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Land on fire: The spatial production of the mafia

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Abstract

"Land on Fire: The Spatial Production of the Mafia" proposes to address a major lacuna in geographic literature: How mafia groups are socially and spatially reproducing themselves through the intentional setting of fire. Analyzing the 2021 and 2023 wildfire seasons in Sicily, this research proposes that the Sicilian Mafia is operationalizing both rural and urban space in novel ways that reflect a transformation in their organizational structure. This work engages with Henri Lefebvre's theory on the production of space but also uses ethnography in Sicily to reorient our understanding of mafia crime, suggesting that the Sicilian Mafia's operationalization of the landscape reflects not only an evolution of the Mafia but also an altered relationship with the land itself.

Keywords

Fire, Lefebvre, mafia, production of space, Sicily

Land on fire

When the *scirocco*—a Mediterranean wind originating in the Sahara—crosses Northern Africa, it hits Sicily with a dry, hot desert air, producing conditions for extreme heat waves, especially during the summer months.[1] When the winds arrive, a new phenomenon arrives with them: A coordinated, organized, and illegal setting of wildfires. Days after fire encircled the town of Polizzi Generosa in Sicily's Madonie region, the town's mayor commented that the region "was under attack" and that "there [was] a plan behind these fires" (Mocciaro, 2021). More recently, in 2023, when asked about the fires, Palermo's mayor said that "the plurality of outbreaks in recent days suggests malicious

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acts, acts of absolute wickedness" (*Palermo Today*, 2023). The setting of intentional wildfire, *incendio doloso*, in Southern Italy has been tied to vendettas, land disputes, and protests (*XVII Legislatura*, 2022: 12), but recently the mafia has operationalized fire as an accumulation strategy and for territorial control (*Legambiente*, 2022; Roberts, 2021). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have estimated that 80% of wildfires were concentrated in regions known to have a powerful mafia presence (Cockburn, 2016; *Legambiente*, 2021), while the Anti-Mafia Commission report completed in May 2022 concludes that the fires in Sicily show undeniably that the predatory actions of Sicily's Cosa Nostra are a continued "condition of 'power' and 'control' in the territory which . . . go hand in hand with interests of an economic nature" (*XVII Legislatura*, 2022: 74).[2] Whether called arson, mafia fires, or fires set by a "widespread organization of professionals" (*WWF Sicilia Nord Occidentale*, 2023), the issue of *incendio doloso* is becoming as reliable as the *scirocco* winds themselves.

This geographical research addresses how mafia groups are socially reproducing[3] themselves (their power dynamics, modes of production, and organizational structures) through the intentional setting of fire. More specifically, this work looks at the spatial aspects of these new and dynamic practices. Space is not a passive backdrop upon which social lives are lived but is rather actively produced through "power laden practices" (Hart, 2018: 374) that are always simultaneously material and meaningful. Scholars, prosecutors, and journalists have acknowledged that the Cosa Nostra[4] is in a state of transformation (Allum, 2023; Dino, 2019; Prosecutor A, personal communication, 6 June 2023). Thus, a relational understanding of the production of space, or what I refer to as the spatial production of the mafia, is useful, as it enables researchers in the social sciences to trace interconnected historical geographies to a method that is simultaneously historical, material, and geographical. For this study, I use Henri Lefebvre's theory on the production of space to show how fire-setting in Sicily is part of a longer and deeper set of processes indicative of mafia transformations, past and present. Instead of being a singular crime, although it is, *incendio doloso* tells us where to look and helps reorient our understanding of mafia crime, suggesting that the Sicilian Mafia is operationalizing the landscape in novel ways that not only reflect an evolution in its organizational structure but also an altered relationship with the land itself.

Methods and organization

Studying mafias is a complex undertaking. Nothing is obvious, and nearly everything is kept hidden and out-of-sight under the cover of *omertà*.[5] Therefore, researching the mafia relies heavily on police records, court proceedings, interviews with privileged witnesses, and governmental reports, focusing on the material histories mafia crimes leave behind. While this research employs nearly all these methods,[6] it is also important to understand that "researching the mafia" spatially means moving through and being in "mafia spaces" with the hope of understanding the dynamics of active landscape production. I employed a range of methods for this study, but one that was surprisingly helpful in my field research and learning of mafia space was multi-sited landscape ethnography (especially participant observation and photographic and video documentation) and interviews, which helped develop place-based knowledge about the different

fire-affected areas in Sicily. Being in, and moving through, mafia space—long walks through rural areas, meandering drives on mountain roads, along with all-terrain-vehicle off-roading—offered me access to private landscapes that are not visible from primary or even secondary roads. Trekking through post-burn areas provided vistas onto and into Sicily's hinterland and enabled me to understand something more about the spatial practices and patterns of daily life in this region.

Driving through forested and agricultural areas helped me identify how different types of property are marked, what abandoned and untended property looks like, and which areas are monitored by the Corpo Forestale (Forestry Corps of the Sicilian Region). Tracking the location of fire outlooks and government signage revealed complex jurisdictional geographies. Newly planted sections of the mountain landscape were part of state-driven reforestation projects, despite the haphazard appearance of plantings and their design. Driving up to and along mountain ridges offered a chance to make spatial sense of the relationship between different towns while also revealing the location of wind turbines and photovoltaic installations.

While interviews with elected town officials, tour guides, and NGO workers introduced me to diverse perspectives on the fires, I had to rely on anecdotal evidence and casual conversations in the field with residents of the affected areas. They, in turn, have helped me see that more nuancing was necessary to understand the complex social, political, and economic histories of this region and how it might be prone to fire. These methods have proved valuable for this study, but they have left me without a clear answer as to *why* this is happening: Why are a large majority of fires set in Sicily arson? Who are the supposed arsonists, and what is their intention? Instead of looking at fire in isolation, this work uses the theory of the production of space to ground burn scars in interconnected historical geographies, with the hope of understanding the reasons for fire.

The geography of the mafia is a surprisingly understudied and undertheorized area of human geography. This lacuna is odd, given geography's capacity to study territory and processes of territorialization (Elden, 2013), power dynamics in place and space (Massey, 1994), the production of state-space and its vacuum (Lefebvre, 2009), the dialectic of nature–society/nature–culture (Katz, 1998; Smith, 2008), and, above all else, historical materialism. Outside the discipline of geography, the origins of the Sicilian Mafia have been tied to the early dynamics of industrial capitalism (Lupo, 2009), including resource extraction during the "age of sail" (citrus) and inputs for the slave trade, but also to revolutions and rebellion (sulfur mining and production) and the growth of capitalist monoculture, such as wheat (Dickie, 2004; Lupo, 2009). The configuration of the mafia in Sicily continues to move with capitalist developments into the 20th and 21st century. These developments include rural-to-urban transformations and the explosion of postwar urban development, the spread of the Sicilian Mafia to northern Italy, the period of globalization, the 2008 economic crisis and its aftermath, and the mafia's reconfiguration toward financial fraud. For every boom and bust in capitalism, the mafia is already there, ready to exploit any opportunity a capitalist crisis has opened to it. As this article argues, today, in the Sicilian hinterland, fire is being used to capture this dynamic.

Despite the spatial turn of the 1990s, no one has yet put into theoretical terms what the production of mafia space entails.[7] Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* can offer mafia studies a new way of understanding mafia space and the spaces operationalized by the

mafia, since his theory requires an analysis of the social, material, *and* political-economic as a fluid yet intertwined theory. By perusing the production of space instead of conducting a traditional political-economic analysis of the mafia, this work creates a much-needed opening for the study of mafia space (and its production) to better understand how the mafia has embedded itself into the everyday life of Sicilians.

The issue of *incendio doloso*

Wildfire is an increasing threat in Sicily. Despite the island's propensity for seasonal wildfire (like the larger Southern Mediterranean region), in Southern Italy the phenomenon of intentional fire-setting is a particular condition. Roberto Cingolani, Italy's Minister for Ecological Transition, said in 2021 that 57% of Italy's wildfires that year were caused by arson (Dettmer, 2021), while *Legambiente* (2022), Italy's leading environmental organization, has noted that the figure is closer to 77%. Since 2010, wildfires have been increasing, with peak years in 2012, 2017, 2021, and 2023.[8] The trend has been upward since 2016 (see Figure 1).

Despite the increase in fires, the summer of 2021 was unique in terms of their size and scope. So unique, in fact, that the Sicilian Anti-Mafia Commission carried out a formal investigation into the fires. The commission noted that the fires hit the region with "a violence never seen before: 8133 fires in total were registered." Over "78,000 hectares of land (exactly double the 36,000 hectares that went up in smoke in 2020)" burned, approximately 3.05% of the surface of the entire Sicilian region. Numbers this large "require reflection" and a formal investigation into "the causes that move the criminal hands of those who intentionally start a fire" (*XVII Legislatura*, 2022: 3). The investigation began on June 8, 2021, and over the course of 10 months and through ten hearings, the Commission collected testimony from a wide range of actors: commanders in the Forestry Corps of the Sicilian Region (or Corpo Forestale), the Department of Agriculture, National Park authorities, journalists, NGO representatives, mayors of affected towns,

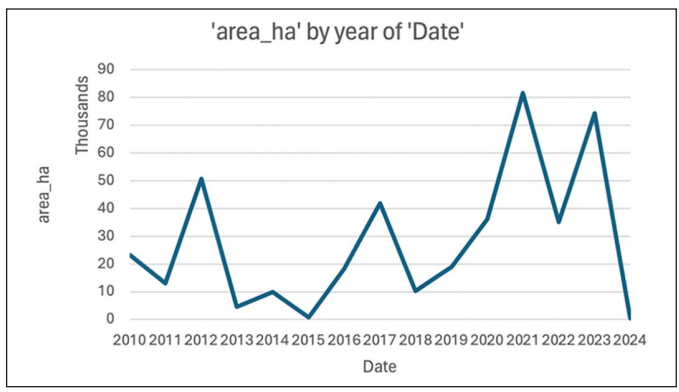

Figure 1. Burned area in thousands ha. per year (European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS), 2024).

and representatives of firefighting commands, among others. They set out to determine, as *Legambiente* did in 2017, if "mafias use forest fires to establish their military power and control over the territory."

Testimony detailed how perpetrators often set fires for the following profit-seeking reasons: To create arable and grazing land, to transform rural land for building or development, or to create temporary employment opportunities.[9] The report noted that fires are often set in "similar areas with similar trigger points" (p. 17), with the intent to overwhelm firefighters so crews have to choose which fires to attend to (usually those closest to towns and utility centers). They also note that fires are often set during heat waves, with the "high summer temperatures, often associated with strong *scirocco* and *libeccio*[10] winds, which cause significantly lower levels of humidity and thus drier vegetation, creating optimal conditions for the ignition of fires" (p. 12). Testimony from a *Salviamo i Boschi*[11] member noted that the fires are "always the in the same places . . . and always with the same weather conditions, with the strong winds of *scirocco*, winds which, of course, are announced because weather alerts [heat waves] are posted by Civil Protection services" (p. 18). This was echoed by the mayor of Petralia Soprana, who, in 2021, said: "it is not clear why, but the Madonie was clearly hit . . . I cannot explain why the fire started in one municipality and shortly afterward in another" (Mocciaro, 2021).

These known causes prompted the Italian state to pass multiple laws over the years, including the prohibition of grazing on burned land for 5 years, or the building of new developments on burned land for up to 10 years. However, implementing these laws requires registering fires on town and regional cadastral maps and the constant surveying of the area for grazing, agricultural use, or building. This comes with its own issues. Toto Cordaro, the Regional Councilor for Territory and Environment, testified that "if soil is crossed by fire, it becomes unchangeable . . . meaning there is a ban on that land for pasture, meaning it is impossible to build, meaning no public funds can be used on that terrain" (p. 23). He concluded that such stringency could create a deterrence to report fires. In this setting, malicious opportunities can abound: A farmer near Catania testified that 5 years ago, a large fire broke out near his land. Then, "3, 4 months after this fire, a matchmaker came and called a district meeting to ask the farmers if they wanted to sell their land" (p. 32). The precarious farmer continued to note the relationship between his land and speculative investors. He saw a "connection between the fire and someone who will ask if you want to sell. Two years ago, an intermediary came from a German multinational photovoltaic company and pretty much bought all that area that was affected by the fire" (p. 32).

The connection between intentionally setting fires and the creation of solar-panel and windmill fields was speculated on before the fire disasters of 2021. Writing about the alleged Cosa Nostra boss Matteo Messina Denaro,[12] Allum (2023) noted that he

> was investing in innovative and forward-looking businesses (such as wind and solar energy companies). All this is abetted by a large network of enablers and facilitators who . . . are often likely to be people with no criminal record of their own, so they are less traceable by the authorities.

One such enabler was Vito Nicastri, the Italian renewable energy entrepreneur and so-called "Lord of the Wind," an affiliate of Denaro's "gray-area" empire.[13] In 2013, the

Italian state seized 1.3 billion euros of his assets, the largest seizure to date, including 43 companies involved in wind and solar power. At the time of his arrest, it was reported that Italy's renewable energy sector had been "heavily infiltrated by the mafia because of once-generous state subsidies and lax controls, as well as the availability of land in areas of southern Italy with a strong mafia presence" (*Al Jazeera*, 2013).

In the aftermath of the 2021 fires, Klein (2021) reported that in Sicily,

> the "green transition" is offering significant funding for solar energy projects, [and] Italian farmers have approached the island's Anti-mafia commission upon finding their fields burning after they refused offers to sell them so the new owners could fill them with solar panels.

Similarly, Roberts reported that "200 applications for photovoltaic projects have already been submitted to the regional government," meaning that there is strong inclination to convert agricultural land for green energy use. She also noted that as "Italy receives the first tranche of the European Union's post-pandemic economic recovery fund [PNRR] . . . criminal organizations are looking to benefit from the funds allocated to the green transition" (Klein, 2021). One of the stated goals of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) is to fund a significant number of "green revolution and ecological transition" projects, allocating 59.46 billion euros (31.05% of the total fund) to this sector. A perfect storm seems to be brewing: longer, hotter summers, a startup industry with millions of state-offered euros supporting its success, and a mafia intent on new opportunities.[14] This rationale held weight until this past summer.

The fires of 2023 were different. Instead of rural, inland, and forested regions being burned, areas perfect for solar and wind installations, namely the hillsides surrounding Sicily's capital city, Palermo, were set on fire. Over the course of 3 days in late July, while other sites across Sicily struggled to contain fires due to the arrival of the *scirocco* winds and intense heat, Palermo faced fires at its eastern, western, and southern borders. At the peak of Sicily's tourist season, Palermo's main airport—the aptly named Falcone-Borsellino[15] Airport—was closed due to fire, its Bellolampo landfill was set on fire, and the city was choked by thick smoke for days. Air Canadas (firefighting airplanes) flew continuously over the city, dousing flames, while civilians took up garden hoses to save their homes. Local newspapers aired the anger of local Palermitans and politicians alike. At the peak of the second day of fire, the region's President Renato Schifani stated that "these fires are mainly malicious," and the Coldiretti Sicilia[16] said in a statement to the press that the fires were a "catastrophe without precedence" (*Rai News*, 2023). While no one denied the intentional act of arson, the ambiguous nature behind *incendio doloso* was as opaque as the smoke inundating the city.

Unanswered questions, empirical unknowns, and ambiguities are uncomfortable for social scientists, but as more and more researchers work at the intersection of the legal and illegal, learning how to identify and analyze illicit geographies is increasingly becoming more consequential. Dev et al. (2022: 656) have noted that ambiguity surrounding illegal acts can "obscure the timing and geographical extent of illicit activities, the actors participating, income generated, and the nature of the activities themselves," but "geographical theorizations" on the illicit can "bring out its socio-spatial and territorial implications" (p. 653). Wading into the unknown, or what they call "knowing what

we don't know," can spawn a productive research method, as it points researchers to other political, societal, and structural mechanisms that support the illicit. By paying attention to the material world, social practices, and lived experiences in and around the illicit, such as the production of space, data can "take on new meanings" (p. 657).

As in the aftermath of the 2021 fires, an official response was demanded, and Palermo's Public Prosecutor's Office opened an official "fact-finding" investigation to understand the causes of the widespread arson (Figliuolo, 2023b). At the time of writing, the investigation is ongoing, but an analysis of the 2023 fire season—and of the fires from 2021—is possible. Despite the different nature of the 2023 fires, their patterns resembles fires from previous years in terms of when and how the fires were lit, their rapid spread in localized areas, and the use of heat and wind to create fire disasters. My fieldwork in Sicily from April to August 2023, during the build-up and peak of the region's fire season, enabled me to understand how the "production of mafia space" can be conceptualized through ethnographic analysis of an *ambiguous* landscape of fire. I turn to this analysis next.

The production of mafia space

The subject of this article is not the criminal act of arson itself, but rather what fire-setting—as an intentional, premeditated, and organized act—might tell us about the territorial practices, markets and economies, and shifting power dynamics of Sicily's mafia. While no one denies that the fires are criminal acts, the question is, how can we understand them as crimes committed by the mafia? Furthermore, how can the fires be indicative of mafia space and how do we identify this?

To best understand the spatial production of the mafia, it is essential to explore Lefebvre's theory on the production of space. Lefebvre's production of space is an inherently dialectical process: Just as society produces space, the production of space is bound to the production and reproduction of society. More specifically, the production of space is formulated through the simultaneity of three types of spaces moving space–time forward: perceived, conceived, and lived space. Lefebvre formulated these as spatial practices (perceived), the representation of space (conceived), and the spaces of representation (lived space) (Schmid, 2022: 266). Although clunky, the concept offers spatial theorists a way to locate power and ideology in social space.

Lefebvre's theories are overlapping and sometimes contradictory, so it can be useful to look at Lefebvre's method through the lens of a more material substance, namely that of territory. Following Brenner and Elden (2009) but also Ballvè (2020), the production of space can be thought of as the production of territory. In this theory, perceived space (territorial practices) represents the material aspect of mafia territory: How space is marked and modified and transformed by networks, flows, roads, and the like. Conceived space (representations of territory) includes a range of tools that translate mafia practices into maps, concepts, plans, strategies, and abstract ways of representing and diagramming mafia territory. Finally, lived space (territories of representation) is created at the intersection of the perceived and conceived, where one finds the fluid, relational, and dynamic lived space (see Figure 2) (Brenner and Elden, 2009: 365).

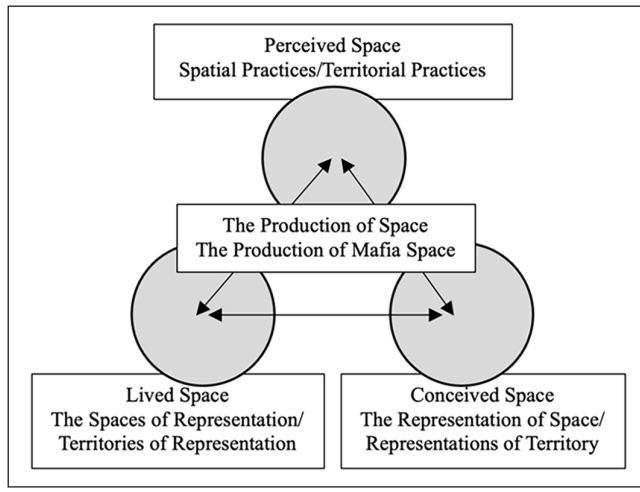

Figure 2. Diagram of Lefebvre's production of space (1991).

As mafia actors build, influence, and impact the material strata of their territory but also strategize their present and future, mafia space becomes tangible, alive, and dynamic and thus influences lived space, where the "everyday practices and lived experiences . . . take place within and beyond it" (p. 366). Furthermore, as mafia space is produced, so too are the social relations bound within processes of (illicit) production, (corrupt) political power, and (mafia) domination, what some have termed "mafia hegemony" (Schneider and Schneider, 2005). To understand this process in practice, fieldwork in Palermo and northwestern Sicily will be analyzed through the lens of Lefebvre's theory.

Landing at the Aeroporto di Palermo Falcone e Borsellino and taking the main freeway route into Palermo, taxis, buses, and passenger cars all pass the small town of Capaci and the Monumento alla Strange di Capaci, the memorial structure dedicated to the May 23, 1992, murder of anti-mafia pool prosecutor Giovanni Falcone and his wife, bodyguards, and travel companions. On that day, 350 kilos of dynamite were placed below the freeway in a drainpipe (Figure 3(a)), while mafia operatives waited for Falcone's entourage in a small shack that still teeters just above the town. Today, the structure boasts the emblematic "No Mafia" logo (see Figure 3(b)), large enough to be seen from the freeway. It serves as a reminder: This is where the Cosa Nostra detonated the bomb that killed Falcone. The state freeway, memorial structure (spatial practices), memory of the explosion and the activist space (representations of space), and daily recognition of the mafia's violence, past and present, in social life (lived space) envelops Sicilians and visitors alike in mafia space. However, this is not only about the control of space but also about the fight against mafia domination in space. This fight for space lives on in a new form: A drive through this specific area in August 2023 showed the aftermath of the late July firestorm, with the hillside surrounding the "No Mafia" shack burned and brown, scarred by dead trees, cacti, and brush.

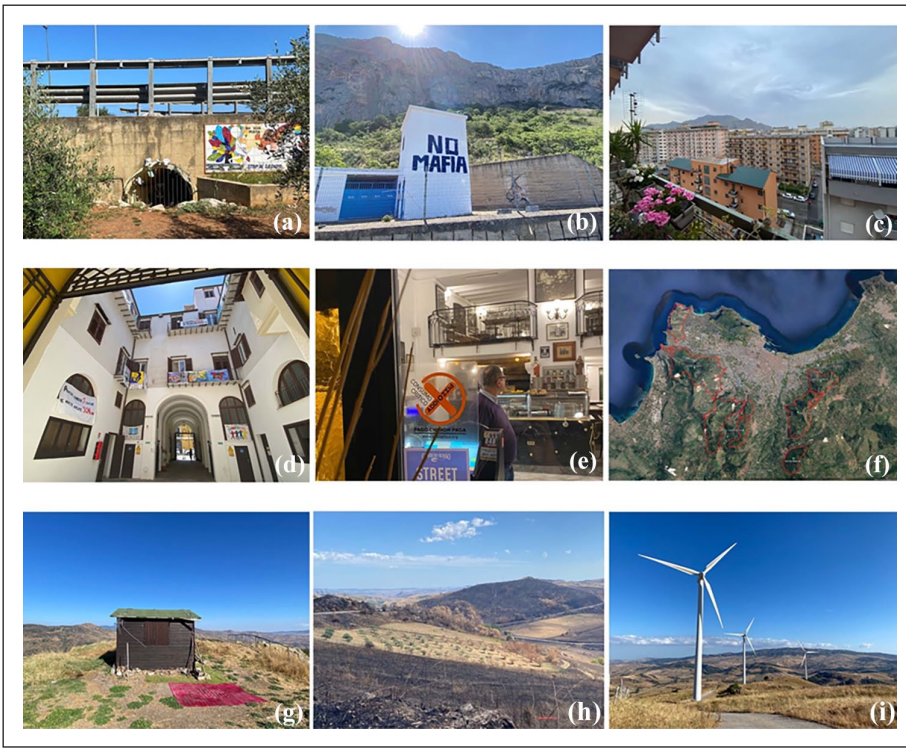

Figure 3. From left to right, top to bottom: (a) Drain pipe at Capaci, (b) "No Mafia" logo in Capaci, (c) View from balcony over the former Conca d'Oro, (d) Children's posters at the Fondazione Falcone, Palermo, (e) AddioPizzo sign at restaurant in Palermo, (f) Burn scars of the July 2023 fires in Palermo, (g) Corpo Forestale lookout in San Mauro Castelverde, (h) Burn scar near Gangi, (i) Wind turbines near Gangi. All images courtesy of the author except 3f (*WWF Sicilia Nord Occidentale*, 2023).

Passing Capaci and entering Palermo's periphery, five- and six-story cement buildings line the two-lane streets. As in other Italian cities, post-WWII reconstruction was urgent following the destruction of widespread bombing campaigns. In Palermo, though, rather than rebuild the old city, local politicians developed the verdant agricultural landscape of the Conca d'Oro, an area lying just outside the city's perimeter known for its historical citrus groves (see Figure 3(c)). Scalia (2024) has written extensively on Palermo's postwar reconstruction and noted that the choice to convert the agricultural area into a construction site was "intimately tied up with political and economic interests bound together with Mafia intermediation" (p. 2). The large-scale, postwar development program launched during the 1960s razed not only severely damaged buildings but also many of the Liberty-style architecture that gave Palermo its visual character. Demolition also leveled historical areas of the city center, where a large portion of Palermitans lived. What has become known as "*il sacco di Palermo*" (the sack of Palermo) lives on as one

of the "darkest chapters in the postwar urbanization of Sicily" (Saviano and Tondo, 2021) and continues to dictate the social space of the city and its periphery.

The sack of Palermo began in the early 1950s, when mayor Salvatore "Salvo" Lima, acting as a power broker for the Costa Nostra, worked with Vito Ciancimino, a Corleonesi, mafioso, and Director of Public Works under Lima. Together, they "blew up [Palermo's] Art Nouveau villas" (Bolzoni, 2022), granting 4205 building permits over the course of 4 years, the majority to "false-front shell companies" with direct ties to organized crime. Today, when one walks through Palermo, especially just outside of the city center, streets, city blocks, and neighborhoods are lined with apartment buildings made of concrete, with crumbling and damaged facades referring to the denigration of Palermitan urban space. Architectural historian Carta noted that the mafia's illegal building spree "devastated the city with cement, disfiguring its parks, landscape and natural beauty" (Saviano and Tondo, 2021).

The residual of the sack still permeates city life, as do the many memorials dedicated to mafia victims. The urban fabric is lined with plaques to victims of the second mafia war and posters completed by school-age children to remember the past (see Figure 3(d)). As a historian at the Museo Falcone-Borsellino told me, "*Io ricordio*—I remember" is an act of defiance (Guide A, personal communication, 18 July 2023). AddioPizzo[17] stickers on shop front doors remind all that the mafia is still here, still demanding a claim to space and the legendary *pizzo* (see Figure 3(e)), but there are those who refuse to pay and who are no longer afraid to say it. Palermo's perceived, conceived, and lived space is marked by the mafia's territorial battle scars, their victims, the spaces they lost, and the spaces they perhaps still retain. Since the murders of Falcone and Borsellino, Italy's regional anti-mafia prosecution offices (DDA), the local police, the Carabinieri (state police), and the will of the Italian people have severely handicapped the Cosa Nostra. For example, after the second mafia war, the Direzione Investigativa Antimafia (1996) (Directorate of Anti-Mafia Investigation, the national anti-mafia investigative branch) noted that "the Cosa Nostra is going through a very difficult time . . . in the light of recent events [Capaci] . . . the organization will take advantage of the situation to try to regroup and develop new guidelines and strategies" (p. 9). As its access to the urban receded, the Cosa Nostra looked back in space and time to its rural roots and began to position some of its operations just outside city center (Prosecutor A, personal communication, 6 June 2023), while still attempting to dominate city space.

Speaking with shopkeepers, anti-mafia activists, and prosecutors made clear how this transition continues to enact violence, but this time environmental. *Legambiente* has well-documented the mafia's environmentally focused illicit activities.[18] Instead of cement apartment blocks, burned hills transform perceived space, while aggregate maps of the burns from July 2023 transform ideas of the urban and representations of mafia space (see Figure 3(f)). The experience of fire in such proximity to daily life resolidifies ideas of the mafia in social life. To better understand this transformation in space, traversing the urban into the rural is essential.

When driving through the Madonie Regional Park in north central Sicily, one inevitably runs into the small, seasonal mountain dwellings of the Corpo Forestale, Italy's forestry protection service. Especially during the summer months, these huts become the temporary residences for on-call forestry workers: lookout points to surveil and report

new fires. Atop one of the highest peaks in the Madonie, in the town of San Mauro Castleverde, a known Cosa Nostra holdout (Figliuolo, 2023a), sits a Corpo Forestale outpost with 360 degree views of the sprawling Sicilian hinterland, from the blue waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea to Sicily's historic inland agricultural region (see Figure 3(g)). On an adjacent ridge, far off yet still visible, sat an installation of wind turbines. A private tour brought me to this spot in early August 2023. Despite extreme heat and wildfires in the region the week prior, the shack was closed when we were there. When asked why the lookout was unstaffed, my guide provided no answers or speculation (Guide B, personal communication, 2 August 2023). An hour's drive west, near the town of Geraci Siculo at the eastern border of the Madonie Park, sat another outpost. This time, a hut was open and manned by two workers within the Corpo Forestale's *antincendio boschivo* (forest firefighting) unit. As they told me, six people crewed this outpost around the clock, but only in summer. They were on call for 2 days before being relieved by two other workers.

The Cosa Nostra has been accused of infiltrating the Corpo Forestale, placing operatives in civil protection services as seasonal workers. Seasonal contracts provide a lifeline to workers living in the inland, rural areas of Sicily. In the aftermath of the 2021 fires, it was suggested that local mafiosi were working within these rural landscapes, steering contract firefighting jobs to those in their ranks: A lucrative trade, where fires were being set by those who paid to put them out (Roberts, 2021). Accusations of mafia actors skimming rural development funds destined for reforestation projects (Armiero et al., 2020; Il Sicilia, 2021) have also been made. While I was walking through a reforested area in August 2023, I saw workers clearing brush from drainage areas along a service road. The area was well cared for, but recent plantings appeared haphazard: Fruit and non-native trees grew alongside pines that still had burn scars. My guide mentioned that the reforested areas are often protected and closed off, with access provided only to forest workers and their families (for work and pleasure).

Over lunch at the Rifugio Marini in Piano Battaglia, in heart of the Madonie mountain range, my guide talked about past fire seasons. They were convinced of their criminal aspect, stating bluntly that the fires were "organized" and "criminal." They continued, "Burning is an expression of power," meaning that arson is done for people to see. Fires are set to remind people that someone is in charge. Similar to "terrorist strategies," they create an atmosphere of "fear and terror." The fires remind all local people that "they," the mafia, are still present and can still do whatever they want (Guide C, personal communication, 4 August 2023). They control the territory and any work plans therein. In many ways, this was the truest expression of mafia space: Perceived, conceived, and lived space produced a space of terror. In this framing, when the Madonie town of Petralia Soprana burned for days and the neighboring town of Polizzi Generosa had to be evacuated, the fires operated as a reminder to the region that the mafia still holds power over these lands.

When I asked how and where the fires were set, my guide told me they are usually set outside of towns, on roads and in locations one can leave easily, for example, at an intersection (Guide C, personal communication, 4 August 2023). Fires are also set at multiple locations close to one another in order to have them spread quickly and overwhelm fire crews. Pieces of burning matter are often left by the side of the road, a point corroborated

by a public official of Polizzi Generosa whom I interviewed later. He showed me a photo of a metal contraption that fire crews believed had been one of the ignition devices that forced the town's evacuation in 2021. He also told me that the fires, which surrounded the town on its natural plateau, almost reached the local petrol station. Fire crews concentrated on this location specifically to avoid a major catastrophe (Official A, personal communication, 8 August 2023). A regional park authority noted that "tube pipes" were used to set the fires. A small flame can be lit inside a metal tube filled with paper or dry grass and then launched from a moving vehicle, allowing the assailant to quickly escape the area before the fire takes hold (Official B, personal communication, 10 August 2023).

In the south of the park, where the border is more rural, it is easier to set fires: there are fewer travelers, fewer witnesses, and areas with low and dry brush for easier ignition (Official B, personal communication, 10 August 2023). This was the case as I drove through Gangi in the Madonie region. The day before, a large fire had been set at the intersection of state roads SS120 and SS286. Driving along the mountain road as the burn scars started to become more visible and overwhelming, my companion commented that the area felt like a crime scene. We parked on the side of the road to take stock of the landscape. Burned grass revealed layers of discarded items left on the roadside: Bottles, aluminum cans, small animal bones, and rocks were all that remained. The burned areas resembled geometric shapes across the sloping hills: both sides of the road were blackened, and a small olive grove directly in front of us was partially damaged (see Figure 3(h)). The ground was black, and the trees were charcoaled. The view presented us with a collection of black, brown, and green plots, interspersed from the main road up the hillside and far off into the distance. The winds were active that day, although the heat had started to subside. At the top of the ridge, just beyond the burn scars, stood dozens of wind turbines.

Wanting to take a closer look, my companion and I drove to the top of the ridge to investigate the energy park. The turbines were majestic. As the wind flowed across the blades, a turbine 30 feet above us slowly turned (see Figure 3(i)). The cluster of turbines was owned by the Italian energy company Enel, with signage indicating it was the Serra Marocco wind park, built in 2004. This region had not been crossed by fire recently, but along the trail we encountered another issue plaguing Sicily: abandoned land. Along the narrow, rocky country road lay a former small farm. As labor, family, and work dynamics shifted across the southern economies, once active agricultural land fell victim to Italy's intra- and inter-migration patterns. Agnoletti et al. (2022) note that due to rural abandonment, Italian forests have doubled their surface since 1861. This land is neither managed nor maintained and thus subject to a range of actors and actions who hope to gain access to it, including the mafia.

In the absence of arrests, interactions with local people became essential to understand and identify mafia space. The proprietors of a small farm and adjacent *agriturismo* in the south of the park were convinced that the mafia was connected to the fires. While unsure of the specific reason for the arson, it was clearly a "business strategy." The fires were too coordinated, with too many ignition points (Proprietor A, personal communication, 9 August 2023). In their opinion, the mafia in the region no longer shot bullets but rather operated through white-collar crime operations. This echoed what President of the Anti-Mafia Commission Claudio Fava noted in 2021: "In Sicily, fires are used more than

bullets." In the same statement, he urged prosecutors and local police to "reflect on" and "follow" what is happening in the region (Scollo, 2021). Understanding the subtleties of mafia space, in history and today, is one way to track these developments.

Conclusion

The material history that mafia actors leave behind tell a story, not just about violence and territorial "wars" but also about everyday life in urban and rural space: Crumbling cement balcony facades of city blocks refer to past infiltrations of the mafia in city planning, while AddioPizzo logos on restaurant doors signal to visitors that these establishments are no longer intimidated by past practices. These subtleties in the space of everyday life are the material of interconnected historical geographies, actions built on one another, producing a stratified spatial structure. Mafia, state, and civilian actors together produce the space of the everyday, and through this production, power is taken, given, and fought for. But in space, it is possible to identify shifts in these same dynamics. One argument this article makes is that fire is also signaling a transformation in and of mafia space.

According to Schmid (2022), the production of space is a "theory in motion," which makes it ideal for the study of the mafia, as it helps us direct attention to the "'blind fields' or unrecognized and unexplained developments and processes . . . helping to recognize and cross invisible analytical borders" (p. 504). For scholars who work in the realm of the unknown and ambiguous, using Lefebvre's method means looking longer and deeper at the world and paying attention to things out of place, investigating affected landscapes with an eye toward their production, but also looking back in history to look forward, what Lefebvre thought of as a "regressive/progressive" approach. It also means to

> critically question the existing representations of space and time . . . our concepts and terms, our images and maps, our definitions . . . to push aside entrenched preconceptions, prescriptions, and ideologies that condition our thinking in order to remain alert to the developments unfolding before our eyes (p. 504).

The interviews, tours, conversations, and analysis cited in this work all point to something malicious afoot in the burned landscapes of Sicily. While the perpetrators may never be caught, looking at Sicily's perceived, conceived, and lived space—urban and rural—in history and today might help answer the question: What does setting *land on fire* offer to the power dynamics found in Sicily today, and does it point toward the next, future iteration of the Cosa Nostra?

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Notes

1. In August 2021, the region experienced the highest temperature ever recorded in Europe, a staggering 48.8°C/119.84°F.
2. All translations from Italian to English were done by the author.
3. In critical human geography, social reproduction encompasses the "daily and long-term reproduction of the means of production, the labor power to make them work, and the social relations that hold them in place" (Norton and Katz, 2017: 1).
4. The term "mafia" refers to the larger body of organized crime operating in Italy, historically and today. Regional mafias include the Cosa Nostra in Sicily, the Camorra in Campania, and the 'Ndrangheta in Calabria. This article will refer to the Sicilian mafia as the "Cosa Nostra," "the Sicilian Mafia," or "the mafia" in specific contexts.
5. Literally translated as "silence," the term is known in mafia studies as the "law of silence" required of all mafia operatives and beyond.
6. During fieldwork (2022–2023, 2024), I conducted interviews with prosecutors at the Direzione Distrettuale Antimafia (DDA) in Palermo and Naples, the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) in Palermo, and the Direzione Nazionale Antimafia e Antiterrorism (DNAA) in Rome; consulted case files from criminal trials; and interviewed town mayors and key staff at regional and national environmental organizations as well as managing directors of regional parks. I also relied heavily on the 2022 Anti-Mafia Commission Report that investigated the 2021 fires, governmental and non-governmental reports on the wildfires, and investigative journalists who reported in the aftermath of the 2021 and 2023 fires.
7. One key exception exists in Anna Sergi and Luca Storti's (2021) special issue on "Spaces of Organised Crime." Although none are specific geographical studies of the mafia, collectively they make inroads into the spatiality of organized crime. Vincenzo Scalia's (2021) "The production of the Mafioso space. A spatial analysis of the sack of Palermo" has been particularly helpful in my conceptualization of mafia space, despite the differences in our analyses.
8. In 2012, 50,714 hectares were burned; in 2017, 41,888; in 2021, 81,637; and in 2023, 74,341. Data were compiled from the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS) (2024) wildfire database.
9. There are also non-profit-seeking causes, including vendettas or vandalism.
10. The libeccio is a wind pattern that originates in the southern Atlantic.
11. Salviamo i Boschi is a networked group of environmental organizations working in Sicily since 2017 to safeguard its wooded areas.

12. Suspected Cosa Nostra boss Matteo Messina Denaro was captured and arrested on January 16, 2023, after years of living underground. He passed away in police custody on September 25, 2023.
13. The gray area, or l'area grigia, is composed of representatives "from the political class, institutions, professional, business world" that provide "organized crime and in particular, mafia dynasties, opportunities to increase profits"; it is a space neither within nor outside mafia operations, "but a space within which mafiosi themselves seek and establish alliances, exchange favours and engage with external actors, offering them different services of protection and intermediation" (Allum et al., 2019: 84).
14. While limited data has been found that connects mafia-related crimes to PNRR funds, a recent investigation revealed that Denaro's gray-area network connected him to an administrator who oversaw the use of PNRR funds (*L'Unione Sarda*, 2024). Libera!, the anti-mafia organization, has also been tracking transparency issues associated with the PNRR.
15. Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino were mafia prosecutors and were both murdered by the Cosa Nostra in 1992.
16. Coldiretti is the largest Italian association representing and assisting Italian agriculture.
17. Addiopizzo is an Italian anti-mafia movement and organization based in Sicily. Since 2004, Addiopizzo has been engaged in the fight against mafia extortion rackets.
18. For example, see Legambiente's "EcoMafia" reports; also Armiero et al. (2020).

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