

WHEN NATION BUILDING GOES BADLY:
DRAFT EVASION, GOVERNMENT REPRESSION,
AND THE ORIGINS OF THE SICILIAN MAFIA

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Abstract

This paper claims that the emergence of the mafia in Sicily in the nineteenth century was in part caused by the discontent with the central government in the Sicilian society during the Italian unification process (1860-1870).

In 1863, while the Italian rulers were striving to hold the new-born country together, a key episode deeply compromised the state legitimacy in Sicily: a repressive military campaign ordered by the central government to curb massive draft evasion in the island. This campaign significantly raised the distrust in the government (Alatri, 1954) and, in turn, helped the Sicilian mafia gain popular support across the region, in line with what theorised by Gambetta (1993).

In this paper I empirically investigate the above hypothesis and show that the Sicilian mafia was originally more likely to spread to municipalities involved in the 1863 repression campaign. To do so, I use original data from the Borsani-Bonfadini parliamentary enquiry on the conditions of public security in Sicily, held in 1875, to infer mafia presence at the municipality level. The town-level data on exposure to military repression are instead mainly derived from the digitalisation of a large number of military reports and notes belonging to Giuseppe Govone, the army general in charge of the military operations being studied.

To generate exogenous variation in military repression, I rely on archival data containing information on the itinerary of the army to construct least cost paths connecting targeted towns, using the historical (1826) road network and, alternatively, Ozak (2010)'s Human Mobility Index. The results hold after controlling for other determinants of the early spread of the mafia in Sicily (e.g. Buonanno et al., 2015; Dimico et al., 2017; Acemoglu et al., 2019) and are also robust to different estimation techniques, such as propensity score and geographical matching. Moreover, I document a positive and statistically significant relationship between repression and mafia presence in 1900, suggesting that government repression committed during a crucial process of institutional change may have had enduring social consequences in Sicily.

In a preliminary mechanism analysis, I find that repression-hit towns experienced on average a lower trust in institutions in the short term, as measured by electoral turnout in 1867, compared to non-repressed towns. I then present some qualitative evidence, taken from Sonnino (1881), Dickie (2004) and General Govone's personal letters, in support of the latter result. Overall, my results suggest that coercive nation building reforms can unintentionally fuel organised crime and lead to the emergence of mafia-type organisations.