicating how this parent could decide to do “damage or sell drugs without having to justify himself to anyone.”

The minor V. then told of various trips with his father “for illegal activities” and in particular of one “to Naples”, with two automobiles, using a relay system for “transporting drugs ... contained in a big package ... because they broke it into sections ... they didn’t put it all together” and having seen them hide it “in the engine ... around the belts, the gaskets.”

He told, finally, about once having seen his father (“about a year ago”) converse with such D.F. as “they were having to bring a load of drugs into the port of [...] and there on his computer screen” – which was found inside the car wash office – “was the map of the port” ... and that from the conversation he realized that they had to “get the ship into port without any checks.”<sup>34</sup>

The person who offered these declarations to the regular Public Ministry, on Friday August 7 and Friday September 9, 2015, was V., eleven years old, the youngest collaborator in the history of the mafia. The child speaks in the context of the Eclissi trial, where among the defendants was his father, arrested nearly a year before and currently doing hard time (41 bis) due to a conviction for the offense of mafia association according to Article 416 bis.

Why did a “millennial”, eleven years of age – Calabrian, Italian, European – find himself in front of a District Attorney in 2015, talking about weapons, the organization of drug trafficking, and illegal commercial strategies at the Port of Gioia Tauro, telling how they filled containers with white powder, how the cocaine trafficking routes were studied and selected to avoid checks, recalling violence and abuse?<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Decree N. 32/15 R.G. Vol. Lega., 29.9.2015, Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, pp. 9, p. 3-4. Meeting in council: President Roberto Di Bella, Reporting Judge Sebastiano Finocchiaro, honorary judges Vittorio Blasa and Francesca Praticò. Italics, bold and underlined are original to the judicial acts, here and elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>35</sup> The members of a mafia association make regular use of violence and intimidation, which is the quickest and easiest way to impose itself on the community, to instill fear and respect and, therefore, to secure the consent which they need to maintain power. “The mafiosi do and will continue to do so as long as the mafia exists. In the course of my career I have seen many people dying of hunger suddenly become wealthy entrepreneurs. But I’ve never seen anyone who has renounced affiliation or the use of mafia methods. *And the same applies to their children.* This is a truth which shows just how difficult is the fight against the mafia: if it were banditry or urban gangsterism, things would be much simpler” (Falcone, 1991, cit., p. 131. Emphasis mine).

This book tells of mafia children, of lives they live, of all that is denied to them, of what they could do if they could be free to choose.

The reason why freedom of choice is vital for these mafia children – indoctrinated and brainwashed from birth by their own parents and by their home environment, deprived of their childhood and adolescence, robbed of their rights as children, forced into a life of violence and illegality – we read here below in the letter that a young Calabrian, now twenty-one years old (born in 1996), the son of an ‘Ndrangheta boss, wrote in 2014 to Ferruccio de Bortoli, then director of the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*.<sup>36</sup>

## 2.2 Second Portrait. The case of R.C.

Dear Director, I am a Calabrian from Locri and my name is R.C. Many have written about me, even if they never used my actual name. It so happened that they wrote things that are incorrect: it was not their story, it's mine. Now I have decided to tell it. On March 7, 2011, I was arrested by the Carabinieri of Locri for theft and damage to a car belonging to the Railway Police. In July I was fully acquitted, but in the meantime I was arrested again for a brawl. This is how it all began. The Court of Reggio decided to move me away from Locri for one year, so that I could leave certain experiences behind me. So started my journey. I arrived in Sicily. At the beginning it was not easy at all, I was alone and far from home. Everything changed when they moved me to Messina where I began to see one of the volunteers of Addiopizzo Messina:<sup>37</sup> a psychologist, a guy who has helped me to

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<sup>36</sup> Riccardo Cordì, in a letter entitled “Il figlio del boss che sceglie lo Stato”, published on the front page of *Corriere della Sera*, dated May 8, 2014. The case of Riccardo attracted the attention of the international press; see “The big story. Italy fights mafia with new strategy: banish sons”, Frances D’Emilio, Sep. 28, 2014, AM EDT.

<sup>37</sup> The “Addiopizzo” Messina Committee is a non-profit association whose chief priority is the promotion of a virtuous economy, free from ‘pizzo’ [the bribe fee which the mafia extorts from the civilian population] and from the influence of mafia-type criminal organizations. To this end, the association works from the bottom up through the promotion of “Critical Consumption Addiopizzo” and other strategies of non-violent action, aimed at supporting Sicilian citizens and business owners and promoting a culture of legality, solidarity and environmental awareness. The following submitted proposal, shared with the judicial authorities of Catanzaro and Reggio Calabria, is comprised of the numerous activities of social solidarity conducted by the Association and responds pragmatically to the purposes set out in its statutes, in particular “in the promotion and development of strategies of non-violent struggle against mafia rule [...] and in the planning and support of initiatives, activities and interventions that are designed to promote the birth of an anti-mafia movement.” In working toward this end, on May 13, 2013, the Association signed an Operational Protocol with the Office of Social Services for Juveniles in Messina (Department of Juvenile Justice) with the objective of promoting an integrated operation in the design and/or implementation of individualized projects for minors entering the criminal justice system. Said protocol was made immediately operational in order to take charge of some children of ‘Ndrangheta families subject to the provisions issued by the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria

discover a new life. In the period that I spent in Messina I have done things, met people, I lived in places that I had never seen before. One morning, together with that guy, I went to the sea. From there I saw Calabria, my land. But this time I saw it from another perspective: I observed it from another place, but it was me who was truly different. I decided that my life had to change. I want to return to Locri, but I do not want to have any more problems with the law. Not only because it's not good for me, but also because I want to live in peace. I want to stay clean. Before having this experience, I thought that the State doesn't care at all about people. The State was what took you away from home. And you did not know if you would return and when you would return. In these months I have known a different State, not one that wanted to change me at all costs but one that for once tried to understand who I really was. And who am I really? An eighteen-year-old boy, a boy like any other. I was very young when my father was killed, I saw my brothers go to jail. I would like a different future for myself. This does not mean that I renounce my family. They will always be my brothers. Calabria will always be my land. It's only that I would like to be a kid like other kids. Before me now there is only one road that I must choose. The State that before was so distant is giving me different possibilities. Now I can choose whatever I want to do. I can choose which job I want to do, which city to live in. I can reach for the sky. I do not know if I will get there, but I will try. Certainly something has changed. I made it, I can do it. And it's not just me. There are many kids like me who need the State in this way. They don't believe it exists. I do know and I am writing this letter so that others will know as well. It's still an uphill road. But it is not true that happy endings are only an illusion. They can be a reality.

These are the words of a mafia child belonging to one of the most powerful 'Ndrangheta families from the area around Reggio. The intervention of the juvenile authorities in Reggio has guaranteed him a new possibility at life, which spurred him to talk about his new education and training (*Bildung*). And thanks to this education, he came to recognize that the State is not an enemy to be fought,<sup>38</sup>

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which, in order to try to “*give them at least a chance to get to know a different way of living and thinking [...] and to remove them from an otherwise inevitable fate within the mafia*”, has experimented with removing them from their own immediate family (in situations of established psycho-physical injury), with the assistance of Juvenile Social Services authorities from outside the region of Calabria. On the ‘pizzo’ see Diego Gambetta, *La mafia siciliana. Un’industria della protezione privata*, Torino, Einaudi, I ed. 1994.

<sup>38</sup> In this regard I cite the admission of Antonino Belnome: “They teach you to hate the State, the forces of law and order, the police [...]. They drill it into your head that they [the cops] are rotten and dishonest, and you are the one who is in the right” (Gratteri and Nicaso, *Dire e non dire*, cit., 2012, p. 20). Belnome is an ‘ndrangheta member with several murders on his record. His statement is contained in the *Memorial* speech delivered to the magistrates of the District Antimafia Directive (DDA) of Milan in 2011. With regard to the visceral aversion which *mafiosi* hold against representatives of the State, Falcone states (and this assertion he made regarding Cosa Nostra also applies to the ‘Ndrangheta): “The bloodiest insult for a man of honor consists in sticking him with the appellative of ‘cop’ or ‘rat’” (Falcone, 1991, cit., p. 100).



that the justice system outside the home is not something alien to be abolished, that it is not true that his destiny lies only in the hands of his parents and the made men of his neighborhood,<sup>39</sup> that alternatives do exist. The young man acknowledges that the State is made up of real flesh-and-blood people, not of mere figures and bogeymen to denigrate and spray with buckshot as he was taught by his family;<sup>40</sup> and that one can converse constructively, not just clash destructively.<sup>41</sup> Hope of another possible life emerges in a boy who from birth

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<sup>39</sup> On July 4, 2017, in reference to the massive operation of security forces against the ‘Ndrangheta (see footnote 13), the newspaper *Il Fatto quotidiano* ran an article by Lucio Musolino. The title was: “‘Ndrangheta. Nelle carte dell’operazione Mandamento Jonico il cuore delle cosche: dagli appalti ai desideri degli studenti” [The ‘Ndrangheta. In the case of the Mandamento Jonico operation, the heart of the syndicates: from contracts to the desires of the students]. The subtitle read “C’è anche la lettera di un 15enne che scrive al boss in carcere tra le 3mila pagine dell’ordinanza che ha portato all’arresto di 116 persone. Gli interessi delle cosche si spingono a qualsiasi appalto, persino il tribunale di Locri, gli ostelli della Gioventù, i contributi pubblici. E si scoprono le dinamiche interne per *processare e punire* chi trasgredisce il codice d’onore interno” [There is also the letter of a 15-year-old who wrote to the boss in prison, among the 3000 pages of the injunction, which led to the arrest of 116 people. The interests of the syndicates lead to contracts everywhere, even with the court of Locri, youth hostels, and public funding. And you will discover the internal dynamics to *prosecute and punish* those who violate the Code of Honor here inside]. This is a passage from the article, based on papers seized from the mafia that place us right in the heart of the problem treated in this book: “Hello my dearest, how is it going? I hope all is well. I am writing this letter [...]. The main reason is that I signed [*omissis*] that *I would like to make myself available for You and Your Family.*” These words are taken from a letter written by a fifteen-year-old boy and delivered to Alessandra Cataldo, the twenty-two-year-old daughter of boss Antonio Cataldo, known by the nickname ‘Pappuzzedda’ [ladybird], so that she could pass it on to her father in prison ([www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/07/04/ndrangheta](http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/07/04/ndrangheta). Emphasis mine).

<sup>40</sup> On the myth of belonging to crime families which guarantees social status, respect, and a life in the highest ranks – an idea that holds enormous fascination and attraction for the minors described in this book – we cite the words of Gratteri and Nicaso: “These are surnames that locals pronounce with reverence and respect, and also with fear to put their noses where they don’t belong. These are bosses who enjoy social status, whom you see hobnobbing with politicians and professionals, who befriend them, negotiate with them, make deals with them. They see themselves as men of honor, different from all the others, those they think of as ‘losers, suckers, people without balls who make do with a thousand euros a month, without any dignity, without any joy’” (cit., 2012, p. 20; the quotation is taken from Claudio Antonelli and Gianluigi Nuzzi, *Metastasi. Sangue, soldi e politica tra Nord e Sud. La nuova ‘ndrangheta nella confessione di un pentito*, Milano, Chiarelettere, 2010, p. 27). And, the two co-authors continue: “Even more explicit, during an interview with the members of the family in the Palmi prison, Francesco Pesce describes the *others*, the ‘cops’: “They are zero... mixed with nothing” (*ibidem*; the source of the quote is an intercepted conversation on March 6, 2006, in the course of the operation *All Inside*).

<sup>41</sup> On this point see the report by all the Italian newspapers on July 4, 2017 (see footnotes 13 and 39), including *Il Fatto quotidiano* with another article by Lucio Masolino, titled: “‘Ndrangheta, maxi-blitz in Calabria: 116 arresti. Il nipote di *u Tiradrittu* intercettato: ‘Lo Stato sono io, qua’” [‘Ndrangheta, huge operation in Calabria: 116 arrested. The nephew of *u Tiradrittu* in a tapped call: “I am the State, right here.”] The article is subtitled: “Retata nella Locride decapita 23 clan, comprese le cosche Pelle, Ficara-Latella, Morabito, Alvaro. I Carabinieri hanno scoperto non solo nuove cariche e strutture, ma anche veri e propri ‘tribunali’ per chi violava le regole del sodalizio” [The roundup in Locride decapitates 23 clans, including the Pelle, Ficara-Latella, Morabito, and Alvaro syndicates. The Carabinieri have discovered not only new caches and facilities, but also actual ‘courts’ for those who break the rules of the association]. To which follows the first paragraph of article: “‘*I am the State, right here, Pé... Controls... The mafia, the original mafia,*

was denied the responsible and autonomous development of his own individuality with the acquisition of an awareness of his own free will.

### 2.3 Free to Choose

This is a positive outcome of the measures adopted, for the first time in Italy in the history of the mafia, by the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria in collaboration with the a Juvenile District Attorney, public defenders and Social Services.<sup>42</sup> Since March 2012, following the horrific act bloodshed concerning Maria Concetta ‘Cetta’ Cacciola to which I shall return later, the Court adopted a completely new series of measures for the protection of minors of the mafia.<sup>43</sup> Parallel to judicial action, since September 2012 the Court has initiated the first steps for filling a serious institutional weakness with the creation of a network of acceptance and support for minors who are recipients of the measures. The purpose was to accord the implementation of personalized avenues of rehabilitation, support and social reintegration. The measures adopted led on March 21, 2013, to the Memorandum of Understanding “Free to Choose”, signed by the judicial authorities of the Province.<sup>44</sup> In the meantime, starting from prior

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not the one in decline.’ Speaking is Giuseppe ‘Ringo’ Morabito, nephew of the Africo boss, Peppe Morabito, known as ‘Tiradritto’ [*u Tiradrittu* in the Calabrian dialect]. The interception is included in a detention order that brought in a huge haul tonight in Locride, in the province of Reggio Calabria. At the request of the DDA, the Carabinieri of ROS have arrested 116 persons accused of mafia association, extortion, illegal transport and possession of arms, fraudulent transfer of assets, fraud and other offenses, all aggravated by the aim of assisting the ‘Ndrangheta” ([www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/07/04/ndrangheta](http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/07/04/ndrangheta). Emphasis mine).

<sup>42</sup> In the field of social services, skills are entrusted to the municipalities that are the privileged interlocutors of the judicial authorities in various areas. The relationships were regulated by Art. 23, Paragraph 1, Letter C of D.P.R. 616/77 and by Art. 14, Paragraph 2 L.1085/62, for civil and administrative departments and by Presidential Decree 448/88 for the criminal justice system. In the civil sphere relationships of collaboration which the services maintain with the judicial authorities in the matter of juveniles in need of protection are of utmost importance (L.149/2001 and Book I of the Civil Code). The field of criminal law instead emphasizes the general criterion of Art. 6 of the DPR 448/88 (Code of Juvenile Criminal Proceedings) where it states that: “In every state and level of the process the judicial authority avails itself of the assistance services imposed by local agencies.” Of course, the management of quite complex and delicate situations relating to minors presupposes a proper relationship of collaboration between the Municipalities, individuals or associations, those appointed to the functions of protecting minors, and the juvenile judicial authorities, but also of the latter with the educational agencies and healthcare organizations which can collaborate with the justice system, if called to do so. Relationships of these workers with the judicial authorities are characterized by collaborations in the context of the technical and professional autonomy of the latter, regulated by the agencies on which they depend (*ibidem*).

<sup>43</sup> Here we refer to the case concerning the minors of Maria Concetta Cacciola; see Decree n. 83/12 R.V.G. of March 6, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> The Memorandum of Understanding, signed on March 21, 2013, “between the Judicial Offices of the District Appellate Court of Reggio Calabria (Reggio, Palmi, Locri) to agree upon operative

experiments with positive role models through the collaboration of the volunteer anti-mafia associations Free Calabria<sup>45</sup> and Addiopizzo Messina, in February 2014 the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria had submitted a proposed project, also titled Free to Choose, to the Department of Juvenile Justice. It is a comprehensive project whose aim is to initiate, with funding from the European Union, a systematic plan of action with respect to children from ‘Ndrangheta families, ensuring the implementation of that vast support network of judicial provisions in order to offer these children concrete cultural, training, and job opportunities. As Di Bella writes:

In substance, the project foresees the establishment of specialized educational teams; that is, of educational pools [...] to be formed in a targeted manner in relation to the unique needs of these children, with the presence of a tutor and a psychologist with specific experience in the field, there to accompany these young people each step along the way. It is envisioned as a specialized network – also formed by families, homes and community organizations prepared ad hoc – that will help the children to overcome the initial difficulties linked to their removal and, at the same time, is able to help them recognize their greatest needs, which had been oppressed by mafia ideology and upbringing.<sup>46</sup>

On July 1, 2017, five years from the beginning of this journey, the government accepted the request of Di Bella and, in the Prefecture of Reggio Calabria, an

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modes, coordination, and communication in cases of: 1) proceedings relating to sexual abuse or abuse leading to the injury of minors; 2) criminal proceedings relating to offenses committed in collaboration by subjects who are minors and adults; 3) civil proceedings for the protection of children of suspects/defendants/those convicted of offenses referred to in Art.51 Paragraph 3B of the penal code and elsewhere; 4) civil proceedings relating to minors and to households subject to measures of protection” (available online at the official website of the Ministry of Justice, p. 18, <http://www.tribmin.reggiocalabria.giustizia.it>, p.1 ).

<sup>45</sup> We refer here to the Calabrian presidium *Libera. Associazioni, nomi e numeri contro le mafie*, established on March 25, 1995 by its founder and current president, Don Pio Luigi Ciotti, with the intent to urge civilians to join the fight against the mafia and promote legality and justice. Currently *Libera* is an organization of over 1,500 associations, groups, and schools, regionally engaged to build political-cultural and organizational synergies capable of spreading a culture of legality. Laws on the social use of assets confiscated from the mafia, education in democratically-based legality, the fight against corruption, anti-mafia training camps, employment and development initiatives, and anti-usury activities, are some of the concrete initiatives to which *Libera* is committed. *Libera* is recognized as an association for social promotion by the Ministry of Social Solidarity. In 2008 it was included by EURISPES among the Italian centers of excellence. The key points of the operation implemented by *Libera* are: democratic legality, social justice, peace, solidarity, environment, memorializing mafia victims and victims of any violence, not forgetting those who undertook to bring about justice; protesting, according to the principles of non-violence, the dissemination of illegality and mafia control of the region. Its motto is “ In order to change it is important to participate!”

<sup>46</sup> Roberto Di Bella, “Le potenzialità della Giustizia minorile nel contrasto ai sistemi criminali familiari: la tutela dei minori di ‘ndrangheta tra prassi giudiziaria e prospettive *de iure condendo*”, in *Rivista Interdisciplinare Minori e Giustizia*, n. 3, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2016, pp. 1-15, p. 2.

important agreement was signed between the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Interior, and the Province of Calabria, in order to undertake the implementation on a national scale of the project *Free to choose*.<sup>47</sup> On this occasion Luciano Trovato, President of the Juvenile Court in Catanzaro, among the signatories of the agreement, recalled that the magistrates of Reggio, especially Di Bello, were

the first to have transformed into judicial measures the conviction that justice cannot stop at the doorstep of the home belonging to organized crime families.<sup>48</sup> In particular when, from the proceeding's pages, one sees how familial affectivity in reality helps to perpetuate the syndicate's control, transforming children into child-soldiers by indoctrinating them from an early age into the cult of bullying and weapons, of contempt for those who do not share the same values, a lack of respect for the law and its representatives, a rejection of scholastic education in favor of a criminal education, all coming to fruition with the commission of the first petty crimes.<sup>49</sup>

The governmental agreement provides for the allocation of funds necessary to strengthen the network of acceptance for minors who are subject to the rulings of the Court of First Instance.<sup>50</sup> More specifically, it concerns the training and

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<sup>47</sup> Nine of the signatories to the July 2017 agreement: Minister of Justice Andrea Orlando and Interior Minister Marco Minniti; the Presidents of the Juvenile Courts of Reggio Calabria and Catanzaro, Roberto Di Bella and Luciano Trovato, respectively; president of the Appellate Court of Reggio Calabria Luciano Gerardi and the delegate of the Appellate Court of Catanzaro (Luciano Trovato); president of the Province of Calabria Mario Oliverio; Public Prosecutor at the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Giuseppina Latella and of Catanzaro, Rita Tartaglia. See the article by Anna Foti from July 1, 2017 ([www.reggiotv.it/notizie/cronaca/53163/liberi-scegliere-cambiare-vita-sottoscritto-prefettura-accordo-minori-famiglie-mafiose](http://www.reggiotv.it/notizie/cronaca/53163/liberi-scegliere-cambiare-vita-sottoscritto-prefettura-accordo-minori-famiglie-mafiose)).

<sup>48</sup> Remember that an important precedent to the action of the current court in Reggio is represented by a 2008 measure signed by then President Antonino *Nino* Mazzù, relative to the two minor children of a powerful crime family of Reggio Calabria. The decree entrusted the children exclusively to the mother (found to be exempt from her husband's criminal activity) and terminated the parental rights of the father (a *mafioso*, murderer, and fugitive, belonging to one of the most powerful families in the 'Ndrangheta); see the Juvenile Court of Reggio, Decree, October 21, 2008, n. 786; pp. 1-7). This ruling, however, had remained an isolated case, until Di Bello worked to systematize and make it the goal of his project.

<sup>49</sup> Extract from the speech by Luciano Trovato on July 1, 2017, in the Prefecture of Reggio Calabria, on the occasion of the signing of the governmental accord for the realization of the project *Free to choose*.

<sup>50</sup> Here I cite Article taken from the July 2017 document, p. 7, paragraph 4: "In particular, the said agreement is aimed at: guaranteeing children from organized crime families adequate safeguards for a regular upbringing, and ensuring the satisfaction of their needs and requirements typical of adolescence, through the promotion of the values of legality and the enhancement of the specific potential, inclinations, and resources of minors and young adults; developing an experimental program for the prevention of social marginalization through educational opportunities, work, and recreational activities; enhancing the creative potential, communication skills, and the sense of identity, responsibility, and legality of minors and young adults subjected to rulings by the juvenile judicial authorities and who find themselves in situations of social and emotional hardship, through the creation of activities and the presentation of projects, even of an experimental nature; creating, with the collaboration of penitentiaries, of the U.S.S.M. (Office of

remuneration of specialized personnel (social workers, psychologists, foster families), with the creation of valid offers of employment for young people in difficulty. The signatures of the government representatives sanctioned an important change in direction for Di Bella's project, ensuring the progression from the original provincial level – which required Di Bella's involvement for its implementation and was set to expire on September 15, 2019, upon reaching the end of its mandate – to a regional institutional practice that will be extended to the national level. It represents a decisive step, in the hope (and an inspiration for the writing of these pages) that in the not-too-distant future the lines of communication between the different judicial offices of the Italian peninsula will be normalized by the law and will finally become a European directive.<sup>51</sup>

What is this protocol?

Free to choose is dedicated to ensuring the safety of minors, protecting their normal development and upbringing, offering them the possibility of experiencing cultural alternatives in order to avoid their inevitable indoctrination into crime. The protocol represents a fundamental step in the strategy of the Court of Reggio and, for the first time, requires the application of existing laws for the protection of minors of mafia families. Namely, this legislation relates to the limitation, suspension or revocation of parental rights in the case of parents objectively unable to care for and adequately fulfill their duties and obligations with respect to their own children for various reasons (serious and recurrent addiction, imprisonment for criminal offenses, et talia similia).<sup>52</sup> Its novelty lies in its groundbreaking and courageous application in the area of inappropriate family

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Juvenile Social Services), and of other offices of criminal enforcement, actions aimed at the reintegration of minors who are beneficiaries of the project by offering activities and programs, intended to include the birth family, that support actions already in effect; experimenting with restorative justice interventions and penal mediation involving, where possible, the birth family as well.”

<sup>51</sup> In accordance with procedure, the protocol must be converted into a bill following its rewriting by the Legislative Offices, to then be approved by the two branches of Parliament (Chamber and Senate).

<sup>52</sup> In this respect it should be noted that “even today there remain in use, unaltered, the ‘old’ forms of the original repressive system devised by the criminal code of 1930, in the violation of the obligations of family assistance (art. 570 c.p.), the abuse of means of correction or discipline (art. 571 c.p.), and domestic abuse (art. 572 c.p.” (Pier Giorgio Gosso, former President of the chamber of the Court of Torino, *L'abuso sui minori e il processo penale*, p. 15, p. 3, [www.regione.piemonte.it/polsoc/osservatorio/dwd/incontro/gosso.doc](http://www.regione.piemonte.it/polsoc/osservatorio/dwd/incontro/gosso.doc)). Di Bella explains that the experience gained by handling cases of *mafia children* “strengthened the conviction within the offices of Reggio’s juvenile justice system that we need to censure the mafia models of upbringing in the same manner in which we intervene against other parents who are violent or abusive or who have problems with alcoholism or drug addiction” (Di Bella, *Le potenzialità della Giustizia minorile nel contrasto ai sistemi criminali familiari: la tutela dei minori di 'ndrangheta tra prassi giudiziaria e prospettive de iure condendo*, cit., 2016, p. 3.)

dynamics, in a mafia context such as can be found in Calabria, where the ‘Ndrangheta is not only a powerful and unscrupulous criminal organization, but above all a widespread cultural fixture, with strong popular support gained from a tradition of ignorance, terror, and silence. As he often repeats in his writings and public meetings, Nicola Gratteri, then Chief Prosecutor of Catanzaro, states: “without this support the Mafia would not exist.” The aim of the Court and of the Juvenile Prosecutor in Reggio Calabria is to temporarily remove children from ‘Ndrangheta families whose parents (one or both) are recognized as ‘mafiosi’ by Italian law, with the objective of providing a normal upbringing, separated from the influence of family structures, thus allowing them to freely choose the direction of their own lives.

The Free to choose protocol “represents a true precedent in the national arena for its innovative network strategy and the objectives it pursues”,<sup>53</sup> and it is necessary in order to compensate for the insufficiencies of a purely public network. The latter was unable to guarantee effective planned interventions by the Court which arrange for accompaniment, tutoring, psychological and educational assistance, integration, the logistical relocation of minors (often together with their mothers), into organizations and environments suitable for their new path to re-creation and re-form – and, most importantly, in places well removed from the original path of deviation. Therefore, it has become a priority to implement a plan for the strengthening of public resources and their integration with those of the private social sphere.

Free to choose was born out of a humanitarian and social crisis. What happens once the judiciary and the Court intervene, act, debate, decide and decree the fate of a minor living in grave family conditions? In fact, the effective action of the magistrates and judges can be said to be complete as soon as they issue their decrees and judgments. What then? Who takes care and protects the minors to whom those decrees and judgments are addressed? Who makes sure to accompany them along the next stages of their troubled adolescence? The answer should be: the State. But the question is not rhetorical, and the State is often absent, insufficient, if not indifferent. What does intervene, then, is the immense amount of wisdom, work, and experience of the volunteer corps: a social buffer and share capital representative of the most obscure part of the Italian nation.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Roberto Di Bella, speech to the Senate, cit., 2015, p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> According to the last survey of the ISTAT (Italian Institute of Statistics), carried out in 2021, the volunteer corps and the so-called ‘third sector’ – the private institutions that produce goods and services for the public or collective interest, and not for profit – consists of 4, 616.915 million citizens. These individuals are Italians at least 14 years of age who performed voluntary work, defined as ‘activities performed free of charge and without any obligation,’ at least once a month. The majority of them – over 4 million people – volunteered within organizations (associations, committees, movements, informal groups); the remaining performed services directly for other



The need for an efficient synergy between the State and private society requires the empowerment of a multidisciplinary team working alongside the judiciary and the offices of Juvenile Social Services (a necessary but insufficient contribution provided by the State) to provide an array of valuable qualified psychologists, mediators, and educators: an indispensable contribution offered by volunteers. The volunteers of the associations Libera Calabria and Addiopizzo Messina, with their network of educational, relational, and job opportunities, are an integral part of the project. The recent seal of approval by the government underlines the recognition of a commitment, that of President Di Bello, to rescue young lives from a future of incarceration or death. This protocol represents a decisive step toward synergy between the State and various institutions,<sup>55</sup> a step which validates the legal procedure inaugurated by Di Bella in 2012,<sup>56</sup> despite many opinions to the contrary and many adverse reactions elicited from the outset, as is obvious from the words of Trovato:

Admittedly, time is not always a gentleman. In this case it was necessary to resist a contrary wind, to wait and not give up on our own convictions, and also necessary was the objective condition of exercising specialized jurisdiction in an office with legislative autonomy. The contrary wind: it blew, and it was not a mere breeze. Let us not forget that all the great Italian newspapers spread the notion that the Law, then limited to Reggio (but today also in Catania, Naples

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individuals, the community or the environment. The rate of volunteering is equal to 12.6 percent of the population: one in every eight Italians. See: [www.Censimento permanente delle Istituzioni non profit](http://www.istat.it/it/temi/censimento-permanente-delle-istituzioni-non-profit), ISTAT, 2024.

<sup>55</sup> Concerning the current counter-response of the State to the ever increasing invasiveness of the mafias, for the sake of a more effective synergy among the institutions, is the recent news of the successful meeting in the Marian Shrine considered the stronghold of 'Ndrangheta, between Interior Minister Minniti and the Bishop of Locri-Gerace, Monsignor Francesco Oliva. The weekly magazine of political and cultural information, *L'Espresso*, dated July 6, 2017, published an article by Michele Albanese, with the title: "In the shrine of the Godfathers: now Calabria wants to separate God from the 'Ndrangheta." It has always been before the Madonna di Polsi, in Calabria's most sacred place, that the clans held their rites of affiliation and summits. But the visit of Interior Minister Minniti and the bishop of Locri are the sign of a new willingness to reaffirm that religion and crime cannot stand together, and to give hope to the people" (<http://espresso.repubblica.it/attualita/2017/07/05/news/nel-santuario-dei-padrini-ora-la-calabria-vuole-separare-dio-dalla-ndrangheta-1.305583>). On June 21, 2014, during his pastoral visit to Calabria, Pope Francis (Bergoglio), speaking at the Mass of *Corpus Domini* in the plains of Sibari, stated: "Those who have these evil paths in their lives, the *mafiosi*, they are not in communion with God; they are excommunicated." This is the first time that a Pope excommunicated the members of the 'Ndrangheta in such a dramatic fashion, describing the association as "the adoration of evil" (<http://www.famigliacristiana.it/articolo/il-papa-775371.aspx>).

<sup>56</sup> The path paved by Di Bella has been fully accepted among psychologists, to whom sufficed the important note entitled, significantly, *The right to existence*, written on July 9, 2017, following the signing of the July 1 governmental accord, by Tiziana Catalano (former Honorary Court Judge for juveniles and of the Appellate Court in Reggio Calabria, and consultant to the District Attorney's office and to the Courts of Reggio Calabria and Naples). See <https://www.calabriapost.net/storie>, pp.1-3.



and Catanzaro) referred not to precise relationships and existing rules but to unacceptable ethical principles, almost bordering on ethnic cleansing. Personally I remember very well the opinion of colleagues and lawyers, based mostly on misinformation and on a certain loose interpretation, who were more than a little perplexed by the bench-warrant arrests accrued. Certainly the winds were not only contrary: the courageous initiative of my colleagues in Reggio was shared and garnered the admiration of national and international media, even some from other continents.<sup>57</sup>

That the new procedure is not coercive, punitive, or against the very principles of the family unit, as its many detractors have claimed, is demonstrated by the fact that this very project, Free to choose, devotes ample space to a proper path to rehabilitation for family members:

In parallel, the same network must be able to function with family members as well, by explaining to the parents (with the aid of a psychologist/specialized mediator who has studied the relational dynamics and the histories of the individual “families” [*cosche*]) the motivations and goals of the rulings as protective in nature, with the immediate objective of reducing the emotional impact and – not

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<sup>57</sup> Luciano Trovato in his July 1, 2017 speech (cit., see footnote 47). News of the governmental accord, endorsed thanks to Roberto Di Bella’s initiative, was reported in all the Italian newspapers and has circulated worldwide: <http://m.todayonline.com/world/europe/italy-steps-rescue-plan-mafia-children>. On July 7, 2017, it was reported by a myriad of paper and online news sources in articles with very telling titles. These include, just to name a few, in India: [www.google.it/amp/www.thehindu.com/news/international/italy-steps-up-rescue-plan-for-mafia-children/article19235184.ece/amp/](http://www.google.it/amp/www.thehindu.com/news/international/italy-steps-up-rescue-plan-for-mafia-children/article19235184.ece/amp/); Singapore: <https://singapore.shafaqna.com/EN/SG/182291>; China: <https://chinanewscloud.com/2017/07/07/italy-steps-up-rescue-plan--for-mafia-children/>. Australia: <https://medium.com/@connieagius/the-italian-mafia-and-thier-violence-agaisnt-women>. Important western newspapers have been following Di Bella’s operation. Here we mention a few: Scandinavia, the *HelsinginSanomat*: <http://www.hs.fi/ulkomaat/art-2000005283462.html>; Great Britain: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/23/mafia-italy-ndrangheta-judge-breaks-families-save-children-reggio-calabria> (February 23, 2016); <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/24/banished-mob-italy-mafia-sons-exiled-crim> (September 24, 2014); “Justice system tries to save children of Mafia parents”, <http://www.west-info.eu/justice-system-tries-to-save-children-of-mafia-parents/2017.07.06>. Germany: <http://www.aol.de/video/kalabrien-richter-nimmt-mafia-familien-die-kinder-weg>; USA: “Moving children of mob families across Italy to break cycle of criminality”, *The New York Times* (February 11, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/10/world/europe/breaking-up-the-family-as-a-way-to-break-up-the-mob.html> (February 10, 2017); <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-italy-fights-mafia-with-new-strategy-banish-sons-2014sep27-story.html>; France: <http://www.lejdd.fr/International/Europe/Le-juge-qui-sauve-les-enfants-de-la-mafia-italienne-850403>; “Italie brise la Chaîne du crime en retirant leurs enfants aux gangster”, <https://actu.orange.fr/monde/l-italie-brise-la-chaine-du-crime-en-retirant-leurs-enfants-aux-mafieux>, (July 7, 2017); www.L-ACTU.fr, No. 5424, “Rencontre: EC juge veut sauver Les enfants de la mafia italienne” (October 24, 2017). In Spain: <http://www.infobae.com/america/2017/02/14/la-polemica-estrategia-de-un-juez-italiano-antimafia-para-cortar-el-ciclo-del-crimen/>; <http://eldoce.tv/mundo/el-juez-roberto-de-bella-calabria-italia-lucha-contra-mafia-le-quita-los-hijos-los-criminales-35418> (February 14, 2017). In the Netherlands: <https://witfilm.nl/en/projects/children-of-the-mafia> ( July 17, 2017).

purely utopian – of involving the parents in the rehabilitation processes by leveraging their maternal and paternal sentiments.<sup>58</sup>

The protocol (among the judicial offices) and the project (regarding the support networks for the rulings issued by the Court) Free to choose have the same title because they are two interconnected documents, which function together to achieve a common goal: the “cultural infiltration” necessary to rescue minors from exposure to the mafia dynamics which their families impose upon them. With its crucial lessons, this important document is the only one in Italy to have created “systematically an information network with the Anti-mafia District Prosecutor’s Office.”<sup>59</sup> And, as we have seen, it was created due to an awareness of the limitations inherent in the relocation rulings issued by the juvenile courts, which in themselves may not be sufficient to resolve the problem. In order to counteract the *‘ndrine*, it is necessary to take these comprehensive measures. The Court must become an efficient mechanism, equipped with tools to sniff out the stench of the mafia within an underground world that is so difficult to dig into and dredge. The protocol, drawn up and signed in the wake of those measures, stems from the consideration that

indispensable criminal prosecution or seizing of assets are not the only suitable means to eradicate the phenomenon of the *‘Ndrangheta*. It is primarily a cultural and self-sustaining phenomenon, maintained within the family, in a perverse spiral that is difficult to eradicate, above all because of the low incidence of criminals turning informant. The purpose of the agreement is to provide coordinated judicial intervention for the protection of underprivileged minors, either perpetrators or victims of crime.<sup>60</sup>

The end goal of this collaborative effort – already successfully tested in some of the cases discussed in this book – is to guide young people in a direction of liberation from the mafia culture, in order to gain autonomy both in their lives and their work.

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<sup>58</sup> Roberto Di Bella, speech to the Senate, cit., 2015, p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Roberto Galullo, “Linea dura per togliere i figli alla *‘ndrangheta*”, *Il Sole 24 ore*, January 16, 2017, n. 15, pp. 1-7, p. 2.

<sup>60</sup> Michela Mancini, “La rivoluzione silenziosa di un tribunale di frontiera” (subtitled: “Il Tribunale dei Minorenni di Reggio Calabria, su iniziativa del presidente Roberto Di Bella, ha stanziato alcuni provvedimenti per allontanare provvisoriamente alcuni minori dalle famiglie di *‘ndrangheta*. Un modo – controverso e dibattuto – per dare a questi ragazzi un’alternativa alla mafia”), *Inchiesta Minori di ‘ndrangheta*, pp. 27-40, *Narcomafie*, January/February 2015, pp. 31-37, p. 35. The investigation is subtitled: “They grow up in families where violence is their daily bread, with fathers and brothers in prison or murdered, and mothers weeping and screaming for revenge. This is the fate of *‘Ndrangheta* children. It is necessary to intervene for their protection, in order to break the blood bond that fosters new recruitment to the organization.”

And the keyword, as Terry Eagleton reminds us, is ‘culture,’<sup>61</sup> which is a human creation sharing a humble etymological root with the term ‘agriculture.’<sup>62</sup> Therefore it alludes, figuratively speaking, to the cultivation of individuals, and among its various traditional meanings is that of a common ground of traditions and values handed down, accepted and shared, with a greater or lesser degree of awareness on the part of the people, depending on their social position and their degree of literacy. Here, then, is the reason why it is essential to counteract the mafia subculture with cultural weapons: the only means to provide, from an early age, the intellectual, dialectical, and critical tools needed to escape the influence of the mafia.

Recalling one of Falcone’s sayings on the importance of the school’s role – that is, that the mafia will be defeated by an army of elementary school teachers – we immediately enter into the meat of the problem and we begin to understand the operation of the Court and of the Juvenile Prosecutor of Reggio Calabria, whose goal is a constructive one for the children, not a destructive one for the families. The measures necessary for the protection of minors do not only consist in separating parents and children and removing the latter from their family home but, as already mentioned, also in providing a fundamental parallel task of re-establishing parental responsibility (whether incarcerated or not) when the parents manage to overcome all resistance and agree to undertake a new path. The signatories of the document make it very clear that, in order to give ‘Ndrangheta children a real chance at a life that breaks free and moves beyond the one imposed on them by their family and home environment, it is necessary to offer paths toward rehabilitation in both the civil and the criminal spheres, thus minimizing the difficulties of integration into the community. The intention is to entrust them to volunteer families (from associations such as Libera, Gerbera Gialla, and Addiopizzo) so as to expose them to other realities, environments, stimuli, and people. One must also bear in mind that giving custody to a community or family is always a temporary measure. The objective of the protocol, with its affiliated network of contacts, is (when possible) the parallel rehabilitation and reunification, under State supervision, of children and at least one of their parents: usually the mother, given that the fathers are often imprisoned, in hiding, or dead.

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<sup>61</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Culture*, Yale, Yale University Press, 2016, *passim*.

<sup>62</sup> The term ‘culture’ derives from the Latin verb *colĕre* which means ‘to grow,’ even in the figurative sense of ‘to care for,’ ‘to treat with attention or respect,’ and therefore ‘to honor.’ More precisely, ‘culture’ derives from the neutral nominative plural *colturus*, the future participle of *colĕre*, that commonly has a final value and an active meaning. And “therefore, just as *ventura* refers to what is about to happen, and *nascitura* to one who is about to be born, so *cultura* refers to things having to do with cultivation, growing, honoring” (Massimo Angelini, *Alle origini della parola ‘cultura,’* [http://www.montesquieu.it/biblioteca/Testi/Angelini\\_cultura.pdf](http://www.montesquieu.it/biblioteca/Testi/Angelini_cultura.pdf), p.2).

The protocol has a dual effect: it saves the children and rehabilitates the parents, at first only the mothers, but as we shall see, now even the fathers are starting to be involved in this virtuous circle:

No one would dare to say that removing minors from these situations means taking them away from their loved ones; indeed, in all cases the measures are only limited and temporary and never completely sever family ties, but rather they give these minors the ability to choose, to discover that another world exists, that they have the same ability as all young people to explore their aspirations, their aptitudes, to choose [their own partner] without constraints.<sup>63</sup>

The case of R.C., documented in the opening of this second portrait, is enlightening and outlines what one hopes will be the future for baby-collaborator V. of the previous portrait: even as he tells the courts about his father's criminal enterprises, he is still too young to have the tools necessary to suspend his typical child's credulity and admiration for the grownup who, by giving him an (evil) upbringing, teaches and transmits the (evil) mafia life.

#### 2.4 Third Portrait. The case of siblings D. and N.

Tuesday, October 22, 2013, a Calabrian online newspaper publishes the following article entitled "Tentate estorsioni della cosca [...] a [...]. Il minore col ruolo di vertice, la lista degli obiettivi e il ruolo dei commercianti taglieggiati" [the attempted extortions of [...] by the *cosca*. The juvenile in the top position, the list of objectives, and the role of the merchants paying protection money].<sup>64</sup>

They were stealing most of the economic resources used for maintaining members of the family, including those incarcerated, in order to acquire movable and immovable property and to launch commercial activities, taking over the economic activities of [...] by extorting money from small businesses and merchants. The *cosca* [...] of the Piana area was far from dead, and the forces of law and order knew this very well. So, they have kept an eye on the family's offspring and alleged new affiliates, and after many complex and multi-faceted investigations, coordinated by the District Anti-mafia Directive and the District Attorney at the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, the staff of the Mobile Command Unit of Reggio Calabria, directed by Gennaro Semeraro, and the Commissariat P.S. of [...], directed by the deputy chief of police Fabio Catalano, they made two provisional arrests on suspicion of crime against four members, one being a minor, all believed responsible for mafia association and

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<sup>63</sup> Tiziana Catalano, "Il diritto all'esistenza", cit., 2017, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> [www.strill.it/calabria/news/2013/10](http://www.strill.it/calabria/news/2013/10).

attempted extortion. The subjects are A.C. (class 1961), alias ‘P’; R.B. (class 1986); R.B. (class 1977); and [D.S.], juvenile. They are still actively pursuing a fifth subject, also a minor, who is currently unaccounted for.

The current operation should be considered as the natural continuation of the now famous operations Cosa Mia I, II and III which, from 2010 onwards, have dealt severe blows to the *cosca* [...] of [...], from top to bottom. Today’s operation was a success and a great source of happiness for former Chief Prosecutor Federico Cafiero De Raho, especially in the way he managed to catch the arrested subjects: “This is the start of a virtuous circle represented by the police reports made by those who have suffered extortion. The ‘Ndrangheta”, adds De Raho, “works in what I would call an almost mechanical manner in the area: extortions are still carried out extensively. What does emerge from the operation, however”, he then points out, “is that the *cosca* [...] deployed minors who bear the title of higher-ups in the organization. The minors deployed as soldiers today used to fill the role of unskilled labor, much lower, I would say, than what they are forced to take on today, precisely because the organization itself is in a weakened state.”

The chief prosecutor’s reflection, which echoes the words of Chief of Police Guido Longo: “extortion is the litmus test of the ‘Ndrangheta’s territorial reign. Thanks to operations in recent years, most of the leaders of the *cosca* are in prison, but their family members still try to continue the criminal activity.” This new element is represented by the declarations in which some of the area business owners and merchants (one working in the construction sector, the other in the field of trade and the third, also the victim of loan sharking, as a food product representative) have provided the crucial confirmations of what had emerged in the parallel investigations carried out against affiliates and members of the *cosca*.

The District Attorney at the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Carlo Macrì, in stressing full coordination on investigations and full agreement on the application of detention orders, focuses on the fact that beyond the attempts at extortion, the operation demonstrates that there is a certain determination on the part of the *cosca* regarding the community of that area to demonstrate their presence and to continue to exercise criminal authority despite arrests that have hit the family hard. Regarding the position of [D.S.], Macrì is categorical: “Do not think for a minute that we are talking about a juvenile in the lower rank and file; on the contrary, he presents himself as his own man, with a very specific role, he makes himself known and wants to assert his own authority.” Macrì also regrets that already in 2010, the District Attorney’s office tried to handle the child in question by asking for his removal from the family (both parents had been arrested) in order to begin a rehabilitation process: “But we weren’t able to begin the process due to the delays and constraints of the local

Social Services” which never followed through on the task. Suffice it to say, moreover, that a second ruling from last July is still outstanding as well. Chief of Police Longo emphasized this point as well, offering both praise and full support for “the virtuous path that aims at rehabilitating minors” undertaken by the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria: “When Prosecutor Macrì says that the judicial authority made its ruling but that it is unfortunately unable to do anything further, this demonstrates just how difficult is the path ahead of us. It is important to understand that we are all part of the State, that we have to work together.” The Police Chief’s statement is an invitation “to those who have not done their job to start doing so from today onwards, because what happened is truly scandalous.” The head of the mobile command, Gennaro Semeraro, also stresses the importance of collaboration on the part of the victims: “It has opened a door: reporting to the police is the only means”, he says “to effectively combat the parasitic activity of the pizzo.” This is to be understood not only as income obtained through extortion, but also as an imposition on business owners to provide much-needed labor for the *cosca*.

Deputy chief of police Catalano also emphasizes the delicacy and the difficulty of an investigation that has finally prevailed over the business owners’ trepidations (though they risked the same fate as their fellow merchants indicted for aiding and abetting). In doing so he also reveals an important detail: “We intercepted the extortion list that certain prisoners had written to their relatives. Through a laborious investigation we managed to get our hands on this sheet and therefore on the intended victims.” Nevertheless, it should be noted that the investigation discovered another minor at large, albeit with a minor role as compared to [D.S.]. On this Macrì is clear: “He was checked in an intimate manner because he was trying to hide the list of extortion victims, as well as a roll of money, inside of his underpants. I cannot say more at the moment.”

At the time of the occurrence D. (born in 1997), one of the two juvenile protagonists of the story, was sixteen years old. Son of the boss of [*omissis*], he was following the mafia upbringing he received from his family. As a result of the facts reported in the article, D. was investigated

for the crime in accordance with Art. 416 bis c.p., with the specific complaint of having been part of the nefarious association of the same name and, in particular, for having contributed to the management of the extortion activity performed in the interest of the [criminal] association<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Sentence of the Juvenile of Reggio Calabria, January 23, 2014, p. 9 (meeting in council: President Roberto Di Bella, Judge Francesca Di Landro, Honorary Judges Pierangela Salemi and Aldo Musmeci), p. 2. Note that in this essay ‘c.p.’ always stands for ‘codice penale’ (current penal code).

and, subsequently, sentenced to imprisonment in a juvenile facility for the crime of mafia association and for attempted extortion with multiple aggravating circumstances. The sentence issued by the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria on November 4, 2014, states:

D. is guilty as charged, which fulfills the prerequisite of continuity, and, with the lowering of the minor age equivalent to the aggravating circumstances sub b), excluding that referred to in Art. 112 Number 4 c.p., the court sentences him to the penalty of five years and two months of imprisonment and a fine of 1000 Euro, thus reduced due to summary judgment. [...] The court declares D. banned from all public offices for the duration of five years.

Thanks to a reduction of the penalty,<sup>66</sup> D. spent three years and five months in prison. He is now twenty years of age. He is free – but placed on probation for a minor offense (conspiracy to commit drug trafficking) made before his arrest<sup>67</sup> – and finally reunited with his mother and his sister. His mother served five years in prison, during which she asked the Juvenile Court of Reggio for help to escape and start a new life away from the criminal lifestyle of her husband’s family. Today, with the help of the Association Libera, all three of them live together, far from Calabria, in a secret location in the North of Italy.

During the period spent in the juvenile prison, D. was followed closely, for a year and a half with bi-monthly meetings, by an excellent and experienced psychologist who accompanied him along the difficult path of self-redefinition. And precisely to the situation of mafia children in these sorts of conditions a 2019 TV film is dedicated, sponsored by RAI (Italian Radio and Television).<sup>68</sup> Enrico

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<sup>66</sup> The process of appeal (the second level of judgment in the Italian system) reduced his penalty by one year, and he was granted a further reduction of some months for ‘good conduct.’

<sup>67</sup> The juvenile trial is adjudicated in the stage of the preliminary hearing that, among its various outcomes, can provide for the suspension of the trial with the consequent probation of the accused (art. 28 d.p.r. 22.9.1988 n. 448). The latter institute, which consists of a rehabilitative path under the control of the competent authorities, is applied in cases in which the Court considers that there exists the concrete possibility of a positive transformation of the accused’s personality (deduced from the acquired awareness of the disvalue of the deed committed, and by the accused’s own admission). The probation period has a duration not exceeding three years for offenses with a sentence of life imprisonment or imprisonment of not less than 12 years; in other cases, the period must not exceed one year. In certain cases the probation period may be partially or totally spent in a community facility. The probation may be revoked. In the case of a positive outcome, the offense is no longer punishable (<http://www.tribmin.reggiocalabria.giustizia.it/chisiamo/470/875/>).

<sup>68</sup> The film on the ‘Ndrangheta youngsters entitled *Liberi di scegliere (Free to choose)* was first broadcasted on Rai 1 channel on January 22, 2019 . The TV film, directed by Giacomo Campiotti and produced by Angelo Barbagallo’s Bibi Film and RAI Fiction, was shot in Apulia, Calabria, and Sicily. Characters are played by the famous Italian actor Alessandro Preziosi, along with Nicole Grimaudo, Federica De Cola, Carmine Bruschini and Francesco Colella. The plot is based on the stories produced by the protocol *Free to choose*, which has tried to breathe new life and



Interdonato<sup>69</sup> the psychologist also interviewed by the New York Times<sup>70</sup> who has followed both R.C. and D., told me that

the kid has changed a lot and has made great progress from a teenager full of anger and violence who would hit just for the sake of hitting and who went around all arrogant and threatening, protected by the name of his ' *ndrina* (the most powerful in the area), to extort money and threaten reprisals against merchants and shopkeepers in the name of his family, reduced to poverty by the Court's capital measures and penalties against his parents and other numerous relatives convicted as mafia members.<sup>71</sup>

Today D. wants to go back to school, get his diploma, and find a job, and he seems convinced that he wants to try his best to avoid slipping back into the underworld of his past. From this it can be hoped that his future holds a better fate for him than the seemingly unavoidable and inescapable one imposed by his family.

As for his sister N. (class 1998) who grew up in the same environment, she has from a young age been involved in the nefarious activity of her family, to the point of being stopped by the police while she was in the company of adult members of the *cosca* that bears her name. At the time of arrest, on December 9, 2011, she had on her person a considerable sum of money of illicit origin (extortion payments) and other documents of great legal importance (a calendar containing suspicious annotations) that, as she herself would admit in front of the police officer, she had quickly hidden inside her panties in order to prevent them being found.<sup>72</sup> In the years immediately following, the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, having meticulously assessed the situation of the girl – bearing in mind the context of organized crime affiliation, the arrest of both her parents and brother, the non-suitability of close relatives (*mafiosi* and in prison) to take care

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dignity into the children of the 'Ndrangheta. Trailer available on line: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQLRwW85GJA>.

<sup>69</sup> Enrico Interdonato, psychologist and founding partner of the anti-racketeering association *Committee Addiopizzo Messina-Onlus* (see footnote 37), is a person of great experience in the field of psycho-educational work with children from 'Ndrangheta families, having in the course of his training delved into correlations of the mafia psyche, i.e. the study of psychological variables that form the personality of *mafiosi* within criminal organizations. Interdonato, thanks to his professional knowledge and expertise in treatment/intervention with this specific group has achieved results that, albeit partial, have proved to be encouraging.

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/breaking-up-the-family-as-a-way-to-break-up-the-mob.htm> Feb 10, 2017 .

<sup>71</sup> Private Conversation, June 15, 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Sentence of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, November 4, 2014, p. 21, by President Di Bella.

of her – saw conditions that justified limiting the father and mother’s parental rights and entrusting N. to the Office of Juvenile Social Services

for the necessary assistance, psychological support and supervision, to be accomplished by Social Services and Social Healthcare Services in the region where the child will be placed.<sup>73</sup>

This solution appeared to be the only practicable means to avoid retaliation, to remove the girl from an inevitable fate, and to

allow the child to experience cultural, emotional, psychological contexts and an alternative lifestyle to that of her corrupt background, in the hope that she can free herself from the influence of her upbringing [...] This determination is in line with the principles for the protection of minors established by internal legislation and using the guidelines of the most important international conventions in this field, including the one in New York in 1989, wherein was emphasized the principle that the family must educate the child to live in civil society and raise this child with the principles of peace, tolerance, dignity and solidarity and, likewise, to preserve the child from the risks inherent in the transgression of these rules.<sup>74</sup>

N., unlike her brother D., showed no willingness to follow the path chosen for her by the family *cosca*. From the documents emerge her continuous state of anxiety due to the crushing control exercised by her family and, in particular, by her brother D. who “was very possessive of her, and would not let her go out unless she was accompanied by his friends.”<sup>75</sup> This portion of her declaration reveals the status of masculine prevarication and feminine submission which still comprises the homocentric reality of the ‘Ndrangheta. Crime, forced involvement in illicit activities, suffocating control, blind obedience, retaliation, lack of freedom, anxiety, fear: these are the family rosary beads which we see recited before our eyes when reading the decree regarding the young N.

Her doubts about her home environment and upbringing take shape in admissions made to the nun who was taking care of her during the time spent away from home and are reported in the minutes of the Court:

The willingness of the girl to leave and her very clear worries (“N. had just entered into our home when she told me that she wanted to leave Calabria; one day she expressed her fear of ending up in prison like her entire family”) were reiterated by Sister A.P. before the P.M.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Decree of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, January 23, 2014, cit., p. 7.

<sup>74</sup> Ivi, p. 5-6.

<sup>75</sup> Ivi, p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> Ivi, p. 4.

The young N.'s words support the course of action adopted by Di Bella who, in the last five years of implementation, has handled forty cases with twenty-five removals from the family, including, as in the case just saw, some relating to young girls. These numbers demonstrate a well-reasoned but painful choice:

There is no 'confiscation,' 'deportation,' 'ethnic cleansing' or punitive logic as we have been accused. We work within a solid regulatory framework and our objective is the protection of minors.<sup>77</sup>

The removed minor is temporarily entrusted to a facility or to family homes thanks to which

he or she returns to school, undergoes rehabilitation toward a life of legality with psychologists, educators and volunteers from associations such as Libera and Addiopizzo, expresses him or herself freely. When the minor approaches the legal age it is he or she who asks us for help never to have to return to Calabria.<sup>78</sup>

## 2.5 Family

To understand the reasons behind the accounts in the three previous portraits, more must be said about some of their underlying conditions. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, scholars of psychology,<sup>79</sup> anthropology,<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Roberto Di Bella, in a private conversation on April 26, 2016.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>79</sup> The concept of imitation constitutes the nucleus of Gabriel Tarde's (1843-1904) social psychology that considered this psychological phenomenon as fundamental in the creation of social relations. Tarde was the first to study scientifically the social phenomenon of imitation, analyzing its *laws* in his foundational work *Le leggi dell'imitazione* [The Laws of Imitation]. Imitation, according to Tarde, is an elementary social phenomenon, in that society is defined as "a group of people who have among them many similarities produced by means imitation." His is a veritable mimetic anthropology: "The social being, in being social, is essentially an imitator." Later Jean Piaget (1896-1980), in *The Child's Conception of the World* (English translation, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1932), focused on imitation by connecting it to the mental development of the child when, around the second year of age, on a sensory-motor level, where there already exists a primitive semiotics (symbolic play, drawing, language), the child moves on to that mental representative stage in which he or she masters imitation even without a model to imitate. This is the stage of "deferred imitation" which Piaget discusses in *Six psychological studies* (English translation, New York: Random House, 1967). This imitative behavior relates not only to the isolated individual but also to one who enters into a relationship with society through the imitation of shared gestures, sayings, and actions, as happens for example in a relationship of friendship. In psychology the concept of 'identification' is also fundamental, in that it represents the process by which an individual creates his or her own personality by assimilating one or more traits of another individual and modelling his or her own upon them.

<sup>80</sup> Anthropology has turned its attention to the phenomenon of imitation, which French anthropologist René Girard has developed and taken to be a fundamental instance of human action within his mimetic theory, stating that all human actions are determined by his or her desire to

psychoanalysis,<sup>81</sup> and psychiatry have shown, in the variety of their respective theoretical approaches and schools of thought, the important role that imitation plays in the development process of an individual.<sup>82</sup> In the developmental stage, nothing is more detrimental than bad role models offered to the child, all the more so if that child is deprived of the possibility for comparison and dialectic, leaving no room for other choices that do not coincide with those set forth by the parents. The children of the ‘Ndrangheta are the designated successors of the criminal tradition of their family from the moment of their conception, which is never “simply biological, but also cultural and psychic” (Lo Verso).<sup>83</sup> Recently

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emulate and imitate someone who appears happy (*mimetic desire*) because he or she hopes to acquire this same happiness. (R. Girard, *Mensonge Romantique et Vérité Romanesque*, Paris, Grasset, 1961; English translation English translation: *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966).

<sup>81</sup> Psychoanalysis considers imitation to be a phenomenon of identification for the most part with the child’s own parents, and it focuses on particular pathological aspects such as hysterical imitation originating from the phenomenon of suggestion which also generates, as Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) elucidates, the imitation of unintentional mass hysteria: “In the widest sense *involuntary imitation* belongs to the phenomena of suggestion [...]. In a crowd the single person loses his self-control not because he himself is enthused but because the crowd infect him. Thus passions spread and it is in such imitation that fashions and customs have their source. [...] We exercise judgments, affirm values and take up attitudes which we have simply taken over from others without intending or knowing that we have done so. It is not our judgment, evaluation or attitude yet we feel *it is ours*. This acceptance of others’ judgment as our own along with the semblance of its being our own all the same has been termed ‘suggested judgment.’ [...] But suggestions may also be *intended* and in that case the concept of suggestin grows more circumscribed and is of more superficial application. It then signifies only the intentional influence of people on each other (which in its intensified form becomes hypnosis).” K. Jaspers, English translation, *General Psychopathology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 377-78. On manipulation, see Mario Di Fiorino, *La persuasione socialmente accettata, il plagio e il lavaggio del cervello*, Forte dei Marmi, Psichiatria e Territorio vol. I, 1990. Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) in his famous work “The Structure of the Unconscious” [1916] (English translation in *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, ed. and trans. Gerhard Adler and R.F.C. Hull, Princeton (NJ), Princeton University Press, 1966, 7: pp. 269-304), wrote that society is organized not so much by laws as by the tendency toward imitation. He argues that copying, emulating, trying to live like those who appear successful, seem to be the viaticum for current human generations. A criminal who knows how to become a successful role model or who becomes wealthy by stealing or taking advantage of the naivety of others, or a person who knows how to profit from his talents for manipulation, becomes the example to follow in order to reach the highest goals in life.

<sup>82</sup> ‘Imitation’ (see *Enciclopedia Treccani*): “A dynamic process, typically infantile, on which depends much of the individual’s learning and development of the personality. This occurs through the adoption of models: the child reproduces the gestures, expressions, or attitudes of adults and parents in particular. In sociological psychology imitation indicates the process by which the elements of a person’s or a group’s culture are absorbed and duplicated in the person’s behavior or in some of its roles within a framework similar to or different from the one in which the original elements function. This concept was highlighted by G. Tarde (*Les lois de l’imitation*, 1890), who saw in it the fundamental principle of socialization. Every homogeneity of emotions, habits, actions, and thus every resulting form of social aggregation, is possible, according to Tarde, only in so far as the spirit of imitation is inherent in the individuals, leading each of them always to adapt to the example of others.”

<sup>83</sup> Lo Verso, cit., 1998, p. 27. On the history of ‘Ndrangheta, please refer to the abovementioned detailed book by Gratteri and Nicaso, *Fratelli di sangue* (2008); the essay of Mario Casaburi,

psychology, in particular the Italian method of group analysis of the subject, has redefined the relationship between psychic life and relationships with others. Lo Verso explains that:

the psychic life and identity are born as well from the fact that the parents “transmit” and actively offer themselves to the newborn child, and that these children develop by means of identification with the parents.<sup>84</sup>

The family into which one is born, as well, is always a psychological and relational field closely connected to the surrounding society. In this case, the ‘Ndrangheta family imposes itself and is perceived as sacred and inviolable,

regulated and devised by a cultural world which largely defines within it the criteria of good and evil, of fair and unfair.<sup>85</sup>

The great strength of the ‘Ndrangheta – today the most powerful mafia organization in the world with an annual revenue evaluated at around 44 billion Euro<sup>86</sup> – is that of availing itself of the connection between the biological family

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*Borghesia mafiosa. La 'ndrangheta dalle origini ai giorni nostri* (Roma, Dedalo, 2010), in which he analyzes the historical, economic, social, and cultural causes of the ‘Ndrangheta from its birth up to our time, focusing particularly on the origins and motives of its rapid dissemination at the national and international level; in Isaiah Sales, *Storia dell'Italia mafiosa. Perché le mafie hanno avuto successo* (Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2015), an important and rigorous study of history, politics and criminal psychology. On the psychological aspects see Emanuele Coppola, Serena Giunta, Girolamo Lo Verso (a cura di), “La ‘Ndrangheta tra la realtà detentiva e l’idealità organizzativa: una ricerca psicologico-clinica”, *Rivista di Psicologia Clinica*, 1, 2010, pp. 80-99. On historical-sociological aspects see Anna Sergi and Anita Lavorgna, *The Global Dimension of the Most Powerful Italian Mafia* (London, Palgrave, 2016), which shows that ‘Ndrangheta clans have an innovative way of existing and performing mafia work through a dense network of relationships both in the “upperworld” and in the “underworld” and explores why the ‘Ndrangheta is today viewed as “the most powerful Italian mafia.”

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>85</sup> Lo Verso, cit., p. 27. Documented here below is the definition taken from the *Relazione Semestrale del Ministro dell'interno al Parlamento sull'attività svolta e sui risultati conseguiti dalla Direzione Investigativa Antimafia (DIA)* [Semi-Annual Report of the Minister of the Interior to Parliament on the Activities Carried Out and the Results Achieved by the Anti-Mafia Investigative Directive], the first half of 2016, in paragraph 3, entitled *Calabrian Organized Crime*, p. 68, note 148: “The family, understood as nuclear and characterized by blood ties between its members, constitutes the basic social unit of the ‘Ndrangheta model which, strong in its familial solidarity, whether they be ascending, descending, lateral or acquired as a result of marriage, has demonstrated little vulnerability with regard to the phenomena of defection or judicial collaboration” (<http://direzioneeinvestigativaantimafia.interno.gov.it/semestrali/sem/2016/1sem2016.pdf>).

<sup>86</sup> The financial and economic power of the ‘Ndrangheta is enormous. It is a veritable empire that has solid foundations in Calabria and branches in all continents. An in-depth study on the wealth of the ‘ndrine in the EURISPES 2008 estimated that a revenue of 44 billion Euro per year, equal to 2.9% of national GDP, more than the entire economy of Estonia (13.2 billion Euro) and Slovenia (30.4 billion Euro) put together. More recently, according to a ranking of Italian companies produced by the research department of Mediobanca, “With its 52.6 billion yearly [...] the

and the social family. The overlap of the two has created that unique quality which is characteristic of the 'Ndrangheta and which is absent in those criminal organizations loosely called 'the Mafia,' but that are not in fact mafia:<sup>87</sup> in other words, the pervasive subculture, based on links that are intra-family and inter-family, popular and populist, widely shared. The context of this problem addressed by the Court and by the Juvenile Public Prosecutor of Reggio Calabria relates precisely to the deleterious effects of this mafia culture on children.

The 'Ndrangheta children pass through childhood – a fundamental period of the adult individual's development – in the midst of degradation, exposed to stress, to stimuli, to deviant family role models operating under the banner of illegality and mafia crime.

Maria Stefanelli gives an inside view of what it is like to be born and to live in this type of family and environment. An 'Ndrangheta daughter and the widow of Francesco "Ciccio" Marando, a powerful Calabrian boss and drug trafficker who ruled the region around Turin, she became a State's witness and the protagonist of an autobiographical book dedicated to her own daughter in which she reveals the harassment and abuse, both physical and psychological, which she suffered from childhood:

To grow up in an 'Ndrangheta family is also this: the torment of seeing images of death, violence, and madness as completely commonplace.<sup>88</sup>

These minors reach adolescence immersed in this environment (small villages or city neighborhoods with a high density of crime) where day after day they are

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'Ndrangheta would rank as the fourth highest Italian company for revenue. A colossus surpassed only by Eni, Fiat-Exor and Enel" (Gratteri and Nicaso, *Fiumi d'oro, Come la 'ndrangheta investe i soldi della cocaina nell'economia legale*, Milano, Mondadori, first edition October 2017, p. 27). This is a very controversial issue on which no agreement has yet been reached. On the 'Ndrangheta's enormous global business and on the means to combat it, we highly recommend the recent, well researched work by Gratteri and Nicaso, *Fiumi d'oro* mentioned above. On page 29 the two authors note that in 1997 the American Senator John Kerry, future Secretary of State and candidate in the 2004 presidential elections, underscores on page 21 of his book *The New War. The Web of crime that threatens America's Security* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1997) the importance of the Italian mafias, numbering among the "Big Five", together with the Russian Vory v Zakone, the Japanese Yakuza, the Chinese triads and the Columbian cartels. According to Kerry, "the global criminal axis" represents the third largest financial power after the United States and Europe. Moreover, on page 35, Gratteri and Nicaso note that in 2008 the US government placed the 'Ndrangheta on a "black list" of major organizations devoted to drug trafficking [...]. The list also includes Al Qaeda and the PKK, the Kurdistan Worker's Party."

<sup>87</sup> On the use and misuse of the term 'Mafia' (applied to criminal organizations of a different nature), see Salvatore Lupo, *Storia della mafia. Dalle origini ai giorni nostri* [1993], Roma, Donzelli, 2004, pp. 11-18.

<sup>88</sup> Maria Stefanelli and Manuela Mareso, *Loro mi cercano ancora*, Milano, Mondadori, 2014, p. 5.

bombarded with the elements of mafia culture which exert a strong pull on them, while still in a crucial stage of their identity development. The system draws them in by relieving them from the sedom and everyday tasks imposed by school and by social norms. They enter into an environment of immediate economic means, power, supremacy, leadership, bullying ... and not only among their peers. Just this summer, as we have already mentioned, came the news of the fifteen-year-old who sent a letter to the powerful boss of Locri, Antonio Pappuzzedda Cataldo – currently in prison – wanting to join the ‘Ndrangheta:

I, the undersigned [*omissis*], would like to make myself available to you and your family.<sup>89</sup>

There is no attestation more direct or genuine to describe the admiration which *cosca* boss Pappuzzedda still enjoys in Locri, as if his criminal record was an example to emulate. The local teenagers consider him an idol, inspiring them to achieve the same respect and power. This is a subculture that distorts the relationship with government institutions, viewing them prejudicially as enemies. It is this same subculture of oppression and violence that journalist Mancini, in February of 2014, expressed at the beginning of her investigation into the children of Calabrian mob:

They live in a state of permanent warfare in a world divided by a trench. Arrayed as soldiers: they are on one side, on the other is the Country. Educated in the name of honor, they have grown up learning only one “rule”: the mafia rule. Before everything else comes the family, which in their lands mean the ‘Ndrangheta. At the age of fourteen they are already made men: they are children of the mafia. On behalf of their fugitive or incarcerated parents, they collect bribes from merchants, they traffic drugs, they kill. It is part of the rules, they cannot say no, they are not allowed to turn back. Some, they say, have the faces of police officers tattooed on the soles of their feet, so while walking around they can trample on the State: a State they don’t even know.<sup>90</sup>

With this additional information, let us return to V., the baby-collaborator now eleven years old. In order to outline certain traits of his childhood we shall use the acts of the Court.

In the decree of September 29, 2015, we learn through numerous audio and video interceptions, executed by investigators inside the Volkswagen Golf TG of V.’s father, that

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<sup>89</sup> See footnote 35. See also <http://ildispaccio.it/primo-piano/149954-il-15enne-di-locri-che-scrive-al-boss-per-affiliarsi-alla-ndrangheta>

<sup>90</sup> Michela Mancini, *Dalle madri ai figli. Se la ‘ndrangheta perde i suoi soldati*, February 28, 2014, *Calabria*; <http://www.liberainformazione.org/2014/02/28>.

as the parent, on several occasions, he allowed the children to overhear conversations with some high-level members of the above-named mafia faction, even when they spoke openly about arranging the physical elimination of “rivals” belonging to other “ndrine” (see the interception in the acts of December 20, 2013, sequence 68-69, wherein G. makes the sign of slitting their throats in the presence of his daughter M., as well as of December 23, 2013, wherein the younger son V. offers to keep an object likely of unlawful possession for his father, in order to avoid the inspections of the Carabinieri,<sup>91</sup> an institution considered the enemy, thus manifesting adherence to his paternal educational model (according to which it is considered completely appropriate to possess an illegal gun, while inspection and reprimand by law enforcement is considered unfair). Moreover, from the interception of communications (audio and video) which took place on December 31, 2013[...] it emerges that G. handled firearms in the presence of the child V. who then, under paternal guidance and in the presence of other associates, uses a firearm himself to spray shots (V.: “I want to shoot some more ... Dad, can I try one more time?”), thus revealing an incongruous and alarming familiarity with weapons, considering his tender age (at the time just nine years old).<sup>92</sup>

The facts are clear. At the age of six a child (M.) sees her father make the sign of slitting his enemies’ throats, and not in jest. At the age of nine a child (V.) volunteers to fool the Carabinieri and, proud to be seen as a big boy, is encouraged by his father to shoot with a real weapon. Here we catch a glimpse into the makeup of a subculture in which these ‘Ndrangheta children are trapped from the earliest moments of their existence:

If you are born into an ‘Ndrangheta family, you have no dreams, only a destiny. If you are male, before you even learn to babble, you learn to punch. You cannot cry, you cannot run to your mother, you would be considered weak. You must stay firm. Tough. At less than ten years old you learn to shoot, when you come of age you are ready to kill. If you are female you must clean the house, give birth, take beatings, stay silent, immobile, deaf. Don’t try to understand, ever. Because the mafia is a business which is handed down. <sup>93</sup>

‘Ndrangheta children do not have autonomous ideals to realize, but rather an already marked road to follow, the outcome of which is almost always, statistically, an early violent death or hard time in prison.

This is the reason why Di Bella took action with his Court.

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<sup>91</sup> The child V.: “*then give it to me, they don’t, they won’t look at me...because I’m so small*”, Decree No. 32/15 R.G. Vol. Lega., 29.9.2015, p .2

<sup>92</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>93</sup> Andreana Illiano, *il-baby-pentito-che-scuote-la-ndrangheta*, October 6, 2015, <http://www.robertosaviano.com>.



The work of the judiciary has shown how biological mafia families guarantee themselves power over their territory thanks to generational continuity through the systematic indoctrination of their children, and that the phenomenon of 'Ndrangheta children, i.e. that of the transmission of a mafia culture from father to son, is "endemic, often hidden, and for too long it has been underestimated" (Di Bella).<sup>94</sup> To better explain this idea, we often draw a parallel between the 'Ndrangheta perpetually at war, both within its own ranks and against the world, for the conquest/confirmation of its own power, and an army that has a continuous need of soldiers: the sons of the 'ndranghetisti are these soldiers. If the soldiers were removed, the army would become weak and more easily combated.<sup>95</sup> A keen awareness of the transmissibility of 'Ndrangheta culture has motivated the Court of Reggio to act in order to save these children.

In the light of this information, let us return to the cases of the three previous portraits in order to examine the situations of these young protagonists and what the Court has actually done for them.

## 2.6 *The Young V.*

What brought V. to tell his story to the magistrates?

The story stems from his mother A.'s decision to try to give her three children a brighter future by removing them from the conditions set by their paternal mafia family. A. turned to the competent authorities in search of help, and thus became a State's witness under serious personal risk. In fact, for the 'Ndrangheta, whoever dissociates and speaks with State officials is a traitor, a rat who, according to their primitive mafia code, must be reduced to silence and eliminated without mercy.

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<sup>94</sup> Roberto Di Bella, speech to the Senate, cit., 2015, p. 1.

<sup>95</sup> Michela Mancini (2015, cit., p. 35): "In the last [25] years the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria has handled about 100 trials for mafia association and more than 50 trials for murders and attempted murder against minors,\* many of whom – now adults – are subjected to 41 bis or were killed in the course of feuds between the 'ndrine. These are significant numbers confirmed by different sources. For example, the magistrate Nicola Gratteri and the historian Enzo Cicone mention these statistics: 'From the data it has surfaced that 59% of 'Ndrangheta affiliates at the end of 2005 were less than 45 years of age, confirming the ease with which the 'ndrine are able to replenish their workforce. Enzo Cicone has examined 52 trial sentences given in Calabria from 1884 to 1915, noting that defendants aged between 14 and 30 years accounted for 71.58 % of the total.'" Nicola Gratteri and Antonio Nicaso recall that: "In the course of the second mafia war in Reggio Calabria, many minors were used as hit men, some of whom were killed" (*Fratelli di sangue*, cit., 2008, p. 36). \*For cases linked to its jurisdiction, concerning young people between the ages of 11 and 17, Di Bella specifies: "The sentences were around fifteen years; in many other cases there have been absolutions (witnesses were inaccurate or have retracted their statements), or the minors were acquitted of murder because they were under 14 years of age and therefore not held accountable" (private conversation with the author, October 28, 2016).

Nevertheless, this mother resolved to request the assistance of the State. And in response to the request made by the District Attorney's office, she was admitted to the special witness protection program.<sup>96</sup> The boldness with which the baby-collaborator speaks to the magistrates, according to his mother, is due to the fact that V.

seems more grown up than his age, because he was accustomed to doing things like an adult, to seeing weapons and drugs. Certainly if I had not made the decision to leave [...], I would have an 'ndraghetista son, either in prison or already killed by the age of fourteen.<sup>97</sup>

The mother's statements – all backed up by incontestable facts – are those of an adult who has made a radical choice in her life and in that of her three children, while the words of V. are those of a child who recounts, uncritically and with great admiration, the facts of his life with his dad.<sup>98</sup>

However, the life evoked by his words is not a life fit for a child. The key words from his statements to the Public Minister Giulia Pantano – who carried out the investigation and collected testimony first from the mother's outburst, then from the son's reconstructions – are: "guns", "drugs" and "illegal activities." V. speaks quite calmly of the domineering control exercised by his father, to the point that in the town where they lived, and which he controlled, nothing happened without his approval. The child already shows great familiarity with the mafia concepts of "family" and "honor." His testimony reveals that for him it is normal to do things in secret, to deceive law enforcement officers, to act with impudence and arrogance.

Here one observes a family dynamic in which the father/master reigns without scruples, the submissive and desperate mother tries to survive, and the children

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<sup>96</sup> With the decree n. 8 of 1991, a "reward" system for "collaborators with the State" on mafia crimes was introduced in the Italian legal system, similar to the disciplinary strategy previously adopted for terrorist offenses. In 2001, the measures in favor of "*pentiti*" were substantially extended to "State's witnesses" (see in particular Articles 13, 16B and 18C). The witnesses are identified as those who "with regard to the criminal offense(s) to which they are bearing testimony, assume solely the quality of an injured party or of a person informed of the facts, or of a witness" on condition that they are not the subject of preventive measures. For the differences between the legislation on collaborators with the State and on State's witnesses, see the A.C. 3500, proposed by Rosy Bindi, (current President of the Parliamentary Commission, which introduces in to the set of rules a special legislation fully dedicated to State's witnesses. For further information, see the website [www.Documents.Room.it](http://www.Documents.Room.it).

<sup>97</sup> Decree no. 32/15, R.G. Vol. Lega. of 29.09.2015, cit., p. 1.

<sup>98</sup> After the arrest of the father G., while trials were under way at the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria concerning himself and his three children, the mother A. stated: "Now I am trying to teach V. true values, which have been totally subverted for him, given his extreme attachment to his father, about whom he still asks me even today." Ivi, p. 4.

know more than most adults, but in a perverse and aberrant way. The mother's declarations to the magistrates confirm this dynamic:

Mrs. A., during the s.i.t. interview held on June 30, 2015, highlighted the depth of her husband's criminality, mentioning that "from childhood he was at the disposal of his mafia family [...] and called upon and used by members of the family to carry out crimes"; she remarked how "the family ... in addition to extortion and loan sharking and other crimes he dedicated himself to drug trafficking", affirming to have personally seen her husband "cut drugs on a low wall at home" and to have learned from her younger son V., which he in turn learned from the father, that "the criminal gang [...] imported drugs from Cuba and that the drugs also came in through Sardinia." She then reported, "I do not have any rights over my son V." (the eldest of the three) "primarily because he was too attached to his father and, secondly, because my husband G. took control and wanted to bring V. with him to show him weapons and drugs", and she has tried in vain to "get him back and teach him to behave well because the father's influence prevailed" over her own. Called back again on August 7, 2015, she reiterated how her husband liked "to cut corners and be a Mafioso" and "make easy money" without caring "about the fact that his children, especially the younger V., see and witness things meant for adults which are illegal", repeating to the young V.: "You need to learn to cut powder!!". And again on September 18, 2015, she declared how in one instance G. had hosted "three fugitives of the family [...]", putting the apartment at their disposal for the night, and having them dine with her children.<sup>99</sup>

A family in which the mother learns second hand: a) from her nine-year-old son that he knows all the details of his father's illegal activities, and (b) from the arrest warrant, which has resulted in her husband's imprisonment, that her son was handling weapons and preparing drugs.

A family in which a father considers it completely normal to teach his son to shoot and cut cocaine. A family in which three children share their home and meals with fugitives belonging to one of the most powerful and feared 'Ndrangheta *cosche* in the area. It is clear from the statements that the relationship between the husband and wife was neither idyllic nor respectful: the father G. was dominant and aggressive, and the mother A. submissive and resigned.

Until the moment in which A. – herself a daughter of this subculture that requires women to transmit its family values to the children, to be faithful guardians of its traditions, to practice *omertà*<sup>100</sup> – opposes her passive and submissive fate and,

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<sup>99</sup> Ivi, p. 2-3.

<sup>100</sup> "His mother A., in the past, claimed responsibility for crimes she had not committed in order to protect her husband. She was pregnant when, during a raid by the *Carabinieri*, she hid ammunition

faced with evidence of the progressive ruin of her children caused by their own father, she rebels. She leaves her home, faces the arduous path that has alienated her from the world she knows, and chooses the chance to build another life.

The mother is convinced she must rely on the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, presided over by Di Bella who, on Tuesday September 29, 2015, signed the sentences for the case relating to V. (born in 2004) and his two younger brothers (S. and M., born in 2006 and 2007, respectively). All three children belong to G., who today is in prison for the offense of Art. 416 bis as the second in command of [omissis], a powerful 'Ndrangheta family of the Piana di Gioia Tauro. Following the path of the law inaugurated in 2012, the decree signed by the judges of this small provincial court – with minimal staff in the middle of a zone with one of the highest densities of mafia and criminal activity in all of Europe – has established that<sup>101</sup>

the entirety of conditions summarized and the serious risks related to the choice of Mrs A. to be admitted into the witness protection program require, therefore, an acceptance of the request from P.M.M. to entrust the offspring in subject exclusively to the mother and declare, in an urgent and precautionary measure, the removal of G.'s parental rights, with the consequence that every decision concerning both the acts of ordinary and extraordinary administration in the interest of minors V., S. and M. – including the one to accept the measure of proposed protection and to enact the related requirements – should be taken exclusively by the same A., without the need to consult the other parent.

There is no doubt that this extraordinary decision cannot be shared by the two parents and moreover might expose the mother and the children to serious emotional pressures and, furthermore, to risks to their safety, both for the criminal affiliation of the spouse as well as for the not unlikely possibility of an uncontrolled reaction by the father G. on account of his dangerous personality.

For the sake of completeness, it would not be superfluous to emphasize that the ablative measure is also justified by reason of the above-mentioned behavior of G., which represents a blatant contempt for the basic rules of upbringing and caretaking of his children, and therefore substantiates serious violations of obligations related to his parental responsibilities, with an abuse of its powers and consequent harm to the psychological and physical health of his children.

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and drugs on her own person. The *Carabinieri* discovered them on her. They arrested her. She stayed silent.” (Andreana Illiano, cit., 6 October 2015).

<sup>101</sup> Decree no. 32/15, R.G. Vol. Lega. of 29.09.2015, cit., p. 4-5.

In other words, the systematic activity of indoctrinating his son into the mafia – which consisted in having exposed the young V. to the use of arms, having him assist with criminal activities and making him a participant in the criminal aims of the organization – has led *ictu oculi* to a severe impairment of the child’s psycho-physical health, so much so as to utilize the extremes of abusive conduct for the purposes of the present civil procedure (a circumstance that, under the profile of a possible criminal offense, should be assessed by the competent office of the Prosecutor).

Indeed, there is no doubt that the minor V. is to be considered a real victim of repeated mistreatment by the Father who, by involving the child in the illegal business of his criminal association in order to indoctrinate the child, showed absolutely no care for the irreparable damage to his delicate emotional needs as well as for the risks to his own safety.

In order to save the children, the law allowed the mother A. to leave Calabria and move to a protected location where she could rebuild her life and the lives of her three children, and it revoked the parental rights from the father G., imprisoned for 416 bis, who, due to harmful conduct aggravated by the repeated commission of criminal acts in which he also involved his own children, was deemed completely incapable of upholding their rights guaranteed by the Italian Constitution,<sup>102</sup> by the Convention on the Rights of the Child of New York,<sup>103</sup> and

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<sup>102</sup> The constitutional coverage is ensured by Art. 2: “The Republic recognizes and guarantees the inviolable rights of man, both as an individual and in social formations where he may develop his personality, and requires the fulfillment of the imperative duties of political, economic and social solidarity”; by Art. 30: “It is the duty and right of parents to support, instruct and raise their children”, but “in cases of inability on the part of the parents, the law provides for the fulfilment of their duties”; and again by Art. 31, second paragraph: “The Republic protects maternity, childhood, and youth by promoting the institutions necessary for such purposes”, according to which it is precisely the task of the State – and of its own institutional branches – to protect childhood and youth by promoting the institutions necessary for this purpose, and to intervene in order to protect the physical and social health of minors, through measures aimed at safeguarding real life opportunities that allow for an actual integration (or reintegration) into the social fabric by restoring collective shared values.

<sup>103</sup> As regards the international conventions, of absolute importance – among others – is the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, signed in New York in 1989 and ratified by Italy with the law n. 176 of 1991, in which it states: “In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration” (Art. 3, paragraph 1), which can result in separation from the parents “in a particular case such as one involving abuse or neglect of the child”, (Art. 9), whose “education of the child shall be directed to the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own; and the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin” (Art. 29).

by the European Convention on Human Rights (C.E.D.U.).<sup>104</sup> The Juvenile Court of Reggio officially revokes his parental rights, given that

in applying the above-mentioned national and supranational regulatory principles, one can affirm that the mafia model of childrearing – such as the one adopted by G. – violates the fundamental rights of the child (including that of receiving a responsible and empowering upbringing), it being the source of serious moral, psychological, and sometimes physical prejudices [to the detriment of the children].<sup>105</sup>

This is the reason why the international and national sources, while decreeing the child's right to grow and be brought up within their own family, also allow for a separation, albeit temporary, from one or both parents when it is necessary for the best interests of the child. Particularly in the case law of the C.E.D.U. concerning Art. 8,<sup>106</sup> it is consistently affirmed that the deprivation of parental rights represents a particular measure of vast import to be applied only in the case of exceptional circumstances justified by an overriding requirement that matches the best interests of the minor.

These considerations are necessary to understand the scope of the operation of Di Bella and his colleagues, in addition to the hostile reactions that this operation has aroused and continues to arouse, exposing the Court and the Juvenile Prosecutor of Reggio Calabria to constant threats and misleading criticism: they have been accused of deporting minors, of seizing children. In a speech to the Senate of the Republic in Rome on November 24, 2015, Di Bella – beginning from its assumption that “the first victims of the ‘Ndrangheta are their own children”, and revealing the fragility and the unspeakable suffering of these emotionally isolated children (often their grandparents, parents, and siblings are in jail, or fugitives, or have been killed in ambushes), which is part and parcel of being mafiosi – stated,

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<sup>104</sup> The *European Convention on Human Rights* (C.E.D.U.), was signed in Strasbourg on January 25, 1996, and ratified by Italy with Law n. 77 of March 20, 2003. According to this Convention: “Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence. There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right except such as is in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.”

<sup>105</sup> Ivi, p. 6.

<sup>106</sup> C.E.D.U., Article 8: “Right to respect for private and family life 1. Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence. 2. There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right except such as is in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.”

with all the force of his grace and intellect, that in spite of criticism and smear campaigns:

the measures adopted do not have a punitive logic and are not against “the family”, but are issued for the protection of children and, in any case, cease to be in effect on the eighteenth year of age or upon fulfilment of probation period in the penal process. In addition, they are allowed contact and to seek alliances with family members who decide to accept the path of rehabilitation or show signs of reformation, while with others – i.e. those who refuse to change – the appropriate relational modalities must be found. From the perspective of the legal framework, I wish to assure you that we are not playing fast and loose with the law, but rather we are moving within a solid regulatory, constitutional and internationally agreed upon framework.<sup>107</sup>

To clarify what Di Bella means when he says: “We are not playing fast and loose with the law”, we must first see what the Italian law states concerning the establishment called the Juvenile Court [Tribunale per i minorenni; T.M.]:

The T.M. shall exercise jurisdiction in criminal, civil and administrative matters in the spirit of realizing the best interests of the minor (see Art. 3, subparagraph 1, Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, ratified by Italy with Law 176 of 1991, which has ruled: “In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.”

And then we should look more closely at the details of its jurisdiction.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Roberto Di Bella, speech to the Senate, cit., 2015, p. 2.

<sup>108</sup> The powers of the Juvenile Court pertain to three categories: criminal, civil, and administrative. Criminal jurisdiction covers cases where a minor is at least fourteen years of age and is accused of having committed an offense. At this point the Public Prosecutor requests the initiation of a criminal trial which is quite different from that meant for adults. In fact, the court must decide not only if the child has committed the crime of which he/she is accused, but also if he/she had sufficient mental capabilities to understand that he/she was violating the law. The court must therefore get to know the personality of the child and his/her family environment, and for this reason there is a special social service agency linked to the Ministry of Justice. Among the general principles of the juvenile criminal procedure code is the following: “4. The obligation to assess the personality of the minor (the conditions and personal, family, and environmental resources) in order to ensure his/her social reintegration by means of services or persons who know the child or with the collaboration of experts, but in an informal manner. These services can also be used even if the accused has become an adult during the process of the trial, and they are included in the dossier of the preliminary hearing.” The civil sector relates to interventions in matters of parental rights over the child. Among the primary civil proceedings are those of control over the exercising of parental rights, Articles 330 and ff. c.c. and the regulation of biological parental rights, Art. 317/B c.c. Finally there is the administrative jurisdiction that relates to minors with problems of

In terms of criminal jurisdiction:

In criminal matters the T.M. has exclusive jurisdiction: it adjudicates all crimes committed by persons who, at the time of the deed, were aged between fourteen and eighteen years; a minor below the age of fourteen is considered by law not guilty due to diminished capacity to understand and act willfully (Art. 97 c.p.).

And within the framework of the juvenile criminal procedure code, among the general principles is the following:

4) it is the obligation of the public prosecutor and judge to acquire information about the conditions and personal, family, social and environmental resources of the child in order to ascertain the liability and the degree of responsibility, to assess the social relevance of the deed as well as to enact the appropriate criminal measures and implement possible civil procedures. Social relations can be used even if the defendant became an adult during the process of the trial (Art. 9 DPR n. 448/88).

In terms of civil jurisdiction:

Therefore T. M. oversees primarily interventions for the protection of minors in cases where the parents do not properly fulfill or fulfill in any way their duty to their children (Article 147 of the civil code establishes these duties as those of maintenance, upbringing and education).

The Court may place limits on the exercising of parental rights by issuing orders to the parents of the minor and activating the intervention of social services to support and oversee the quality of life of the child within their family (Art. 333 of the civil code). The Court can also remove the minor from the family home (Articles 330, 333 and 336 of the civil code) and entrust him/her temporarily to another family or agency or even to individual persons (Articles 2 and

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social maladjustment and with behavioral difficulties. For these minors the court can order measures of educational support. Very often this type of intervention can be carried out in accordance with the procedural rules of the civil jurisdiction. The methods falling in the administrative jurisdiction are governed by Articles 25 and 25/B R.D.L. 20.7.1934 n. 1404 and succ. mod. (See [www.servizilegali.org/doc/II%20Tribunale%20per%20i%20Minorenni.pdf](http://www.servizilegali.org/doc/II%20Tribunale%20per%20i%20Minorenni.pdf)). It should be noted that: “The civil proceedings of the juvenile court are initiated at the request of one or both of the parents, or at the request of the Public Prosecutor. Some cases (e.g. request of authorization for marriage) begin at the request of the minor him/herself. In the case of neglect or in matters of serious urgency the court can begin the process in the office and take interim measures. Normally, however, the general rule applies, according to which the judge should not proceed automatically but only at the request of the persons entitled to do so. The law does not include social services among these. Therefore, alerts from social services that are received by the Court are transmitted (except in cases of serious urgency) to the public ministry, so that it can assess whether or not to implement the corresponding procedure” (*ibidem*).



4 of law n. 184/83). In the most serious cases, it may declare parents to have forfeited their parental rights over their children (Art. 330 of the civil code), and when the child is in a situation of moral and material neglect, it may declare the status of adoptability and integrate the child definitively into another family, by arranging the cessation of the minor's relations with his/her family of origin (Articles 8 and following of Law n. 184/83).

In terms of administrative jurisdiction:

The T.M. also has an administrative jurisdiction which concerns educational interventions to aid adolescents in difficulty and with irregular behavior (Articles 25 and 25B of the R.D. 1404/34 and successive modifications).

In all spheres of its jurisdiction, an important characteristic of the T.M.'s activity is to avail itself of the collaboration of social assistance services and provincial healthcare services; intervention on behalf of the minor or for families is therefore not meant to be punitive, but rather a proactive measure to better the quality of life and family relationships through the activation of the services required in a given situation.<sup>109</sup>

In order to better illustrate all of these elements, particularly the last point, and to examine more carefully the various positive aspects of Di Bella's project, we must return to the case of R.C.

## 2.7 R.C.

His letter to the *Corriere della Sera* brings to light the positive outcomes of reintegrating minors into a more appropriate and stable environment, by entrusting them, if necessary (if even the mother and other relatives are unreliable or incapable of caring for them), to other families or Social Services until they have reached eighteen years of age. The intervention of the Court becomes necessary when the behavior of the parents or of the broader family environment affects the minor's development due to the aberrant model embraced by the mafia. As we already know, in fact, this model is founded on the principles of intimidation, of prevarication, and the practice of physical violence on others, including the sacrifice of one's most valuable asset – one's life.

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<sup>109</sup> See the official website of the Ministry of Justice, [www.tribmin.reggiocalabria.giustizia.it](http://www.tribmin.reggiocalabria.giustizia.it).

Let us see why the Juvenile Court of Reggio had to resort to the measure that led to the (temporary) separation of a child from his parent. First of all, there is a background of petty crime.

How did R. come under the radar of the Court?

Because at the age of sixteen years he was discovered, with other friends, near a damaged vehicle belonging to the local railway police. The trial for theft and damage concluded with an acquittal due to lack of evidence. However, the youth's life story, as it emerged during the investigation, was such that it caused the Juvenile District Attorney (Public Prosecutor Francesca Stilla) to request an urgent injunction, issued immediately by the Court, by which R. was relocated to a community facility outside of Calabria, in order to protect him and try to save him. Save and protect him from what?

We find the answer in the July 19, 2012 decree, which outlines the family situation of a boy who had dropped out of school (public and mandatory in Italy), who spent nights in the company of known criminals, who had no doubts about what he would become, following in the footsteps of his brothers and father.

This is the summary of his life: at a very young age he lost his father, who was killed in a mafia ambush. His brothers were imprisoned for murder and mafia association, one of them doing hard time (41 bis). The mother was completely unable to control her children's dangerous behavior. These were the reasons why R. (Class 1996, today twenty-one years of age) was "at serious risk of criminal behavior."<sup>110</sup> The fact that he belonged to a mafia family was well established beyond any reasonable doubt;<sup>111</sup> therefore, the Court decreed that "the conditions are sufficient for issuing – with urgency and *inaudita altera parte* – a measure limiting parental rights" and that "as a corollary to the above ruling, it is essential to entrust the child to Social Services" with

a mandate to relocate him immediately into a community facility suitable to his needs and to be located outside the region of Calabria (with the clarification that the facility must have staff members who are professionally qualified in dealing with problems similar to those noted in this youth and must provide at the same time a true cultural alternative); this solution appears to be the only practicable means of saving C. from an unavoidable fate (as also mentioned in the report by the Ministerial Community of Reggio Calabria dated March 9, 2012, **wherein it finds in the minor's attitude "a certain resignation to a**

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<sup>110</sup> The decree of the Juvenile Court in Reggio Calabria (President Roberto Di Bella, Judge Francesca di Landro, honorary judges Davide Maria Furforoso and Annunziata Rizzi), 19.7.2012, pp. 1-3, p. 1.

<sup>111</sup> *Ivi*, p. 1-2.

**predetermined life**”) and, at the same time, of allowing the child to experience alternative cultural contexts and a different life from that of his negative upbringing, in the hope that he can free himself from the parental models he has assimilated thus far.<sup>112</sup>

The decision of the Court initially petrifies the mother, who resists this outcome. However, once she understands that the measure is not punitive but directed to save her son and keep him from the same fate as his father or brothers, she agrees, in order to “avoid more drastic measures”, to follow the “provisions necessary for recovering her parental rights and taking the proper approach with her youngest son.”<sup>113</sup> As Mancini concludes, it is possible that the mother has acted

in the – unspoken – hope of avoiding what seemed even to her an inevitable fate and which she does not seem to have the resources to counteract.<sup>114</sup>

But an even more surprising fact and harbinger of hope:

paradoxically, even the older brothers of the child encourage the mother to follow this “new path” recommended by “a judge who for once shows some interest in them.”<sup>115</sup>

It is quite surprising that even the older brothers, already entrenched in their criminal fate, glimpsed and wished for this glimmer of hope for their younger brother. This glimmer had been denied to them, but it was obviously a possibility nonetheless. R. was welcomed into a small Sicilian community. After the initially overwhelming impact, he realized that someone, for the first time in his life, truly cared about his wellbeing. In order to help him, highly trained professionals such as psychologist Enrico Interdonato and social worker of the Ministry of Justice Maria Baronello, of the USSM (Office for Juvenile Social Services) of Messina, which works with the association Addiopizzo Messina alongside Don Ciotti’s Libera. Thanks to their support, R., who at the beginning of his new path tried to make himself invisible to others and to himself,

in the course of time has participated in the events organized by anti-mafia organizations in the region in which he resided.<sup>116</sup>

He also

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<sup>112</sup> Ivi, p. 2.

<sup>113</sup> Ivi, p. 3.

<sup>114</sup> Michela Mancini, *Dalle madri ai figli. Se la ‘ndrangheta perde i suoi soldati*, cit., 2014.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>116</sup> Michela Mancini, cit., 2015, p. 35.

began to volunteer in a facility that cares for underprivileged children, helping them to do their homework and playing with them. He has also returned to his studies. Periodically he went to visit his mother; their paths moved forward in parallel [...], their wish for change was no longer only a dream.<sup>117</sup>

Upon reaching eighteen years of age R. left the Sicilian community and was reunited with his mother, determined to continue on this new road. Today he is working abroad in the field of food services.

According to the statistical data which I consulted, currently almost none of the children subject to these measures, now living their lives as adults, has thus far committed offenses, except for two. One is R., who had a DASPO,<sup>118</sup> a disciplinary measure for sporting events (for spraying pepper spray during a game). This is an administrative rather than a criminal penalty, which should certainly be avoided, but is nevertheless quite different from those acts which his brothers had committed at the same age, they at twenty years old already imprisoned for mafia-related crimes. The other offender, a nineteen-year-old whose relapse is criminally more serious, was arrested on October 10, 2017 for the transport of fifteen kilos of marijuana.<sup>119</sup>

The case of R. exemplifies the aims and practices of the juvenile court of Reggio, thanks to the implementation of the protocol and project Free to choose: to help mafia children in disastrous family conditions find their own way (good or bad, as it is always a question of free will), by shielding them from the unquestioning absorption of mafia culture, from the negative validation of deviant cultural models, from the manipulation of family and adults in their home environment, and by offering a new path of respect for the values and laws of the State and of civil society.

The juvenile judiciary of Reggio has in fact initiated an action whose ultimate aim is to transform the child-soldiers of the ‘Ndrangheta into free citizens, capable of deciding their own future for themselves. The initial, albeit partial, results of the measures issued in the last five years are encouraging. Based on the various cases heard (as of today approximately forty, according to Di Bella’s estimate) – some

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>118</sup> DASPO is an acronym for ‘prohibited entry to sporting events’, the title of Law n. 401 of December 13, 1989, which aims to combat violence in sporting venues ([www.treccani.it/vocabolario](http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario)).

<sup>119</sup> <http://www.corrieredellacalabria.it/cronaca/item/62599-in-auto-con-15-chili-di-marijuana-a-cosoleto-3-arresti/62599-in-auto-con-15-chili-di-marijuana-a-cosoleto-3-arresti> (October 10, 2017).

of which have required, as in the case of R., the provisional removal from the family environment – they have already achieved significant results:

the minors have resumed attendance of school, which had been interrupted, have performed community service, and have followed the rehabilitative path to legality organized by juvenile social service workers, sometimes in collaboration with other magistrates of the district, with representatives of the police force and with volunteers (psychologists, educators, etc.) of associations engaged in combatting organized crime: in essence, the children have shown their potential which had been suppressed by their deleterious home environment.<sup>120</sup>

The action of the Reggio Court, following the agreement of July 1, 2017, will become national law. The legislative process toward this goal is now underway. At the end of October 2017 the CSM (High Council of the Judiciary), moving forward from the praxis of this initiative, requested that the legislature change the penal code by introducing the accessory penalty of forfeiture of parental rights for those convicted of mafia association, when this association involves their children.<sup>121</sup> The request is contained in a resolution developed by the sixth Commission and, on November 14, 2017, was discussed by the full committee of Palazzo dei Marescialli.<sup>122</sup> Among the recipients were the presidents of the Senate and the House, the Parliamentary Anti-mafia Commission and the Minister of Justice. Hoping to see Di Bella's legal tool quickly become law, the next step will be to propose it as a European Directive. Because if it is true that the 'Ndrangheta is one of the most successful global phenomena in existence – considering its (already mentioned) annual revenue – it is equally true that limited national anti-mafia laws are not enough to counteract it; what is urgently needed are international European and global measures of a broader scope.<sup>123</sup> It is in this

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<sup>120</sup> Roberto Di Bella, speech to the Senate, cit., 2015, p. 3

<sup>121</sup> The CSM, whose task it is to take an active part in the procedure by proposing explicit rules into the civil and criminal codes, fully supports the course of action of the Juvenile Courts of southern Italy which began in Reggio Calabria, "maintaining the 'mistreatment' of mafia families toward their children to be equal to those where a parent is a drug addict or who uses physical violence: removal of parental rights is a measure of *extrema ratio*, write the advisers, but it can be indispensable to "protect the child from injury which comes from the violation of his or her right to be brought up in respect of the constitutional principles and values of civil coexistence." The CSM calls for a reinforcement of the tools at the disposal of the juvenile courts and stresses the need for the measures affecting parental rights to be accompanied by requirements and rehabilitation projects that – at least in the first instance – involve the entire nuclear family" (see "Il Csm: una legge per revocare la patria potestà ai boss", [www.ilmessaggero.it](http://www.ilmessaggero.it), Thursday, October 26, 2017. See also Gigi Di Fiore, "'Clan, legge per revocare la patria potestà': il Csm chiede nuove norme", [www.ilmattino.it](http://www.ilmattino.it), Saturday, October 28, 2017).

<sup>122</sup> The official seat of the CSM in Rome.

<sup>123</sup> On this point see the countless appeals of Nicola Gratteri in many of his public interviews (on the news and talkshows).

perspective that we must understand the significance of the struggle between a modern-day David (Di Bella) and a global Goliath (the 'Ndrangheta).

If the case of R.C., despite the DASPO, shows us the benefits of the difficult process of temporary removal from a destructive family environment, the case of D. allows us to enter into the midst of the very difficult purgatorial phase that many mafia children must overcome in order to detach themselves from the mafia.

So many bitter realities within this discourse show that the law, *dura lex sed lex* as the Romans knew well, is not easily implemented and does not lead to certain, immediate happiness and wellbeing for those who it has helped to break free of terrible life conditions. The process of disentangling oneself from the mafia has many things in common with that of exile described by Edward Said:<sup>124</sup> separation from the places and people in one's life, separation from loved ones (no matter how bad or criminal), being uprooted from one's origins, from one's customs, from one's recognized, recognizable and never questioned way of living. The geographic transfer, the transplantation of the self into an unknown elsewhere, the nostalgia, the sense of loss, the feeling of being dispossessed by one's life and by one's self. Along with this, the name change, the loss of one's closest relatives from infancy. All of this, which takes place under the system of protection for minors at risk of mafia involvement, requires a huge amount of effort and flexibility. But if the knee-jerk reaction would be to say 'no' to the State which intervenes in place of the parents, this action causing revolt and, not infrequently, resentment and hatred (serious threats included) demonstrated against Di Bella's operation and that of his court,<sup>125</sup> on the other hand, common sense and a sense of justice reveal that these are cases of "desperate circumstances calling for desperate measures." And if the list of reasons for this exile cause pain, far worse are the family conditions to which these mafia children are condemned, through no fault of their own.

The case of the brothers D. and N. is emblematic in this regard. Let us take a closer look.

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<sup>124</sup> Edward Said, *Reflections on exile*, in *Reflections on exile And Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 137-149.

<sup>125</sup> During their work in Reggio Calabria, President Di Bella and the Court and Juvenile District Attorney's office, received written threats, toy guns deposited at night in front of the entrance gate of the Court by people disguised as military officers, and bullets left on the premises of the Social Services office. They had also been victims of a smear campaign in the press, in which they were accused of 'deporting' children from their families. On the other hand, marches had been organized in support of Di Bella and his court.

## 2.8 D. and N.

The case of D. is complex because it also involves his sister, N., and his mother: an entire family which had to start life over in a new location in search of a better future. And this case is important for the purposes of this book, due to the double misfortune characterizing it, which is clearly underscored in Macri's criticism (page 26) of Social Services' inefficiencies and failure to take preventive action to protect the child D.

The boy not only comes from a detrimental mafia family environment, but if Social Services had honored the request made by the Juvenile Prosecutor in 2010, which called for D.'s removal from his family (both parents had just been arrested for mafia crimes) in order to begin rehabilitation, he would not have been involved, at sixteen years old, in criminal activities well beyond his years, which led him to spend three and a half years of his young life in a juvenile prison. In 2010 Di Bella had not yet arrived at the Juvenile Court of Reggio, and after his arrival in 2012 he completely changed the rules of the game. This included, as we have seen, the cases of D. and N., both involved – to a varying degree – in the illegal activities of their family *cosca*: the case of D. resulted in a conviction according to Art. 416 bis, while N. was entrusted to foster care for a period of time.

The family situation, which is evident from the respective files of these two siblings, is depressing. Their father is a boss of one of most powerful *cosche* of Piana di Reggio Calabria, as noted in an article from the online newspaper New Cosenza in March 2008:<sup>126</sup>

Back home for the Easter holiday, the fugitive R.S., wanted since 2002, was arrested

He returned home to spend Easter with his family, but was caught and arrested by officers of Reggio Calabria's mobile command unit. R.S.'s years in hiding are over: a man whom investigators consider a key figure in the *cosca* [omissis] and wanted since 2002. The man was convicted for mafia crimes and must serve the remainder of his sentence.

And here the article lays out the extent of family dysfunction into which D. and N. were born:

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<sup>126</sup> [www.nuovacosenza.com/cs/08/marzo/html](http://www.nuovacosenza.com/cs/08/marzo/html).

R.S., 43 years of age, a fugitive for the past five years and wanted to serve the remainder of his eighteen-month sentence, was found in a bunker within a woodshed on the ground floor of the [...] house where his family resides. Inside the bunker State Police agents of the Commissariat of [omissis], directed by C.P. and coordinated by Deputy Chief Renato Panvino, confiscated a pair of night vision goggles, a scanner, listening device detectors, closed-circuit television cameras and two multipurpose knives. “The capture of R.S.”, said Reggio’s commissioner Santi Gioffrè in a meeting with journalists, “came after an intense investigation that led to his identification, removing any possibility for him to flee.” R.S. is the brother of the better known D.S. and G.S., both condemned to life imprisonment, and of C.S., out on parole from Fossombrone prison for several years and under special surveillance, the latter present at the time of the police raid on the house. All are sons of A.S., who died of natural causes and who, in the 1980s, had instigated a bloody feud for control of the criminal [omissis] against the opposing families of [omissis]. D.S. and G.S. were sentenced to life imprisonment for the triple murder of A., V., and L. [omissis], which occurred in the mid-80s on a farm in the Ponte Vecchio area of [omissis]. Furthermore, the S. brothers were accused of the attempted murder of three police officers, G.A., G.V., and A.I. During the press conference, investigators also mentioned some incidences of extortion that the S. brothers had used against contractors, and other crimes in connection with the family B. [omissis]. Two warrants were issued by the DDA [District Anti-Mafia Directive] of Reggio Calabria against C. and T., the brother and sister of R., a fugitive since 2002 and arrested by the police in a bunker constructed in the family’s home [omissis]. The family members of the fugitive are accused of willful non-compliance with the law. The arrest of R.S., wanted to serve the remainder of his sentence, was preceded by an ‘intense investigation’ by the coordinator of the District Antimafia Directive, Salvatore Boemi, and the Deputy Prosecutor Roberto Placido Di Palma, who oversees investigations of the crime families of the Piana di Gioia Tauro area. The State Police, according to rumors, would be examining some documents of particular investigative value found in the house of S. Also involved in the inquest was Assistant District Attorney Joseph Lombardo.

Father, grandparents, uncles, aunts, relatives, friends and acquaintances, all participate in crimes of every type: disregard for the law, illegal activities, extortion, feuds, attempted murders, murders. And, as a consequence: prosecutions, fugitive status, trials, sentences, imprisonment, life without parole. At that time the mother of D. and N. was in prison as well. Here we find the particular situation of the girl,



deprived of both parents' support, both imprisoned for serious mafia crimes, [and whose] situation has worsened as a result of her brother D.'s preventive custody in prison.<sup>127</sup>

The precautionary measure was for the crime committed by D. (see p. 26-27), for which

the girl N. was also investigated, albeit for a marginal role, against whom the investigative results [...] showed a constant and harmful influence caused by the family.<sup>128</sup>

The “influence caused by the family” is not a vague assertion of the Reggio judiciary. The judgment of April 11, 2014, relative to the case of D., comprises a 59-page file, densely written in single space type, which details a ten-year sequela of blood and horror: the history of the *cosca* to which D. owes his name, with all the sentences and decrees involving many relatives, friends and affiliates in a well-oiled mafia machine founded on abuse of power, power, violence, threats, extortion, feuds, murders. The war between D.'s *cosca* and the enemy *cosche* for dominance over the same territory with all its trafficking and movements, has caused more than fifty deaths in the past ten years. The murderous cycle is repeated over and over: alleged offense (for example: opening a bar in disputed territory), assault and physical elimination of a member of the rival family, and then murderous revenge by the other side, and so forth. Counteractions by the State – which in recent years has implemented four operations (Cosa Mia I, II, III, and Orso) against the ‘Ndrangheta in this region – have upset the *cosca*'s structure and imprisoned many of D.'s family members while confiscating the family's property. This includes: the family home (a true landmark for the whole area and undisputed symbol of the family's power), property and real estate in Calabria and in other regions of Italy, companies, and holdings, amounting to several million euros.

This stage populated by mafia criminals, thieves, and murderers with the faces of their grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts, family friends and acquaintances, all members of the ‘Ndrangheta, is the one that gave birth to D. and N. From the police reports based on interceptions and cross-references, it appears that, among many other illegal activities carried out by the *cosca*, even the family home was a product of theft, deception, threats and extortion against the previous owners and official landlords.<sup>129</sup> How could these two children have lived in a house inhabited by such a family? What could they have seen, heard, and experienced from their

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<sup>127</sup> The decree of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, 23.1.2014, cit., p. 2.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>129</sup> [www.pianainforma.it/cronaca/palmi-sequestrato-palazzo](http://www.pianainforma.it/cronaca/palmi-sequestrato-palazzo).

earliest years? What values could these parents, relatives, friends and acquaintances have taught them? As adolescents, both the brother and his younger sister took part in the illegal activities of the adults. One day, while other families were celebrating the Easter holidays, they witnessed law enforcement enter their house and capture their fugitive father, hidden in a bunker in their house and who, at the time of writing, must serve another twelve years of 41 bis in a maximum security prison – while their relatives (including two brothers) were sentenced to life for murder and incarcerated in other maximum security prisons – , and they saw the capture of their mother, sentenced to five years for false registration of assets with the aggravating circumstance of mafia membership (now free after serving her sentence).

After the arrest of their parents – while the sister, in their absence, is shamefully exploited and used by the adults, legally inculpable due to her young age – it is the sixteen-year-old D., now undertaking the role of temporary breadwinner to replace his imprisoned father, who must go around beating, threatening, extorting in the name of his family, accompanied by a henchman able to drive the car, given that as a minor he could not do so without attracting suspicion.

But who had ever taught D. to oppose the dictates of his family and to choose another path? Who had ever offered him the possibility of growing up without becoming a mafioso? To go to school, get a diploma and learn a trade other than bullying, terrorizing his sister and enemies, beating, threatening, and extorting?

It might sound overly deterministic, but his fate, like that of many other mafia children, was decided from the moment of conception.

The same applies to his sister N.'s coerced involvement in terms of gender differences due to mafia culture. Small and female, powerless to counteract her family's orders and lifestyle, found to be in possession of a large sum of extortion payments, at sixteen years she confessed candidly (and implicitly) the family's business:

I dissociate myself from this extortion activity. I try to stay away from these things because it does not interest me. I am no stranger to the activities of my family.<sup>130</sup>

She therefore demonstrates knowledge of the 'Ndrangheta's rationale and eventually tells the person in charge of overseeing the foster home in which had been placed: "I shouldn't have talked, they'll make me pay."<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> The decree of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, January 23, 2014, pp. 1-9, p. 3.

<sup>131</sup> Ivi, p. 4.

From this we understand that she feared retaliation, which is the norm in her situation. At the same time, the child, with two parents and a brother in prison, has also admitted: “Mamma always said to tell the truth during an interrogation.”<sup>132</sup> This statement was used as evidence in favor of the mother who, in fact, during her five-year sentence, agreed to rehabilitation in order to regain parental rights to her two children at the end of the sentence.

While their father, still loved by both children, is now doing hard time in prison and making efforts to reach out to his children and wife despite their separation, the mother and the two children have been reunited, in another city, in another part of Italy. The association Libera is taking care of them. While in prison, the mother understood that she needed to change and found her way back to her children. The father, an ex-boss reduced to powerlessness, has shown his acceptance of the family’s rehabilitation and social reintegration, promoted and protected by the State, the judiciary, Social Services, and volunteer anti-mafia associations, without which all this would not be feasible.

The case of D. and N. (with noted differences) reveals the steps of a difficult journey: their childhood and adolescence lived not as they should be, violence and oppression as their daily bread, omertà, contempt for the State, the suffering and pain of their victims, their own suffering and pain and that of their loved ones, trials, sentences, convictions, prison, relocations, family homes, probation, a sense of abandonment, of being lost, of constant distance from their family, nostalgia, hopelessness.

It is not easy to be born, to become, to be the son of a mafia boss.

From the childhood of V. and his two siblings, whose protection and relocation the mother requested from the State; to R.’s reaching adulthood far from home, thanks to Social Services and anti-mafia associations, and finally returning to his own rehabilitated mom; to the troubled adolescence of D. and his sister N., ending with their reunification with their rehabilitated mother and relocation to a new area. We followed these three important cases to exemplify the subject matter dealt with in this book, but the minors we called V., R., D. and N. are not isolated cases.

The voluminous files on dozens of juvenile cases, which the Court of Reggio handles daily, record the testimonies of many other, similar voices united in a choral crescendo of oppression and a search for justice. The work of the juvenile judiciary is necessary to help these mafia children find an alternative for the future. It represents escape from an inevitable fate imposed on and absorbed by

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<sup>132</sup> Ivi, p. 7.

them even before they are able to understand and voice their own desires; a fate that, if measures are not taken in time, will ruin them for life.

