WHEN NATION BUILDING GOES SOUTH: 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 19th century was in part caused by the discontent with the central government in the Sicilian society during the Italian unification process. From its establishment in 1861, the Kingdom of Italy’s central government introduced a range of nation building policies, including conscription, to strengthen internal stability. Still, in 1863 a key episode deeply compromised the state’s legitimacy in Sicily: a repressive military campaign ordered by the government to curb widespread draft evasion on the island. Historians like Alatri (1954) have argued that this campaign raised distrust in government and, in turn, helped the Sicilian mafia gain popular support across the region. In this paper I empirically investigate this hypothesis using an instrumental variables approach and show that the Sicilian mafia was more likely to develop in municipalities victimized by the 1863 repression campaign.

In the main analysis 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 town level. I combine this information with town-level data on the exposure to the 1863 military repression campaign, coded from archival material including military reports and notes written by Giuseppe Govone, the army general in charge of the military operations. Moreover, to generate exogenous variation in military repression, I rely on archival data containing information on the itinerary of the army. Using the pre-existing (1826) road network, I construct least cost paths connecting towns that had military barracks and were in the approximate path of the armies. I then calculate the distance from such optimal paths for each town in the dataset, to predict the respective exposure to repression. Finally, I remove the towns with military barracks from the sample, to identify the effect of repression in municipalities that were only treated incidentally due to their position along the shortest route between two garrison towns, in the spirit of the “inconsequential places” approach described by Redding and Turner (2015).

Employing both OLS and IV estimation, I document a positive and significant effect of repression on the emergence of the Sicilian mafia. 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. In a preliminary mechanism analysis, I also 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 complement these results with other qualitative evidence, taken from Sonnino (1881), Dickie (2004) and Govone’s personal letters, indicating a decrease in state legitimacy following the forceful introduction of conscription in Sicily.

Overall, my findings suggest that coercive nation building reforms can unintentionally fuel organized crime and lead to the emergence of mafia-type organizations.

JEL Codes: K42, H11, P16.