

CHAPTER 11

SPEECH IN GOMMOPOLI

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WELCOME TO GOMMOPOLI

In the summer of 2013, the Trapanese journalist Rino Giacalone published a piece in the homonymous news outlet of an association called ‘Articolo 21, liberi di . . .’, which promotes the freedom of expression that is enshrined in that article of the Italian Constitution. Article 21 of the constitution opens with the words: ‘Everyone has the right to express their thoughts freely in words, in writing, and in any other means of diffusion. The Press cannot be subject to authorizations or censure.’¹ In its penultimate point, Article 21 specifies what should be the relationship between such postulated liberty and the funding of the press: ‘the Law can establish, with norms of general character, that the means of financing of periodical press should be made known.’

It is exactly this relationship between information, the more or less established means for its divulging and the political economy of those means that Rino Giacalone tried to capture with the nickname he gave to his hometown: Gommopoli, or ‘Rubberville’. His 2013 piece was titled ‘From “Mafiopoli” to “Gommopoli”: The Trapanese Mafia in the Age of Matteo Messina Denaro’ (Giacalone 2013). The use of that nickname for a locality explicitly echoed Peppino Impastato and his comrades’ strategy in calling their town Cinisi ‘Mafiopoli’. Only unlike the 1970s context of Impastato’s Radio Aut, in 2013 the word ‘mafia’ is neither radical nor focalizing any more (Puccio-Den 2021: 196). Giacalone’s piece itself does not elaborate on the inspiration for the name. When I asked him, he told me that it comes from Marco Risi’s 1991 movie *The Rubber Wall* (*Il Muro di Gomma*), which recounts a journalist’s attempts to investigate the ‘Ustica disaster’, the mysterious crash of an Italian

DC 9 plane flying from Bologna to Palermo in 27 June 1980, off the island of Ustica, which lies north of Palermo. ‘In Gommopoli everything bounces back and disappears . . . In the province of Gommopoli it’s the journalists who tarnish the cities’ images, and it’s the mayors who sue them for libel. But this is also the fault of the other journalists who prefer to look the other way, and who recount the trials the way the defence lawyers want them to.’² In contrast to Risi’s film title, the rubber wall in Giacalone’s ‘Gommopoli’ prevents not access to the truth behind it, but the ability to accuse. Where ‘everything bounces back’, anything you write can turn against you. Critical speech – a communicative device that recounts to a certain public certain events – becomes irrelevant.³

This chapter is about the relationship between secrets, publics and the partial criminalization of association in Italy (see Rakopoulos, this volume). Gommopoli opens for us a contemporary window into the predicament of writing about mafia-related things and people in a context in which the official legal construction of the mafia – what it is, and whom and what it includes – leaves certain pieces of the puzzle out of place. Giacalone did not refer to mafia-related murder or other overtly violent events. On the contrary: regarding those, the piece’s opening sentence declares that ‘We know the faces of Trapanese mafiosi, old and new, like we know the names of those who have fought against them.’⁴ Instead, Giacalone’s lament about things and words ‘bouncing back and disappearing’ referred to words about *borghesi*, upstanding citizens. ‘Nowadays the mafia . . . is made also of persons beyond suspicion . . . who move between politics and the economy, and who have also conducted various political campaigns . . . it is made of white collar workers and professionals.’⁵ While silence and its imposition is central to some legal-dependent working definitions of the mafia (e.g. Puccio-Den 2021), Giacalone’s lament reminds us from the outset that the mafia as it is experienced and imagined, at least in the Trapanese, ‘is made of’ more than its legally incriminated members (Rakopoulos 2019), a characteristic of both mafia and *mafialogia* that Salvatore Lupò (2018) identifies as structural for well over a century.

‘Secret’ has three functions in this context. It serves judicial investigations, which can claim to keep things concealed, especially from those investigated, to prevent interference with the course of criminal justice. Secrecy also shapes the professional role of journalists, who sometimes cannot or do not wish to publish what they come to know (Jusionyte 2015), a discretion that interlaces their professional production into the dynamics of public secrets and their always partial revelations regarding the social realities on which these journalists report (Taussig 1999: 57–58). Finally, it plays a crucial role in the definition, criminalization and particular incrimination of the Sicilian Cosa Nostra as based on the concept of *omertà* (see Schneider and

Schneider, this volume). Although the case at hand takes place in 2010s Trapani rather than in 1980s Palermo, and involves mostly online outlets rather than newspapers, it revolves around resonating dynamics (Schneider and Schneider 2003: 199–203). As Jane and Peter Schneider’s piece in this volume shows, and as Maria Pia Di Bella has shown elsewhere, the silence–talk pair is central to mafia and mafilogists’ craft (Di Bella 2008; Rakopoulos 2018b; cf. Puccio-Den 2021).

If we acknowledge that social formations like Cosa Nostra operate beyond their criminalized dimensions, manifestations or parts (Sergi 2017: 77), then we may realize journalists’ predicaments in attempting to inform their readers about things that – at that point at least – are not considered criminal. Ieva Jusionyte’s (2015: 27) anthropology of a criminalized frontier reveals how journalists ‘face decisions about if and how to report on activities that are illegalized yet legitimate’. Here the obverse holds: journalists need to decide how to report on activities and relations that, even if they are not illegalized, they consider to be illegitimate. If we take the construction of the mafia to be controlled by legal procedures, then what counts as the anti-mafia follows, as a more or less stable public – that public which partakes in the successful criminalization of that same mafia, the ‘sculpt[ing of] the existence of the mafia in the territory into a public shape’ (see Rakopoulos, this volume: 214). Rakopoulos shows that public to contain internal polemics and contradictions, even regarding recognizable criminalized events and persons. To complement this perspective, in what follows I consider how the same non-unified, multi-centred construction of the mafia can destabilize who gets to claim to be ‘anti-mafia’ too. ‘We recognize’, Giacalone declares, ‘the faces of the true anti-mafia, whom every now and then someone tries to sully [*mascariare* in Sicilian – ‘taint with charcoal’].’ And to that he counterposes: ‘We would like to, we want to, recognize the faces of those who have in these long years made deals with the mafia, day by day, for things large and small.’⁶

Public secrets in Gommopoli are doubly unstable. Realist treatments of secrets – in the sense that they take the secret to hide something that ‘everybody knows how not to know’ – draw their publics around such secrets (Shryock 2004; Piliavsky 2011). Treatments of public secrets that include more than one public tend to distinguish among the latter following a socially recognizable parameter: local versus foreign, or class and its antecedent relationship to state actions (Jusionyte 2015; Yeh 2012 respectively). Rihan Yeh’s examination of the interaction among publics provides a clue as to the working of speech in Gommopoli. In Tijuana, the counter-public that appears in the gestures of exclusion from ‘informed debate . . . through genres of hearsay ranging from the specificity of “what I heard” to the vast generality of “we all know . . .”’ is ‘literally criminalized’. Together, ‘[t]he

bourgeois-type public and the hearsay [criminalized] public . . . articulate themselves according to very different logics of representation, circulation, evidence, and authority' (Yeh 2012: 716). In Trapani, on the contrary, both Giacalone's followers and those of his counterparts belong more or less to the same social classes. Both sides claim to be anti-mafia, or at least against the mafia (no one claims that they stand or speak for the mafia).⁷ If we imagine with Giacalone that Gommopoli's mafia 'is made of' people beyond suspicion, then we should acknowledge that such persons would be indistinguishable from those who accuse them of partaking in that wider, shadier mafia universe. And why should we assume that such accusations only travel in one direction, rather than bounce back, as if from a rubber wall?

Giacalone's 2013 'From "Mafiopoli" to "Gommopoli"' piece used the rubber nickname while explicitly naming Trapani, the administrative capital of the eponymous province in western Sicily. Meanwhile, Giacalone began to write short messages on his Facebook and Twitter accounts referring only to Gommopoli, also disguising other details behind allusions. These posts appeared in parallel to his journalistic pieces in local outlets and regional and national newspapers. At times they included links to the respective piece.

For example, on 14 January 2016, Giacalone posted the following: 'Gommopoli . . . and that press that works with the mouse-size filter', using his nickname for one of his counterparts, 'the mouse', to suggest that he controls what gets published.⁸ In response, his friend the journalist and photographer Ninni Ravazza wrote: ' . . . could we please stop these subliminal messages and call a spade a spade if we are in the know? These messages that are directed at "those who want to get it" aren't messages . . . they most of all resemble warnings. If you have something to publicize . . . names and surnames and facts . . . for the sake of intellectual honesty and so that everyone could understand what you want to say.'⁹ Someone asked Ravazza rhetorically if he always has the courage to call a spade a spade; 'I don't think so, not in Trapani.'¹⁰ To which Ravazza replied: 'No . . . in fact after they blew up my house I stopped being a journalist. Now I go sailing and I don't send any coded messages.'¹¹ At that point, Giacalone joined the fray: 'for names, surnames and facts, you can read my articles if you want. That's the right home for recounting names and facts. On Facebook there's only the imaginary town of Gommopoli and the facts can be told only this way . . . the warnings that you wrongly spotted are not mine.'¹² After Ravazza told Giacalone that he reads his articles but does not like the coded messages, Giacalone concluded: 'Imagine that the same thing sometimes happens to me . . . though when I read articles in the newspaper!' (Ravazza concurred).¹³

I do not mean to suggest that Giacalone's Gommopoli is unique in its use of pseudonyms in or for the town and its *dramatis personae*. To mention one example, avid readers of the Commissario Montalbano series mentioned to

me Andrea Camilleri's fictional reference in *La Gita a Tindari* to Trapani and to its leading politician as 'senatore Ardoli' (Camilleri 2000, quoted in Bova 2021: 219). Yet this particular social media thread crystalized many conversations of Gialalone with his friends and colleagues I observed and took part in. The Gommopoli posts' nomenclature runs the gamut from easily decipherable nicknames for towns in the province (*Vetrocity* for Castelvetrano and *Satirocity* for Mazara del Vallo, home of the 'dancing satyr' statue) to messages that contain concrete information about unfolding events. It is this latter side of the spectrum that I wish to examine now, specifically regarding a chain of events that became public in mid-January 2016, the same day as Gialalone's exchange with Ravazza, in order to examine the hermetic feel to the hermeneutic economy in Gommopoli.

THE STORM IN THE TEACUP

Later on the same day of his Facebook exchange with Ninni Ravazza and others – 14 January 2016 – Gialalone posted on his Facebook wall: 'Gommopoli . . . il silenzio colorato di bianco Natale.' The reference to silence continued the earlier point about the press's tendency to leave out too much news of public interest. This new thread visualized that 'silence' (it was the dead of winter, but Trapani does not receive much snow) with the image of 'white Christmas' (also the title of a 2010 song by Irene Grandi). Except the holiday's name signified (for those who wished to get it, as Ravazza had pointed out) the name of the person involved in that day's event, a notary called Di Natale, whose brush with the law eluded mention in the news hour and on the website of the town's only TV station.

That same day, Gialalone published a short piece in one of the news outlets that operate in the Province of Trapani about the arrest, two days earlier, of a 36-year-old woman from Marsala, titled 'Drugs: A Minor, Arrested; Perquisition for a Notary'. As the title shows, the text, which informed readers that the woman was put under house arrest, mentioned that her partner was Francesco di Natale, 'a famous Trapanese professional' whose home was searched during the arrest, where 'investigators found a wiretapping detector device' (Gialalone 2016a). Gialalone's piece mentioned that the assistant prosecutor in charge was Andrea Tarondo, who was already known for prosecuting some key corruption and mafia-related trials in the province, and that the investigation was carried out by agents of the State Forestry Corps (the Forestale), an infrequent presence in the judicial investigative panorama (Bova 2021: 223). Yet these details appeared without elaboration or explication, fulfilling Ravazza's 'names and surnames' requirement, but signifying something only to those already familiar with the provincial ground.

Giacalone's piece was not the only one that informed the province's public about the matter. At least two other outlets followed suit the next day, including Marco Bova, whose longer piece, which appeared in *TP24* – a leading outlet in the province – as well as in a geographically wider outlet, *Malitalia*, included more details, spelled out more of the case's implications and suggested some 'preoccupying' dynamics. The 49-year-old notary 'boast[ed] a distinguished curriculum', which included public offices, judicial administrators and some key local magnates. Bova, working from the same news release of the Prosecutor's Office, mentioned that the notary explained his possession of the wiretap detector as a means 'to secure his professional confidentiality'. Bova's piece contextualized the notary's most recent brush with the law in an ongoing trial for tax embezzlement (we will return to that later), as well as in the investigation and trial of Michele Mazzara, a businessman from the province who was accused of false registration of assets' ownership. The original accusation included suspicion of favouring the mafia, which was later dropped in the conviction sentence (Bova 2016a, 2016b). Bova's description combined the three threads of events that, until that moment, seemed to share only their protagonist (Bova 2021: 224–27). But while the protagonist was, as everyone cared to mention, well known in the province, it remained unclear whether mentioning that fact was supposed to suggest that there was more to the story than what the pieces reported. Such a 'something more' could have taken the shape of further detail, interpretation or both. It could have emerged either as additional facts in any of the three threads (arrest for drugs, embezzlement and false registration of assets) or regarding the way to interpret the relationship between them. On social media, Giacalone shared Bova's own post about his *TP24* piece, and the next day lamented the general news outlet silence: 'in Gommopoli-News a solitary parrot counts more than a scoundrel who gave drugs to a kid.'¹⁴

About two weeks later, a chain of texts of a different kind appeared in various outlets in the province. Giacomo di Girolamo, the editor of *TP24*, who had achieved some national renown for a series of books on mafia-related matters, published a report-cum-reflection piece in the same outlet as Bova's (*Malitalia*) as well as on his blog, which updated his readers about the case's ramifications. Di Girolamo's piece, after a confession of his love for his craft and for the frequent and enthralling opportunities that his province provides him to pursue it, told his readers that the latest issue of a local print weekly, *Social*, had published an anonymous three-page piece written against two journalists – Giacalone and Bova – for their pieces on the notary's vicissitudes.

As with secrecy, of which it is a subspecies, anonymity too should be qualified in the case at hand. While no name appeared on the three-page piece in *Social*, the letter's text clarified that its author was Nino Marino. Di Girolamo

explained to his readers that even though the three-page piece was not signed, it was easy to see who had written it. First, because the author called the notary ‘my client’. Everyone knew, Di Girolamo explained, that the notary’s lawyer was Nino Marino, whose son also happened to be the director of the province’s only TV station. Second, Di Girolamo seemed almost gleeful to add, because of the piece’s style – typical of Marino as a signature in his view – which included ‘much rancour and prosopopoeia’. The original issue of *Social* was accessible either in paper form or behind a paywall, so most people heard about the development from pieces like Di Girolamo’s and those that followed.

In essence, Marino’s pseudo-anonymous letter accused the journalists Bova and Giacalone of misrepresenting what had happened to his client, who Marino claimed was an innocent victim of the relevant prosecutor’s doggedness and subterfuge. Marino described a series of inquisitions by law officers (on 4, 11 and 14 January) regarding minor drug possession, which – he deduced from the events – involved ongoing wiretaps of the notary. Since the drug possession did not amount to much, the thrust of the letter suggested, and denounced, persecution of his client (Marino 2016). Marino chose not to name Giacalone, and chose instead various mocking mispronunciations of his outlet, *Alqamah* (he did name Bova). He referred to his own past activity against the mafia (older than the 1982 law) and his decades-long acquaintance with the province’s criminal chronicles – all in coded terms and allusive temporal markers. Marino was not just any penal lawyer. Like various other veteran lawyers, he boasted friendship with important figures like judges Giovanni Falcone and Giangiacomo Ciaccio Montalto and sociologist-journalist Mauro Rostagno, all murdered by mafiosi. In addition, he had been a leading member of the provincial federation of the PCI – the Italian Communist Party – and involved in some of the federation’s most significant attempts to collect, analyse and spread information about the relationship between mafia, politics and the local economy in the 1980s (Marino 2006). It is this role in the town and the province’s past fight against the mafia that provided him with credit that his counterparts needed to acknowledge.

Draped in the cloak of his erstwhile anti-mafia exploits, Marino thus went after two of the journalists who wrote about his client. ‘What’s at stake here is not the right to critique or the freedom of speech of those who don’t think like you. Here the issue is the idea of a newspaper not as a space of reflection, analysis and the production of meaning, but as a washtub of interests, a paid *dazibao* for settling accounts’ (Di Girolamo 2016a, 2016b). The predicament of the notary and that of his partner seemed to drift into the background of the intra-journalistic acrimony. At a certain point, Di Girolamo’s text almost addressed Marino directly, asking why he had not contacted

either outlet to request an interview for his client. Di Girolamo said he did not know the notary. He and the notary's partner shared a common friend, as well as membership of 'a certain milieu in Marsala'. In a personal tone, he added, 'If Rino or Marco made a mistake, which can happen, there are a thousand ways to clarify, incorporate, retort. We're here for that.' The main reason for the pseudo-anonymous note would have been 'to transmit once more an image (of the Trapanese) as a land where turbid things happen, and where those who write have to beware not only of the anonymous letters that arrive in the mail but also of those pseudo-anonymous letters that circulate in the newspapers.'

Days later, the Trapani branch of the Sicilian Press Association (Asso-Stampa), the unitary labour union of journalists in Sicily, issued a statement against what they labelled a "direct and libelous attack" against Giacalone and Bova' and called the Order of Journalists – the national professional association – to intervene. The statement, signed by the Trapani branch's secretary, Giovanni Ingoglia, described 'a long downward drift' that 'characterized and crushed' journalism in Trapani and its province, ending most recently with the notary's case. An earlier event involved accusations against Trapani's ex-bishop, after which 'more opinion battles among colleagues appeared in the press' than reporting of 'the essence of the severity of the facts for the readers' (Ingoglia 2016). Later, in May 2015 (seven months before the notary's case), the lunchtime news hour of *TeleSud* picked up an earlier nameless reference in *Il Giornale di Sicilia*, and explicitly alleged that Rino Giacalone was – so claimed both a reporter and the TV station's president (the son of the lawyer Marino) – under investigation for attempted extortion and peddling influence (*millantato credito*). *TeleSud* accused Giacalone of attempting to extort a local industrialist by telling him that he could get him off the hook in an investigation against him (they lost in Giacalone's two libel suits – civil and penal – against them in 2019).

Yet these two events had happened months before the imminent trigger for AssoStampa's statement. Recounting the facts of the notary's case, Ingoglia echoed earlier judgements of Marino's letter (which he called 'very long [lunghissimo]'). Marino's anonymous letter included, apart from a clarification of his client's legal situation, 'a very harsh attack against the two journalists . . . who wrote about the event on the basis of the Prosecutor's Office's news release.' If Marino had wanted to clarify his client's position, 'he could have used the tools that the Press Law provides' (Ingoglia 2016). Both *TP24* and the main local site for Giacalone's articles, *Alqamah*, published AssoStampa's statement (Redazione *TP24* 2016; Redazione *Alqamah* 2016), the former followed by a retort from one of the interested parties in the earlier, pre-2015 event, already published in another local outlet, *Trapani Oggi* (Mazzara 2016).

Some of the other outlets in the region, including clearly partisan ones like *Libera Informazione*, tried to explain the situation in depth by articulating the connections to investigations by the Trapani Prosecutor's Office into relationships between the province's hegemonic politician, senator and once deputy minister of the interior Antonio D'Alì and several leading members of the provincial mafia (Frigerio 2016); investigations informed a trial that ended up in a definite guilty sentence by the Court of Cassazione only in December 2022. Yet these reconstructions retold these details as suggested context, not as elements in the facts of the immediate story. As such, they could be and were easily interpreted along the same fault lines. Some saw such mentions as necessary pieces in a mosaic that was only temporarily still hidden. Others saw the same mentions as conspiratorial doggedness, which only served to mark those mentioning them (like *Libera Informazione*) as aligned against them. All along, both sides gladly claimed to be fighting the mafia, and just as gladly accused their adversaries of not really being anti-mafia.

THE NOTARY

Via XXX Gennaio (30 January St.), which commemorates the arrival of anti-Bourbon revolutionary fervour in Trapani in 1848, stretches almost the width of the old town of Trapani. The street passes today where a canal once connected the tramontane coast to the north and the port to the south, a canal that separated the walled old town to its west from its agricultural lands – now modern Trapani – and the rest of the island of Sicily. Nowadays, the Police Headquarters is located on the northern end of the street (together with the Prefecture) and the Courthouse (which includes the Prosecutor's Office) is located on the street's southern end. Right in the middle stands a bar, which is called 'the bar in the middle ('Il bar nel mezzo'), and while the name could also designate the geographical midpoint between that part of town's two shorelines, its patrons – many of whom are journalists and magistrates – underline institutional geography in their exegeses.

In late March, when Giovanni Ingoglia and I met for one of our regular café sessions at the bar, he told me that the Ordine dei Giornalisti was about to come for a hearing. This was already a month and a half after his request as secretary of AssoStampa Sicilia. In those days, I was spending my time scanning the document folders of the murder trial of the notary Craparotta, in 1957. I was studying that trial for two reasons. First, it was one of the criminal cases that Giovanni Falcone dealt with in the province before moving to Palermo (Mugno 2014: 74–88). Second, Giovanni Ingoglia and his friend the lawyer Nino Marino had told me a couple of years earlier about that

trial as an important case to understand dynamics in the province from the 1950s. Notaries played a key role in the post-war agrarian reforms, as they had in earlier moments of political economic change and its related power realignments between landed elites, professionals and mafiosi (Riall 2003: 37). Their intimate knowledge and involvement in economic transactions make them ideal figures for interweaving the politico-legal and sociocultural perspectives on mafia-related things (Fiume 1996: 763–64).

That day, while I was scanning files, I saw that Marino had been the defence lawyer for one of the defendants in the 1969 trial, in which Falcone was the prosecutor who had reopened the case. After telling Giovanni Ingoglia about it at the bar, I asked him for news from Nino Marino. In response, he told me that they had argued regarding Marino's *Social* piece. He recounted the chain of events and told me he imagined that the Ordine dei Giornalisti would suspend the director of *Social* and reprimand all parties for their acrimonious correspondence. In this, Ingoglia was working to position himself as arbiter and mediator, both regarding the specific case and in general. He too was known in town and province for his erstwhile investigative journalistic writing on the mafia and its relationship to local politics and economy, often in collaboration with PCI politicians like Nino Marino, mostly in the PCI newspaper, *L'Unità*, and in the Sicilian paper most identified with anti-mafia writing, *L'Ora* (for example, Ingoglia 1980, 1984). After one of my questions regarding whom I should speak to, he repeated a sentence he had told me several times before: 'You have to talk to everyone!'¹⁵

A couple of days later, I was talking to a journalist I knew from another town in the province who was sitting in a café with a friend, who herself seemed to know the intricacies of the notary's case. The journalist was asking me how my work was going. I replied, telling them about the 1957 Notary Craparotta case that I was reading. In the middle of the agrarian reform of those years, so goes one of the explanations of the murder, mafiosi in the area were trying to figure out whom to kill to make sure that precious land (which had been unmoored by the reform) would remain under their control. The journalist then turned to the friend and said: 'Now they turn notaries into drug addicts.' I added, without thinking much (or enough) about it: 'yes, through their Marsalese girlfriends.' In retrospect, I realize I had assumed my journalist friend was comparing killing with drugging as mafiosi's strategies regarding nodal notaries such as Craparotta in 1957 and the Trapanese notary and his companion, whose ongoing vicissitudes were on everyone's lips. The journalist replied, and seemed to reprimand me, telling me that I should 'keep it in the code'. I was not quick enough to react to her, and managed to reflect about that moment only later. I did not know the friend, so I could not say the same for her, but the journalist was definitely

considered part of the ‘true anti-mafia’ from Giacalone’s description. The journalist knew that I was in regular contact with Giovanni Ingoglia, and that I had spoken in the past with Nino Marino as well. The demand to ‘keep it in the code’ framed the drug arrest in a concrete context of mafia-related investigation, of which it seemed in retrospect that they were both aware. Since they had not told me anything about that wider mafia context previously, my mention of it might have made them suspect that I had heard the same level of detail about the story – and if not from them, then from Nino Marino, either directly or through Giovanni Ingoglia (they did not know that the two had argued). Either way, what my blunder clarified was that the ‘something more’ involved the relationship between the drug arrest story and the mafia-related threads in the context.

BOVA’S PREDICAMENT

The notary’s vicissitudes left the pages of the local news outlets quickly thereafter. About a month after the first news about the drug arrest, in February 2016, Rino Giacalone published a piece following the end of the notary’s tax embezzlement trial, for which the latter was found guilty (Giacalone 2016b). Giacalone referred to some of the January drug arrest details, which now belonged only to the context of the notary’s conviction. In March, the entire affair was generally dropped, and all that remained was the fight among the involved journalists, which occupied ever diminishing space in the various outlets, and then became subsumed by other threads of the same acrimonious alignment.

Marco Bova was working on a book about the failed attempts to arrest Italy’s number one most wanted and the suspected leading figure of the Sicilian Cosa Nostra, Matteo Messina Denaro (a native of the Trapanese town of Castelvetro), for about a year or so until the book’s publication in late autumn of 2021 (Bova 2021). He had been covering various penal affairs for around a decade at that point, first mostly around Trapani and later also in Palermo and throughout the Sicilian capital’s territorial jurisdiction, for local outlets as well as national newspapers like *La Repubblica* and *Il Fatto Quotidiano*. While the book traced various aspects and periods in the chain of failed attempts to capture the mafia boss, the book’s last chapter, ‘I Veleni di Trapani’, focused on Trapani and the poisons (‘veleni’) that permeated its court. We had been in regular contact already for a couple of years at that point and had discussed our understandings regarding various events from that period. When I read the part of the chapter that dealt with Di Natale’s partner’s drug arrest, I recalled, and recounted to him, my March 2016 café conversation with the journalist and her friend.

I asked him to recount to me how he had come to learn what ended up in that chapter of his book. He told me he had heard about the notary during the trial of the entrepreneur Michele Mazzara, which he followed for *TP24*, ending up writing several chronicle pieces as well as a long, four-installment background article. The notary's name emerged as managing ownership operations that were investigated in two anti-mafia operations of the early 2010s: Halloween and Eden, both directed against people suspected of helping Matteo Messina Denaro manage his assets and hide (of which the notary himself was not accused). In early 2014, the notary was investigated (his office was searched), both following some suspected anomalies in the operations regarding one of the province's major companies and, separately, regarding a drug distribution network of which the notary was a client.

A year into the investigations, in July of 2015, the investigators discovered from a wiretap that the notary and his partner were aware of them. The prosecutor in charge then moved that part of the case to the responsibility of the Forestale, in an attempt to avoid further leaks from their operation. Michele Mazzara's trial was going on at the time in court, and during one of the sessions, in March 2015, one of the persons who served as fronts for the entrepreneur said that it was the latter who had pointed the notary to him (together with other names) and who 'perhaps participated in one of the [business] meetings'.¹⁶ These three elements – the suspicion that the notary was aware of being wiretapped, his involvement in the creation of front persons for Mazzara and the extraordinary role of the Forestale – appeared already in Bova's piece immediately after the mid-January 2016 arrest. But, as Bova himself commented in that piece, at the time they seemed only 'a series of very worrying investigative elements'.¹⁷

In retrospect, the thing that the investigators knew already in mid-January 2016, and that Bova told me he had discovered only when he was collecting material for the book a couple of years later, coloured the entire chain of events in the most significant way. A couple of days after Christmas 2015 – eight days before the first perquisition in the notary's office, which Marino recounted – the notary was intercepted saying that he arranged twice the selling of an apartment in which 'it's certain that Matteo Messina Denaro was staying'.¹⁸ For Bova, this information connected what he had known and written about the notary's previous relations to Michele Mazzara with the events that followed that Christmas – the three searches in the notary's home, office and parents' house, as well as the journalistic clash. That he and other journalists had heard about it only later is suggested by the fact that neither Bova nor anyone else writing about the notary's vicissitudes mentioned anywhere the name of the wanted mafia boss. Two of the anti-mafia operations that involved Michele Mazzara – Halloween and Eden – were directed against the boss's collaborators. In other cases where some

relationship to the boss's hiding is suspected, his name is mentioned in the context, and often in the title, even if the facts of the case do not directly involve him.¹⁹

Marco Bova's book came out late in 2021. Most of the threats of libel suits, legal letters to the press that published his book and negotiations regarding demands to change what he had written focus on the chapter involving Trapani and, particularly, the sections involving the notary. Since the summer of 2022, every town in Italy where Marco Bova goes to present his book welcomes him with a piece in one of the local outlets that accuses him of false declarations in the original version of his book, which was changed following a settlement between his publishing house and the people who brought forth that accusation. Since the currently printed versions of the book no longer contain any of this specific bone of contention, it seems to me at least that the chain of local publications is intended to discredit him more generally, not to mention revenge.

CONCLUSION

The events that this chapter has recounted continue to this day, moving between the various traces that we mentioned and others, which for brevity were left out. The notary himself was never prosecuted for anything other than his embezzlement charge. I am certain that if ever officially charged, the notary and his partner would be able to demonstrate their absolute lack of culpability (Palumbo 2013: 147). If I chose to focus this piece on speech in Gommopoli, I did so to outline the mediatic ramifications of the 'sociologically relevant fact' that what is legally describable as partaking in the criminal organization Cosa Nostra, and can therefore be spoken of by journalists and other writers, forms only a part of what those writers know, suspect, consider or construct as mafia-related words, things and people.

It goes without saying that the boundary between those dimensions of the mafia that are criminalized and those that are not can and often does shift. That which was not criminalizable in any practical sense before 1982 became gradually incriminated ever since. Indeed, many accounts of the mafia and anti-mafia begin with a pre-legal battle and show how the Italian criminal justice system assumed it. Yet the arc of such plots of successful criminalization of mafiosi suggests that justice lies in the promise of closing the gap between the social and legal views of the mafia. This is improbable, if we recall the words of Sally Falk Moore (1978: 1), 'that the same social processes that prevent the total regulation of a society also reshape and transform efforts at partial regulation'. Investigative journalists, in any case, operate in that gap, which appears to them as a stable condition of their

practice, as long as they wish to inquire into and write things that have yet to be legally processed.

In their predicament, which they share with anti-mafia agricultural cooperatives (Rakopoulos 2018a), journalists must engage in encounters across the boundaries of mafia and anti-mafia. Cooperatives seek to build a wall to constitute their enclaves of legality and mutuality. Journalists similarly seek to safeguard the bounds of secrecy regarding some of what they know but cannot or would not share with their readers; these are bounds that, as we have seen, shape wider aspects of their social relations. At the same time, journalists seek to partake in publics beyond such epistemic enclaves – to write for the same audiences that they share with the persons ‘beyond suspicion’ whom they accuse – only to have their attempts bounce back at them, as from a rubber wall. It would be tempting to extend the comparison and see such a wall as separating two publics – of mafia and anti-mafia. Yet such a division of publics based on conflict runs into some problems (Fraser 1990: 61–62). First, from Bova’s perspective and from Giacalone’s, some of their counterparts claim to be anti-mafia themselves. Second, both parties see themselves as the counter-public, while they mostly share with each other ‘the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public’ (Warner 2002: 86). Perhaps what the rubber wall seems to divide is two apparent counter-publics within one shared public: where some people read – quite carefully – their counterparts’ accusations and do their best to ignore or make them bounce back. Consequently, limiting our concept of the public to those people who care to hear successful (if partial) revelations such as Giacalone’s and Bova’s reduces discursive circulation to shared ideology. In other words, it causes publics to resemble communities.

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NOTES

1. ‘Tutti hanno diritto di manifestare liberamente il proprio pensiero con la parola, lo scritto e ogni altro mezzo di diffusione. La stampa non può essere soggetta ad autorizzazioni o censure . . . La legge può stabilire, con norme di carattere generale, che siano resi noti i mezzi di finanziamento della stampa periodica.’
2. ‘A Trapani il tempo sembra essersi fermato, e la Cinisi di Impastato è tornata a

rivivere a Trapani, “Gommopoli” dove tutto rimbalza e sparisce. A Gommopoli non ci sono riflettori accesi. I sindaci dicono che Matteo Messina Denaro non è il primo dei problemi, per il potente *deus ex machina* della città, il senatore D’Alì, non è un mafioso ma un mascalzone, malandrini e non mafiosi per il sindaco Damiano. In provincia di Gommopoli sono i giornalisti che sporcano le immagini delle città e a loro i sindaci chiedono i danni, ma questo è colpa anche di altri giornalisti che preferiscono girare la faccia dall’altra parte, che raccontano i processi come vogliono gli avvocati difensor.’

3. I thank Theo Rakopoulos for suggesting this direction.
4. ‘Conosciamo i volti dei mafiosi trapanesi, vecchi e nuovi, come conosciamo i nomi di chi li ha combattuti e li combatte.’
5. ‘Oggi la mafia di Matteo Messina Denaro è fatta anche da insospettabili, persone apparentemente al di sopra di ogni sospetto, che si muovono tra la politica e l’economia, e hanno fatto tanta campagna elettorale . . . A Trapani c’è la mafia fatta da colletti bianchi e professionisti che parlano di Messina.’
6. ‘Conosciamo i visi dell’antimafia vera, e che per questo ogni tanto qualcuno cerca di “mascariare”, sporcare . . . Vorremmo, vogliamo, conoscere i volti di chi in questi lunghi anni ha trattato con la mafia, ogni giorno, giorno per giorno, per le grandi cose e per le piccole cose.’
7. What follows remains, as I have mostly, nearer one of these publics.
8. ‘Gommopoli . . . e quella informazione che funziona col filtro del topo’, Facebook, 14 January 2026, <https://www.facebook.com/rino.giacalone1/posts/pfbid037m2e6AFoEVrYsJth84dJ56yKkUMtxsby2mfgigTidTqi5wfN4SpebuLd9u3rJfNol> (retrieved 24 January 2024).
9. Ninni Ravazza: ‘Rino . . . ma la vogliamo finire con i messaggi subliminali e diciamo pane al pane se ne siamo a conoscenza? I messaggi lanciati “a chi vuol capire” non sono messaggi . . . somigliano ad avvertimenti piuttosto. Se hai qualcosa da propagandare . . . nomi cognomi e fatti . . . per onestà intellettuale e per fare capire a tutti cosa vuoi dire.’
10. Barbara Meyer: ‘Ma tu hei [*sic*] sempre il coraggio di dire pane al pane? Non ci credo . . . non a Trapani.’
11. Ninni Ravazza: ‘No . . . infatti dopo che mi hanno fatto saltare la casa ho smesso di fare il giornalista. Ora me ne vado a mare e non lancio messaggi cifrati.’
12. Rino Giacalone: ‘Per nomi, cognomi e fatti puoi leggere se vuoi i miei articoli, se ne hai voglia, quella è la casa giusta dove raccontare nomi e fatti, su fb c’è [*sic*] solo il paese immaginario di Gommopoli e i fatti si possono raccontare solo così . . . gli avvertimenti che tu hai mal intravisto non sono cosa mia . . .’
13. Rino Giacalone: ‘Pensa che a me capita la stessa cosa talvolta . . . ma leggendo articoli di giornale!’
14. ‘A Gommopolinews un pappagallo segregato conta di più di una sciagurata che dava droga ad un ragazzino’, Facebook, 16 January 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/rino.giacalone1/posts/pfbid02Cx2G88hm7UP3wBVVc1aTc4bRvhUYdRfYrMwYhUfazaZd1F7yrCA5Wtzmxyxdedaowl> (retrieved 13 December 2023).
15. And true to this, he had originally introduced me to Nino Marino as well as to Rino Giacalone, clear adversaries, among various others.
16. Tribunale di Trapani, trial of Michele Mazzara + 2, hearing of 19 March 2015; quoted by Bova (2021: 227–28).
17. ‘Una sequela di elementi investigativi parecchio preoccupanti’ (Bova 2016b).

18. 'La casa dove Matteo Messina Denaro è certo che è stato ospitato due volte, l'ho venduta due volte quella casa' (Bova 2021: 233, 321n. 45–46).
19. For example, 'Castelvetro, in the Town of Messina Denaro the City Council Auto-Dissolves' and 'Arrests for Freemasonry and Crime in the Town of Matteo Messina Denaro' (respectively *RaiNews* 2019; *La Repubblica* Correspondent 2016).

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