



# Shaping mafia power through extortion: the evolution of the pizzo in sicily

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## Abstract

This article examines the evolution of mafia extortion (pizzo) in Sicily, building upon existing literature to propose an integrated perspective on this complex phenomenon. Combining insights from a systematic literature review with empirical data from interviews with experts ( $n=10$ ) and judicial documents from six recent anti-mafia operations (2018–2025), the study explores how the pizzo functions across three interconnected dimensions: economic-relational (generating resources and business connections), political-territorial (exercising control over local communities), and socio-cultural (reinforcing the mafia's internal cohesion and welfare system). The analysis suggests that while state repression and civil society resistance have challenged Cosa Nostra's ability to impose the pizzo through violence, the phenomenon has adapted through more subtle forms characterized by mutual convenience and collusive relationships. The study aims to contribute to organized crime scholarship by: (1) offering a framework that connects complementary theoretical perspectives, (2) presenting recent empirical evidence on adaptations in extortion practices, and (3) discussing potential implications for anti-mafia policies that address both coercive and collusive aspects of contemporary mafia extortion.

**Keywords** Mafia · Extortion · Pizzo · Sicily · Organized crime · Anti-mafia movement

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## Introduction

This essay aims to thoroughly examine a specific and deeply entrenched aspect of the mafia phenomenon: extortion (Gambetta, 1993). This criminal activity involves the forcible imposition of the so-called “pizzo”: a payment in money, goods, or services demanded from entrepreneurs and merchants operating in mafia-controlled territories.

The study focuses on Sicily, and particularly on the city of Palermo, where protection racketeering represents a distinctive feature of mafia-type criminal organizations. Unlike other illicit activities such as drug trafficking, usury, or gambling, the pizzo system plays a fundamental strategic role within the mafia power structure, serving as a tool to affirm and reproduce their authority across Sicilian society (Sciarrone, 2009; Santino, 2015). Studies quantifying the economic and social dimensions of mafia extortion have revealed how this phenomenon significantly impacts Sicily’s economic development, with consequences extending far beyond direct financial costs (Arcidiacono et al., 2016; Lisciandra & Asmundo, 2008; Lisciandra, 2014; Balletta & Lavezzi, 2023).

At the micro level, the imposition of the pizzo goes beyond a mere economic burden for the affected companies. It severely limits entrepreneurial initiative, fostering a culture of silence and fear that negatively impacts businesses’ competitive capacity. Those forced to submit to extortionate demands often hesitate to invest, expand, and seize new market opportunities, thereby reducing their growth potential. Moreover, at the macro level, this mafia tax undermines trust in institutions and the integrity of the economic system, creating a climate of uncertainty that discourages investment and hinders development. At the same time, the entrenchment of the pizzo system fuels a culture of illegality and connivance that permeates the socio-economic fabric. The widespread acquiescence to paying protection money normalizes illicit behaviour and creates a “gray area” of collusion and complicity involving sectors of entrepreneurship, professions, and institutions (Sciarrone & Storti, 2019).

In recent decades, evidence suggests that mafia clans in Sicily have shown signs of adjusting their extortionate practices (DIA, 2023: 26), though the phenomenon remains a significant concern. This evolving pattern can be attributed to both external and internal factors.

On the external front, two key developments have been crucial. First, relentless law enforcement efforts have been instrumental in containing the phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Investigations, arrests, and counteraction activities conducted by the authorities have made it possible to dismantle numerous criminal organizations and limit their ability to impose protection money on entrepreneurs and merchants. Second, resistance movements led by economic operators themselves, with support from civil society, have emerged and strengthened. An increasing number of entrepreneurs and merchants have reported extortionate demands, actively collaborating with institutions and refusing to pay the pizzo. This courageous stance and the mobilization of anti-mafia associations have significantly eroded the influence of criminal organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> Chronologically, the most recent noteworthy result was the arrest of boss Matteo Messina Denaro after 30 years in hiding (Sciarrone & Picarella, 2024).

On the internal front, several factors within criminal organizations have also contributed to weakening their extortive capacity. The recruitment of increasingly young and less experienced members, internal power struggles, and changes in clan leadership have caused instability and a loss of criminal “know-how”. Moreover, the dismantling of top-level collegial bodies like the “commission” has hindered the establishment of a common strategy and effective coordination of extortion among the various territorial structures.

Despite these efforts and the partially positive results obtained, the mafia and its extortion system remain entrenched in many areas of Sicily today. As mentioned, extortion constitutes a central and essential element, without which mafia organizations would lose much of their ability to control and take root in the territory.

Therefore, thoroughly understanding the nature and implications of extortion is fundamental to outlining the dynamics of mafia-type organized crime. Analysing the imposition of the pizzo offers a crucial perspective in the study of the mafia, allowing researchers to delve deeper into the internal socio-cultural dimension of the clans, the ways they exercise power, and their ability to adapt and reproduce over time. Furthermore, studying extortion can shed light on the interactions between mafia organizations and the external environment in which they operate, specifically the relationships they maintain with institutional, political, and economic actors to strengthen and extend their “social capital” (Sciarrone, 2009).

To investigate these complex dynamics, this study employs a qualitative approach combining secondary sources and original field research. The empirical data was collected through two main channels. First, we conducted 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews with experts, including scholars ( $n=3$ ), magistrates ( $n=3$ ), journalists ( $n=2$ ), and other qualified observers ( $n=2$ ). These interviews, lasting between 40 and 60 min each, were conducted between June 2022 and March 2024 either face-to-face or via video call. Second, we analyzed judicial sources from six key legal cases (Operation “Cupola 2.0” 2018; Operation “Resilienza” 2020; Operation “Bivio” 2021; Operation “Resurrezione” 2023; Operation “Luce” 2023; Operation “Grande Inverno” 2025), including wiretap transcripts, judicial orders, and court sentences. These cases were selected based on their temporal relevance (post-2018), their focus on Palermo’s extortion-related crimes, and their comprehensive documentation of Cosa Nostra’s practices.

Through this methodological approach, the paper offers three main contributions to the existing debate. First, it provides a systematic review of mafia extortion literature, integrating sociological, criminological, and economic perspectives. Second, it presents original empirical evidence on the transformation of the phenomenon, documenting recent developments overlooked by previous research. Third, it develops a conceptual framework that moves beyond Gambetta’s (1993) economic paradigm of “protection services” by analyzing the pizzo as a multidimensional tool serving economic, political, and organizational functions within mafia power structures.

To develop these contributions systematically, the essay is structured in three main sections. Following this introduction, Sect. [The dimensions of mafia extortion: a systematic literature review](#) analyzes the pizzo through three dimensions: as a market protection mechanism, as an expression of political authority, and as a tool for maintaining mafia organizational cohesion. Section [The evolution of mafia extortion: from](#)

[business tool to territorial control](#) examines the evolution of extortion in Sicily over recent decades, analyzing both external factors (law enforcement and civil society resistance) and internal dynamics (generational changes and organizational fragmentation). The concluding section discusses theoretical implications and policy recommendations, emphasizing the need for an integrated approach to counter organized crime.

## The dimensions of mafia extortion: a systematic literature review

Mafia extortion represents one of the most enduring and complex phenomena in organized crime studies. While often viewed primarily as an economic activity, scholarly research has increasingly revealed its multifaceted nature and central role in mafia organizations' operations and survival. This review synthesizes and analyzes the main theoretical contributions of the last three decades that have fundamentally reshaped our comprehension of this phenomenon.

Through a systematic analysis of the scholarly contributions, we identify three fundamental and interconnected dimensions that characterize mafia extortion: economic-relational, political-territorial, and socio-cultural. Rather than treating these as separate aspects, we argue that their interaction creates a robust system that enables mafia organizations to maintain power, generate resources, and ensure organizational continuity. This multidimensional approach helps explain both the persistence of extortion practices and their evolution in response to changing social and institutional environments.

Early research on mafia extortion primarily viewed it through an economic lens, focusing on its role as a criminal market activity.<sup>2</sup> However, this narrow perspective began to shift in the 1980s and 1990s as scholars increasingly recognized the broader social and political implications of extortion practices. This evolution in academic understanding was driven by both theoretical developments and empirical research that revealed the complex ways in which extortion fulfills multiple functions within mafia organizations.

The economic-relational dimension of mafia extortion was first comprehensively theorized by Gambetta (1993) in his influential work "The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection". His characterization of the mafia as "an industry that produces, promotes, and sells private protection" marked a significant departure from previous approaches that viewed extortion as simple predation. Gambetta's analysis revealed how protection emerges as a crucial resource in environments characterized by pervasive distrust, though he notably observed that this "protection" is often

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<sup>2</sup> While acknowledging the foundational contributions of early scholars such as Mosca (1949), Franchetti (1993), and Hess (1973), as well as the influential works of American scholars like Anderson (1979), Ianni (1974), and Block (1980) in developing the first systematic analyses of organized crime, this review focuses on literature from the last three decades. This choice reflects three main factors: first, the unprecedented empirical evidence available since the 1990s through judicial records and pentiti testimonies; second, the significant theoretical developments that have reshaped our understanding of mafia extortion beyond traditional interpretations; and third, the profound transformations in mafia organizations during this period that have required new analytical frameworks.

imposed regardless of demand, creating a situation where “whether one wants it or not, one obtains it and is required to pay for it” (1993: 31).

This ambivalent nature of mafia protection - between service provision and coercion - prompted scholars to further investigate the varying dynamics of extortive relationships. Building on these insights, Varese (1996, 2014) developed a more nuanced theoretical framework by introducing a sophisticated typology of criminal groups based on their extortion practices. His distinction between predatory, extortive, and protective organizations helped explain the varying relationships between criminal groups and their victims. While predatory groups demand unsustainably high tributes leading to business collapse, and extortive groups demand payment without providing services, protective groups offer genuine protection that businesses may actively seek. This typology has proven particularly useful for understanding how different criminal organizations evolve and adapt their extortion practices over time.

Monzini (1993) made a crucial contribution by demonstrating how extortion serves not only as an economic regulatory tool but also as a catalyst for developing symbiotic relationships between criminal and legal spheres at the local level. This insight was substantially expanded by Sciarrone (2009), who developed a sophisticated analysis of how mafia organizations accumulate and employ social capital through protection rackets. His research shows how extortion practices form “the foundation of the mafia’s relational system” (Sciarrone, 2006: 370) by creating a complex web of obligations, exchanges, and interdependencies. Beyond simple economic transactions, protection payments become entry points for broader collusive relationships that allow mafia groups to penetrate legitimate business networks and establish connections with political and institutional actors. Through this mechanism, Sciarrone (2011) demonstrates how criminal organizations transform coercive power into social capital, creating what he terms a “gray area” where legal and illegal spheres intersect and reinforce each other.

While the economic-relational perspective illuminated key aspects of mafia extortion, scholars increasingly recognized the need to examine its fundamental role in establishing territorial control and political authority. Block’s (1980) seminal distinction between “enterprise syndicate” and “power syndicate” provided a crucial theoretical foundation for understanding this political dimension of mafia extortion. Building on this framework, scholars have demonstrated how extortion serves as a fundamental tool for establishing and maintaining territorial control.

Catanzaro (1988) notably argued that the Sicilian mafia’s distinctive feature lies not merely in its capacity to manage illicit trafficking (characteristic of the enterprise syndicate) but more significantly in its ability to exercise territorial control (typical of the power syndicate). He conceptualizes the mafia not simply as a provider of protection services, but as a “political entrepreneur” that actively shapes the demand for protection. His analysis demonstrates how mafia organizations strategically employ their territorial monopoly of violence to generate the very insecurity they then offer to resolve. This dual role as both source of threat and provider of protection transcends pure economic interpretations, revealing how extortion serves as a foundational mechanism in a broader system of territorial governance. Through this lens, Catanzaro shows how protection payments become institutionalized not merely as economic transactions but as expressions of political authority and social control.

La Spina (2005) further developed this political perspective by explicitly linking extortion mechanisms to Weber's concept of political authority. Through extortion, mafia organizations manifest themselves as quasi-political entities, complete with bureaucratic apparatuses capable of imposing norms and extracting "taxes" within their territories through physical coercion. This interpretation gains historical support from Weber's own observations of the mafia, where he noted how protection payments, while initially sporadic due to their illegal nature, often evolved into regular periodic payments resembling formal taxation systems (Weber, 1920/1999).

Paoli (2000) and Dino's (2002) analyses have significantly contributed to revealing the social dimension of mafia extortion, moving beyond purely economic interpretations that reduced it to a mere source of profit. According to Dino's research on judicial documents and pentiti testimonies, the pizzo system operates as a "ritual of sovereignty" through which mafia groups assert and maintain their territorial control. Dino demonstrates how protection payments represent not just economic transactions but acts of symbolic submission that reproduce mafia authority and social legitimacy. The symbolic value of these practices in affirming territorial control and organizational identity remains crucial even when economic returns are limited.

Paoli deepens this perspective by showing how the extortion system is integrated into a broader system of "generalized reciprocity" that characterizes mafia associations. Extortion is not simply a means of enrichment, but an instrument to create and maintain social bonds of dependence and recognition within the controlled territory. Additionally, the pizzo system serves as a socialization mechanism for new affiliates to become familiar with the mafia method of operation. This explains why, as Paoli notes, the amount requested is often less important than the demonstration of submission to mafia power.

These social aspects help understand both the persistence of extortion and its effectiveness as a tool of territorial control. The pizzo is not just a "tax" imposed through violence, but part of a more complex system of social relations that legitimizes and reproduces mafia power over territory. Colletti (2016, 2019) reveals, the "common fund" mechanism, where extortion proceeds are centrally managed, fulfills vital organizational functions beyond revenue generation. This system enables both the financing of routine operations and the maintenance of a sophisticated welfare system for members and their families, reinforcing internal cohesion and solidarity bonds.

Such social dimension underpins the remarkable resilience of mafia extortion despite intense law enforcement pressure. The ritualized practices of extortion create what Paoli describes as a "subuniverse of meaning" - a shared cultural world that provides both internal cohesion and external recognition of mafia authority.<sup>3</sup>

From this extensive scholarly analysis, it becomes clear that these three dimensions - economic-relational, political-territorial, and socio-cultural - should not be viewed in isolation but rather as mutually reinforcing elements of a complex system. Our analysis suggests that the effectiveness and persistence of mafia extortion derive

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<sup>3</sup> While this social dimension has been crucial historically, Paoli (2000) also notes how these traditional bonds have come under increasing strain in recent decades due to modernization pressures and growing emphasis on economic profit.

precisely from how these dimensions interact and support each other. For instance, the ability to provide protection services (economic dimension) depends on territorial control (political dimension), which in turn requires organizational cohesion maintained through solidarity mechanisms (socio-cultural dimension).

The three strands of research analysed (Fig. 1) offer complementary perspectives for framing the complexity of the mafia extortion phenomenon. These approaches provide a multidimensional view of extortion, which cannot be limited to a mere predatory activity aimed at economic profit. On the contrary, the pizzo is a versatile tool through which Cosa Nostra shapes economic, political, and social relations. It affirms its power over the territory and reproduces its own organizational structures.

This theoretical framework provides a valuable lens for examining how mafia extortion has evolved over time. The following section will trace this evolution through different historical periods, showing how Cosa Nostra has continuously adapted these three dimensions in response to changing circumstances while maintaining their fundamental interconnection.

### The evolution of mafia extortion: from business tool to territorial control

The theoretical framework developed in the previous section illuminates three fundamental dimensions of mafia extortion that, while analytically distinct, are deeply intertwined in practice. Their relative importance and specific manifestations have evolved significantly over time in response to both external pressures (state repres-

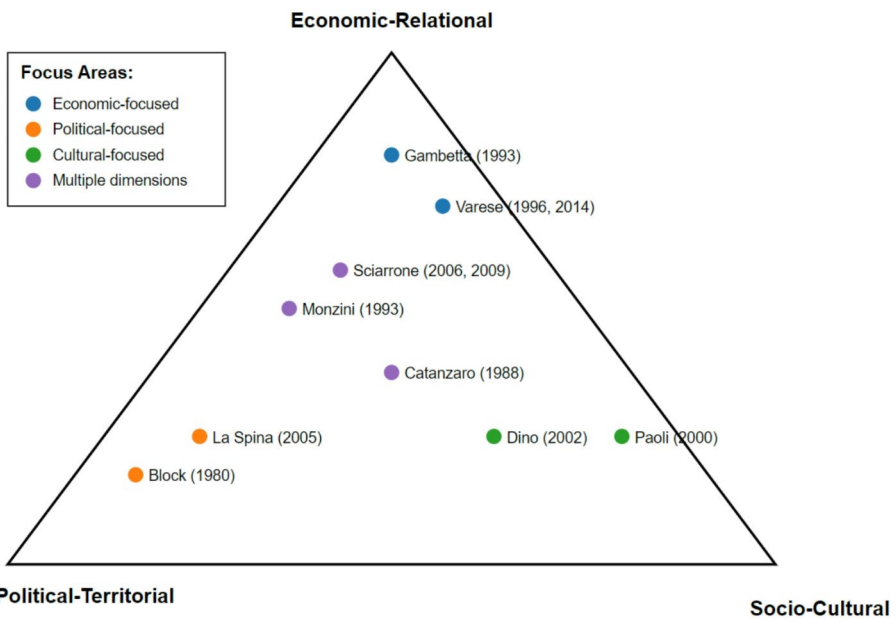


Fig. 1 Positioning of scholars across the three dimensions of mafia extortion

**Table 1** Chronological evolution of mafia extortion practices in Sicily (1970s-present)

Time period	Main characteristics	Key external factors	Internal organizational dynamics	Dominant dimension
<b>1970–1980 s</b> <i>Strategic business tool</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selective targeting of strategic economic sectors</li> <li>• Focus on construction industry</li> <li>• High extortion amounts from few targets</li> <li>• “Tavolino” system for public contracts</li> <li>• 3% fixed “tax” on public works</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited state intervention</li> <li>• Tolerance from institutional actors</li> <li>• Absence of organized resistance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong hierarchical structure</li> <li>• Centralized leadership</li> <li>• Effective Commission (Cupola)</li> <li>• Significant criminal “know-how”</li> </ul>	Economic-Relational
<b>1990s-early 2000s</b> <i>Territorial control</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Blanket collection” strategy</li> <li>• “Pay little but everyone pays” principle</li> <li>• Extension to small businesses</li> <li>• Lower amounts but more widespread</li> <li>• “Submersion” strategy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maxi Trial verdict (1991)</li> <li>• Capaci and Via D’Amelio massacres (1992)</li> <li>• Intensified law enforcement</li> <li>• Loss of drug trafficking supremacy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provenzano’s leadership</li> <li>• Attempt to reduce visibility</li> <li>• Focus on territorial control</li> <li>• Restructuring of organization</li> </ul>	Political-Territorial
<b>Mid 2000–2010 s</b> <i>Resistance &amp; Adaptation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased difficulty in imposing pizzo</li> <li>• Selective targeting</li> <li>• Avoidance of businesses with anti-racket connections</li> <li>• Territorial differentiation of control</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emergence of Ad-diopizzo (2004)</li> <li>• Growing civil society resistance</li> <li>• Continued police operations</li> <li>• Economic crisis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership vacuum</li> <li>• Failed attempts to reconstitute Commission</li> <li>• Internal conflicts between families</li> <li>• Generational tensions</li> </ul>	Socio-Cultural
<b>2015-Present-</b> <i>Transformation &amp; Collusion</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Racket 2.0” methods</li> <li>• Imposition of suppliers and services</li> <li>• Shift toward mutually beneficial arrangements</li> <li>• Diversification into new criminal markets</li> <li>• “Leopard spot pattern” of control</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continued civil society mobilization</li> <li>• Integration of anti-mafia into social fabric</li> <li>• Fluctuating economic conditions</li> <li>• New criminal competition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Declining criminal “professionalism”</li> <li>• Crisis of “vocations”</li> <li>• Strengthened welfare system for affiliates</li> <li>• Balance between tradition and innovation</li> </ul>	Multiple (hybrid)

sion, civil society resistance) and internal organizational dynamics (leadership changes, generational turnover). This section traces the evolution of mafia extortion from the 1970s to the present (Table 1), revealing how Cosa Nostra has continuously adapted its practices to maintain and reproduce its power.

### **From business tool to territorial control: the evolution of traditional extortion (1970–1990 s)**

The period from the 1970s through the 1980s represents a distinct phase in the evolution of mafia extortion. Building upon Gambetta’s (1993) theoretical framework, which conceptualizes extortion predominantly as a protection service, the empirical

evidence from this period reveals how the protection dimension enabled and reinforced broader strategic relationships with economic and political actors.

From an economic perspective, as one senior magistrate interviewed for this study noted, “Extortion represented a secondary criminal activity for Cosa Nostra, given the considerable income derived mainly from drug trafficking” (Int. 1). This observation challenges the common perception of extortion as Cosa Nostra’s primary revenue stream. However, what made the pizzo system strategically crucial during this period was its role in creating and maintaining relationships with key economic actors (Monzini, 1993).

The mafia’s approach to extortion during this phase was highly selective and “professional”, focusing mainly on strategic sectors and entrepreneurs rather than small businesses. The effectiveness of this system is evidenced by the payment of massive sums during this period. As later revealed in conversations intercepted while in prison of Salvatore Riina, the former head of the Sicilian Mafia and leader of the Corleonesi faction, in 2013, even major entrepreneurs like Silvio Berlusconi were paying substantial protection money.<sup>4</sup>

These relationships often evolved beyond simple extortion into more complex business partnerships, as noted by one expert: “The payment of protection money often marked the beginning of a deeper relationship. Many entrepreneurs who started by paying the pizzo ended up in business partnerships with mafia-connected companies” (Int. 3).

This dynamic proved particularly crucial in the construction sector, where Cosa Nostra established a sophisticated system of control that went far beyond simple protection payments. This period saw the emergence of what became known as the “tavolino” (small table) system (Lo Forte, 2008: 46) - a three-way arrangement between mafia, politicians, and entrepreneurs for controlling public contracts, as later revealed by pentito Antonino Giuffrè. According to his testimony, “This table was specifically designed to divide up the works from the very beginning, ensuring kickbacks once the tender had been completed and the works contracted out to politicians on one side, and to the area and mafia family where the work was to be carried out” (Procura della Repubblica presso il Tribunale di Palermo, 2003: 1053).

The system operated through multiple interconnected levels. At its core was a fixed “tax” of 3% on public contracts, but this monetary component was just the tip of the iceberg. As documented in the landmark “mafia-appalti” dossier (Procura della Repubblica presso il Tribunale di Palermo 1999), the organization managed to control every stage of the construction process, from the supply of building materials to the awarding of contracts. This control extended to determining which companies could operate in the sector, creating what would later be described as a complete system of economic infiltration.

This comprehensive control exemplifies what Sciarrone (2009) describes as the generation of social capital through extortion relationships. During this period, the pizzo served as an entry point for broader collusive relationships, allowing mafia groups to accumulate both economic and relational resources. Through their control

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<sup>4</sup> Riina was recorded saying “He was giving us 250 million lire [approximately €129,000] every six months” describing payments made in the 1980s (Tribunale di Palermo, 2018: 3983–3984).

of the construction sector, mafia groups established connections with local administrators and public officials who were crucial for obtaining contracts and permits.

The long-term impact of this system became evident in subsequent decades. As documented in multiple judicial investigations, many of the business relationships established during this period continued to influence economic dynamics up to the present day.

Recent investigations have highlighted the persistence of these networks. The involvement of figures like Franco Bonura (recently released from prison after years under the strict 41-bis prison regime), the notorious mafia-connected builder Agostino Sansone, and the Buscemi brothers, who were already identified in the 1991 “Mafia Appalti” dossier, persisted through various incarnations, demonstrating the enduring nature of these networks (Procura della Repubblica presso il Tribunale di Palermo 1999). Indeed, as recently as 2025, investigations revealed that some of the same families and business networks identified in the 1980s were still active in attempting to control public contracts, albeit through more sophisticated methods (Procura della Repubblica di Palermo, 2025a).

Furthermore, the investigations conducted by the Public Prosecutor’s Office tell us that: “Even Matteo Messina Denaro continued to consider infiltration of the procurement sector as strategic for his leadership. This was also because contact with entrepreneurs was the path that led to dialogue with politics. This is an old story that we should keep well in mind to try to uncover the secrets of the man who had become the most entrepreneurial of mafiosi” (de Lucia & Palazzolo, 2023: 142).

The system of extortion as a relational tool, which had proven highly effective throughout the 1970s and 1980s, underwent a dramatic transformation in the early 1990s. The final verdict of the Maxi Trial in 1991, followed by the massacres of Capaci and Via D’Amelio in 1992, led to an unprecedented state response. The resulting crackdown saw thousands of men of honor arrested and hundreds becoming collaborators of justice, severely weakening the organization’s operational capacity (Lupo & Fiandaca, 2014).

As noted by historian Enzo Ciconte: “During this period, while Cosa Nostra was facing intense law enforcement pressure, another crucial shift occurred: the drug market changed from heroin to cocaine dominance. The ‘ndrangheta seized this opportunity, while the Sicilian mafia was forced into a secondary role” (Ciconte).<sup>5</sup>

This dual crisis - intense law enforcement pressure and loss of drug trafficking supremacy - necessitated a fundamental rethinking of the organization’s strategy. The period clearly illustrates Block’s (1980) concept of the “power syndicate”, as Cosa Nostra shifted its focus from selective business relationships to broader territorial control through extortion.

The response was the implementation of what became known as “blanket collection” (riscossione a tappeto), encapsulated in the principle “pay little but everyone pays” (pagare poco ma pagare tutti) (Punzo, 2015: 97). A former anti-mafia investigator describes this strategic shift: “It was a complete reversal from the previous model. Instead of targeting selected businesses for large amounts, they extended the

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<sup>5</sup> Il Post, “La mafia siciliana è alla ricerca di capi”, 19 January 2023.

pizzo to virtually every economic activity in their territory, but with generally lower demands” (Int. 4).

The new strategy proved effective for several reasons. First, it provided a steady income stream at a time when other revenue sources, particularly drug trafficking, had been disrupted. Small amounts collected from many sources added up to significant revenue while attracting less attention from law enforcement. Second, the lower amounts made it less convenient for victims to break the wall of silence. Many entrepreneurs, faced with paying a sustainable sum or risking retaliation, chose the path of least resistance (Grasso & La Volpe, 2009). This drastically reduced the number of reports and cooperation with investigators, weakening counteraction efforts (Bolzoni, 2018). Third, and perhaps more importantly, it reinforced territorial control. By imposing the pizzo on everyone, even if just symbolically, Cosa Nostra reminded the entire community of its presence and authority. It wasn't just about money anymore; it was about power. This aligns with Catanzaro's (1988) theoretical framework, which emphasizes the political dimension of mafia control.

Under the leadership of Bernardo Provenzano, this transformation was part of a broader strategy of “submersion” (inabissamento) (Grasso & La Volpe, 2009; Grasso, 2024; Dino, 2011). As pentito Giuffrè explained: “Cosa Nostra needed to become invisible to have time to reorganize calmly” (Palazzolo & Prestipino, 2007). Provenzano understood that the old aggressive approach was no longer sustainable. He promoted a more subtle form of control, where the pizzo became part of a broader system of social and economic influence.

This evolution reflects the extraordinary adaptability of Cosa Nostra in the face of existential threats. The organization transformed what had been primarily an economic tool into a sophisticated instrument of territorial control and organizational resilience. This shift demonstrates how the political-territorial dimension of extortion, theorized by Block, became paramount during this period, even as its economic implementation changed significantly.

## The 2000s: challenges to the Pizzo system

The early 2000s marked the beginning of a new phase characterized by unprecedented challenges to Cosa Nostra's extortion system. A turning point came in 2004 with the emergence of the anti-racketeering movement Addiopizzo (Gunnarson, 2014, 2015). The appearance of those stickers saying “A whole population that pays the pizzo is a population without dignity” marked a radical break with the past. For the first time, there was a collective, public opposition to the mafia's extortion system. This initiative represented a dramatic departure from previous isolated acts of resistance, like that of entrepreneur Libero Grassi in the early 1990s, which had ended tragically.<sup>6</sup>

The impact of this civil society mobilization on Cosa Nostra's territorial control has been significant. A senior investigator notes: “Demanding the pizzo has become

<sup>6</sup> Libero Grassi was a Sicilian businessman who publicly refused to pay protection money to Cosa Nostra. In January 1991, he wrote an open letter published in the *Giornale di Sicilia* newspaper denouncing mafia extortion. He was murdered by Cosa Nostra on August 29, 1991, after being left isolated in his protest. His assassination demonstrated the risks of individual resistance to the pizzo system (Bellavia & de Lucia, 2009).

much riskier today compared to the past. The mafiosi know that targeting businesses affiliated with anti-racket movements can trigger immediate investigations” (Int. 7). This assessment is supported by wiretapped conversations from recent investigations, which uncovered discussions among mafia leaders about potentially abandoning pizzo collection altogether due to increased risks. As revealed in intercepted conversations, some bosses complained that there were “too many entrepreneur-informants” and “too many risks”. As boss Filippo Annatelli lamented: “Without demanding the *messa a posto* [protection money], there’s no more respect... they come here, set up shop, look you in the face, and laugh...” (Procura della Repubblica di Palermo, 2018: 45).

A collaborator of justice and a former extortionist, admitted that Cosa Nostra would be reluctant to demand the pizzo from those who join Addiopizzo and anti-racket associations: “If a shopkeeper joins Addiopizzo or an anti-racket association, we don’t go there, we don’t ask for anything. There are more ‘camurrie’ (problems) than money that is collected. [...] There is a lot of concern among us. If there are reports, then investigations are carried out, they put in bugs, and so it’s better to avoid it” (CPA, 2014: 2).

The effectiveness of civil resistance was enhanced by its collective nature. The genius of Addiopizzo lay in creating a network of mutual support through critical consumption practices (Mete, 2018). When hundreds of businesses publicly declared their refusal to pay, protected by a network of conscious consumers, it became much harder for the mafia to target any single one of them. This collective approach directly undermined what Catanzaro (1994) identifies as the mafia’s ability to exercise territorial control through individualized intimidation.

While civil society resistance challenged Cosa Nostra’s extortion system from the outside, the organization simultaneously faced serious internal organizational problems. The failure to reconstitute the “Commission” (Cupola) after multiple law enforcement operations created significant coordination problems (Pignatone & Prestipino, 2019). Without the Commission, there was no central authority capable of regulating extortion activities and resolving disputes between families. This led to increasing fragmentation and occasional conflicts over territories and collection rights.

A former prosecutor explains: “This situation was exacerbated by Riina’s previous centralization of power in Corleone, away from Palermo. After his arrest, the Commission ceased to function effectively. Only after Riina’s death did the heads of the families feel the need to reorganize and restore discipline to the organization, shifting the Commission’s power back to Palermo after decades of Corleone’s dominance”.<sup>7</sup>

The absence of a functioning Commission’s regulatory authority manifested in several violent conflicts between families. In the Bagheria district, deep tensions emerged between two factions. Similarly, in the Partanna Mondello district, power struggles erupted between different leaders. As one wiretapped conversation revealed, boss Cusimano refused to recognize the authority of Michele Micalizzi, threatening armed confrontation over extortion territories: “I’ll have to take up the

<sup>7</sup> L’Avvenire. “Mafia. Preso l’ultimo padrino. Così la cupola si stava ricostruendo”, 4 December 2018.

revolver again”, he declared, rejecting any collaboration: “Everyone on their own” (Procura della Repubblica di Palermo, 2025b: 761).

In the anti-mafia operation “Resurrezione”, the management of extortionate pressure would have also created frictions between the two neighbouring mandamenti (territorial units), Resuttana and San Lorenzo, which were addressed during a clarifying meeting between the representatives of the two families (Procura della Repubblica presso il Tribunale di Palermo, 2023a).

These tensions sometimes escalated into open violence. In September 2020, in the Zen district of Palermo, two armed groups engaged in a daylight shootout in the streets. This incident, which fortunately resulted in no casualties, prompted mafia leadership to consider eliminating “unaligned” and “uncontrollable” members. Only law enforcement intervention prevented further bloodshed. The absence of strong central authority also led to uncontrolled criminal activities, with some groups planning armored car and gas station robberies using military-grade weapons and plastic explosives to generate liquid assets for supporting both free and imprisoned mafia members (Procura della Repubblica presso il Tribunale di Palermo, 2021a).

The organization also faced a growing crisis in recruitment and leadership succession. “Today’s mafia faces a real crisis of vocations” notes one expert. “The quality of new recruits has declined significantly. Many lack the criminal ‘professionalism’ that characterized the men of honor of the past” (Int. 2). This deterioration in human resources has directly impacted the management of extortion rackets, with younger members often lacking the skills and discretion needed for effective implementation (La Spina, 2005; Spina, 2015: 16).<sup>8</sup>

The generational tensions within the organization became increasingly evident. As documented in Operation “Cupola 2.0” (Procura della Repubblica presso il Tribunale di Palermo, 2018), conflicts emerged between younger bosses eager to assert their authority and older mafiosi returning from prison. In one intercepted conversation, Brancaccio boss Giancarlo Romano lamented the current state of affairs: “The level is low today... they arrest one and he becomes an informant; they arrest another... miserable level, low level, what are we talking about?” He nostalgically recalled a time when mafia leaders had connections with “doctors, lawyers, those who commanded Italy, Europe” drawing a stark contrast with the current generation’s focus on small-scale drug dealing: “Do we have to live off hash blocks? Is this what we’ve been reduced to? The people of the past, those who unfortunately ended up in prison for life, did they talk about hash blocks? If they had to discuss drugs, it was about a ship full of them... We think we’re doing business, but today others are doing it... we used to be first, now others do it... we are the gypsies” (Procura della Repubblica di Palermo, 2025a: 32).

This decline in the quality of membership reflected a broader crisis in the organization’s ability to maintain its traditional criminal standards and business model (Punzo, 2015). The younger generation’s approach to crime, focused on immediate

<sup>8</sup> As prosecutor Pietro Grasso has pointed out, it is not difficult for Cosa Nostra to recruit “manpower suitable for murders, pizzo collection, and various dirty work”, while the real critical issue concerns the higher levels, the leadership ranks (Grasso & La Licata, 2007: 163).

gains rather than strategic relationship-building and systematic extortion, represented a significant departure from historical practices that had proven successful in the past.

These internal strains coincided with the emergence of new criminal competition, particularly in historically mafia-controlled neighborhoods. The establishment of Nigerian criminal groups in areas like Ballarò, Palermo, represents a fundamental challenge to Cosa Nostra's territorial monopoly. This development would have been unthinkable during the organization's heyday, demonstrating a significant weakening of what Block (1980) identified as the power syndicate function. The most recent DIA report (2022) confirms this trend, noting how Nigerian organizations have gained a competitive advantage particularly in the drug sector, managing both supply chains and substantial profits despite the pandemic.

The combination of civil society resistance and internal organizational problems led to a perfect storm that severely tested the traditional pizzo system. The economic-relational dimension theorized by Gambetta became harder to maintain as businesses gained alternatives to mafia protection. Meanwhile, the political-territorial dimension emphasized by Block and Catanzaro faced mounting pressures from both organized resistance and competing criminal groups.

However, while these challenges have significantly weakened Cosa Nostra's grip, they haven't eliminated the pizzo system entirely. The organization has demonstrated remarkable adaptability in finding new ways to exercise control and extract resources, suggesting the need to examine its evolving extortion practices - a topic that will be addressed in the next section.

### **Recent developments: adaptation and transformation**

Despite these multiple challenges to the traditional pizzo system, recent evidence reveals how extortion, while experiencing significant changes, remains fundamental for Cosa Nostra's organizational reproduction and territorial control. However, its implementation has become increasingly differentiated across Palermo's urban landscape, creating a "leopard spot pattern" (*macchia di leopardo*) of criminal control (Scaglione, 2020).

This territorial differentiation is particularly evident in the contrast between different urban areas. As documented in recent antimafia operations, extortion remains deeply rooted in working-class neighborhoods and peripheral areas such as Zen, Brancaccio, Borgo Vecchio, and Ballarò. In these territories, as one scholar notes, "the pizzo system maintains its traditional characteristics of pervasive control" (Int. 9). Conversely, in residential areas like Libertà and Viale Lazio, where the anti-racket movement Addiopizzo has gained significant support, the organization's grip has notably weakened (Scaglione, 2020).

In areas where social and economic marginalization persists, the mafia's traditional systems of control remain strong. In contrast, areas with stronger civil society presence and economic development have shown greater resistance to mafia infiltration, demonstrating how socio-economic conditions continue to shape the geography of mafia power.

Despite these territorial variations, the extortion system remains crucial for the organization's reproduction, particularly in its historical strongholds. This persis-

tence is intimately linked to what scholars have identified as the mafia's welfare state function, which has become increasingly sophisticated in times of economic crisis.

Colletti (2016) observes, the mafia welfare system has emerged as a crucial mechanism for maintaining organizational cohesion and social consensus. The system operates through multiple interconnected channels: providing basic necessities to prisoners' families, securing employment in extorted businesses, offering positions in the drug trafficking chain, and distributing food aid to families in need. This "social function" has been strategically reinforced during periods of economic crisis, transforming extortion proceeds into a tool for building social legitimacy.

Recent investigations have revealed the organizational complexity behind this system. Extortion proceeds flow into a "common fund" (*cassa comune*), managed by a designated "treasurer" (*cassiere*). As documented in a monitored meeting of the Zen clan, this role requires a capable and reliable individual, fully embedded in the criminal context to ensure proper management of both business affairs and welfare provisions. In some families, like Santa Maria del Gesù, the boss personally maintains a "master ledger" (*libro mastro*) meticulously recording extorted businesses and tracking income and expenses, particularly those related to supporting imprisoned members (Procura della Repubblica presso il Tribunale di Palermo, 2025b).

However, this welfare function generates significant internal tensions. As captured in recent wiretaps, one boss complained about the strain of maintaining these support systems: "It's not like there's a bank... it's not like one is employed at INPS [National Social Security Institute]" (Procura della Repubblica presso il Tribunale di Palermo, 2025a: 37).

To preserve this crucial system, Cosa Nostra has demonstrated remarkable adaptability in its extortion practices, developing increasingly sophisticated collection methods.

Recent judicial evidence reveals how Cosa Nostra has developed increasingly sophisticated collection methods, what Prosecutor de Lucia describes as a "benevolent approach" to extortion. As he notes, "The mafia has adapted to state countermeasures by transforming itself into almost a service agency".<sup>9</sup> This evolution represents a significant departure from traditional violent intimidation methods towards more subtle forms of economic control.

A significant shift has emerged in recent investigations of the Villabate clan, revealing a fundamental change in extortion practices. Rather than maintaining the widespread "pay little but everyone pays" approach of the 1990s, some mafia families have adopted a more selective strategy focusing on larger businesses. As revealed in wiretapped conversations, boss Salvatore Lauricella advocated targeting only wealthy entrepreneurs, particularly in the bar and restaurant sector: "We need to target the big ones... there are 800 bars." This strategic choice was explicitly linked to both economic efficiency and organizational sustainability: "This way I can get 1,700 [euro] so my family can survive... what's the point of getting 500? [euro]" (Procura della Repubblica presso il Tribunale di Palermo 2023b).

<sup>9</sup> Palazzolo, (2023). "Intervista al procuratore de Lucia". *La Repubblica*, 26 August 2023.

This evolution in extortion practices is further evidenced by what Anti-racket Commissioner Nicolò describes as “Racket 2.0”.<sup>10</sup> The modern extortion system operates through the imposition of suppliers, hiring requirements, security services, and management costs that businesses would partially incur anyway. This transformation makes resistance more complicated, as entrepreneurs often perceive these impositions as less burdensome than the traditional pizzo system. This new approach embeds criminal control within normal business operations, making it harder to detect and easier to rationalize.

While these adaptations have helped preserve the extortion system, Cosa Nostra has also responded to increased difficulties in pizzo collection by diversifying its criminal activities. A significant change in recent years has been the increasing importance of other criminal activities in compensating for the challenges faced by the traditional extortion system. Several recent antimafia operations have revealed how Cosa Nostra has strengthened its position in both traditional and emerging criminal markets. As one journalist notes: “With the pizzo system becoming more difficult to maintain, the organization has increasingly turned to other criminal enterprises to ensure its financial stability” (Int. 6).

The online betting sector has emerged as a particularly profitable alternative revenue stream. “It has become one of Cosa Nostra’s main sources of income,” explains a scholar familiar with recent investigations, “with the organization controlling illegal gaming operations throughout the territory” (Int. 10). These activities often intersect with traditional extortion practices, creating what one prosecutor describes as “hybrid forms of criminal entrepreneurship” that combine territorial control with more sophisticated financial operations.

In the Tommaso Natale-San Lorenzo district, when faced with difficulties in drug supply to the Zen area, the clan developed an alternative strategy: allowing dealers to source their drugs independently while imposing a “tax” proportional to the type of drug sold. This demonstrates the organization’s flexibility in maintaining revenue streams even when traditional control mechanisms are compromised.

While expanding into new criminal enterprises, Cosa Nostra has also fundamentally transformed the nature of its extortion relationships.

As Addiopizzo volunteers note in their recent report, a significant number of businesses, particularly in specific urban areas and sectors, continue to pay extortion without reporting it to authorities.<sup>11</sup> However, what has changed significantly is the nature of the relationship between extorters and victims. As Prosecutor de Lucia emphasizes: “Today, people continue to pay the pizzo not just out of fear but out of convenience. We’re dealing with segments of society that actively seek agreements with the mafia, aware of the potential benefits, and some even offer themselves up”.<sup>12</sup>

This evolution is particularly evident in sectors like construction, where entrepreneurs often engage in what might be termed “transactional relationships” with their extorters. In exchange for pizzo payments, they seek various services: eliminat-

<sup>10</sup> Ziniti, A. (2025). “Il pizzo c’è ancora anche se non si vede”. *La Repubblica*, 12 January 2025.

<sup>11</sup> Comitato Addiopizzo (2024). “Il fenomeno estorsivo è cambiato: molti di coloro che pagano sono conniventi con Cosa Nostra”. [www.addiopizzo.org](http://www.addiopizzo.org), 29 June 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Palazzolo, (2023). “Intervista al procuratore de Lucia”. *La Repubblica*, 26 August 2023.

ing competition, collecting debts, recovering stolen goods, resolving labor disputes, and mediating neighborhood conflicts. This transformation aligns with what Gambetta (1993) identified as the mafia's ability to provide "private protection services," though in a significantly evolved form.

While judicial proceedings over the past two decades have documented hundreds of successful denunciations by economic operators who subsequently maintained their businesses normally, many others have chosen to maintain these collusive relationships.

This evolution towards more collusive relationships reveals how Cosa Nostra continues to adapt its methods while maintaining its fundamental role in territorial governance (Sciarrone, 2011; de Lucia & Palazzolo, 2023).

The differentiated pattern of extortion thus reveals both the organization's vulnerabilities and its resilience. While civil society resistance has successfully challenged mafia control in some areas, the persistence of the pizzo system in others demonstrates its continued importance for organizational reproduction, particularly in territories where traditional mafia settlement remains strong.

This persistence demonstrates how the three theoretical dimensions identified earlier - economic-relational, political-territorial, and socio-cultural - continue to intersect in new ways.

These transformations suggest that while the classic theoretical frameworks of Gambetta (protection services) and Block (power syndicate) remain relevant, they need to be updated to account for the increasingly complex and intertwined nature of modern mafia activities. As Sciarrone argues, what distinguishes mafia organizations is still "their capacity to establish roots in a territory, to control community activities and influence political and institutional life at the local level, while seeking a degree of social consensus".

## Conclusions

This study has demonstrated how mafia extortion in Sicily represents a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that goes far beyond simple economic predation. Through a systematic analysis of its evolution from the 1970s to the present, we have shown how the pizzo system combines three interrelated dimensions: economic-relational, political-territorial, and socio-cultural. These dimensions have evolved and adapted in response to both external pressures and internal organizational dynamics.

Our analysis has revealed several key findings that highlight how these dimensions interact in practice.

First, the economic-relational dimension has shown remarkable adaptability: the pizzo system has transformed from a targeted approach focused on strategic economic sectors in the 1970–1980s, to a mechanism of widespread territorial control through 'blanket collection' in the 1990s. In recent years, we've observed a shift toward more selective practices that prioritize larger businesses and focus on sectors with greater profit potential. This strategic evolution reflects Cosa Nostra's pragmatic approach to resource extraction, balancing operational risks against financial returns.

Second, the political-territorial dimension has undergone a fundamental transformation in response to external pressures. While direct territorial control has weakened in areas with strong civic resistance and law enforcement presence, Cosa Nostra has adapted by developing more sophisticated governance mechanisms. This transformation reflects a shift from predominantly coercive practices to increasingly collusive relationships, where extortion becomes embedded in complex business arrangements that blur the line between victim and accomplice. As Lupo (2018) observes, this evolution demonstrates the persistent “need for the mafia” among certain segments of Sicilian society, where criminal organizations continue to be viewed as providers of valuable services: from eliminating competition and collecting debts to resolving disputes and mediating conflicts. Cosa Nostra has effectively positioned itself as an alternative governance structure in contexts where state institutions are perceived as distant or ineffective.

Third, the socio-cultural dimension remains crucial, particularly in disadvantaged neighborhoods that constitute Cosa Nostra strongholds. As prosecutor Lia Sava emphasizes: “It’s not enough to imprison people; we must erode mafia consensus in the neighborhoods. I don’t have a magic wand, but I know that if the mafia boss continues to provide money for legal expenses to a detainee’s family, we will have failed in the eyes of their children. We need to create an ethical culture in these neighborhoods - only then can we foster economic development and encourage other businesses to invest in Sicily”.<sup>13</sup>

This assessment is echoed by Santino, who argues that Palermo should not be seen simply as a city sick with mafia, but rather as a “mafiogetic” city - characterized by a weak legal economy, precarious employment, widespread undeclared work, and an anti-mafia movement that struggles to engage with working-class communities. He emphasizes that “a renewal project requires adequate knowledge, an investigation that identifies problems and priorities. We need to ‘know Palermo’ if we want to change Palermo”.<sup>14</sup>

This transformation in the nature of compliance demands a qualitative leap in anti-mafia strategies. Traditional law enforcement approaches, while necessary, must be complemented by innovative measures targeting the “grey area” where legal and illegal activities intersect. Enhanced administrative tools are needed to disrupt corrupt networks, while positive incentive systems can help shift the cost-benefit calculation for businesses. A promising approach could be the development of tangible economic and administrative benefits for businesses that reject extortion demands, expanding beyond Addiopizzo’s existing “whitelist” model. These could include preferential access to public contracts, tax incentives, streamlined bureaucratic procedures, and dedicated support services for businesses that demonstrate commitment to legal operations. Furthermore, creating stronger protection mechanisms and legal support networks for entrepreneurs who decide to report extortion attempts could significantly reduce the perceived risks of non-compliance with mafia demands. This supportive

<sup>13</sup> Lombardi, A. (2022). “Lia Sava e il welfare mafioso: oltre al recupero dei detenuti dare lavoro alle loro famiglie”, Centro Studi ed Iniziative Culturali “Pio La Torre”, [www.piolatorre.it](http://www.piolatorre.it), 19 June 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Santino, U. (2025). “L’economia debole di Palermo e il disagio giovanile”. *La Repubblica*, 12 February 2025.

rather than punitive approach acknowledges the complex situations many businesses face while still encouraging a shift toward greater resistance against organized crime.

The role of civil society must also evolve beyond simple resistance to extortion. Critical consumption initiatives, which encourage consumers to support businesses that reject the pizzo, represent a powerful tool for changing economic behavior. These efforts should be combined with broader cultural and educational programs, particularly targeting young people, to promote not only rejection of mafia influence but also active citizenship and economic responsibility. Success depends on building stronger alliances between institutions and civil society, creating a unified front against both coerced and voluntary compliance with extortion demands.

The analytical framework developed in this study offers valuable tools for understanding mafia phenomena beyond Sicily. The interaction between economic, political, and social dimensions of extortion likely characterizes other criminal organizations' operations, from the 'Ndrangheta in Calabria to the Russian Mafia and Chinese triads, though their manifestations may vary significantly based on local contexts and institutional environments.

Moving forward, research should focus on systematic comparative analysis of how different criminal organizations adapt their extortion practices across varied cultural and institutional settings. This could contribute to developing a general theory of mafia extortion while recognizing the importance of local variations. Additionally, promoting dialogue between researchers, practitioners, and civil society actors from different contexts could enhance our understanding of effective counter-strategies.

The challenge of mafia extortion requires a global and multidisciplinary response that combines repression with prevention while remaining attentive to local specificities. Only by addressing both the immediate manifestations of extortion and its deeper social, economic, and cultural roots can we hope to effectively counter this phenomenon. This means not only strengthening law enforcement and supporting resistance movements but also promoting a culture of legality and civic responsibility that can gradually erode the social basis of mafia power.

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## Declarations

**Ethical approval** Not applicable.

**Informed consent** Not applicable.

**Consent to participate** The individuals who participated in the interviews for this study have provided their informed consent to participate anonymously. Furthermore, they have granted permission for the publication of their data in a scientific article.

**Competing interests** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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