

The Social Life of Mafia Confession

Between Talk and Silence in Sicily

by Theodoros Rakopoulos

Exploring Sicilian secular confessions, this essay discusses anthropological impasses on talk and silence. Such dilemmas reveal ethnographic frailties in engaging with concealment and revealing. The delicacy of negotiating between those demanding silence (the mafia) and those demanding self-revelation (the antimafia activists) unsettles the fieldwork ethics of our own anthropological entanglement in the gray areas of fieldwork between silence and talk. I show that *pentiti* (mafia confessants) blur the area between mafia and antimafia, allowing people to navigate across institutional categories. What is more, the essay embeds Sicilian confession in an intellectual genealogy, comparing mafia confession with its Christian counterpart and with bureaucratic theodicy. The move of confessional material of mafiosi and ordinary Sicilians from a private exchange to the public sphere recalls comparisons with religious ritual. While acknowledging the effects of confession on the mafia person, akin to the religious experience as a path to change and a new self, the essay suggests that secular confession should be approached through the lens of its effects on the lives of others. Its secularism is not imbued in an institution as much as it is invested in the life trajectories it inspires, often in the face of punishment.

This essay examines secular confessions in a Sicilian context. It explores the area between instituted silence and talk, situating inquiry into how these confessions navigate different situations and produce a gray zone where knots of relations pertaining to mafia, antimafia, and state both conflict and merge. The Sicilian mafia's code of *omertà* calls for silence before the law and is notorious as a bond that holds it together as a secretive male brotherhood, as both state actors and scholars note (Coco 2013; Ingroia 2010). A mafioso who violates that code in order to collaborate with the authorities is called a *pentito* (penitent; Allum 2006).¹

Drawing from my ethnographic encounters with the mafia and antimafia in Sicily, I present two vignettes that both rely on and confront existing moral and moralized antitheses between concealing and revealing. The first concerns people committed to fighting the mafia and deconstructing its code of silence, *omertà*, while the second concerns the consequences of mafia confessions on a local family's life.

These vignettes elucidate ways in which the realities on the ground are more complex than a dichotomic worldview of social life that arranges relations around binary axes such as talk and silence. While I rely on fieldwork stories and reports about *pentiti* in the first part of the essay, in the second part I also present some of the limitations of fieldwork to account for

this gray zone between mafia and nonmafia. In a vignette encompassing people with different and even contradictory ideas about silencing and confessing, I explore the fragility of conversing with mafiosi and antimafiosi and of converting idioms of talk and silence between those groups of people. In pursuing how concealing and revealing are unsettled in praxis, the essay also discusses anthropological dilemmas on talk and silence. Bringing forward these two points of conversion between concealment and revelation, I attempt to unpack the intellectual challenge of such conversion.

Current approaches to the phenomenon of *pentito* confession take for granted a mafioso's individual choice to collaborate with the state as well as the life out of prison he would be granted (e.g., Gruppo Abele 2005). This vantage point suggests a transaction between the mafioso and the state (Dino 2006; Gambetta 2009; Moss 2001) that might overlook two significant issues: how this secular confession process strips the mafioso of his former web of social obligations and how such relations are then affected by the mafioso's confession. To address these issues, I think beyond the state-mafioso "exchange" and toward the social life in which the confession is embedded.

The ethnography presented here unpacks the main cognitive tool the state has produced to constitute our knowledge of the mafia: the insider and revelatory role of mafia confessants. For prosecutors and sociologists alike, *pentiti* insights have been central in understanding and constructing the very idea

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1. The more official term, used by state agents, is *collaboratore di giustizia* ("justice collaborator").

of mafia (Puccio-Den 2015). Indeed, both the state and the mafia tend to uphold the ideology that pentiti confessions could destroy the mafia (Pizzini-Gambetta 2006). However, it is necessary to take a step back and observe the people around the pentiti: Sicilians operating in a constant gray zone encompassing both concealment and revealing. This is how we can account for the consequences of *pentitismo* as well as the aftermath of the historical state-mafia confrontation of the 1990s (Lodato 2012).

This essay, therefore, explores the secular confession process as a complex phenomenon that, rather than consolidating, actually undermines binary distinctions such as mafia/anti-mafia or concealment/revelation. It situates the antagonisms of revealing and concealing within the broader dynamics of Sicilian life to argue that their constitution as confession and omertà are rooted in a specific intellectual history. It thus assesses the secular nature of these confessions against a rich intellectual backdrop of Christian and bureaucratic lineage, engaging in a comparative anthropological endeavor.

Assessing the confessional genealogy, the essay shows how secular confession is entangled with, but also different from, Italian bureaucracy and the practicalities of secular theodicy (Herzfeld 1992, 2009a) or Catholicized agency (Muehlebach 2013) as well as the individualizing Christian practice of sin (Robbins 2004, 2008). While I take on board the acknowledgment of the individualization of a confessant's collective personhood in anthropologies of Christianity, which is relevant for mafiosi, I also underline the effects of mafia confessions on local society. Sicilian confession's secularism—and, indeed, its volatile nature, which allows for conflicting trajectories—relies on the local social life it assembles and dilutes, rather than on an institutionalized setting.

Encountering Omertà in the Village of Penitents

Mafiosi today face exceptionally difficult prison conditions.² If turned penitents, however, they enter witness protection schemes and are set free under a wholly new identity. *Pentitismo*³ has been understood as a “legal” phenomenon that emerged in reaction to communist and fascist (“red and

black”) terrorism in the 1970s and 1980s (see Allum 2006). Recent historical research has shown, however, that the pentiti are not a product of contemporary republican Italy, as *pentitismo* has a precedent in the interwar period as well as in the interstices between mafia and politics (Lupo 2006). Fascism, which aimed, among other goals, to eliminate the mafia in Sicily (cf. Lupo 2008), found an unexpected ally in a community of local penitents. Indeed, the police protected the anonymity of the occasional mafioso confessant (referred to as “a trustworthy person”; see Coco 2013:246).

The shared suppression of the talking ego, common among its members, is a defining characteristic of mafia—a force that binds mafiosi's sense of brotherhood in Cosa Nostra, the major Sicilian mafia group.⁴ Shared silence is crystallized in the way its members experience their being in the organization. This rootedness in a collective personhood has been unsettled by *pentitismo*, which poses as the mafia's inimical Other in the narratives of both mafiosi (e.g., Buscetta, in Arlacchi 1994) and state agents (Falcone and Padovani 2004).

A closer look might prove otherwise, however. There is a long genealogy behind the conceptualization of the mafia person who deserves trust (*persona degna di fede*) in the eyes of the state. There also exists an extensive yet undocumented history of routine repentance among Sicilian mafiosi. In fact, mafiosi have always broken the rules of omertà—for instance, talking to the police when it served their interests—but this does not make them pentiti. Drawing on this history of mafiosi talking to police, the historian Salvatore Lupo dismisses the radicality of *pentitismo*; according to him, the idea that talking breaks a boundary might be an ideology (Lupo 2015:161–184). After all, omertà is an idea that the early anthropologist Giuseppe Pitrè associated with a positive sense of manliness rather than with mafia already in 1882, unwittingly contributing to the term's ideological consolidation (see Pitrè 2007 [1882]:292–294).

In contrast to a field where the mafia is undone, the stories of *pentitismo* I came across in San Giovanni,⁵ the village where I undertook ethnographic fieldwork in western Sicily, elucidate the antagonisms inherent in both omertà and routine silence. Spending time in Sicily, I learned that the practice of omertà was the utmost form of expression among Sicilian mafiosi, but

2. The prison conditions (under Art. 41-bis of the Italian Criminal Code) for mafiosi are particularly dire, so much so that Amnesty International has issued a statement questioning it (Amnesty International 2003). But here, “the realm of mafia is an *exceptio legalis*,” as the Palermitan magistrate Dr. Rossio told me. These ideas reflect broader tendencies in legal theory in Italy to view the mafia as a “state of exception,” due to which the Italian state justifies its stricter criminal procedure (Ingroia 2010) as “extraordinary measures.”

3. The term means “the act and ideology of confessing,” literally translated as “confessionalism.” The legal codification of the phenomenon has a story spanning three decades: it first appeared as the ambiguous Law 15/1980 and was developed further by Law 82/1991, which amended the original problems concerning the excessive guarantees to the justice collaborators. This latter law was applied to the cases of most mafiosi discussed in this essay. Today, Law 45/2001 is applied to such cases.

4. This is recognized in the criminal law: Article 416, paragraphs 1 and 2, of the Italian Criminal Code explore the definition of a mafia. Specifically, 416-bis (paragraph 3) defines a mafia as an unlawful association where

the participants take advantage of the intimidating power of the association and of the resulting conditions of submission and silence [omertà] to commit criminal offenses, to manage or in any way control, either directly or indirectly, economic activities, concessions, authorizations, public contracts, and services, or to obtain unlawful profits or advantages for themselves or for any other persons.

5. All toponyms, as well as people's names, including those of well-known mafiosi, are pseudonyms, to protect the safety of my interlocutors. This is not the case with state and civil-society organizations.

it was also a charged idiom that converted routine silence and concealment of information, pervasive in rural Sicilian life, into a normative domain. For many Sicilians, including informants in San Giovanni, breaking this loaded silence is viewed as a heinous infringement. With the exception of those committed to the legality ideas of the antimafia,⁶ many people express contempt for those who broke the *omertà*, considering this act a sort of treason or cowardice.

San Giovanni is a village located in the valley of Spicco Vallata, the heartland of Cosa Nostra during the period when the organization was at its most influential (the mid-1980s to mid-1990s) as it managed a monopoly of heroin trafficking on a global scale (Lodato 2012). After the mid-1990s, when the relationship between the state and Cosa Nostra shifted from connivance to conflict (triggered by an escalation of mafia violence), numerous Spicco Vallata mafiosi between 1996 and 2000 (12 clan leaders in San Giovanni alone) were jailed. A number of mafiosi landed properties were confiscated and ended in the hands of local municipalities. Mayors pushed for the formation of a specialist bureaucratic apparatus to administer the transfers of usufruct rights to local cooperatives, guarantee the “social use” of the land, and promote the cooperatives’ activity at large.

In Spicco Vallata, I conducted participant observation among members of these “antimafia” agricultural cooperatives that cultivate land confiscated from significant local mafiosi by the Italian state (Rakopoulos 2014, 2015, 2017a).⁷ In interviews, the members of antimafia cooperatives refer explicitly to a political struggle waged against the mafia’s *omertà* and argue for “legality,” an activist and ethical embracing of the law. It was through fieldwork among antimafia activists that I met some mafia affiliates in San Giovanni and came to an understanding of the nature of *omertà*.

The mayors of five Spicco Vallata villages welcomed the creation of the Progress and Law Consortium (Consorzio Sviluppo e Legalità) in May 2000, which to this day oversees the cooperatives’ activity, “to administer the assets in associated

use and for a social goal” (Consorzio Sviluppo e Legalità 2001:1). The Consortium is tasked with the transfer of confiscated land and other assets “from the clans to the state and the community” (Consorzio Sviluppo e Legalità 2001:12; Rakopoulos 2017a). The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Libera has also played a key role: although it has no administrative powers itself (not being a state organization), the Consortium has delegated it full responsibility for the representation and marketing of the antimafia cooperatives.

The co-ops had a two-tiered structure, composed of two types of cooperative members, administrators (based in the co-ops’ offices) and manual workers (locals, working in the fields). The cooperatives’ offices are ungracefully located behind a petrol station. This was where the cooperative administrators worked, mostly young Palermitans. They were unimpressed by San Giovanni. Overlooking the Mato Valley, the village’s panoramas were charming, but cooperative members almost unanimously felt that the village itself was dreadful. Every morning they had to travel the 31 km from Palermo along a highway they described as a dire construction financed by a 1980s Cosa Nostra money-laundering scheme.

Members had permanent contracts, although there were important distinctions between administrator-members and worker-members concerning levels of remuneration and timing of payment, as well as periods and time frames of actual work. (While administrator-members enjoyed professional terms of continuous work, most worker-members were restricted by their permanent contracts, receiving actual work and pay for only the agricultural season.)

It is important to emphasize the local character of the confiscated land’s restitution process. The cooperatives cultivate land confiscated from significant Spicco Vallata mafiosi. Such mafia figures include Totò Riina and Giovanni Barbetto, one of the figures in this essay’s story, who controlled Cosa Nostra’s heroin trafficking in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Sicilian mafia organized the largest share of the world’s circulation of the drug (Camilleri and Lodato 2002). Collectively, the land tracts these cooperatives managed amounted to almost 600 ha; they include mainly organic vineyards and cereal farms (Consorzio Sviluppo e Legalità 2010; Libera 2009). The fact that the majority of confiscations in Italy took place in the cradle of Cosa Nostra, an area renowned for its *omertà*, was highly symbolic.

According to a series of newspaper articles from the late 1990s that still resonated with both locals and other Sicilians, the 6,000-people-strong village was known as the site of the “800 mafiosi.”⁸ Many mafiosi from San Giovanni became

6. The term “legality” has been a central tenet of the antimafia movement and cooperativism (Rakopoulos 2014:21; see also Santino 2009). “Legality” (*legalità*) can be loosely defined as a sociocultural embracing of Italy’s jural apparatus. In Sicily, in particular, this identity politics developed with a strong antimafia agenda, consisting of urban and university-educated activists who took a lead in the antimafia movement (Schneider and Schneider 2002b, 2005). This mobilization interacted with and incorporated broader social concerns with consumption-driven sensibilities, such as food ethics (Rakopoulos 2013).

7. Law 646/82, passed in Parliament in 1982, suggested the sequestering of mafia property. Proposed by the Communist Party Member of Parliament Pio La Torre (who was assassinated, for this reason, by the mafia), the idea was elaborated into a more encompassing legislation with Law 105/96, which mandated that the confiscated assets be given to social cooperatives and associations. When the assets included land—as they often did—they were bestowed to agrarian cooperatives for production of agrarian produce, to establish a “project based on purity” (Libera 2009).

8. In a widely discussed newspaper article published right after Barbetto’s arrest, a leading antimafia journalist called San Giovanni “the village of the 800 Barbetos” (Fava 1996), implying that Barbetto, a mafioso who, by his own account, had killed “around 150 to 200 people” (Lodato 2006:3), was the tip of the iceberg in a sea of social consensus and kinship links: the “tradition” of San Giovanni was mafia connivance. In 1999, the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* conducted a survey in which it was alleged

pentiti, giving information to the police about the organization and its members. Among these repentants were around 12 major and middle-range mafiosi within the Cosa Nostra clan hierarchy, including the major figures of Giovanni “the Animal” Barbeto and Roberto “Robi” Evola.⁹ Their dramatic confessions earned San Giovanni a poor reputation among Cosa Nostra members, affiliates, and sympathizers as a “village of mafia cowards.”

The idea—indeed, the ideology—that speaking out was both detrimental to mafia and a morally debatable act was shared by policemen, mafiosi, and many ordinary Sicilians. In my visits to nearby Tarini, the “capital” of the mafia, I was regularly looked at with contempt when I told people, even those with no mafia connections, that my research was based mainly in San Giovanni, a place they thought was “cowardly.” In fact, many Tarinesi mock Sangiovese, because Tarini, which sits just above San Giovanni in the Cosa Nostra hierarchy, boasts almost no pentiti. The Sangiovese were considered mischievous and untrustworthy, their mafia being “bubbly” (*chiaccherona*). Sangiovese would often greet such comments with a degree of sarcasm, arguing that “they [the Tarinesi] did the mafia, while we undid it”—implying that San Giovanni was as important to the history of the mafia as Tarini was, as San Giovanni’s pentiti destroyed Cosa Nostra’s power. In short, the village has gone down in local history as the birthplace of pentitismo—far from a positive depiction.

In a place like San Giovanni, confession, pentitismo in particular, challenges the ideological backdrop of rigid taxonomies of silence and talk. It blurs the twofold normativity of antimafia managers and local people, unsettling their boundaries and rendering relational balances slippery. Moreover, it can change the lives of those confessing and those affiliated with them—as demonstrated by our first story, that of *bar* owner Marco Virilia.

Encountering Pentitismo’s Aftermath: The Story of a Bar Owner

I met Marco Virilia through Adamo, a 40-year-old Sangiovese agricultural worker-member of a cooperative, as well as through his friendship with other co-op workers. It was a fruitful contact: indeed, I spent a formidable amount of my time in Sicily in his *bar* (in Italy, “*bar*” is a term used for a café). This was mainly because information circulated within its bounds in the two main forms I came to appreciate on the island: as relations of trust in commensality and as deliberate gossip that provoked reactions. The story of his *bar* can highlight the role of pentiti in distorting lines between concealing and confessing in Sicily. Virilia was locally reputed to

be the most articulate café owner and one of the most sophisticated storytellers in San Giovanni. Antimafia cooperative members often frequented his establishment. Checco, the representative for the two San Giovanni cooperatives, frequently suggested that his fellow Palermitan colleagues took their lunch break at the classy Virilia café. He had established a relationship of mutual trust with Virilia and often visited his café to talk news and trivia. Virilia often congratulated Checco on the work of the antimafia cooperatives. However, Checco was unaware of the “whispers” regarding Virilia, whose local nickname was, tellingly, “Foxy.” When gossip about Virilia’s past eventually reached Checco and he learned of Virilia’s “mafia connections,” he admitted that he felt foolish to have trusted him and resolved not to associate with him thenceforth.

After countless chats, older locals confirmed that 20-odd years ago, before the time of pentitismo, the place had been a meeting point for San Giovanni mafiosi. It was conveniently located at the heart of the newest part of the village, an area that had been built through local mafiosi’s investment in construction during their 1980s money-laundering schemes. Until the mid-1990s, San Giovanni’s primary mafia clans were those of the aforementioned Robi Evola and Giovanni Barbeto. They were first allies and then rivals (because of Evola’s confessions to the police). People affiliated with both clans gathered at Virilia’s venue every evening, rendering the *bar* a meeting place for the village’s mafia, owing to the owner’s personal popularity.¹⁰ Allegedly, according to some of my interviewees, the clan alliance between Evola and Barbeto was sealed at that very café. Certainly, the old establishment was Evola’s favorite hangout.

San Giovanni’s Robi Evola was arrested in January 1993 and became, after Tommaso Buscetta, the most famous mafia pentito. His most celebrated (yet still disputed) confession to the authorities was that then-Italian Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti had met him and undisputed Cosa Nostra leader Totò Riina in 1987 to arrange a nonconflict pact between the state and the mafia (Robb 2009:53). Evola, a low-ranking player in the mafia who reached the organization’s higher echelons, broke the omertà as soon as he was arrested. His “cowardice” was renowned. As a farmer from San Giovanni told me, “Other mafiosi, they had to beat them up to make them talk; as for him, they had to beat him up to make him stop talking.” The information Evola confessed to the authorities allegedly led to the capture of Barbeto and Riina. While in the witness protection program, he returned to San Giovanni to punish the allies of his archenemy, Barbeto, then still at large.

In the late 1980s, before his arrest and while still on good terms with Barbeto, Evola had promised to give Virilia money so that he could buy a bigger establishment. A policeman I interviewed confirmed that Virilia had been “close to Evola

that 60% of *sangiovesi* said the mafia was “a great thing” (Mignosi 1999).

9. Despite—or, rather, because of—the fact that the mafiosi mentioned in this article are public figures well known in Italy, I have decided to use pseudonyms, with the exceptions of mafiosi who have passed away.

10. This was still the case when I did fieldwork in 2008–2009. During my time in San Giovanni, I often visited the original site of the café, which had been renamed Billi, under new management.

and profited from it.” Many of my research interlocutors remembered the construction of this new establishment, a café complete with almost provocatively lavish and decadent decor. “It was too much for the village, too excessive . . . but Evola did it because that was his favorite place,” a local man with a mafia past told me.

Pretending to ignore the rumors around these dealings, I kept visiting Virilia’s café. He had mentioned several times that his activity had been “interrupted” in 1995. This was around the time Giovanni Barbeto went into hiding, following accusations that he had committed in excess of 150 homicides and had played a major role in Cosa Nostra’s international heroin trafficking. Robi Evola was already in the hands of the authorities; facing the first stages of a trial embedded in a broader investigation, he would soon become Italy’s most widely known pentito.

The arrests were allegedly related: the newspapers had speculated that Evola’s pentitismo brought the police closer to catching Barbeto. Virilia’s “interruption” was also seemingly related to the confessions of Evola, which included information that incriminated Barbeto. This event had a major impact on Virilia’s life. In one of our discussions, Virilia, bitterly sipping *amaro*, his preferred tippie, explained how the venue had been destroyed by a serious bomb attack in 1995. Riled by the memory and animated by the strong liquor, he turned his gaze to me and shouted at the top of his voice, as if addressing Evola in person:

I was neither with you nor against you! I have my business, I am doing my things and do not want anything further to do with you. Yes, we can share stuff, but don’t get me involved in your stories: my wife did not sleep for a year after this [the explosion]. We would never just abandon our property, our entrepreneurial project, our *bar*, and leave the village. We wanted and needed to stay, and they [the mafiosi] couldn’t just drag us away like this.

I spoke with several other locals about the event. Narratives from different sources confirmed that “everything was razed to the ground.” Interlocutors who were in their thirties when the incident took place described how the café became a pile of shattered glass and cement overnight. The reason for the attack, my informants explained, was that Evola, by collaborating with the authorities and revealing Barbeto’s hideouts, had unsurprisingly infuriated Barbeto, who immediately turned against those whom he thought were Evola’s “local allies.” As Barbeto explained to a journalist after turning pentito, he felt an increasing hatred for Evola, who, after turning turncoat himself, had even sabotaged the properties of mafiosi aligned with Barbeto (Lodato 2006:153–154).

“Virilia was caught in the crossfire . . . drowned in the bile that pentitismo brought about,” a regular at the café confided to me. Other regulars’ memories of the explosion contributed to the rumors that Virilia had been affiliated with Evola. Being the friend of a person who was both a major mafioso and later a pentito, Virilia became discredited by both sides:

by those sympathetic to the mafia, who viewed pentitismo as a disgrace, and by those with antimafia sentiments, because Evola had been a leading mafioso. Some commented that “Virilia got affiliated and paid for it”; those who believed that he “had invested in mafia contacts” saw in his *bar*’s demise the “natural outcome of such dealings.” Most observed that this was a classic outcome of the treachery and barbarity of pentitismo. “He wanted to fly high,” a 65-year-old farmer commented, while a friend of his insisted that this was an “expected event” connected to the general fluctuation of “developments he couldn’t control.” Everyone I spoke with in San Giovanni agreed that forging links with mafiosi was perilous, as mafia clan relations had been “unstable and unreliable” since pentitismo had become part of the local mafia culture.

In the late 1990s, in order to boost the local economy and the seemingly widespread antimafia sentiment reinforced by Cosa Nostra atrocities (Schneider and Schneider 2003),¹¹ state institutions subsidized private businesses that had suffered the escalation of mafia violence. For Marco Virilia, the bombing of the café was a turning point, after which he considered himself fanatically “committed to antimafia.” “Waving the antimafia flag” showed that Virilia had “crossed sides for interest,”¹² as another local farmer told me. His own take was that Virilia was a victim not only of the mafia but also of pentitismo and was thus afflicted in several ways by the mafia phenomenon.

However, local gossip told a different story, and the police hypothesized that Virilia still had loose relations with the mafia. Therefore, despite his having successfully claimed “security and development” subsidies from the Ministry of Internal Affairs for the reconstruction of the café, the local authorities turned on him. In 2000, Maria Analco, then San Giovanni’s leftist mayor, conducted what Virilia saw as a character assassination campaign against him. Tracking the rumors regarding the explosion, she encouraged a police investigation into what she called “the local mafia-business complex.” The investigation identified Virilia as an “affiliated entrepreneur” in a series of press releases by the municipality.

Analco explained to me in an interview that she appealed to the police “after following a stream of whispers,” some of which stemmed from pentiti confessions. She underlined that these people were “scum, but scum that helped us all make sense of what was going on . . . in general and in the case of Virilia in

11. Such atrocities include a number of assassinations of magistrates and politicians and even terrorist threats against the populace.

12. Tellingly for the nature of the mafia/antimafia distinction, Virilia managed to access European Union (EU) subsidies to repair his property after the explosion. In his application for the subsidy, he stated that he was “antimafia” and registered with the police as a “victim of mafia,” which enabled him to acquire a sum from the EU’s PON-5 program “for reconstruction of private enterprise damaged by mafia.” When he finally received the subsidy at around the same time as the antimafia cooperatives were being established in the village, it led to a new flood of rumors that he had been “paid by the antimafia,” thus gaining him the reputation of an “opportunist” who would go “whichever way the wind blows.”

particular. They helped us understand where we lived, who we were.”

The overlaps and contradictions between mafia and antimafia ideas of speech and freedom were therefore evident from the very start of my fieldwork. It is through such contradictions that one can see how the image of the pentito has become central to antimafia understandings. As much as this holds as an ideology, it is a powerful idiom that can undermine relations (and, indeed, labor relations) developing in the gray area between silence and talk. Before I explore the pentitismo phenomenon analytically, it is helpful to consider an incident where the anthropological presence in the field unwittingly deepens that shady area involving silence and talk. Unpacking further this contradictory gray zone that the ethnographic narrative engulfs itself in will provide a great deal of light into our investigation.

Who Speaks with Whom: Confidentiality and Confession

In San Giovanni, some antimafia-committed cooperative members maintained loose relations with minor mafiosi. While kinship and sociality idioms dominated the life of local agricultural members of the cooperatives, the co-ops’ managers had a different relation to the village, as they came from Palermo and had few to no local ties (see Rakopoulos 2017a). The administrative managers were of the opinion that silence and talk should be neatly separated—a condition that led to frictions within the antimafia cooperatives. This resulted in different and even contradictory ideas within the co-ops about who could speak with whom and whether people were free to talk to others about such interlocutions. Because of such differences among the co-ops’ work teams, ideas on the relative safety of interlocutors and anthropologist were sometimes conflicting.

Consider the case of co-op worker-member Adamo. He and I had established, and had been nourishing, a close connection for some months, based on an instant liking and mutual trust. A lively figure who often raised some eyebrows with his wit and humor when he would chat to managers in the cooperative offices, he had become, apart from a friend, a source of contacts and information. However, he put me in an awkward position when he came up with the idea of introducing me to a mafioso friend of his. His story reveals some of the delicacy of negotiating between the mafia, who demanded total silence, and the antimafia co-op managers, who demanded total self-revelation. Anthropologist and main informant were somewhat stuck in the middle, partaking in both sides of the speech axis.

During my stay in the village, I would spend several hours with Adamo when not working for the co-ops, either helping him with agricultural work in his own plot or lazing in his garden, playing with his children. At no point did he hide that he entertained certain loose liaisons with “old friends from school.” These were “rusty neighbor relations,” as he would put it in his often-whimsical personal jargon. These old friends were protagonists in stories and reminiscences, and a couple of them had been involved in “dealings” and had served time in

“college” (*in collegio*, a favorite San Giovanni phrase to describe prison). But his proposal that I meet one of his old mates, the real small-time mafioso protagonist of one of his nostalgic stories of youth, came as a surprise.

When he suggested that I meet Gioacchino, who had recently been released from prison, I paused for a second and changed the subject after telling him I would call him the next morning to let him know about my “schedule.” That was a euphemism, as in fact most of my schedule involved precisely spending time with people like Adamo—but meeting Gioacchino was a risk I was not sure I could take at that point. I grappled with the question of whether my anthropological commitments to my main research participants prevented me from diving into that liaison. Bound by the regulations of anthropological ethics and safety rules at large, and after I communicated with colleagues in England to ask for their opinion that evening, I called Adamo the next morning and politely denied his invitation.

He was stunned. He commented on my unwillingness to meet his mafioso friend, calling me, in typical Adamo manner, a “pussy” and a “fake anthropologist” and suggesting that “a real man and a proper anthropologist should be into this kind of stuff,” that is, speaking with everyone. He often emphasized the fluidity of relations with mafia, arguing that mafia and antimafia were indeed distinct but not two worlds apart. As he had told me in connection with another instance, “The mafia is eternal in San Giovanni: as omnipresent as the fog is in your London.” While mafia clans’ interrelations are unpredictable, Adamo and others saw the mafia as a constant aspect of local life, much as “family is the center of Sicilian life,” as earlier anthropological research stated in a now-debatable fashion (Boissevain 1966:19; but see Rakopoulos 2017a).

The main feeling of unease I had was not from Adamo’s comments or my own sense of safety, as I understood that that was guaranteed—my friend would not have recommended connecting me with the mafioso if the link were actually dangerous. It was uncomfortable, rather, because of the risk that the cooperatives’ antimafia-committed administrators would find out about that link. That Adamo, Gioacchino, and I had “dealings” would have had to stay a secret; indeed, if the administrators found out, it might have had grave consequences for his position as a cooperative member. Adamo, like everyone else in the co-ops, was not free to express any positive views about people he liked if they happened to be mafia members, let alone bring externals like me into contact with mafiosi. His stance, although not identifying with the silent mafia person, was removed from the views of (most of) the members of the antimafia team who condemned anyone who had relations with the mafia.

I felt that I had to respond—not to his personal challenge and perceptions of what constituted a “real man” and a “real anthropologist” but to our own bond of trust. It was vital that I could keep a secret and maintain confidentiality. A sort of “routine omertà,” to use Adamo’s words, understood in a sense

of active discretion, is a widespread condition in San Giovanni, and I chose to show him that he could rely on my secrecy. I therefore met Gioacchino, an unrepentant middle-aged man who had served 3 years in prison precisely for *associazione mafiosa* (i.e., for the crime of belonging to the mafia as a member of Cosa Nostra). Recently released, he led a peaceful life back with his family in a modest farmhouse right outside San Giovanni. It was there that we met, and I followed his daily routine of bringing the sheep back to their stable. Gioacchino, very polite but with the rough voice of a chain smoker, offered me his homemade ricotta cheese and a bit of bread as we sat just outside the stable on a slightly cold spring afternoon. That day we ended up talking about prison and animal husbandry a lot.

Some days after the meeting, Marelio, a 31-year-old administrative member of an antimafia cooperative, told me he had overheard me talking on the phone and suspected that I had dealings with mafiosi. Finding this situation dangerous, he asked for details. I clarified that I could not share information with him, since I had an obligation to protect the anonymity of my informants. He commented that I was “buying into omertà, the dangerous ethics of the mafia code of silence,” and was running the risk of becoming an immoral person. “Silence is what we are against in the antimafia co-ops,” he continued. “We, co-op members, are exactly the opposite of that. We are about speaking—sharing info.”

He therefore identified what anthropologists perceive as ethical behavior with mafia ethics regarding the exigency of silence. The 34-year-old president of Borsellino co-op, a fiery man called Silvio who was a committed antimafia administrator, heard through Marelio about my alleged interaction with Adamo. Silvio asked to see me and explained that there ought to be “strict lines between the cooperative and the mafia.” He felt my contacts with “the mafia” could put me at risk and suggested disciplining the person that might have led me to establish links with “very shady figures.” Although I did not reveal my gatekeeper’s identity, this discipline was the very danger Adamo had spoken of to me some days before.

Thankfully, Adamo was never disciplined. The co-ops’ administrative council, consisting of five members, did not even have to decide upon the matter, as most members shrugged it off. This might have had to do with the fact that three out of the co-op’s five council members were from Spicco Vallata and thus, to a certain extent, shared views with Adamo about speaking with locals, however “shady,” and about keeping a secret. Luca, the co-op’s president, who was actually from Palermo, told me that same evening in a private exchange at my home that “Marelio is a newbie in the co-op and does not know the village much. He is right in his reaction, he is morally sound, but we all know that local workers have known mafiosi since childhood. It is not something we like, but it is what it is.” Although annoyed, Luca had a matter-of-fact attitude about “certain silences we endure,” as he pointed out.

Episodes like this allowed me to reflect on how the arguably rigid ethics of anthropological fieldwork often contrast with indigenous ideas about respectability in speech, as illustrated by

the fact that confidentiality was conflated with omertà. More to the point, the event is indicative of confession’s valuation by people differently positioned vis-à-vis the mafia’s omertà.¹³ The vignette also shows the relationality of the ethnographer’s research position, which is contingent on each specific relationship rather than a confined moral universe of concealment or confession.

In oscillating between such moral worldviews, I experienced an analogy of the ambivalence associated with confessing that a mafioso might encounter, as well as the onerous consequences of the possible breaking of a bond with a confidant informant. On the one hand, respecting the mafioso’s confidentiality was important. On the other hand, speaking out was a moral thing to do in the context of my positionality as participant-observer within antimafia cooperatives. This morality regarding speech was in some contrast with my broader ethnographic embeddedness in the village and the morality that that situatedness suggested. It was also tainted by the hierarchies within the co-ops, dictated by the managers, who were fewer in number (but more powerful), over the many agricultural workers, including Adamo. Either way, these ambiguities carried a certain normative weight—namely, that confessing the truth about Adamo’s contacts could lead to his potential disciplining. His work life could thus have been imperiled had I confessed my link to the mafioso through him.

The notions of confidentiality and confession play out on an antagonistic field, allowing for clashes rooted in ideas of morality and personhood, and can have corrosive consequences for nonmafia people who entertain relations with mafiosi. These clashes occur beyond the transaction between the individual confessant and the collective institution hosting him (in this case, the cooperative in which both Adamo and I worked). The conflicts in fact take place outside the confessional “booth” (to make an ecclesiastical analogy), and their consequences directly affect the confessant’s relational domain (Adamo’s life, in this case).

The antimafia ethics implied that people like me, involved with the co-ops, should not feel free to speak with just anyone. Instead, when asked, they should feel obliged to share information about anyone they speak with. Both this confessing process and, at the same time, the process of concealing and keeping a secret are interpersonal in their constitution and are largely understood as an honored interlocution between men. This idea was reflected in the San Giovanni Carabinieri¹⁴ marshal’s words to me. The experienced military policeman advised me not to divulge any information that mafiosi shared with me. After all, he explained, he did the same: “I have informers; you have informants. We have to respect their confidentiality.”

13. Such codes of conduct were informed by the cooperative’s distribution of labor (which was in turn influenced by people’s class background). They reveal the often-contradictory morals that separated colleagues in the cooperative, who differed in terms of their work, personal background, and participation in local kinship and friendship networks (Rakopoulos 2013).

14. Italy’s military police, often occupied with mafia issues in Sicily.

The Socialized Confession and the Social Life of Repentants

If the process of secular confession and sharing of information in Sicilian pentitismo can inspire self-understanding (“who we were”) in Analco, a left-wing mayor, and can put a Carabinieri marshal in a respectful position between mafia and antimafia, then one wonders about the powers of such confession. In San Giovanni, life with and around the mafia is, for many, an everyday reality: mafia’s omertà is fused and shared in social settings much wider than the Cosa Nostra echelons (Di Bella 2011 [2004]). Di Bella indicates a holistic line of thinking that encompasses religious and political silences that both engulf and extend beyond omertà. What separates silence and talk seems to also unite these two states, forming *sfumature* (shades). If we focus on the pentito phenomenon, it becomes clear that the state-repentant knowledge “transaction” can thus be located only at the point when a mafioso attempts to “buy” his freedom. It actually, however, belongs to a more complicated world of shade-ridden relations—what I call a gray zone.

To conclude the rite of passage to a new individualist life, the San Giovanni pentiti were given new names and fake identities and today live under extraordinarily sophisticated witness protection schemes in northern Italy or abroad. None came back, and none were ever reported to be in danger—despite the efforts of the press, who wanted to interview them, and of other, loyal mafiosi, who in effect wanted to silence them for good by killing them. Instead of exploring these penitent mafiosi’s “motivations” (which would be an issue difficult to examine ethnographically and even limited in its cognitive significance), we could be observing what repenting does to personhood, social life, and its associated relationality. Virilia’s life was severely affected by mafia confessions, while the repentant persons (Barbeto and Evola) have been effectively terminated as mafiosi, living under new names elsewhere. They have confessed themselves out of omertà and thus irreversibly out of their collective mafia personhood. “By speaking,” as Virilia put it, “they have killed who they were.”

The temporalities of Virilia’s story lend support to what anthropologists have long argued: that personhood is relational by definition and is thus not individualistic.¹⁵ The ascription of technologies of personhood, such as naming,¹⁶ to

the repentants already indicates this. However, existing scholarship seems to refrain from seeing pentitismo as a socialized event and a relational phenomenon, focusing on “individual” “life” choices. This sociology examines the “repentant” as a choosing agent (see, e.g., Allum 2001, 2006), arguing that the individual performs a cost-benefit analysis in deciding whether to exit the mafia or criminality (Arlacchi 1994, 2010).

Inspired by the internal logic of the state (the reasoning of Palermitan courts), Alessandra Dino’s (2006c) volume, a major point of reference on the phenomenon, points out pentiti’s calculating strategies of “narration” (Dino 2006b:xxv). Dino indicates, in the introduction (Dino 2006b:xxi), how attention to the utilitarian nature of the pentito transaction is important. While this methodological point permeates much of the volume, it belies the reflections Dino makes in her own chapter (Dino 2006a), where, using interviews with members of the Italian public, she tries to extend our inquiry beyond what many see as a moneyed opportunism. Both that chapter and the volume at large aim to rethink the religious underpinning of the term “pentito.” The fact that Dino, like Allum (2001:344), appreciates that mafiosi generally care about their organization is not contradictory to these scholars’ general understanding of pentitismo as an individualized exchange resembling a market transaction. But her take, as well as those of Simona Riolo (2006) and Cardella and Macaluso (2006, in the same volume), also designates a more nuanced way to conceptualize the phenomenon, allowing for attention to a broader spectrum of interests and concerns that confessant mafiosi seem to be invested in. The nuances in this take include, for instance, the lapses of pentiti’s memory, the worries over their families, and a sense of defending a real mafia as opposed to a declined one.

While the book is a major contribution that elucidates the broader workings in which (mafia) confession operates in Sicilian society, I find the utilitarian hypothesis hinted in the introduction (that the mafioso “sells” information, breaking omertà to “buy” his freedom and a new identity) not fully convincing. Such a take, contradicted, as I noted, by some of the work undertaken in that very book, vaguely resembles neoclassical economics—providing little fodder for social theory. Comparisons can be made here with Diego Gambetta’s (1993) idea of the mafia as “seller of private protection,” which also borrows from economics and, more specifically, from game theory, a model that has obvious currency among theorists who resort to methodological individualism. The legacy of Gambetta’s analysis claims a universalizing, context-blind applicability over mafia studies (like economics’s überdisciplinary framework), traced in work on transplantations of mafias outside Italy (see Varese 2011).

There are more-nuanced analyses of pentitismo based on exchange theory, however. Anthropologist David Moss sees the pentito phenomenon as a form of gift giving to the state that indicates how secular confession can delineate ways to discuss not only the partibility of the giver, à la Strathern’s sense of the person, but also the partibility of the gift itself (Moss 2001:308).

15. The list is seemingly endless and constantly growing: it spans from Melanesia to Brazil and contains, for instance, Erikson’s early papers “Ego Development and Historical Change” and “The Problem of Ego Identity” (1980) and Susan Geiger’s study of “collective biography” (1996), as well as many works by Strathern on the “dividual” in Melanesia and by Turner on the Kayapo (where society is seen as the collective whose opinion of the person matters and through which the person values and is valued).

16. João de Pina-Cabral has been following practices of naming for some years now. Much of his recent work on the constitution of personhood in the context of human relatedness is pursued with reference to practices of naming, either of the relatedness between named and namer (de Pina-Cabral 2012) or of namesakes and what coincidence of names does to partied identities (de Pina-Cabral 2010).

Specifically, seeing the information the pentito shares as an immaterial asset and accessing it in terms of Maussian exchange theory, Moss underlines how the gift of repentance is personalized (2001:306). A mafioso's repenting cannot be firmly situated in a contractual relation between an individual person (the repenting mafioso) and a collective institution (the state) as a means of exchange. The pentito, although an agent of exchange at the time of confession, also remains enmeshed in broader obligations pertaining to collectivities and associated with the legal fact of being ascribed a new identity (Moss 2001:309–312).

Whereas Moss' framework on personalized information is more holistic than the sociology of pentitismo, it shies away from acknowledging the transaction's embeddedness in broader social relations. The story of Virilia, including the mayhem that confessions caused in the lives of many people, can put to the test this exchange theory, as it implies the exploration of omertà and its associated repentance as phenomena both inextricably interwoven with and embedded in a web of other social relationships that affect the lives of ordinary Sicilians.

Secular Confession

Proving that the confessional "transaction" is embedded in social relations is of course easily agreeable to anthropologists. But the social life of confession—that is, what the pentitismo "transaction" does to Sicilian social relations—deserves more-detailed analytical scrutiny. What I am concerned with here is confession's intellectual genealogy and how its corrosive effects undermine the dichotomies of speech/silence as well as of antimafia/mafia.

Christian confession (called the Sacrament of Penance in Catholic dogma) takes place not in the open but in a small, enclosed booth. This spatial isolation guarantees that the penitent can confess anonymously but also allows for an individualization process. In Foucault's terms, confession is a discourse ritual central to the making of the modern, Western subject (Carr 2013:35). The management of time and space in the booth erases the social scenery of the confessional utterance (Carr 2013:37). Crucially, the penitent remains isolated from his or her environment and locked out from his or her relational personhood in a faceless correspondence with a major religious institution. The Catholic confessional format thus establishes a spatial form that isolates the person from the outside, opening up a direct line with God (the real addressee of the penitent's speech, as per Robbins 2008:428). This is a process designed to decollectivize the relational person and atomize him/her in a solid self.¹⁷

17. While I acknowledge the importance and potential contribution to our anthropological understanding of an Austinian performativity of words (what language, and indeed confessional discourse, does), I avoid, like other mentioned anthropologists, the attribution of "psychological inner states." This can be tackled more firmly if we accept, with Robbins, "not knowing the other's mind" and focus on what our interlocutors do with the information they confess.

The iconography and associated symbolism of mafia-related official or informal confessions might be Sicilian variants of a larger phenomenon, whereby Catholicism frames social action in Italy (Ben-Yehoyada 2015:192), as well as Italian variants of neoliberal individualism (Muehlebach 2013). Restoring the sacred amid secular modernity is part of a broader framework of recasting the individual as a person dependent on the words and deeds of other persons (Smart 2010). This is particularly acute in Italy, especially in the context of confessing. The structures of religious practices and thought pervade the secular universe of Italian dealings with the state—whose very bureaucracy was partly derived from that of the Vatican—as the state entertains a millennial relation with the Holy See. In Rome, for instance, the conditional amnesty for construction work done without planning permission (*condono edilizio*) has a strong ecclesiastical basis modeled on Catholic indulgence (Herzfeld 2009a: 132–133). One can reflect on and resituate how the idiom of pentitismo is part of a larger phenomenon (Herzfeld cites the term "*perdonismo*") that is found throughout Italian Catholicism's political underpinnings and connotations.

To mimic the Catholic rite of auricular confession when designing the structure of pentitismo was an obvious move on the part of the Italian state. By isolating the confessing person from his or her social relations, the jural process actually annihilates them. In the case of Evola, this destruction concerns his relations with his friends Barbetto and Virilia. However, as the story of Adamo shows, omertà and the demands to break it are not unidirectional in Sicily, and people do not always follow them—even in the face of punishment.

We can benefit from viewing how the state-mafioso relationship is construed (to "save" the penitent mafioso) and how it enters the public sphere (to cause havoc). Like its religious counterpart, secular confession also rethinks the distance between private interlocution and publicization. In Adamo's vignette, information is a trust-based relationship that is established in private but can become public—a metaphor for confession's intersections with the state. While pentitismo has existed since the time of Fascism, it made headlines only after the archmafioso Buscetta's confessions, in part because of the "friendship" he established with magistrate Giovanni Falcone during the confessional process (Falcone and Padovani 2004).

Akin to an anthropologist, Falcone insisted on creating a long-term relationship with his interlocutor Buscetta. This entailed a slow, consensual collection of confessional material, the outcome of face-to-face interlocutions between the magistrate and the mafioso. The publication of this private material had severe consequences for Buscetta's closest relatives, all of whom were assassinated by enraged rival mafiosi (see Lodato 2006). However, it made those person-to-person discussions part of the broader understanding of Sicilian political life in a reflexive way that resonates with Mayor Analco's phrase, "It helped us understand . . . who we were."

Since the case of Buscetta, the configurations of Sicilian pentiti confessions have prompted reflection by the public on the various hidden histories of the Italian republic's treatises

with the mafia (Travaglio 2014). Because of this, private confessions of pentiti offer a means to comprehend the wider workings of Italian public life, both when seen as firsthand material and when filtered through sociological discourse (Santoro 2011:13–14).

The condition of this “private,” face-to-face secular confession has been socialized, given a public life. This entrance of a confessional self-narrative into the public sphere often takes the form of best-selling autobiographies penned by major former mafiosi. Such publicized confessions may be edited by sociologists (as in Arlacchi 2010) or cowritten by mafiosi and journalists (Lodato and Brusca 2006). This established interaction has formed an intersubjective methodology with its own merit, and the moralities it has elicited, in the relations between mafiosi and state officials, have been revisited and praised (Fiandaca and Lupo 2014). Not only can the outcome of a confession be socialized, but social life in its wake can never be the same.

The secular confession of pentitismo cuts off a penitent mafioso from his web of relations. This is a process that compels him to destroy not only the relational backbone on which his mafia personhood relies but also whatever is boxed out of “the booth”—his ties to the secretive brotherhood. This is not dissimilar to the way Joel Robbins (2008) speaks about the Pentecostal cementing of the particled self into an atomized identity: to become sinners is effectively to become individuals. The Melanesian person implodes into an undivided atom through the private act of confession, accompanied by the semipublic ritual of the spirit disco (Robbins 1998:310–311).¹⁸ The mafia person is, to a large extent, a similar case of a foreclosed relatedness that is solidified into an atomized identity when he confesses. The confessional process leads to a catastrophic dissolution of collective personhood, the act of speaking destroying the relationality of the mafia person.

The ideological components of this condition are important: it affects the social surroundings of the mafioso and has corrosive effects related to a confessional tradition borrowed from Catholicism. The pentito confession in Sicily surely affects a (secretive) male brotherhood bound by the collective silence that constitutes the collective mafia person.

The Christian historicity that sees silence as sin and confession as a path to individualization has been fully secularized in Sicilian confessions. The secular repentance in the Italian context invites comparison with Michael Herzfeld’s insights on secular theodicy in his discussion on bureaucracy. Secular theodicy is a symbolic representation of authority by those over whom it is exercised (Herzfeld 1992:39), a mechanism that people use to explain bureaucratic indifference toward their own lives—to accept, in a sense, the disembodied

rhetoric of officialdom. It is “the idiom of grumbling against the state” that people use in order to justify their humiliation by bureaucrats, a “fatalistic” response to bureaucratic obstructionism (Herzfeld 1992:127–128). Convenient in a sense, it provides cosmological ramifications to absolution from personal responsibility (Herzfeld 1992:159).

While it operates in a format of an unequal relation between a person and the abstract jural apparatus of the state, I believe that pentitismo belongs to a different order of secular thinking. This is a nondyadic relation played out in a domain consisting of a dialogical triplet that involves the state, the pentito, and other groups of relations. Such a dialogue can thus be catastrophic for other kinds of relations external to it. Specifically, the confessing process brings forward unsettling processes in workplaces like the antimafia cooperatives or small businesses like Virilia’s café. Rather than a mechanism of making sense of transcendent yet nonreligious apparatuses, Sicilian mafia-related confessions are a secular engagement with others that makes and unmakes social bonds. Instead of functioning as a state-like transactional affair, it is premised in the secularism of everyday interlocations—in face-to-face private conversation entering the public sphere, as shown above.

This condition produces the gray areas that confession both harnesses and operates in. Rather than a passage from silence to speech, from mafia to state, or indeed from mafia to antimafia, people in Sicily treat confession as situational and messy. They learn to navigate their ways around punishments from institutions, avoiding talk and remaining respectfully silent, as I learned liaising with Adamo and Gioacchino. They also find their own place in antimafia rhetoric when affected by the confessions of old mafiosi friends, as Virilia’s vignette showed. The main matter of people’s concern regarding confession or concealment seems to be the effect the act would have on others, rather than its transactional nature.

In addition to its dissimilarities to bureaucracy, secular confession is also different from the Catholic tradition. Instead of the ecclesiastical moiety of sin and salvation, pentiti and the nonmafia people who choose whether or not to confess abide by more perplexing conditions of reality. Such situations can even include the odd anthropologist invited to the choosing game, as we are reminded by Adamo’s story. Their trajectories present people with gray areas where the private/public or concealment/confession dichotomies become blurred. This messiness can include shifting alliances that change their stances, fluctuating conditions that alter their positionality from “philomafia” to antimafia, and a matter-of-fact acknowledgement of mafia’s permeating presence in Sicilian social life.

By acknowledging this ambiguous condition, we challenge the firm duality of concealing/revealing when addressing the social life of confession associated with institutions (the church, the state, and the mafia). Mafia influence in Sicilian life cannot be read in polarized ways; indeed, it affects many who allegedly partake in antimafia activity as well as those around

18. While private confession is the basis of lawful personhood, successful possession during a spirit disco is what provides individuals with the proof that they have achieved such personhood. The private act of confession is necessarily linked to the very public, extroverted, and even paroxysmic dance within the church’s ground (Robbins 2004).

them. This is particularly the case with instituted silence, an attribute not exclusive to mafia but one that mafia and anti-mafia people can share in abstruse ways, involving people, like this anthropologist, seemingly working primarily with what appears as “the one side” of the two: antimafia.

Conclusion: Gray Zones

Borders between silence and talk are intellectual and political projects—they do not explain reality but instead call for exegesis. While the ideology of pentitismo implies that when one speaks, one shifts sides, people navigate their ways around omertà and speech, ascribing different validations to confessional processes, a condition that can embed anthropological ethics within intricate gray zones.

The raw material elicited from pentiti confessions, the ritualistic nature of these secular confessions, and their transformative effect on the confessing persons constitute matters of anthropological concern. It may thus come as a surprise that pentitismo has not been a matter of inquiry in the anthropology of crime and criminalization (see the excellent recap by Schneider and Schneider 2008; cf. Moss 2001). This essay addresses this lacuna and traces Sicilian confessions to their intellectual genealogy, comparing them to Christian and secular conceptualizations of confession. This comparative practice seeks the ideological domain that forges practices of silence and confession.

The practical entanglement of mafia and confessional idioms borrowed from religious practice is a reality in and of itself, stretching temporal consciousness (Palumbo 2004). But unlike theodicy and personal ethics, which rely on the person's relation to an ecclesiastical or statal institution, confessional secularism relies on the confessant's local life. It is because of that form of secularism that confessions also have an enduring aftermath for others as well as a blurry shape that allows for navigation between categories (mafia and antimafia). Confession in the Sicilian gray zone cannot be understood outside the effects it has on the social sphere.

Sicilians fail to abide by absolutist terms (omertà and pentitismo, silence and talk), and personhood is negotiated beyond such polarizations in the resulting gray zone of silence and talk (Di Bella 2011 [2004]). While Sicilians in the stories I have included do often hold to the ideology of two opposed, clear-cut worlds of silence and talk, their trajectories and life histories cross the border between omertà and confession. These people need to choose sides in an existing system of opposition that does affect their lives—but side takings become intertwined as people try to make sense of the ideologies of talk and silence that they live by.

A mafioso's confession—like any type of confessing and repenting, even if seen in terms of exchange—is relational. The effects of mafia repentance are manifold, causing havoc in the lives of ordinary Sicilians associated with mafiosi. Investigating this social life of confession, this essay has juxtaposed a framework informed by the unsettled web of relations condi-

tioned by mafia with debates on confession and its deleterious consequences (Rumsey 2008). The act of speaking destroys the relationality of the mafia person and, in consequence, proves toxic for other relationships in which the mafioso is invested.

Although largely ideological, there is obviously a value in seeing what both omertà and pentitismo do—but for this reason precisely, it is useful to see them as ideologies, not dismissing them but assessing their real action on the ground. This practice called for a submersion that brought about a reflective move in the story of Adamo and Gioacchino. It entailed thinking back to our own anthropological positionality in the field, especially when that underscores the ideological compositions of certain dichotomical normativities. The ethnographic encounter, rather than undermining or solidifying the normative domain of talk and silence, has shown how in flux these terms are on the ground. Navigating across anthropological ethics and relations with interlocutors in the field seems to reflect people's own practices of steering across norms of speaking and silencing in Sicily.

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Comments

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Whispers Ethnography in Sicily: A Confession

Theodoros Rakopoulos's article investigates the social life of mafia confessions in a village in western Sicily that is considered the “birthplace of pentitismo.” San Giovanni in Val di Spicco Vallata is only a pseudonym, but it clearly references one of the historic homes of Cosa Nostra that went on to become the cradle of pentitismo in the 1990s and, in the new century, the adoptive home of the branch of the Sicilian antimafia movement that has invested in the social and economic recovery of land confiscated from mafia groups in an effort to imbue civil society with a “culture of legality.” Rakopoulos's field of research is thus inevitably slippery. There are two ethnographic vignettes in the paper that help illustrate

the inherently transactional character of confessions by former mafia members and the effects of breaking the code of omertà as felt in the daily relations of people living and working in the village, including the anthropologist himself.

While Schneider and Schneider (2003, 2005) deserve credit for having identified the distinguishing line between mafia and antimafia values and practices, Rakopoulos certainly deserves credit for reweaving their integrated history. To do so, he delves into that restless social *agon* in which people are required to maneuver—without ingenuousness—among “concealments and [partial] revelations,” the terrain Berardino Palumbo explores so well in his work in southeastern Sicily (Palumbo 2009). What I would like to focus on here is precisely the methodological reflection Rakopoulos offers when exploring the “ethnographic frailties” in engaging with concealing and revealing (*infra*). Although this is not a new issue for anthropology, it is worth exploring in more depth the dialogic limits of the relationship between secrecy and transparency within the specific social setting the author examines. I am convinced, in fact, that the ethnographic impasse in which he found himself provides more insights than his text suggests. The ambivalent code of transparency and secrecy the anthropologist is required to maintain in the field and the difficulties he faces in meeting expectations are noteworthy—as Rakopoulos is aware—not so much because they raise ethical dilemmas for research but because they allow the ethnographer to explore profound dimensions of the context under consideration. But what dimensions?

“Secrets”—as an interesting special issue of *Current Anthropology* titled “The Life and Death of the Secret” noted—“are communicative practices of telling and silence that regulate access to knowledge” (Manderson et al. 2015:S184). In his paper, Rakopoulos describes finding himself in the challenging situation of not knowing whether to accept an invitation from Adamo, one of the local members of the agricultural cooperative heading the antimafia movement he studied in Sicily, who meant to introduce him to an old friend, a small-time mafioso from San Giovanni who had just been released from prison. Considering the proximity of both actors (the anthropologist and his confidant) to the local antimafia circuit, the first as an activist and the second as a participating observer, Adamo stresses how important it is that the meeting remain secret. However, it takes only a couple of days for the news to begin circulating among other members of the cooperative (as far as we know, because one of the managers of the co-op overheard a sentence the anthropologist whispered on the phone). This immediately triggers a reaction within the social space both Adam and Theodoros move in, the former with more skill and experience seeing, as he has always lived in San Giovanni and is in charge of not only the meeting but also the communicative regime governed by ambivalence used to manage the relationship. The anthropologist thus sees the situation getting out of hand, fears ethnographic engulfing, and so hesitates; he then rightly seeks to shift the delicate circumstances in the field to his advantage in order to strengthen a nonpolarized reading of the

relationship between mafia and antimafia in the Sicilian context. However, the reader remains doubtful as to whether the researcher, in order to thoroughly shift from “anxiety to method” (Devereux 1967) in his anthropological work, ought to have taken more fully into consideration “the secret’s *mise-en-scène*” he ended up in the middle of. Perhaps if had done so we might have developed a deeper understanding of the performative aspects of the confessional logic this paper explores.

In my view, the space created by what might be read as the “staging” of the scandal surrounding the risky encounter with a local mafia subject appears to resemble less a shadow “zone” as Rakopoulos defines it and more a “line” like the one Joseph Conrad evokes in his famous novel *The Shadow Line: a Confession* (2002 [1917]). I have in mind the moment of transformation and passage that enables people (and even more so, anthropologists who seek to grant meaning to the forms of agency of a group of people capable of navigating between talk and silence in a “hyperspace” characterized by mafia penitismo) to take note of their own independence, overcome the guilt associated with their individual ethnographic positioning, and—at the cost of employing “uninhibited” research methods (Bouchetoux 2013)—decide to confront the (perhaps “irreversible”) destinies of those who construct their human dimension by combining “disorder” and “legality,” just as occurs in other postcolonies (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006). My appreciation for Theodoros Rakopoulos’s work makes me hope that he is capable of giving us an ethnographic description that crosses this threshold, perhaps by leveraging the “stream of whispers” (*infra*) that lies between talk and silence in Sicily.

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A couple of years ago, rumors circulated in Aliporto in western Sicily that Totò Panino had been seen around town. Panino, who according to his own testimony had killed around 40 persons before becoming a pentito, was so central to key trials in the province that people called him “the Buscetta of the Aliportese.” This allusion had carried with it assumptions about the irreversibility of secrecy and alliance, which Buscetta’s own 1984–1985 testimony had fixed in public and professional memory. Panino’s pivotal involvement in “mafia wars” in at least two towns in the province made his revelations particularly costly to the organizational well-being of the mafia. How could he have been walking “free like the air” in his hometown?

This conundrum came out in many conversations that summer and autumn, when I was conducting fieldwork in the Aliportese. Antimafia activists and victims of mafia harassment, as well as mafiosi’s acquaintances, all pondered the seemingly paradoxical state of affairs. Everyone assumed that the head of the organization in the province was reigning high.

If Panino was walking freely, “it had to mean” either that the head of the organization was not that strong or that he had no issue with Panino’s liberty. The first option did not seem reasonable to anyone I spoke with. Yet the alternative only opened more questions. If the head of the organization was fine with Panino’s freedom, it “must have meant” that Panino had not “really hurt” the organization; that his initial collaboration was “a show.” But this would have meant that Panino was not really the Buscetta of the Aliportese, and everyone thought he was.

These concatenating questions charted the political anthropology of knowledge that Theodoros Rakopoulos persuasively critiques. Pentiti’s revelations are only as valuable as their side switching is drastic. In this segmentary understanding of knowledge, a clear border separates and distinguishes the state and the mafia, a border that people can supposedly cross only once (Rakopoulos 2015). As Rakopoulos shows, both sides are invested in inflating the bipolar value of secrecy. This serves in keeping people from “talking too much,” and it serves in claiming that whenever they do talk, they speak the truth of the organizations they oppose by speaking out. Yet, like any other segmentary model of reality, it reduces the complex, multi-dimensional web of relations (assumed, made and broken, projected, hoped for) into one dimension—that of reciprocity, alliance, and forged brotherhood (Mahmud 2014; Muehlebach 2012; Palumbo 2013*b*; Rakopoulos 2016).

In this fascinating article, Rakopoulos shows how the “secular confession” of mafiosi’s collaboration with state investigators carries “corrosive effects [that] undermine the dichotomies of speech/silence as well as of antimafia/mafia,” and he shows why we should treat the area that the state and the mafia share as a “gray zone.” Here, as in other cases of antistate organizations (Schneider and Schneider 2002*a*), people’s relations are framed as obligating fraternity of the type that usually carries metaphors of blood. Equally revealing, when people want to doubt someone’s motives or sincerity, they judge their actions as self-interested, “tit-for-tat” exchange. Mafiologia shares with the running anthropology of knowledge this tendency to see social relations as made of dichotomous reciprocities and the dissolution of such relations as individualizing exchange. It is this view of the antimafia-mafia relationship that permitted the success of the judicial paradigm that brought about the turning point in the criminalization of the mafia during the long 1980s (Schneider and Schneider 2005). Here, I would suggest that the ideology of pentitismo revolves around not just “silence as sin” but perhaps “organized sin.” In this context, silence marks something much less individual—akin, perhaps, to the kinds of witchcraft and devil-worship accusations that the inquisition once entertained (Ginzburg 1989)—that furnishes some critiques of antimafia investigations (Schneider and Schneider 1998; Sciascia 1990).

For this reason, the most illuminating moment in the essay, in my opinion, comes through in the Carabinieri marshal’s advice to Rakopoulos regarding what to do with the information that a mafioso had given him (and that his antimafia

superiors asked him to divulge). The marshal treats such information as similar to what he manages in his own investigative work: “I have informers; you have informants. We have to respect their confidentiality.” By casting the mafioso’s relationship to the anthropologist as that of informant/informer, the marshal marks the hierarchy that it involves (in that framing) as well as the liberties that such hierarchy would entail for the anthropologist. The marshal should know. The liberty he offers is of the sort that certain Carabinieri officers have been infamous for taking and that has often frustrated antimafia judges and investigators (Fiandaca and Lupo 2014).

The marshal’s framing of the mafioso as informant charts a diagonal social relation for the mafioso’s words. It offers a diagonal trajectory that pierces through this segmentary ideology of knowledge and secrecy. In other words, the marshal turns the mafioso’s speech from the marker of Us/Them into something that could change hands without fixing alliances or identities. As such, it illuminates the relational lay of the land in the “gray zone”: made not only of stretches of reciprocity and islands of exchange but of redistributive hierarchies as well.

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Rakopoulos has achieved two goals with this discussion. On the one hand, he has usefully challenged the tyranny of binarism in the analysis of both politics (mafia-antimafia) and language (speech-silence), showing how both are interlinked spaces for the negotiation of possibility (though I prefer some notion of dialectic, residually binary though it may be, to the vague and static-sounding possibilities of a “constant gray zone”). On the other hand, he has brought the analysis of a local ethical domain—one often but misleadingly construed by officially minded observers as the antithesis of ethics—into direct comparison with the ethics of our own discipline, showing thereby that ethical choices are always socially embedded and that they are therefore irreducible to the language of a simplistic moralism or bureaucratic questionnaire. It is also useful to be reminded that acts of secular repentance are grounded in a recognizable cultural idiom and represent dramatic instances of what at other times might have been petty betrayals not identified specifically as breaches of omertà.

Although in his cautions about Austinian performativity Rakopoulos risks confusing intentions (ultimately unfathomable) with effects (often observable), we are in agreement that anthropologists should not claim to know, or guess, the contents of social actors’ thoughts. Yet a new dualism potentially infects Rakopoulos’ argument when he opposes the privacy of religious and institutional models of repentance to the social basis of the confessional model described here. The personal and the social are not mutually exclusive. Privacy,

like secrecy, can be an intensely public matter (Herzfeld 1985:197, 2009b). The idiom of *pentitismo* is modeled on the Catholic discourse of repentance—on this we fully agree—but the privacy of the confessional booth can be as much of a public performance as the mediatic secrecy of the *pentito*, and it is equally capable of generating socially dangerous consequences. The act of confession means that one is stepping away from the nexus of doctrinally unacceptable cunning and aggression that mark masculine sociability in this and similar societies. Such is the rhetorical frame into which the state's functionaries drag the supposedly repentant mafiosi. Discrediting them with their erstwhile colleagues resembles the wedge a priest tries to drive between sinners and a society that applauds their peccadilloes.

Speech acts of repentance never take place in a vacuum. Malicious gossip may follow the sighting of a penitent in the confessional booth; indignant chatter—often dangerously consequential, as Rakopoulos shows—typically follows the revelation that a locally familiar mafia operative has decided to sing to the authorities. A Cretan animal-thief who “confesses” his misdeeds in a coffeehouse is boasting, or so he apparently believes, to a sympathetic local audience; but, if he misjudges his audience, or especially if he falsely denies a theft to the victim after being put on oath, he may instead be inadvertently fueling the victim's thirst for revenge. Those few who instead confess to a priest—and priests are assumed to be incapable of keeping secrets—may be setting themselves up for no less dangerous a betrayal (Herzfeld 1985:203, 239–243).

The difference between religious confession and the secular performances of mafia is thus one of degree rather than of kind, as we would expect from a socially common metaphor such as this. All metaphors—and *pentitismo* is metaphorical confession—are by definition imperfect. That is why they are conceptually fruitful; we should resist the closure implicit in the reductionist treatment of religious and secular discourses as mutually incompatible, especially in countries, like Italy, where the religious and the secular are indissolubly intertwined. Rakopoulos perhaps strains too hard to separate the two when his own argument would be better served by recognizing their reciprocal fungibility. It is surely true, as he says, that the act of speaking takes the penitent mafioso out of the realm of local social relations on which the very concept of mafia relies; but confession to a priest similarly undermines the autonomy of local sociality and places the penitent at risk of being removed from the comforting intimacy of everyday sin. The religious penitent also runs a considerable risk, sometimes no less serious and certainly no less social than that of the mafia *pentito*, should the priest conform to the stereotype and fail to hold his tongue.

Rakopoulos's description of social relations in San Giovanni thus also implies that we would do well to investigate the social consequences of acts of confession in the religious domain. While such acts are ostensibly private, they resonate socially—even, on occasion, to the point of discrediting the church as a social institution. In an example that allows us to

make use of a piece of deception that would not easily pass muster with a social-science ethics committee, Nicotri (1993) tells how in a series of confessional booths he adopted several roles, mostly those of wealthy corporate operators, in order to discover how easily the priests might themselves be easy prey for temptation; in exposing dishonesty, he adopted what a dogmatic view would have characterized as a dishonest move itself (“set a thief to catch a thief,” in the popular saying; see also Gilsenan 1976:206–210).

The story of San Giovanni as Rakopoulos tells it makes nonsense of a Manichaean world view. Ethical opposites, as he demonstrates, require each other. In the framework of any system of complementary opposition (see, notably, Needham 1960), however, that means that they must exist *as* opposites while speaking to a shared social logic. The verbal pairing of mafia and antimafia makes this condition abundantly clear. If such a common ground did not exist, the religious basis of the confessional metaphor would make no sense either to the people of San Giovanni and their detractors or to the anthropologists who seek, sometimes (as Rakopoulos suggests) by suspending the formal rules of their own ethical universe, to understand its significance.

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There are many facile binaries that Rakopoulos's beautiful article on the social life of mafia confessions undoes, the most obvious being the binary between silence and talk, which maps onto mafia and antimafia, respectively. Rakopoulos situates this binary—so important to those committed to the revelation of information regarding organized crime and thus to the morality of talk—in both space and time. The state-mafioso encounter through *pentitismo* emerges from within the thickness of Sicilian everyday life, which is already organized around complex commitments to concealment and revelation. While the state-mafioso relation appears as disembedded, since it takes the form of the confessional, it is in fact embedded within the deep socialities of social and familial obligation, friendship, fears of repercussion, and anticipated revenge. Yet *pentitismo* must also be emplaced within much longer genealogies of silence and masculinity in the southern Italian context, where the capacity to stay silent—*omertà*—has long been understood as a marker of manliness.

This makes the categorical distinction between speech and silence a relative one—deployed situationally and contextually. The open secret, in short, is that many, including the anthropologist, get pulled into the vortex of *omertà*-like relations, where silence (and the necessity to be able to trust someone to be silent) reigns. The antimafia cooperatives, who might in one instance accuse the anthropologist of having

fallen for the dangerous logic of *omertà*, might in others shrug off the fact that there are certain silences that simply need to be “endured.” Rakopoulos even finds the local policeman to be an unexpected ally (“I have informers; you have informants”). We learn that talk—on the part of the mafia, on the part of the anthropologist—can, like silence, destroy, even “kill” social relations.

There are other binaries that lurk more subtly in the background of this article and are similarly undone in powerful ways, such as that between market and other kinds of transactions. Rakopoulos here takes to task the methodological individualism that has crept into some scholarly assessments of the state-pentito relation, which tend to read this relation as a kind of utilitarian transaction where information is sold and freedom bought like commodities. In fact, we learn, these transactions cannot be disambiguated from their associated relationality. The relation between the state (say, in the figure of Giovanni Falcone, one of the high priests of Italian legality) and its Others (here in the figure of the archmafioso Tommaso Buscetta, the monster turned quasi-ethnographic informant) can be quite intense, intimate, long-term, and based on a transactional logic that is more Maussian than Smithian.

Speaking of Italian legality, another compelling subtext in this piece concerns the binary between mafia and antimafia, or mafia and the state. Rakopoulos deftly shows how this binary is in fact an ideological vehicle through which an important reality is masked—that the mafia is “scum” but is also “us.” The categorical distinction between mafia and antimafia must thus constantly be asserted through the performative morality of transparent speech (“We are about speaking—sharing info”) even as this distinction can barely be upheld in everyday practice. Indeed, the mafia is both dark underside and alter ego of the Italian state and its street-level workers that include the antimafia co-ops and the local police: an alter ego that must be repressed even as its innermost core must be forcefully pried open through the revelatory tactics of the state. There are two kinds of virility at stake here—that of the state, whose power is constantly threatened by organized crime and whose legitimacy hinges on its capacity to penetrate the mafia’s innermost secrets, and that of the brotherhood of *omertà*, whose virility hinges on its capacity to stay silent. Taken together, we encounter a state locked into a complicated embrace with its Other; evil is shrugged off in some moments and exorcized at others.

And, speaking of priests, Rakopoulos, finally, astutely disentangles the binary between the secular and the sacred. The binary is troubled in his discussion of the clear connections between Catholic penitence and pentitismo, which mimics the form of the sacred bond between sinner and priest. It is also undone in his insistence that the political theology of the Italian state has since its inception availed itself of Catholic techniques of rule. Even the scholars whom he criticizes for their methodological individualism might in fact be buoyed by a subliminal Catholicism, insofar as they misread individualized penance and confessional form through their neoliberal analytics. Finally, the members of the antimafia co-op’s ad-

ministrative council are, as Max Weber might argue, quite Catholic in their shrugging off of the anthropologist’s possible illicit relations with the other side. After all, as Max Weber argued, Catholicism, unlike Protestantism, is characterized by cycles of sin, repentance, and atonement, only to be followed by renewed cycles of sin. Sin, in other words, tends to be shrugged off more easily in Catholicism, since it will inevitably be followed by repentance and atonement. From this perspective, it is really Catholicism all the way down. Indeed, one might go so far as to argue that the Catholic Church is the mother of all *omertà*: two thousand years’ worth of secrets and sin, hidden away by a silent brotherhood of priests.

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In my opinion Theo Rakopoulos’s essay provides a useful contribution to the anthropological study of Cosa Nostra. In fact, Rakopoulos chooses to investigate, from an ethnographic perspective in a specific local context, the phenomenon of the so-called pentiti. He focuses on the effects that the decision of some mafiosi to collaborate with justice have on their own social networks and, more in general, on those active in the investigated context.

Such a perspective produces some positive effects for an understanding of mafia. First, it allows a (possible) way out of a certain *cul de sac* in which studies on the Sicilian mafia seem to have been entrapped during the past two decades. In the early 1990s, some historic works (Lupo 1993) caused a paradigm shift, forcing social scientists (anthropologists *in primis*) to acknowledge the associative, unitary, and structured character of Cosa Nostra. This institutional shift produced, at the same time, useful critics of the traditionally instrumental theses of some Sicilian folklorists (Pitrè), as well as a debate on the “culturalist” readings provided by classical ethnographic works during the 1960s and 1970s. Even if such a change in the interpretive frameworks has produced important analytic results, by the end of the mafia “wars”—that is, when Cosa Nostra chose a militarily low profile, re-inmerging itself among the meshes of Sicilian society—the limits of exclusively historic and/or institutional readings had become more evident. Since then, the need to go back to sociologically and culturally thick analyses, close to the practices and the experience of those “native” people who are (also) men of mafia, as well as those who explicitly oppose them and, finally, the many who live together with people belonging to this criminal organization, has become more and more urgent.

Taking a look in the middle of a local community characterized by the daily presence of mafiosi and antimafia activists, and more generally by social networks that crisscross factions, civic associations, and secret societies, Rakopoulos meets this renewed interpretative sensibility. In this sense, he provides

an interesting contribution. The choice to focus on the role of the pentiti and on the “catastrophic” effects that their revelations have on a stratified and interconnected social fabric has the effect of conjuring up some of the interpretative limits of many sociological, criminological, and psychological studies conducted in recent years with/on justice collaborators. In a certain sense, through the study of (on/with) the “repentant,” scholars (nonanthropologists) and journalists have tried to come closer to the experience of men (more rarely women) more or less formally connected to mafia organizations. Very often, however, this has been done without a thorough methodological and epistemological reflection on the peculiar nature of the “subject”/(subject) “object” relationship. This relationship is always built within an institutional space from which it is impossible to expunge the juridical-penitential connotation and with respect to which the positioning of the researcher can never be either neutral or indifferent. To some extent, one might also say that many of the “sociological” works on/with the pentiti are, on the one hand, a rib of the judicial inquisition and, on the other, a ghostly evocation of a (religious) confessional relationship. Without, however, denying the value of such studies, Rakopoulos’s paper has the merit of reminding us of these limits and trying to reflect on them. The author stresses how those borders (between good and evil, an inquisitor and a criminal, a confessor and a pentito, the citizens and Cosa Nostra), which studies on/with pentiti often take unconsciously and uncritically for granted, collapse whenever we observe the social and practical effects that “confessions” have on a concrete social reality.

I fully agree with this choice and with much of the resulting interpretative outcomes. I find, however, that Rakopoulos’s paper ultimately blames the “sociological” choice, or, rather, the choice to read the effects of confessions (only, or chiefly) in terms of social networks and positions, including those allowed to the glance of the ethnographer. This choice has the effect, on the one hand, of simplifying the understanding of the “cultural” dimensions of the social effects of repentants’ action and, on the other, of projecting any analysis of such dimensions on the level of an abstract and generic Italian Catholicism—so fashionable in a number of contemporary American ethnographies. Such a tendency appears to be related to the need to evoke the so-called French and/or Italian theory more than to urge of analysis of the Catholicism(s) practiced in specific social contexts. I mean, in short, that Rakopoulos’s sociographic analysis of the “confessional dimension” of the investigated field ends up by short-circuiting the possibility of getting meanings closer to the social practices of the protagonists and, above all, to the experience of the same researcher. What I think Rakopoulos’s ethnographic data clearly show—and what he does not seem interested, or willing, to grasp—is that what is at stake in the situations he points at is something more complex and, I would say, more interesting than the tactical and/or the strategic positioning of an ethnographer or, on a more general level, a confessional characterization of the Sicilian and Italian public space.

When an antimafia activist tells you that he has connections with that world that he formally fights, what becomes problematic is not simply a substantially external distinction between mafia and antimafia or the “simple” tactical/social positioning of an ethnographer. I suppose that when he invites you to meet a mafioso “friend,” he is telling you something like “Hey baby, take a walk on the wild side”; that is, he is both inviting you and challenging you to follow him on the other side of that moral fault that separates the interior from the outside, the not completely legal from the not entirely illegal. It is not just about entering a so-called gray zone or crossing the threshold of “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 1997). The request (and the interpretative problem) is to show yourself capable of moving in a different “moral economy,” where a specific vision of the male Self (a man equipped with the necessary force to enact forms of agency different from those the “informants”) assumes, or imagines to know, what is to be considered proper in the anthropologist’s world:

You, coming from outside, from Europe and its modernity claims, you, pretending to understand us, are you really able to come and see how we are and what do we really do? What kind of man (male) are you? You, claiming that you want to study the mafia, how do you act when I give you the concrete opportunity to make a first, timid step, into what I know is in your opinion the dark side of my modernity?

Such a borderline is never static, but it is always established through cultural and social transactions. The majority of those (men) with whom I have worked myself in Sicily were able to move with ability and elegance along and through this border. At the same time, they used to play a multiple positioning game, often asking their interlocutor to aid and abet them.

In such a scenario, those antimafia activists who represent themselves as shocked by the possibility of coming into contact with mafiosi make the border harsher—so assuming not only a well-defined ideology but also ideas about the social world, the self and its agency, seen in line with a supposed ethical modernity. In this way, it seems to me that, at the end of the day, they confirm the presence of boundaries that people, including the mafiosi and, more rarely, the same activists, are well able to cross. Such a boundary, the social poetics (Herzfeld 1997) associated with it, and the more general “moral economy” (Asad 2003) within which they are inserted are decisive aspects of a specific “Sicilian” encapsulation in a “global hierarchy of value” (Herzfeld 2004), which has been active in the area at least from the time of the Grand Tour (Palumbo 2013a). We are faced here with a precise historical-cultural and sociopolitical construction—of which the official Catholicism of theologians and philosophers is only one of the many aspects involved. Compared to the peculiar “moral economy” it refers to, and the kind of agency/subjectivity it requires to practice for ethnographic purposes, Rakopoulos’s otherwise interesting paper says little. It is perhaps because of this that, at the end of reading, it leaves me with a sense of intrigued disappointment—not very different, I suppose, from the feelings that the

ethnographer's activist friend had to experience after the author's refusal to meet a mafioso.

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Rakopoulos addresses in his essay a thicket that anyone studying, living with, challenging, or prosecuting organized crime necessarily comes upon: indeterminacy. This indeterminacy is in part generated by the fear, loyalty, and territorialism condensed in the ways the mafia practices *omertà*, the ideological norm to mind one's own business and, if privy to them, keep secrets. As the author points out, *omertà* is not exclusive to the mafia. Rather, it is a phenomenon diffused across many domains in Sicilian life (Di Bella 2011 [2004]). Social and political economic pressures, including the threat of violence, to speak or keep silent blur distinctions between mafia and antimafia, and, I would argue, nonmafia. The affects and interests that entangle residents of a town like San Giovanni bring many sorts of people into contact and can shade into myriad forms that might be called complicity, which in turn can shade into something like conspiracy and enduring criminal association (Pine 2008).

Significantly, Rakopoulos underscores that penitismo is a cognitive tool invented by the Italian state for its own production of knowledge about the mafia, and he shows that it is an imperfect tool that does not end controversy. Revelations do not always prevail undisputed, and they do not always yield full conversions into hoped-for hegemonic "culture of legality." This is in part because contact with the mafia can easily come to mean, for a local public, a contagion that repentance will not reverse: some people cannot ever get clean. And, as Rakopoulos argues, because "secular, social confession" is not equivalent to its perceived purifying religious counterpart, the results of penitismo are unpredictable and "messy." While this cognitive tool legitimates the material-discursive sorting of criminal from penitent, it can render everyday social relations toxic and produce social pollution.

Revelation, confessing and thereby breaking a secret, is not always equivalent to transparency, the absence of secrets. Revelation, while it implies an object, can heighten indeterminacy. It raises the question of whether the teller was or still is complicit, and suspicion can linger around the teller indefinitely. Transparency, while it implies unobstructed vision, can blur the scene. It is the code of ethics of the antimafia group Rakopoulos studied, and it is the ethical code he himself tried to adhere to as an anthropologist. The rigidity of this code threatened to convert both Rakopoulos and Adamo into pollutants by reifying them as a mafia sympathizers.

The territory Rakopoulos entered is a contact zone where some people "live with" the mafia, others get embroiled with the

mafia, and most others endure the silences. In this zone, indeterminacy is the organizing principle, and it even encroaches on antimafia groups. Distinctions often remain elusive and ethics situational, as identifications and representations give way to the qualities and qualia of relation (Pine 2012). Rakopoulos shows that these relations entangle even the magistrature. Giovanni Falcone's efforts to establish a rapport, even a "friendship," with Buscetta in order to cull from him a consensual confession creates, or better reveals, an unsettling imbroglio. Getting close brings the knowledge not merely of who is who but also of who *you* are. Rakopoulos provides this tantalizing suggestion, resonating across Falcone's work, former San Giovanni mayor Maria Anaco's assessment of Falcone's and other magistrates' antimafia work, and Rakopoulos's own fieldwork in this thicket of indeterminacy. It would be interesting to follow this suggestion farther and see where it leads. If Falcone's work was akin to that of an anthropologist, does this imply the converse? How do the anthropologist's questions ripple outside the antimafia group, across social worlds, where transparency is far from the livable norm? How does an anthropologist talking to one person affect other people within that person's network? How does the work of an anthropologist in such an environment of fear and suspicion undermine the anthropologist's cognitive tools? How, like magistrate and pentito, do anthropologist and resident together construct, through discourse strategies, tellers of truth (Jacquemet 1996) or its cognates?

This raises the issue of affect. Sicilian mafiosi, like Neapolitan *camorristi*, generate fear, in part, through the indeterminacies surrounding them: the unknown extent of their power and their never fully realized potential for violence. These indeterminacies are also self-regenerative. They reverberate in everyday talk, leaving ellipses in their wake. Many residents of a territory—in fear, loyalty, indifference, unknowing, or any number of other affects—make do with these dynamic gaps. Some people try to fill the gaps by drawing closer to a perceived center of determinacy, the eye of the storm, a potency where, at least for a time, there seem to be no secrets to be kept or told. Most people, however, keep, share, and tell secrets in the ongoing day-to-day art of navigating this force that has already bound them together in indeterminate ways (Pine 2012). These are the affective (and aesthetic) contours of an environment of secrecy, suspicion, and indeterminacy. In his essay, Rakopoulos begins to trace a force field of fear, titillation, ambivalent tolerance, indignation, and revulsion that necessarily embroils him.

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After the early 1970s breakup of the French connection, Sicily became the strategic hub for heroin traffic to the United States.

This billion-and-a-half-dollar bonanza culminated in a “mafia war” between interior groups, centered in Corleone, and groups in the Palermo region, initially more adept at trafficking because of their proximity to export-oriented orchard produce, seaports, and the regional airport.

The drug bonanza and mafia war further upended the relationship of mafia and state. Speaking similar “languages of order,” mafiosi had helped the state by regulating everyday criminality and labor unrest and by rounding up votes for centrist political parties; the state had helped mafiosi by ignoring their criminal activity and favoring them and their clients in the development of public works. The collapse of this *intreccio* (interweaving) led the mafia to assassinate troublesome state officials—political leaders, police inspectors, and magistrates—only to have each attack trigger a wave of antimafia mobilization, in which the Sicilian judiciary, bolstered by new laws and a Palermo-centered antimafia social movement, successfully investigated and prosecuted mafiosi, culminating in the “maxitrial” of the late 1980s.

A significant prosecutorial breakthrough came as some mafiosi turned state’s witness, breaking with the mafia code of omertà. Many believe that such justice collaborators had self-interested motives—to mitigate punishment, avoid assassination, or take revenge on enemies. Colloquially known as “pentiti,” they are often labeled “so-called pentiti,” suggesting that they lack the moral standing that penitence implies. This notwithstanding, activists in the antimafia movement strongly supported, and continue to support, prosecutors’ use of pentito testimony.

Activists have also launched civil-society projects, one of which derives from a 1982 law providing for sequester and confiscation of mafia properties and their transformation to “socially useful” purposes. As a result, some mafia-owned agricultural holdings became antimafia cooperatives.

In 2008–2009, Theodoros Rakopoulos conducted fieldwork in a village of 6,000 that he calls San Giovanni. Located in the mountains between Corleone and Palermo, it, and its surroundings (Spicco Vallata), were ground zero for the mafia “war’s” protagonists, provoking the local mafia group to split into murderous factions. Nicknamed “the village of cowards” for its unusually high number of justice collaborators, San Giovanni also saw pentito testimony exacerbate local acrimony. A talented ethnographer who closely studied one of the antimafia agrarian cooperatives, Rakopoulos captures how, a decade and more after the crisis of the 1980s–1990s, the violence of those years continued to reverberate.

Most of the co-op managers, ideologically committed to antimafia, lived in Palermo and commuted to San Giovanni. Rakopoulos observed ongoing tension between them and the farmer-members, who, although vetted for antimafia credentials, had grown up with mafiosi as neighbors or owners of confining plots in the countryside. Here and in a forthcoming book, the author delves into the inevitable “gray area” that co-op farmers navigated almost daily. This article also underscores that, in communities with a strong mafia presence, omertà—the

idea that honor requires redressing conflict without resort to the law—extends beyond the mafia. Locals practice discretion, mind their own business, and avoid entanglements that could embroil them not only with state authorities but also with mafiosi.

This article’s main focus is on the contribution of pentitismo to these issues. As the author acknowledges, much has been written about the complicated lives of the justice collaborators—their isolation, difficult relations with family members, temptation to violate the confines of a witness protection program and return home, likelihood of being manipulated by powerful mafia bosses who promise amnesty in exchange for retracting testimony, and the impossibility of knowing whether, as purportedly can happen to religious confessants, their state of mind has changed. Charting new ground, Rakopoulos explores the social effects of pentitismo.

Two vignettes are illustrative. In one we see the repercussions of the mid-1990s bombing of a *bar/café*, carried out by a mafia faction angry that a rival leader, known to have invested in the *bar*, had become a pentito. Whether or not to frequent the rebuilt establishment remained a point of contention at the time of fieldwork. In the second, the anthropologist is caught between a co-op farmer who wants to introduce him to a mafioso and co-op managers who disparage such interactions. More broadly, Rakopoulos contrasts the attitudes of farmers and managers regarding the value of pentito testimony. In the eyes of the former, a “turned” witness provoked unwelcome disorder; to the latter, such witnesses are invaluable to prosecutorial efficacy, the more so if they pull back the curtain on the mafia-state *intreccio*.

In probing these effects, Rakopoulos sets up oppositions that, to us, underestimate the complexities of the two poles. For example, does a concern with pentiti as catalysts of trouble in their home communities preclude a concern with them as individuals, bargaining with the state? By the same token, because in Sicily, as in Italy, confessing to a priest is often opportunistic—because, too, we cannot know a pentito’s state of mind—what does one gain by defining pentitismo as “secular confession”? The most telling contrast is between the mafia’s code of “silence” and the antimafia’s appreciation of open “talk.” As the author himself notes, mafiosi “talk” to the police when it suits their purposes; antimafia activists value collaborator “talk” but, paradoxically, condemn “talk” with mafiosi. These caveats aside, Rakopoulos provides a compelling account of the “gray” middle. That he was able to imagine himself in a role like that of a mafia pentito, anxious about betraying someone close to him, brings home to us the intensity of his fieldwork in San Giovanni.

In the 1960s and 1970s, we studied a rural community south of Corleone. It had a group of mafiosi, a few of whom we befriended. Subsequently, during the 1980s and 1990s, we lived in Palermo city, where we followed the antimafia process and reactions to it. Because our “mafia” and “antimafia” experiences were considerably more distant in time and space than those of Rakopoulos, our moral map seemed manage-

able by comparison. We much appreciate the ethnographic depth of his account.

Antonio Sorge

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Rakopoulos offers valuable insights into the sociological dynamics of mafia confession, pentitismo, in Sicily, in the process complicating our understanding of the phenomenon by turning his attention to its effects on local networks of relations in a small town he calls San Giovanni. His examination of two cases connected with the consequences of pentitismo leaves this reader in awe of his ability to negotiate conflicting sets of expectations imposed by differently situated interlocutors. He does this without sacrificing his research relationships and reflects upon the circumstances he faces in such a way as to remind readers of the promises and perils of the ethnographic encounter. Rakopoulos manages all this expertly, engaging in a well-considered methodological reflection that shines a light on the opacities and obfuscations that define the reality he investigates.

The account Rakopoulos provides is a familiar one, but its contours are subtly presented. It ultimately centers on the classic theme of the relationship of a small, rural community to the wider society that encompasses it, or, viewed from a different angle, that of a city and its various dimensions of officialdom (cultural, political, legal) to a rural hinterland defined by its customary arrangements and socially embedded systems, where everyone knows everyone else and relationships are multi-stranded. Mafia confession and antimafia activism, and indeed mafia itself, play out within this macro-level context, the broad parameters of which, as I am presenting them here, can seem a little simplified. Seeing this dualism not as a forthright opposition between different types but instead as two scales of organization in which the periphery contends with the weight of the outside world that bears down upon it, and as enshrined in the institutions of the state, allows us to see how the relationship is choreographed, how officialdom adapts to the exigencies of the locality, and how a *modus vivendi* is arranged.

This coadaptation has always entailed the willingness of mafiosi and government agents (politicians, magistrates, police) to transact with one another, as they must, inevitably, in the case of an entity that developed, as Blok (1974) described it, “within the entrails of the State.” Indeed, as Rakopoulos reminds us, “talking to the police” does not necessarily entail running afoul of the rules of *omertà*, insofar, I would add, as it co-opts the latter into the universe of the former, and not vice versa. Thus, talking to the police does not make you a pentito, and so the pragmatic rules of social action, as ever, trump the normative ones (cf. Bailey 1969).

But being a pentito takes things too far, as anyone from Tarini would be quick to point out. Tarinese attitudes toward

San Giovannesi—that they are a fallen bunch, *chiaccheroni*, cowardly, not “real” Sicilians—are revelatory for how they call attention to a ubiquitous competitiveness for reputation and status among neighboring rural towns throughout Sicily and Italy. Tarinese local pride, its *campanilismo* (see Bell 1979:151; Silverman 1975:16) vis-à-vis its neighbor, stems from an awareness of what San Giovanni has done, the trajectory it has taken, by renouncing what Tarinesi regard as the endogenous mechanisms that express the hinterland’s alleged autonomy from the state and thereby embracing legality—understood as the law “imposed” by the state—and thus its subjugation by the outside world. This localist rhetoric is just one cultural model of rural Sicily. A different one, strikingly portrayed by Di Bella (2011 [2004]; cf. Schneider and Schneider 2005), is the resentful subaltern’s recognition of a widespread resignation to a bipolarity of rich and poor, strong and weak, *capelli e beretti* (hats and caps), and of the ties of inequality between the two that are maintained through the threat of violence and that constitute the foundation of mafia.

The pentito—a legally compromised mafia actor who has little alternative than to turn informant—precipitates the collapse of an order that inhibited a collective embrace of legality. For nonmafia actors, this embrace allows them to confront a severe reality in which the set-upon become able to claim what they understand to be rightfully theirs—in the current case, agricultural resources, which are transferred to communal use and administration. However, this is not managed without wrinkles, as Rakopoulos shows. For pentiti, confession acts as a rite of separation that disembeds the confessant from closed networks and forces him into an individual relationship to the state. It must represent a terrific ordeal, and the consequences to other groups of relations underscore the incommensurability of this new relationship with systems of collective responsibility that structure the world of the mafia.

This article contributes to the existing literature on Sicily and the Italian south in more ways than one. It is enlightening in its representation of the broader sociology of particularizing versus universalizing forces, the former exemplified by a condition of embeddedness within local structures and the latter by the abstraction of the individual from those same structures. Co-op administrators, Palermitani who are outsiders to San Giovanni, social atoms with no ties to the community and blind to the exigencies of local life, starkly illustrate this dynamic. It is as if, in the late twentieth century history of Sicily, Palermo, “the capital of the antimafia,” a mantle that the city had already adopted by the turn of the millennium (Schneider and Schneider 2003:2), has exerted its influence deep into its hinterland. The reader is presented with a dynamic of change, wherein a system based on violent brokers’ mediation between the local community and the outside world appears to be waning in the face of the emergence of a civil society defined by a commitment to democratic values and the rule of law. For nonmafia actors formerly beholden to the tyranny of endogenous systems, the culture of legality embodied in the antimafia movement constitutes a force of liberation, and theirs is a story worth knowing. I await with

eager anticipation the opportunity to read Rakopoulos's forthcoming book on these and related themes and to learning more about the lifeworld of the characters who populate his accounts.

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I am an active member of a "university in prison" project that the University of Rome "Tor Vergata" has been running since 2006 in the Rebibbia prison in Rome, where I have been teaching cultural anthropology for two years. Besides "common criminals," Tor Vergata has a special class of high-security students in prison for "*associazione*," that, is the crime of associating with others to commit a crime, for mafia purposes and/or drug dealing. Prison conditions for mafiosi should distinguish between pentiti (with many benefits and often released under state protection), people convicted under Article 41-bis (extremely dangerous bosses in maximum security), and "ordinary" mafiosi under Article 4-bis (not 41!) who do not collaborate and have no access to any benefits. While bosses in maximum security account for just 1.1% of the total prison population of 62,536 (according to the most recent available statistics, for 2013, published in 2015 by the Italian Ministry of Justice), detainees under 4-bis account for around 13.9% of the total. They are, in a way, the natural targets of the confessions of pentiti, and I thought it would be interesting to seek their opinions on the article by Rakopoulos.

Detainees under 4-bis emphasize the ambiguous relationship between silence and talking and insist on a point hardly visible in the article, namely, the gap between true collaborators who cooperate for moral reasons and calculating pentiti who do so for their own interests. People who end up in prison because of pentiti may eventually recognize that someone needs to tell the truth once they have changed their mind-set and "culture," but these are exceptional cases. Most pentiti not only act for their own profit but repeat parrot-like the words that detectives and judges put in their mouths. In a word, they are liars; this is the most relevant feature of their speech, and it sets up an impervious moral barrier with no gray area in between. According to Rebibbia students, some informers might not be believed to be telling the truth because they do not give away their mafia network but only admit individual crimes, while others would immediately be trusted as pentiti for giving away their mates and fellows, even when their lies are evident.

Omertà (conspiracy of silence) is always a sign of belonging to a brotherhood, but it is lying more than talking that tears that tie apart. When we read the article in our classroom in Rebibbia, one student was quick to tell me, "You are talking to us now, and you know you can talk as you wish. Think how you would feel if you were talking to a pentito." He was pointing to the climate of general trust they are

willing to share in the class, while eliciting from me an almost obvious distrust for someone whom I should know is keen to lie. I can talk to them freely because they are men of honor, but would I feel so comfortable dealing with a potential spy?

Silence and talking do not mean much, in this sense. You can talk saying nothing, and you can be silent and communicate your will in detail; this is common sense within mafia culture. What matters is the will to withdraw or transmit information and meaning, and that is something that the anthropologist in the field knows well. The web of meanings we call culture is certainly transmitted through signs, but language is just a portion of the semiotic process of cultural communication, hence linguistic silence does not mean the absence of cultural communication.

Anthropologists are not prosecutors; thus, the confessions of pentiti and insights in understanding mafia should not be overestimated. What pentiti can show us is the mafia at the end of its ideological trajectory. I am not saying that they are like the "owl of Minerva," but it is clear that the relational personhood of the mafioso is not only physically but ontologically jeopardized by pentitismo (collaboration with the authorities). Rakopoulos is right when he insists in passing over methodological individualism and focusing on the social consequences of becoming a pentito, but that should not hide the fact that secular confession creates in itself a new atomized subjectivity, no matter the consequences for the rest of their social network. Pentiti have to "give up living," as my students stated clearly and directly.

Lying out of their own interest, pentiti create the individual, as much as silent mafiosi pay respect to their collective identity, but this is just one part of the picture. A student from Rebibbia rebutted that omertà, the fault of the mafia, becomes a morally positive attitude when practiced in the name of the majority, as with state secrets. Yet, in Italy at least, it is not so obvious that state silence is imposed to protect institutions and those who work in and for them. Apparently, some top secrets are there to protect deviated institutions from the outrage of the people.

The same manipulation by institutions lies at the core of another aspect that Rebibbia detainees insisted on, namely, the fact that pentiti are a powerful device in the hands of prosecutors to bring about a symbolic inversion: "When I was out [of prison], I was the criminal. Now prosecutors have the power, and pentiti are the tool for them to act as criminal towards us." They are manipulated not only to fight against the mafia but also for the internal war among prosecutors' offices and professional careers.

To conclude, I should say that just as there is a vast gray area between mafia and antimafia, silence through omertà and talking by pentiti, so there is friction between the silenced bosses of "maximum security" (Art. 41-bis) and the more talkative rank-and-file mafiosi in simple high security (Art. 4-bis). While the big mafia bosses have little to fear from the pentiti, the smaller mafiosi see pentitismo—with its lies, talking, and perverse silences—as yet another terrible tool of the power of the state that keeps them in prison.

Reply

It is always difficult to find the mots justes to thank colleagues who have taken time off their busy schedules to comment on our latest piece of work. I am humbled and inspired by these comments, and, in order to do justice to the refined and holistic way each commenter puts forward their argument, I shall attempt to answer them both one by one and in tandem, in order to highlight their interconnections.

I am grateful to Mara Benadusi for her points (although not in agreement with her when, *passim*, she notes that the vignettes illustrate the inherently transactional character of mafiosi confessions). She underscores how these confessions have a direct effect on the social life of the people involved. Benadusi points out how the essay is revisiting the achievements of work by Schneider and Schneider (and the authors confirm that point) that demarcated the multiple cultures of Sicily in agnostic fashions (Schneider and Schneider 2005), delineating, to an extent, the mafia-antimafia milieus. If the paper, as she notes, has accentuated the intersectionality of these two social areas, I am more than happy with that result.

More generally, the paper achieves—according to the commentators here—a location work for silence and talk, in domains where the two are parts of power projects (and are thus categorically contraposed). Marking the moral boundary across categories of silence and talk is a game of power, and as Jason Pine notes, whatever agency is marked as blurring them (and as unsettling anthropological ethics) can be cast as polluting. That location work on power boundaries—set in the messiness of the everyday minutiae of social life in Sicily—reveals a gray zone that can help us in our pursuits of linguistic and generally communicative delicacy—but also scruffiness. In that way, the paper is in line with Pine's ethnographic attainment in his full immersion in Neapolitan gray areas (Pine 2012). I hope that the essay does in micro—and in a rural and less verbose, more accustomed to silencing, framework—what his book does at large in an urban setting. His work and mine work in indeterminate settings, as he rightly notes.

That indeterminacy has a broader historicity in Italy—as well as in most places anthropologists work, in different ways. Peter and Jane Schneider underline that the “collapse of this *intreccio* (interweaving)” between state and mafia led to mafia assassinations. In San Giovanni and places like it in Sicily and beyond, as Di Bella has noted long ago, silence has a special communicative apparatus that precedes and sometimes interacts with mafia-related omertà. Schneider and Schneider, in their reaction, define omertà as the idea that “honor requires redressing conflict without resort to the law, [an idea extending] beyond the mafia.” That very specific historicity of silence and silencing (mafia murders being an active metaphor of that silencing) provides a backdrop for the ethnographic events here. Note that San Giovanni took center stage in this *intreccio*: Paolo Sorrentino's wonderful docufiction *Il Divo* (a film revered by pro-

gressive media in Italy and abroad) depicts the kiss shared between Totò Riina (Cosa Nostra's then boss, from Corleone) and Italian Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti. The kiss takes place in the presence of one witness only, San Giovanni's own Evola (I refer to the event in the essay; see “Encountering Penitismo's Aftermath: The Story of a *Bar* Owner”); we learned about the event through his confessions. This is a kiss, an *intreccio* par excellence, shared, not exchanged; in line with the essay and the reactions to it, let us keep transactional theory at bay.

In Sicily and elsewhere, if the life of the ethnographer can prove cumbersome or uncomfortable, it is because of the ways that research situatedness “inevitably” interacts with the aforementioned power categories: the need for there to be clear-cut silence and clean-cut talk. Ethnography's theoretical suggestions, then, require their own location work, and in my case that implied “siding” with one such category, at least as a starting point, in the village. Working every day with ostensibly antimafia cooperatives has specific repercussions in how research is conducted vis-à-vis bipolar categories—and, more generally, how ethnography (not a data collection technique, but a theoretical methodology) is embroiled in power and its categories. As acknowledged in the essay, it has been in the interest and functionality of both state and mafia to keep, solidify, rigidify, and reproduce these two ideal-type categories. But when even our gatekeeping to otherness, to the radical alterity—to use a fashionable term—of the dangerous and impure “other” category, is done through an interlocutor who presumably actively works for the one we might feel more similitude with, then the contradistinction of the two—and even assumptions about their symmetry—collapses.

That was the reason I insisted on relating the story of Adamo at such great length in the essay; his witty introduction to an area that is “his,” but only by way of his being a man of the village with a past there, unsettles the political present that separates categories. These categories seem more needed as part of the Italian public sphere (where legality and antimafia, as Jane and Peter Schneider have been showing so lucidly since the early 2000s, are intertwined) than as organic formations of a local life. I do not mean here that legality and antimafia are top-down categories only. As I have shown elsewhere (e.g., Rakopoulos 2017c), extending Jane and Peter's earlier suggestions, there is a long history of grassroots embracing of the law in Sicily. In fact, to a good extent, the co-op administrators' logic is, as Antonio Sorge notes, “a localist rhetoric [that] is just one cultural model of rural Sicily.” San Giovanni, as the site of the largest antimafia project in Italy, bears a burden, however. The whole village rises as a paradigm both in the political imagination of some mafiosi (“village of cowards”) and, most evidently, among civil-society activists (a paradigmatic case of beating the mafia, a village that attained a grassroots victory). I am particularly indebted to Sorge, who points to this kind of reading of the evidence presented here.

Opting to go for what Dino Palumbo very usefully dubs “a walk on the wild side” reinforces an epistemological choice for

a nonpolarized reading of local complexities. While appreciating that further extrapolation is valuable to ethnographer, commentators, and readers, I would nevertheless respectfully disagree with Palumbo on one aspect of his critique: the extent of the wildness of the “side” that does not side with the conventional and a-tad-bourgeois ethics of antimafia (and Western academia?). Part of my argument on the gray zone is precisely a familiarizing endeavor. That is, since we all agree (and if my reading of the comments is correct, we do) that, in line with a classical anthropological leitmotif, polarized categories are nothing serious to get by, then we might also follow the point to its logical conclusion, steering clear of seeing strongly othering aspects in any of the “sides.” Surely, strengthening the rigidity of one side is a political project; part of the essay’s contribution is to acknowledge how this works locally, how certain people reproduce it, and how that rigidity of the ethnographic path puts bumps on the analytical road.

These bumps might be there partly for what Andrea Muehlebach calls the “dark underside” of the Italian state’s alter ego. As she notes, “we encounter a state locked into a complicated embrace with its Other; evil is shrugged off in some moments and exorcized at others.” Similarly, but not equally, what looks thoroughly exotic and wild might be an interesting afternoon talk about sheep with a mafioso, rather than the revelatory moment of a lifetime. After all, notes Michael Herzfeld in his reaction, “ethical opposites, as [the author] demonstrates, require each other,” and “they must exist as opposites while speaking to a shared social logic.” The wild side is, I also think, in a continuum with a shared social logic (and interpersonal experience with a history, viz., Adamo’s point on “rusty neighborhood relations”). But reflecting on the rigidity of ethical obligation almost prevents the ethnographic undertaking to cross toward what is defined by the state and civil society as radical (and dangerous) otherness, an area governed by the conspiracy of silence. I was thinking too much there, but eventually I did meet the minor mafioso.

Here lies another contribution of the cognitive kind: talk with Gioacchino suggested precisely that the other side might be less laden with otherness than implied in talk/silence bipoles. In fact, much of its otherness is sociological rather than ontological: the mafioso was a poor shepherd rather than the Other mystified by antimafia activists (see also Rakopoulos 2017b). His alterity has more to do with class and marginalization than with wild separation from rational thought (and speech). After all, as Muehlebach so aptly notes, there can be an intense and long-term relation between the state and its Others. The moment when I break bread with the mafioso might be the moment of the secret’s *mise-en-scène*—the situatedness of silence now set in its Pirandellian boundaries—or what Mara Benadusi helpfully indicates as an ethnographic heuristic for secrecy. For this reason, I am most grateful to Sicilian colleagues Mara and Dino for precisely prompting me to further cross that seemingly rigid but actually porous boundary. I share with Palumbo his sense that the boundary is rigidified by power, and I am currently working on an essay

based on the circulation of rumors in San Giovanni *bars* (see Benadusi’s last point).

In our renderings of Sicilian mafia/antimafia dialectics, much relies on Peter and Jane Schneider’s take on reversibility (2003). Naor Ben-Yehoyada talks of irreversibility. That condition is doubted by his Aliportesi informants as a show—again, we have the staging of secrecy and the Pirandellian truthful nontruth. Ben-Yehoyada also puts forward the idea of side switching as a module for a segmentary anthropology of knowledge, one that reproduces local segmentation. I am deeply thankful for his point on the reductive work our anthropology of knowledge often yields to: the *reductio ad transactium* that implies that individualized exchange does not work, although it is seemingly embraced by much sociology of confession (and mafia). The exchange of information, however—and here the essay’s reflective and comparative aspect is taken one step further by Naor’s point—is hierarchized locally. Specifically, the Carabinieri marshal lays out to us how in some occasions (set in a horizontal relationship between mafia representative and state representative) exchange of information can be transactional, while in others (set in an unequal relationship of local actor and hosted researcher) it is nonquantifiable and can escape transactionality. The former condition is between egalitarian informants; the latter between hierarchical informants.

Tony Sorge’s phrase illuminates this scaling of categories: “officialdom adapts to the exigencies of the locality,” and “talking to the police” does not necessarily entail running afoul of the rules of *omertà*, insofar . . . as it co-opts the latter into the universe of the former.” The locality sets the hierarchy: it evens out the expediter of the Italian state on the level of the mafioso shepherd and situates the foreign anthropologist on the receiving end of an apparently innocuous redistribution of stories.

What Benadusi notes as the “dialogic limits of the relationship between secrecy and transparency” I find fascinating. I have pursued work in Greece recently, among other issues on so-called conspiracy theory. I encountered complex attitudes to knowledge making (and knowledge believing) that surprisingly correlate to the Italian *dietrismo*, a cognitive domain opaquely clear—if I am allowed the oxymoron—for how our knowledge of things corresponds to power. Reading such comments, in tandem with what Michael Herzfeld notes on the interlinked spaces of silence and talk, I think the work of Lilith Mahmud (2014) could be useful for our pursuits of mafia invisibility of material communication.

But, and to think with Herzfeld, there is dialectics. I am delighted to see this enlightening reminder. I assume that it is not shared by all; Pine, for instance, might forgive me for thinking that the sensorial and aesthetic hub he narrates and finds commendable in this essay is consciously not dialectic, in the tracing of a gray zone. To be clear, the ethnography here does not formulate a third category that transcends the facile dichotomy; granted, the gray zone is an anthropological concept (in the making?), but it has not arisen as an analytical category *per se*. If it arises, it is more as the side-effect of

testing, empirically, the local application of power categories by nested forces in Sicilian society (the Italian state's and the mafia's local, but also transnational potency). That test showed both its full collapse in the past and its residual lurking in the current state of play (the story of Virilia and his clan alliances and fallouts) and in the ethnographic present (the story of Adamo and Gioacchino's inviting friendship). "Collapse" of power categories is a key term here (note also the reaction by Jane and Peter Schneider). Having said that, I note the acute critique on the possible reviewing of the argument through a dialectical take, especially when that concerns tracing the genealogy of confession(alism).

I also concur with the point that the ecclesiastical booth is only ostensibly a private relation between two persons or between a person and the divine pardon. In fact, as the essay underscores, the conflicts take place outside the confessional "booth." The choice of words in my rendering of the booth in its Catholic version might have suggested its enclosability, but it is more complicated than that. In fact, as Herzfeld suggests, my argument that the confession's afterlife is necessarily social and affects many (despite its seemingly atomizing potential) can extend to include any confession, including an essentially religious one. That take would bring the essay closer to its comparative endeavor's focus, where I actually argue that "the iconography and associated symbolism of mafia-related official or informal confessions might be Sicilian variants of a larger phenomenon" wherein Catholic cosmology reveals itself in secularized variants. In that way, the essay reiterates Herzfeld's points in his Rome book, as well as erstwhile points by Muehlebach and Ben-Yehoyada. I understand that Berardino Palumbo might have some reservations here. I hear, and share, his concern with generalized points on "Catholic culture," and my reading of his comment hopefully says that there is no such overarching statement in the paper.

Jane and Peter Schneider remind us how pentiti are often seen as immoral because "they lack the moral standing that penitence implies." In that way, their penance is at once religious and secular. They also find the choice of the "secular" term somehow debatable; I should stress that it is rather descriptive rather than normative. Keeping with what I have just noted, a reading of the essay that extends its argument on fields that include, rather than compare with, religious penance would benefit the investigation here. I thank the commentators who encourage me to explore this extension in future pursuits. Silence and its religious underpinnings itself are indeed major means of communication for the mafia as well as for the nonmafia (but certainly not the antimafia).

Antonio Sorge's work has inspired me in various ways, here and in other work, concerning the boundedness and location work needed to inquire about local ethics and morals. His reading resolves somehow the tension implied in this reply, to talk about silence and talk as power projects. They might be; but also, for local interlocutors, they can be "just" conflicting sets of expectations. Reiterating what he elegantly noted earlier, he argues that what can be seen as a pragmatic moral

continuum or a shared social space with surprisingly common idioms can also be seen as two scales of organization in which the periphery contends with the weight of the outside world that bears upon it. This—categories of talk, in this instance—can be enshrined in institutions of the state, but "officialdom adapts to the exigencies of the locality"—arranged across informers or informants.

I am fascinated by Piero Vereni's insight on the nuances of response to silence, penitence, and betrayal among mafia inmates, "big and small." The commenter does not see any area for gray zone in the stratified reflections among mafiosi "*in collegio*." This is an important point, especially concerning how stratification feeds into, and interacts with, loyalty to mafia "collective personhood," to go back to a concept I use in the paper. However, much of my argumentation in this article takes into account an erstwhile hierarchy, one attached to territory (*territorio*)—such a key concept for understanding mafia, but also Sicily and indeed Italy—one that precedes the deterritorialized loyalties that take place after the confessions (be they truths or "lies"). In keeping with my reading of Joel Robbins, it is impossible—and, for the sake of an exploration of gray zones, possibly irreverent—to "know the other's mind." At any rate, while insisting on studying the relational afterlife of confession, I do clearly acknowledge the atomization process the confession implies. Whether that atomization can lead to killing the relational apparatus and the person as such (the cases of the two main mafiosi of my story) or to a dignified marginal life (the case of Gioacchino) responds to embedded local and translocal hierarchies. What is definitely fascinating is the postconfessional afterlife of the *intreccio* between state and its dark alter ego, the mafia: how, to extend what Vereni notes, their words (or silences) can be treated as commodities for internal conflicts between jural careers.

Dino Palumbo is right in pointing out the need for socio-cultural specificity at the verge of mafia life, and his own work has contributed much to that; I am therefore glad that he recognizes that this piece also moves in that direction and that, in that move, it also sheds light on the impossibility of being neutral or indifferent. Again, the idea of collapse is central to Palumbo's reaction, as categories collapse "whenever we observe the social and practical effects that 'confessions' have on a concrete social reality." He then notes how the mafioso "is both inviting you and challenging you to follow him on the other side of that moral fault that separates the interior from the outside" and how the ethnographer is invited into a different "moral economy," with a specific vision of the male self.

As noted above, however, I find the moral continuum of some shared social space to . . . continue in the virile relation between three men: ethnographer, "antimafia" interlocutor, and "mafia" friend. For the first to reach the third, and—to simplify—for the nonmafia to reach the mafia, one has to cross through the antimafia. This is the walk on relational selfhood that this essay permits. I fully agree that its interplay is not static (that is the core of the essay); I also agree that talking about manhood and its horizontalizing idioms that allow us to

crisscross “worlds” might be more central than sheer ethics. I take seriously Palumbo’s suggestion on the “moral economy” of the side crossing here, but I would be more interested in measuring what this economy consists of. I am talking not of “currency” (the transactional aspect at bay, at all times) but more about the material stakes of that economy (or its “immaterial, but objective” aspects, to recall a Marxian phrase). No doubt, it is one where selfhood and its collective underpinnings reign supreme. But what are the main stakes, those of otherness? Is the ethnographer trafficking potentially in dissimilitude—or is it, really, the “egalitarian” idiom of masculinity, that draws the three together and that, possibly, makes Luca, the co-op’s president, shrug off the whole event later?

There is an encouraging critique that the reader can trace across most of the nine responses to the essay; namely, that the ethnographic impasse described could possibly provide even more insights than the current analysis suggests. The very poetics of ethnographic frailty, as Herzfeld showed us so long ago (1988), have in common with poetry what I would call an extensive semiology. By this I mean that the data presented/narrated can suggest more to the eye of the beholder (viz., reader) than what the originally embodied knowledge of the ethnographic moment suggested to the writer. This epistemology of spilling meaning is important (and shows how *Current Anthropology*’s brilliant scheme of open commentary adds so much to an essay): the reader sees more than meets the (ethnographer’s) eye and can extrapolate an often more ambitious argument. Being more daring with treating contextual gray zones of communication, as ethnographers, can benefit all ethnographers who narrate such zones to anthropological audiences.

I am much indebted to colleagues for their reactions. To me, the fact that the essay is recognized as a twofold contribution, on our understandings of Cosa Nostra, on the one hand, and on the collapsing of moral borders on the other, would be sufficient. In fact, if—as Jane and Peter Schneider note—the paper showed the current complexities of a synchronicity of mafia and its enemies while problematizing issues of moral hazard, then it has served its purpose. So, to see that colleagues also underscore how the essay elucidates anthropological impasses on ethical demarcation and the moral remapping of silence and talk, is, well, morally rewarding.

—Theodoros Rakopoulos

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