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Ex Malo Bonum: Ambiguity in Stories of Organized Crime

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ABSTRACT

Research on crime tends to emphasize clear-cut stories, either in support of or rejecting crime. Stories, however, are often ambiguous, mainly when they concern complex and multi-faceted phenomena. Based on qualitative interviews with Italian students, we explore how organized crime is viewed and evaluated by non-offenders. We found six widespread stories that highlight the moral ambiguity of organized crime, including such ambiguities as: people are good and evil; family relations take priority; crime involves ample opportunities and big money; organized crime is complex and involves "smart" organizations and that there are gray zones between business and crime and the endemicity of organized crime. Finally, we show the bounds of this moral ambiguity by pointing out what participants could not accept from organized crime organizations. The study was done within a framework of narrative criminology. We put a particular emphasis on how crime is socially constructed by those not involved, how worldviews of criminal organizations are embedded in more widespread values and the importance of ambiguity in storytelling.

Introduction

Organized crime is one of the most significant social problems in the world, in some places taking over and controlling entire societies (Dean, Fahsing, and Gottschalk 2010). It is also one of the most common themes in popular culture, movies, T.V. shows, and even parts of the music industry. Organized crime is steeped in ambiguity on a societal level. On the one hand, it triggers disgust, fierce opposition, and represents the moral "other" that most communities define themselves as being opposed to. On the other hand, it is associated with fascination, shared moral references and in some places is essential for the local labor market and regarded in the same way as any other kind of work. This ambiguity can also be found in individual stories and perceptions of organized crime.

Ambiguity is often forgotten in research, which tends to present clear results and a coherent story. As Butler (1994: 40) claims, the "totality and the presumption of binary structural oppositions" that exist in both society and scholarly work can "quell the insistent ambiguity and openness of linguistic and cultural signification." In criminology, for example, many studies describe crime in mechanical and "cold" ways and describe criminal actions as rational choices (see Cornish and Clarke 2014). This is often challenged by more phenomenological or cultural approaches emphasizing the societal and communal context of crime-doing. Such approaches still rely on cultural univocity and predictability, for example, describing how crime follows particular codes or cultures (e.g., Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003; Kurtenbach et al. 2021; Stewart and Simons 2006). Even when describing how codes coexist and can be switched between (Anderson 1999), these are usually seen as coherent cultural constructions. Only a few studies in

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criminology describe and discuss *ambiguity* in stories about crime (e.g., Brookman 2015; Jimerson and Oware 2006; Poppi and Verde 2019; Sandberg 2009; Sandberg, Tutenges, and Copes 2015). Such studies are usually from the perspective of offenders.

In this paper, we study how non-offending Italian students view crime, more specifically organized criminal organizations such as the Camorra and 'Ndrangheta. We do this within a framework of narrative criminology (Fleetwood et al. 2019), expanding this research approach to include the stories of organized crime among "ordinary" people. There are two critical factors regarding criminological literature. Firstly, organized crime is rarely studied, and secondly, there is little knowledge of how it is perceived in the societies where it operates. Moreover, while the ambiguity of stories is well documented in other social scientific disciplines (Frank 2010; Polletta 2006), the ambiguity of societal perceptions of crime is seldom explored in criminology.

Narrative criminology and ambiguity

Presser (2009) coined and outlined *narrative criminology* by emphasizing how narratives drive crime and other harmful actions. Integral to this perspective is that every crime is essentially a story (e.g., Dollinger and Heppchen 2019). Narrative criminology has mainly emphasized the stories of offenders (Presser and Sandberg 2015; Fleetwood et al. 2019; Sandberg and Ugelvik 2016), but increasingly victims (see Cook and Walklate 2019; Hourigan 2019), and those employed in the criminal justice system have also been studied (see Dollinger and Heppchen 2019; Keeton 2015; Kurtz and Colburn 2019; Offit 2019; Petintseva 2019; Saarikkomäki 2016; Ugelvik 2016). There have also been more frequent attempts to examine the more general societal understanding of crime (Poppi and Ardila 2021; Presser 2018; Sandberg and Fondevila 2020; Tognato 2015) and "ordinary" people's views of crime (Presser 2013; Sandberg and Andersen 2019; Sandberg and Colvin 2020; Sandberg, Copes, and Pedersen 2019). Narrative criminology is rooted in a social constructivist tradition that addresses how particular discourses construct crime (see Henry and Milovanovic 1996). It is often emphasized that these constructions should be studied in a wide variety of contexts (Maruna and Liem 2020).

Narratives, or stories, are discourse-semantic units that serve cognitive, representational, communicative, and social functions (Bakhtin 1986; Wertsch 1998). Narratives are real or imaginary time-ordered sequences of events (Frank 2012), creating and shaping people's social and cultural realities (see Jäger 2001; Tamboukou 2008). When Presser (2018) describes the main structural features of narratives, besides temporality, they include causality, action, conflict, transformation, meaning, situatedness, and unsaid things. Just as narratives serve to integrate and reconstruct "past, perceived present and anticipated futures in terms of beginnings, middles, and endings" (McAdams 1996: 298), stories about crime relate both to the past and possible future scenarios (Shuman 1986). In this regard, Henry and Milovanovic (1996: 170) anticipated narrative criminology by stating that crime and violence are "not so much caused as discursively constructed." Another critical aspect of narratives is the presence of characters (Propp 1968), usually filled with dualistic good and bad impacts (Moxnes 1999). Stories are, however, also associated with ambiguity and plurivocality (Frank 2010; Polletta 2006).

The notion of ambiguity draws upon Derrida's (1978) post-structuralism, and Bakhtin's (1984: 1986) intertextuality and heteroglossia and is crucial for what Frank (2010) describes as dialogical narrative analysis. According to these authors, storytelling constitutes a dialogical process in which multiple voices and the negotiation of viewpoints produce ambiguity. Likewise, complexity, local social contexts, and possible interpretations are also aspects that can catalyze ambiguity, and narratives are a discursive resource where ambiguity is tolerated and even valued (Polletta 2006). In criminological research, there are a few studies emphasizing ambiguity. One exception is Poppi and Verde (2019), who analyze the stories told by an Italian man who killed his former lover. In the descriptions of his motive, he switches between claiming to be forced by the victim and being driven by instinct, and from loving the woman to hating her. He moves between seeing the murder as a punishment for the woman and as a way to punish himself and considers himself both perpetrator and victim at the

same time. Sandberg (2010) describes how another violent offender shifts between blaming drugs, justifying his crime and then regretting the violence he committed. Similarly, Sandberg, Tutenges, and Copes (2015) identify four widespread stories of violence among drug dealers (business narratives, intimidation narratives, moral narratives, and survivor narratives) and argue that the content and frequent shifts between these indicate narrative ambiguity. Brookman et al. (2020) also show how homicide investigators deal with ambiguity through narrative creativity.

Vetlesen (2005: 172) suggests that narrative analysis is particularly suited for more organized forms of crime and harm-doing. These are often motivated and assisted by ideological means, and the victims are identified by "ideological means, concentrating on what they have done or are about to do against us." Such organized forms of harm-doing include war (Smith 2005), genocide (Presser 2013), and terrorism (Copeland 2019), but also organized crime (Dean, Fahsing, and Gottschalk 2010). Poppi, Travaglino, and Piazza (2018) and Poppi and Ardila (2021) analyze the narratives of criminal associations, one of the most structured expressions of crime and harm-doing, claiming that organized crime is also defined by several ideologies that describe and justify criminal actions and attitudes to values and beliefs that regulate criminal organizations' functioning.

In our study, the concept of moral ambiguity is particularly important. Moral ambiguity is an umbrella term that describes a state of perplexity where there is no "immediate or automatic consensus among all of the parties involved about the morally appropriate course of action" (Fiester 2007: 355). The term has mainly been used in relation to white-collar crime (Green 2004). In general terms, something can be considered as morally ambiguous "[i]f people find it hard to recognize what kinds of harms a particular offense causes, or who suffers them, [and] they are likely to be less certain that such conduct is wrong and should be subject to sanctions" (Green 2004: 510). In the case of organized crime, where the use of force, threats, monopoly control, and/or the corruption of public officials are defining features (Albanese 2005: 10), there might, however, be other reasons for ambiguity. There are many similarities between moral ambiguity and the narrative genre that Smith (2005: 24) describes as *low mimesis*. Low mimesis stories have multifaceted characters and situations, assume that people have complex motivations, avoid polarization and emphasize that settling the conflict is difficult. Moral ambiguity and low mimesis stories can sometimes be regarded as a form of self-deception, "the practice of concealing immoral acts and character faults from the public domain while flaunting an exterior disposition of sincerity and truthfulness" (Slater 2013: 7). The ambiguity can also be unintentional or determined by complex social forces and intersecting expectations (see Hitlin 2008).

Organized crime and popular culture

Organized crime can be defined as "a continuing criminal enterprise that rationally works to profit from illicit activities that are often in great public demand. Its continuing existence is maintained through the use of force, threats, monopoly control, and/or the corruption of public officials" (Albanese 2005: 10). Organizations such as the Camorra and 'Ndrangheta, for example, are complex and well-organized (Sciarrone 2014) and based on norms, ideas, and organizational dynamics such as group solidarity (Ross 2000) and in-group loyalty (Bjerregaard 2002). Organized crime is a sociocultural phenomenon that affects society and people (e.g., Kostakos 2018). Some studies have shown how organized crime engages in criminal recruitment and extortion by manipulating identities and societal perceptions (Bovenkerk, Siegel, and Zaitch 2003; Paoli 2008), while others have illustrated the role that culture and social status play in enabling organized crime to infiltrate the economy and institutions (Allum 2006; Kleemans and Bunt 2008; Schneider and Schneider 2003). These studies show how societal perceptions of organized crime affect behaviors, attitudes, and values (Ferguson and Bargh 2004) and diffuse the acceptance of these organizations (Vaccaro and Palazzo 2015).

Separating mythologies from more solid forms of knowledge is one of the main challenges when studying organized crime (Rawlinson 2016). However, the mythologies are also interesting in their own right. Organized crime is surrounded by mythologies, and their main source is popular culture, in particular movies and T.V. series (Larke 2003; Rawlinson 1998). In the Western context, these

mythologies typically reflect *romanticization*, focusing on family loyalties and traditions; *simplification*, where there is a dichotomy between good (i.e. institutions) and evil (i.e. ordinary society), and an emphasis on individual psychology and personal motivations, abstracted from the social and political environment; and finally, *exaggeration* through the representations of archetypes of evil and brutality (Finckenauer and Waring 2001; see also Nicaso and Danesi 2013).

One of the main functions of organized crime mythologies, just as it is for other mythologies, is defining boundaries between the ordinary and the non-ordinary (Barthes 1972/2012). When organized crime is romanticized, simplified, or exaggerated, all of which can be done at the same, it is "always defined as different or separate from ordinary society through its exclusivity, secrecy and ethnic heritage" (Larke 2003: 129). For instance, organized crime members can be portrayed as ruthless, callous, and remorseless and organized syndicates as a group of violent individuals (see Nicaso and Danesi 2013). At the same time, audiences often feel sympathy for or are fascinated by the main characters in TV shows such as *Sopranos, Peaky Blinders*, or *Narcos Mexico*. The leading characters often have very complex and compound personalities adding to the ambiguity audiences feel toward them.

This ambiguity can also be found in empirical research on the personality traits of organized crime members. Schimmenti, Caprì, and Daniele (2014: 321) indicate that Italians affiliated with criminal organizations maintain "a capacity for emotional connection," and in case of conviction and imprisonment, a "greater likelihood of engaging with training and re-socialization programs than other imprisoned offenders." Some research on organized crime support also largely sees this as an expression of a social and economic organization rather than a criminal phenomenon (Arlacchi and Ryle 1986; Rawlinson 2009; Schneider and Schneider 2011). Such studies indicate a complex relationship between organized crime mythologies and the reality of these organizations. Some of the ambiguity from popular culture resonates with the research, and organized crime organizations often mimic popular culture in complex interplays between fact and fiction (Kuldova 2019).

Studying the ambiguity of stories of organized crime, therefore, includes both the ambiguity of institutional knowledge of organized crime (e.g. political and law-enforcement agendas), the ambiguity of popular culture mythologies of organized crime, and the relationship between the two (Larke 2003). Ambiguity is certainly a challenge in all kinds of research, but in this contribution, we argue that the theoretical and conceptual approach of narrative criminology is a resource for understanding societal perception because it imbues ambiguities with a positive, constructive value (Frank 2010; Polletta 2006). We further argue that the ambiguity that comes to the fore in this study can be traced back to both popular culture and "real life" ambiguity, especially given the context of the study in an area where organized crime is widespread.

Our paper expands on an emerging field of narrative criminology and links it with studies of organized crime by addressing three main issues, in particular (i) how crime is socially constructed among non-offenders, (ii) how the worldview and values of criminal organizations are interwoven with more widespread ones, and – considering the above-discussed consideration – (iii) the role and the importance of narrative ambiguity in stories of organized crime.

Methods

The data in this study are from individual interviews with 18 high school and university students and four focus group interviews with three high school and university students in each. The participants, 22 men and 8 women, aged between 18 and 21 years old (average 19,6), were from Foggia in Apulia, a region in Southern Italy affected by organized crime (Bonini and Foschini 2019; Poppi and Travaglino 2019; Scionti 2018). The participants were informally approached via a social network platform (Facebook), through the authors' personal connections, and their friends. The first author conducted a series of semi-structured interviews between July 2019 and September 2019. Although there was no rigid structure that limited the conversations, all the students were asked a set of similar questions in each interview. In general terms, the questions to the participants addressed issues related

to organized crime and the implications that it could have on personal, social, economic, and cultural levels. However they also served to enter into discussions about a wide range of topics related to organized crime. For the analysis, the individual interviews were conducted in writing or orally and took place via Skype or Telegram, an instant messaging application. Conversely, the focus group interviews took place through a combination of written and multi-video chats via Skype or Microsoft Teams. In recent years, the use of software providing video chat and voice calls has become an integrated part of ethnographic research. Various platforms allow researchers to create a free space where the exchange of sensitive and confidential information is facilitated by the medium's inherent nature (Bertrand and Bourdeau 2010). In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, none of the students' personal information was shown.

When analyzing interviews, the first author broadly coded for several key themes. Although the study aimed to study and engage in-depth with a small sample of participants, principles of thematic analysis were applied. A theme is characterized by its significance and reflects two different dimensions. Specifically, the semantic level, which is "the explicit or surface meanings of the data and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 84), and the ideological level, that is, "the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations – and ideologies – that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 84). In this contribution, both dimensions were considered when exploring ambiguity.

The notion of ambiguity in coding included all incidents and descriptions of ambiguity regarding the evaluation of criminal organizations in the data. After this initial coding, we distinguished more detailed stories among these evaluations and described six different types of stories that, when combined, contribute to the moral ambiguity of organized crime in the data. These include: (1) *People are good and bad*, (2) *family comes first*, (3) *big opportunities, big money*, (4) *organized crime is complex and "smart" organizations*, (5) *there are gray zones between business and crime*, and (6) *organized crime will always be around*. Finally, we point to (7) *the boundaries of moral ambiguity*, or more specifically, the cases when participants did not see organized crime as ambiguous and instead condemned it more univocally.

Notably, the titles of the stories are not quotations but describe the content of similar stories in the interviews. Distinguishing between these pertinent stories is both a simplification and an analytical decision. They "are meant as heuristic devices that we are formulating to bring order to the complexity of our data" (Sandberg, Tutenges, and Copes 2015: 6). In other words, these stories are themselves often ambiguous. Every thematic analysis needs to consider that stories and themes are imprecise categories and the data in this study are not an exception. All interviews were recorded or/and transcribed verbatim and translated into English. The translations and audio transcriptions include the stylistic imperfections of spoken and written language that arose in the participants' natural language. The interviewer's questions are reported in italics, while the interviewer's notes are reported in square brackets.

The data set we have is a relatively small one and consists of students only. While this is a pertinent criticism, the aim of this study is neither to reveal representative stories of organized crime from larger sections of Italian society nor is it to get the perspective of organized crime from those engaged in it. Instead, the aim is to explore what genres, types, or forms of stories that organized crime is narrated in among people in this region. The study discusses possible explanations for these patterns, especially highlighting the role of popular culture and the local context. For the aims of such explorations, the present data is arguably fit for purpose.

The moral ambiguity of organized crime stories

In the analysis below, we highlight those instances where participants were ambivalent about organized crime. We distinguish between six different types or sets of stories that in different ways carried the same coda (Labov 1972), conclusion or message that organized crime was neither inherently good

nor inherently bad, but that the moral evaluation of it was negotiable and contextually dependent. Finally, we show how there were still some definite limits to what participants could accept from organized crime groups.

People are good and bad

The students told several morally ambiguous stories about the many dilemmas of organized crime. One was related to why some individuals become affiliated with criminal organizations. Antonio, a first-year university student, told a story about a friend who became a drug dealer in an organized crime network:

> I think he is just a normal, good guy, but you know how these things work. He just could not find anything better to do, so he decided to do something bad and become a dealer. It's not a way to make money, but just to survive, let's say, but I know he is in a very bad situation now [...] He was pushed by bad circumstances, like many other guys like him. I know that not everybody can do that because you need to have something bad inside, you need to be predisposed, but he is just like you and me [...] Of course I could not do that.

In this extract, Antonio first explains that problematic circumstances were why his friend became a drug dealer. He was an ordinary person who just needed to find a livelihood, forced by the social context he lived in. The rationale of the story is the same as when Smith (2005) states that an important facet of low mimesis stories is that the actors are "just like us" (see also Sandberg 2009). However, the coherence of this well-known story is broken by a second storyline, where Antonio emphasizes that his friend did, after all, have a certain predisposition toward "doing something bad." In this version of the reasons for his criminal involvement, the protagonist of the story has a particular predisposition toward being involved in criminal activities. Antonio ends up emphasizing that he himself could never have ended up in this position. The moral ambiguity of Antonio's story is thus twofold: it is seen in the first story where people cannot be blamed for their crimes, and everyone is seen as being a little good and a little bad. When the second story enters, the moral ambiguity is seen in these two seemingly contradictory explanations for crime and the fact that Antonio does not seem able to decide which one of them to choose (a "good guy pushed by bad circumstances" or "a guy predisposed to doing bad things"?).

Family comes first

Another related story that brings moral ambiguity to the fore was when organized crime mixed with family relations. Bruno said this about another aspect that characterizes criminal organizations, namely the family dynamics within Mafia groups.

> If the wife of a boss does not report her husband and stays loyal and committed, I cannot say she is a bad person. [Why not?] Not entirely, I mean. Loyalty and commitment are positive things. People can be good and bad at different levels, so it's hard to say.

Bruno continues the "people are good and bad" topic from the previous category of stories and illustrates it with a scenario where the storyline is that when the family is involved, it gets more complicated. Here, being a "loyal and committed" wife trumps being indirectly involved in crime through family relations, thus making engagement in organized crime more morally ambiguous and dependent upon how and through which relations one is involved. Carlo similarly stated that:

> Even if I knew my father was a Mafia boss, I'd never report him to the authorities. This is just a normal thing to do as he is my father, and I love my father [...] I know that criminal organizations also think like that, but what can I do? I know they are bad, the worst, but I am not like that, and neither is my family.

As these extracts illustrate, the participants describe the moral ambiguity that seems to occur within families that belong to criminal organizations. According to Sykes and Matza (1957), and more recently to Poppi and Piazza (2017), criminal behaviors can appeal to higher values such as loyalty

and trust, especially within the family context, in what Banfield (1958) defines as amoral familism. However, the extracts also appear to present a further dimension. Bruno and Carlo suggest that moral ambiguity also represents people as simultaneously good and bad and that some negative behavior alone is not enough to characterize this person as immoral. As a result, although these participants recognize criminal organizations as a problem for particular people, this can be balanced by other higher loyalties or other qualities they have that serve to justify, mitigate or even deny their criminal involvement. In this way, it is evident how morality, instead of being a clear set of rules, becomes relational and context-specific and thus also more negotiable and morally ambiguous.

Big opportunities, big money

Another set of stories emphasized how some people never got the opportunity for criminal involvement and therefore could not be seen as morally superior to those who did and accepted. A subsection of these stories includes justifying engagement in organized crime if the potential advantage was high. In a focus group interview, Daria, Davide, and Donato discussed the reasons that drive ordinary people toward criminal organizations:

> Donato: People sometimes have no choice, they also know that they can earn a lot if they play their cards right
>
> Daria: Some people always know they can make a lot of money
>
> Davide: Money is the thing
>
> Daria: The thing that . . . it is an opportunity, what else?
>
> Donato: It can be necessary for people to do certain things, but it is also an opportunity
>
> Davide: They are not free, of course, but they can say no
>
> Donato: Nobody does that because the earnings can be huge and saying no is too hard
>
> Daria: Many people can say no, but the costs are huge
>
> Davide: I think you can say no if you are strong or brave enough, but I doubt (. . .)
>
> Daria: I have never known of anybody saying no, and this means that opportunities cannot make people brave
>
> Donato: People who might be brave speak theoretically because they've never had an offer . . . I think it's rare but almost impossible (. . .) If you see an opportunity, you cannot say no, especially when the earnings can be huge.

This discussion raises the issue that cooperation with criminal organizations can be a question of economic opportunities (Sciarrone 2019) rather than moral choices. However, the participants state that the economic opportunities resulting from forms of obligation, compulsion, and threat represent both a coveted and a feared scenario. In fact, the ambiguity here lies in the interplay between opportunity and a threatening obligation, between the possibility of advancement or success and an indication of being at risk of something terrible. Another aspect of ambiguity that emerges regards the conditions that cause this interplay. According to the participants, the state of feeling forced to do something for criminal organizations depends on the size of the opportunity. The bigger the opportunity to earn something from criminal organizations, the greater the will to do it, introducing another layer of ambiguity where the decision to engage or not is based on opportunity and risk-benefit evaluations.

Complex and "smart" organizations

Another story highlighting the complexity of organized crime concerns how it sometimes has other qualities despite being morally problematic. This could, in some stories, provide a more multifaceted portrayal of organized criminal organizations adding to the moral ambiguity in stories about them. Francesco, for example, emphasized that:

> These organizations are really smart: they adapt, and they are flexible, and yet, they are very solid. I don't know how they do that. It's enough to watch some documentaries about them to understand how well organized they are [...] and when you see them, you can imagine there is a sort of list, a hierarchy, like the King, the Prince and so on and all these people rule, the whole organization is like a community where everybody has their own share of power.

The fascination with and admiration for organized criminal organizations are clearly expressed in Francesco's story. He did not deny that they did wrong but simultaneously emphasized that they had many qualities. Flavia told a similar story:

> For instance, and this is what I know from my experience and things I read, the Camorra is like a mosaic, where each tile plays a particular role, and each tile is a family or a group of people [...] yes, the bosses and then everybody else, it's like a pyramid, there is the top and then the other families.

Francesco and Flavia's stories respectively describe criminal organizations as a vertical structure (i.e., a King, a pyramid, see also Poppi, Travaglino, and Piazza 2018) as well as having more horizontal configurations (i.e., a community, a mosaic). While these stories partly contradict each other, they have the same coda (Labov 1972) and story pattern, which is the main emphasis in this analysis. Emphasizing the complex vertical and/or horizontal nature of criminal organizations is used as a way to nuance what they believe to be the dominant image of these organizations. The moral ambiguity produced comes from stories that emphasize that even if these organizations do evil, they are complex organizations run by intelligent people.

Grey zones between business and crime

The story about organized crime being run by intelligent people is further emphasized in comparisons between business and crime. These stories reflect not only the complexity of criminal organizations and the competencies of those running them but also the many similarities between these and legal business organizations. Gabriella said this about how she perceived those running criminal organizations:

> I think these people are more businessmen than criminals, especially the bosses. I see them as people that can make other people above all, but they are also big criminals [...] I think that the main dimension is the one about business and money, and so on.

Giovanni similarly said that: "I see them as businessmen, brokers, like Elon Musk. When I read about the horrible things that clans do, I think of the Mafia. But if you ask me, bosses are businessmen." Lucio also said that:

> If you think about it, most of the big corporations that exist started to do some illegal or immoral things at the beginning. If you check on Wikipedia there is a whole page about the bad things that Microsoft has done. Essentially, criminal organizations are just companies that do illegal stuff, but what big company does not?

Participants described how organized crime leaders combined criminal competencies with an entrepreneurial dimension that has value far beyond these networks. They also downplayed the difference by emphasizing the illegal acts sometimes committed by well-known legal companies. In contexts affected by the significant presence of organized crime, the societal construction of organized crime may be mainly focused on the entrepreneurial dimension. The many gray zones between business and crime were also thematized in the following focus group interview, where three participants describe the many overlaps between crime, legal business, and the political elite.

Ivo: Many rich families became rich because of some illegal trafficking, think about the Kennedys

Ilenia: And this is the same for many criminal families. They are criminals until they become so rich that they . . .

Igor: About the Kennedys, it was the alcohol, right?

Ivo: Alcohol and gambling, I guess

Ilenia: It's the system, society works like that

Interviewer: And what about organized crime? Any difference?

Igor: That's the same thing, without a doubt.

Ilenia: Without a doubt.

Igor: People in the Mafia, Camorra and 'Ndrangheta are full of white-collar workers, businessmen, people with money that live like normal people, with money of course

Ivo: There is also a quote from Gomorrah: "Money makes people honest."

Igor: That means that when you have money, you become just a normal personal

Ilena: Not a criminal anymore

Igor: If you have tons of money, and you create jobs for people, even if you are a criminal, society needs you, so you become a good person because you are useful

As this extract illustrates, the difference between crime and entrepreneurship is flexible and becomes progressively more nuanced during the focus group discussion. The distinction between legal and illegal activity is not attributed to a moral evaluation or to a matter of behavior but primarily concerns the money involved. In other words, the economic power seems to set a dividing line between crime and business, a criterion that contributes to making the definition of organized crime and its societal perception morally ambiguous. In these stories, businesspeople and political elites are criminals, and ordinary business is also morally problematic. In this way, it becomes difficult to draw sharp distinctions between the two.

They will always be around

The final category we identify in these data contributing to the moral ambiguity of organized crime stories is the somehow fatalistic idea that these phenomena are an integral part of society. Lorenzo, for example, said that:

> I think that criminal organizations will never be defeated because they are part of the economy, even the global economy, but they can only be defeated if the whole economic system changes. We should not think of organized crime but about the way society works. Criminal organizations are not a cause of evil, but a symptom, so they are not even a problem. Yes, yes, I know they are incredibly powerful, but still, they are nothing.

Lorenzo claims that organized crime cannot be defeated because of its integration into the global economy. He was also fundamentally ambiguous about these organizations, stating that organized crime is at the same time "incredibly powerful" and yet "nothing." This ambiguity seems to depend on the relationship that organized crime has with society as it "is in many respects the shadowy underside of modernity" (Galeotti 2001: 203).

Luca emphasized that organized crime is not only an integral part of modern society and the global economy but constitutes society and the global economy itself:

> If you think of Italy, we know that some groups such as the Camorra and Mafia go quiet when they become part of the economy itself [. . .] The more they stay silent the more they are part of the legal world. Let's say they will never disappear, but they can just be absorbed into the legal economy and become society, not just a part of it. They will just change their appearance, but I doubt there will ever be any society without organized crime.

Lucia similarly said that "the Mafia will never disappear, but it can become a big legal corporation." Leonardo said that the only way to defeat organized crime was to accept some of the activities they were involved in: "Once governments legalize drugs, prostitution and so on, organized crime will disappear, but this means that State institutions will become criminal organizations." This quote includes elements from the gray zone's stories (there are no crucial differences between crime and business) and combines it with the idea that the activities in themselves cannot be diminished and that there is therefore little use in fighting it.

This moral ambiguity is the result of the problems of distinguishing the legal economy from the criminal economy and institutions from criminality, combined with a certain fatalism in the belief that some of the main activities of organized crime will always be around. In this sense, while they might not be morally acceptable, there is no point in fighting them either and the only way to oppose them is to legalize them. The low mimesis (Smith 2005) genre is striking in the "they will always be around" stories. Multifaceted characters and situations and people with complex motivations make polarization hard. There are no easy solutions, heroes or villains. Instead there is a general tone of disillusion and pragmatism. This contributes to the moral ambiguity (Fiester 2007) produced by all six sets of stories about organized crime identified in this analysis so far.

The boundaries of moral ambiguity

Importantly, participants also had some important boundaries in regard to organized criminal groups, and sometimes demonstrated more clear-cut moral rejections of their activities. The stories in this section indicate the boundaries of moral ambiguity or the conditions under which moral ambiguity was suspended in favor of a clearer distinction between good and evil. In these cases or situations participants often referred to particular types of innocent victims and risks to the community that were considered especially high.

Luca said that "I think these people should never touch kids" and continued to explain how children could suffer from "Mafia" activities. Ada similarly said that organized criminal organizations should not involve "innocents, women, kids, old people, but especially kids should never be involved in these things." When children were the victims of organized crime this was a common red flag among participants. Although others were mentioned (i.e. women and old people) the emphasis was usually on children. Illustratively, Donato also mentions children: "The worst thing they can do is putting young people in danger [...] but you know that in that world there are no rules." Arguably, the last part of the sentence indicates some element of moral ambiguity. However, the emphasis on this being a world other than the one that Donato inhabits clearly makes it symbolic boundary work (Copes 2016) where moral rules and narrator identities are established with clear distinctions between organized crime and ordinary society (see Larke 2003: 129).

Another red flag marking some important boundaries for what participants could accept from organized criminal groups was when entire communities were put at risk. The case of the illegal dumping of toxic waste in the "Terra dei Fuochi" (Triangle of death), which led to a dramatic increase in the number of cancers occurring in that area, was an example mentioned by many (Armiero 2014). Donato said that "if there is something shocking, really, really bad, it is the 'Terra dei Fuochi' [...] That's the worst organized crime has ever done because it's about the health of many, many people, an entire community." Luigi similarly said that "if you think about what happened in the 'Terra dei Fuochi,' that's what greed can do [...] Many people are ill now, and that is really shit but it's normal when money rules everything." While these are clear moral boundaries, the last part of Luigi's statement still leaves the way clear for explaining this not exclusively as the consequence of organized crime but of greed in general.

Participants tended to tell ambiguous stories of organized crime, but also displayed some moral boundaries, particularly toward certain kinds of victim and large-scale community risks. This boundary work (Copes 2016) was important because it separated the participants from members of organized criminal groups. It also made clear that, although they could understand and explain the activities of organized criminal groups and relativize them by comparing them to other "evil" actors in

the regular economy, the participants did not identify with organized crime. They saw organized criminal groups as a distinct "other" and made important distinctions between these organizations and themselves. The moral ambiguity they displayed thus primarily came from the position of an understanding outsider.

Discussion and conclusion

This study shows the moral ambiguity of organized crime stories among Italian students. The stories we have highlighted emphasize different dimensions of ambiguity, such as how people can be good and bad, how family trumps moral concerns, the opportunities to make big money, and the fact that organized criminal organizations can be complex and "smart" entities. Also, the interviews show that there are several gray zones between business and crime, as well as a somehow fatalistic view of these organizations as endemic to society. All these stories contribute to making the moral evaluation of organized crime inherently flexible, context-dependent, and negotiable – although this moral ambiguity also had some boundaries.

As mentioned in the literature review, the participants' perception of organized crime is probably embedded in both local institutional knowledge and popular culture mythologies. Consequently, one reason for moral ambiguity can be the strong and multifaceted presence of organized crime in contemporary Western popular culture. In TV-shows and movies organized crime is portrayed as fascinating and is sometimes associated with concepts of "honor," and the main characters are often two-edged, being both good and bad. Romanticization, simplification, and exaggeration (Finckenauer and Waring 2001) coexist, and ordinary people can mix these, thus producing composite representations (Sandberg 2013). In other words, stories of organized crime may be ambiguous because they derive from the combination of different, and contrasting, representations of crime in popular culture.

Another reason for ambiguity can reflect the local context of the study. In the Foggia area organized crime has a lot of impact in the political, economic, and civil spheres (Bonini and Foschini 2019; Poppi and Travaglino 2019). Here, organized crime provides goods, services and opportunities that are not lawfully accessible in other ways (e.g. recreational drugs, jobs, protection from common delinquency). This may force people to make moral compromises, and the distinction between "right" and "wrong" may become more blurred than in contexts where organized crime is less omnipresent. According to the "Mafia mystique" approach (Smith 1975/1990), organized crime is a complex phenomenon. It is ancillary to the regular economy, not distinct from it and organized criminal groups "are neither exclusively involved in illegal market activities, nor is their development and internal configuration the result of illegal market dynamics" (Paoli 2002: 51). Following such arguments, the ambiguity in stories we have identified only follow the inherent complexity of organized crime as a phenomenon (Finckenauer and Waring 2001).

Criminological studies tend to leave out stories and storytellers' plurivocality (Sandberg, Tutenges, and Copes 2015). The absence of complex and often contradictory stories can be seen in both individual and collective forms of crime. We claim that complex societal phenomena such as organized crime are bound to produce ambiguity, but that this will only be captured by working with a theoretical and analytical framework that has a method for spotting and placing a value on uncertainty, doubt and indecision of mind. Arguably, narrative criminology (Fleetwood et al. 2019) seems to be among the few perspectives that provides a way of bringing the inherent complexity of the stories into research on crime.

Regardless of the reasons for the narrative ambiguity we have identified in stories of organized crime, our study demonstrates that being aware of and exploring ambiguity can be advantageous in order to understand how people relate to crime. The way criminal actions, for example, are described as rational choices (Cornish and Clarke 2014) does not capture this, and neither do more cultural approaches which describe clear-cut criminal codes (e.g., Anderson 1999) or cultures (e.g., Bourgois 2003). There is also a need for more attention to how people other than

offenders view crime, and the ambiguity contained in these views, in order to understand its societal impact. We believe that ambiguity, about crime but also about other social phenomena, is not only a central feature of storytelling but also of life itself and thus warrants more attention in research.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Ethics standard

The authors declare that informed consent was obtained from all subjects before they were included in the study, and no real identifying information about the subjects is included in the article.

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