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Mafia Life. Love, Death and Money at the Heart of Organised Crime

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Date of publication: March 30th, 2018

Edition period: March 2018 – July 2018

To cite this article: Siino, A.R. (2018). Mafia Life. Love, Death and Money at the Heart of Organised Crime [Review of the book]. *International and Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences*, 7(1), 104-106. doi: 10.17583/rimcis.2018.3337

To link this article: <http://doi.org/10.17583/rimcis.2018.3337>

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Review

Varese, F. (2017). *Mafia Life. Love, Death and Money at the Heart of Organised Crime*. London: Profile Books Ltd. ISBN: 1781252548

Starting from the analysis of the specific Russian context (Russian Mafia, Princeton University Press, 2001), Federico Varese has dedicated his researches to the study and the comparison of mafias and different forms of organized crime, referring to their politic, economic and social dimensions. In his last book, he gleans from his stock of knowledge and experiences to offer a peculiar analysis of mafias. Through the comparison of different kind of groups – the Sicilian Mafia and the Italian-American one, the post-Soviets vory-v-zakone, the Japanese Yakuza and the Hong Kong Triads – he shows to the reader the main elements that they have in common reflecting also about the influence of historical and global changes.

But the comparison is not only interesting in itself. There are three main factors that distinguish this book from other attempts to analyse the different form of organized crime.

Firstly, the aim of the book is to introduce the reader into a peculiar dimension of mafias that is the human one. Indeed, mafias are presented not in itself but starting from the personal stories of human beings that belong to them. Each of the nine chapters is dedicated to a different phase life, showing the everyday situations that mafia members might have to deal with. In this perspective, Federico Varese talks about: the real meaning of

initiation rituals (Birth); the difficulties in running – legal and illegal – businesses (Work) and in drawing up alliances to safeguard the group (Management); the use of money and the need of trustworthy relations (Money); the ambivalent role of sentiments and women (Love); the pursuing to be socially recognized (Self-Image); the political role of mafias as social actors (Politics); the way in which a member, or a mafia group itself, can be stamped out (Death); the common desire to be honoured and remembered after death (Post mortem).

Secondly, the analysis is conducted referring to different types of information sources. Mafia members' biographic information, historical references, legal evidences, wiretaps collected by the police and photos are complemented by interviews personally conducted by the author. The limit in using sources collected for different aims is overcome thanks to the author's analytical skills in connecting different elements and his personal knowledge of the contexts about which he talks about. In this way, he can offer to the reader a vivid description of places and people even if the distance that separates their worlds.

Thirdly, the author shows that attitudes typically linked to the mafia image can be surprisingly retraced far from the stereotyped contexts, within other forms of organized crime. In this sense, the author focuses on the common elements existing between mafias and the English Salford's gangs, such as: the instrumental use of violence; the aim in entering the legal economic system; the attempt to influence – directly or indirectly – the democratic process; the citizens' distrust towards legal institutions; the capability to guarantee social order and the existence of a “wall of silence”, just another way of saying “omertà”.

Beyond specific reasons and contextual factors, mafia members and common citizens share the same needs, goals and feelings. Even if the gang phenomenon and the mafia one cannot be overlapped, this book shows how a full understanding of real local dynamics must go beyond a formal use of the label “mafia” paying attention to the current needs of a community. In this sense, the concrete exit-strategies proposed by the author call to account institutions, politicians – called to efficiently manage the justice system and promote a social integration – and civil society.

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Thanks to the analytic and narrative capabilities of his author, this book has the primary merit to introduce a complex phenomenon in a way which is accessible to the reader, showing how every light has its shadow just like every shadow has its light.

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