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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A true crime story: The role of space, time, and identity in narrating criminal authority

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**Abstract**

This article presents a theoretical and methodological argument for employing a narrative-based approach to explore criminal organisations' (COs) claims to political authority, accompanied by an empirical example. International Relations scholarship is increasingly interested in the role narratives play in political meaning-making processes, with violent non-state actors (VNSAs) beginning to occupy a central space in such investigations. This work has contributed important insights into how VNSAs, such as terrorists and insurgents, mobilise narratives to challenge state authority. However, this literature still needs to take stock of groups that do not directly challenge the state but rather live within it. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's literary theory and using the Sicilian Mafia as a case study, I show that COs exercise and construct their narratives of political authority by reappropriating the state's key constitutive narratives of space, time, and identity. By reflecting the same form of (statist) political imagination via alternative spatial, temporal, and identity configurations, these groups simultaneously reject and reproduce modern articulations of political authority in their spatio-temporal and identity dimensions.

**Keywords:** methodology; narratives; organised crime; political authority; violent non-state actors

## Introduction

Narrative analysis has gained increasing significance as a vital analytical instrument within the expansive realm of constructivist thought in the field of International Relations (IR). This is particularly notable in its role in understanding the intricate ways narratives influence the decision-making processes of states regarding their foreign, security, and defence policies, their assessment of successes and failures,[1] and their domestic and international legitimation.[2] This 'narrative

[1] Kai Oppermann and Alexander Spencer, 'Telling stories of failure: Narrative constructions of foreign policy fiascos', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23:5 (2016), pp. 685–701; Alexander Spencer and Kai Oppermann, 'Narrative genres of Brexit: The Leave campaign and the success of romance', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27:5 (2020), pp. 666–84; Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:4 (2016), pp. 610–27; Kai Oppermann and Alexander Spencer, 'Narrating success and failure: Congressional debates on the "Iran nuclear deal"', *European Journal of International Relations*, 24:2: (2018), pp. 268–92; Tom Colley and Carolijn van Noort, *Strategic Narratives, Ontological Security and Global Policy* (London: Palgrave Studies in International Relations, 2022).

[2] Christopher Smith Ochoa, Frank Gadinger, and Taylan Yildiz, 'Surveillance under dispute: Conceptualising narrative legitimation politics', *European Journal of International Security*, 6:2 (2021), pp. 210–32; Roxanna Sjöstedt and Erik Noreen, 'When peace nations go to war: Examining the narrative transformation of Sweden and Norway in Afghanistan', *European Journal of International Security*, 6:3 (2021), pp. 318–37; Helen Stenger, 'Victim versus villain: Repatriation policies for foreign fighters and the construction of gendered and racialised "threat narratives"', *European Journal of International Security*, 8:1 (2023), pp. 1–24; Michelle Bentley, 'Enough is enough: The UK Prevent Strategy and normative invalidation', *European Journal of International Security*, 3:3 (2018), pp. 326–43.

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turn'[3] has also been expanded into the analysis of narratives *about* violent non-state actors (VNSAs), which has produced invaluable insights into how certain understandings of and responses to VNSAs 'become dominant while others are marginalized'.[4]

Increasingly, however, IR has been listening to the narratives *of* VNSAs. Such works illuminate the way VNSAs mobilise narratives to challenge state authority and provide key insights into how alternative narratives of political authority inform alternative state-building projects and forms of rebel governance.[5]

Nevertheless, this literature still needs to take stock of groups that do not directly challenge the state or seek to break away from it but rather live *within* it as they ground their power within the states' socio-political and economic context. Such actors, generally referred to under the umbrella term of organised crime,[6] often exercise significant political control in coexistence with the state. As Lessing notes, 'the activities of these groups affect 'the lives of tens of millions of people in Latin America alone',[7] often triggering states of exception and military interventions.[8]

Rather than trying to settle the 'perennially contested' question of what organised crime – an umbrella term often used to describe a variety of different groups[9] – is, throughout this contribution I follow Lessing in adopting 'criminal organisation' (CO) 'as an atheoretical, inclusive descriptor to refer to any group engaged in criminal activity'.[10] While this broad definition potentially includes a variety of very different actors, my interest is not in establishing fixed typologies, which often rely on blurring distinctions such as that between economic/politically motivated actors,[11] but rather, by studying their narratives, to understand how some of these groups can exercise political authority.

As Lessing asserts, the study of political authority on the part of COs is still an open question, since 'political science has yet to adequately grapple with this reality'.[12] A growing literature has framed this question in terms of criminal governance: 'governance occurs when the lives, routines, and activities of those governed are impinged on by rules or codes imposed by a CO'.[13] Such governance has been extensively documented in relation to different COs, such as the Sicilian Mafia,[14] the Russian Mafia,[15] the Japanese Yakuza,[16] the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta,[17]

[3]Geoffrey Roberts, 'History, theory and the narrative turn in IR', *Review of International Studies*, 32:4 (2006), pp. 703–14.

[4]Alexander Spencer, 'Rebels without a cause: Narrative analysis as a method for research on rebel movements', in Andreas Kruck and Andrea Schneiker (eds), *Researching Non-state Actors in International Security: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2017), chapter 3; Alexandra Homolar and Pablo A. Rodríguez-Merino, 'Making sense of terrorism: A narrative approach to the study of violent events', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 12:4 (2019), pp. 561–81.

[5]Raquel Da Silva, Matthew Bamber-Zryd, and Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, 'Statebuilding beyond the West: Exploring Islamic State's strategic narrative of governance and statebuilding', *European Journal of International Security* (2023), pp. 1–18.

[6]Federico Varese, 'What is organized crime?', in Stefania Carnevale, Forlati Serena, and Orsetta Giolo (eds), *Redefining Organised Crime: A Challenge for the European Union?* (London: Hart Publishing, 2017), pp. 27–55.

[7]Benjamin Lessing, 'Conceptualising criminal governance', *Perspectives on Politics*, 19:3 (2021), pp. 854–873 (p. 861).

[8]Jorge Battaglino, 'Threat construction and military intervention in internal security: The political use of terrorism and drug trafficking in contemporary Argentina', *Latin American Perspectives*, 46:6 (2019), pp. 10–24; Norma Rossi, 'Extremely loud and incredibly close: Criminal terrorism and exceptional legislation in Italy', in Linda S. Bishai (ed.), *Law, Security, and the State of Perpetual Emergency* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), pp. 107–32.

[9]Varese, 'What is organized crime?'.

[10]Lessing, 'Conceptualising criminal governance', p. 861.

[11]Norma Rossi, 'Breaking the nexus: Conceptualising illicit sovereigns', *Global Crime*, 15:3–4 (2014), pp. 299–319.

[12]Lessing, 'Conceptualising criminal governance', p. 855.

[13]Lessing, 'Conceptualising criminal bovernance', p. 856.

[14]Diego Gambetta, '"The Sicilian Mafia": Twenty years after publication', *Sociologica*, 2 (2011), pp. 3–4.

[15]Federico Varese, *The Russian Mafia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[16]Peter B. E. Hill, *The Japanese Mafia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[17]Anna Sergi and Anita Lavorgna, *Ndrangheta: The Glocal Dimension of the Most Powerful Italian Mafia* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

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the Neapolitan Camorra,[18] criminal organisations in the UK,[19] Somali pirates,[20] and gangs in Latin America.[21]

This article contributes to this debate by moving the focus away from the practices of criminal governance to develop instead a narrative-based approach to studying COs' claims to political authority. Shifting the focus in this direction means rephrasing the question of how COs exercise political authority in a constructivist fashion, i.e. by investigating the social construction of 'interpretive dispositions' as conditions of possibility of practices (of criminal governance).[22] Such a line of inquiry means asking: how are COs' claims to political authority made possible? How are they deployed, and how can they be studied?

I argue that answering these questions by studying narratives allows us to grapple with the COs' political imaginations, which underpin their practices of criminal governance. If we define political authority as 'rightful rule',[23] 'the fusion of power with legitimate social purpose'[24] or 'the legitimate exercise of power',[25] then political imagination refers to 'social epistemes', i.e. 'the mental equipment that people drew upon in imagining and symbolizing forms of political community'.[26] Narratives, or 'making stories', are crucial to understanding forms of political imagination and representation, since 'it is through narratives that humans make and comprehend the world and thereby they offer a means of understanding behaviour and action'.[27] Indeed, narratives are crucial to constructing the political imagination informing states' claims to political authority; one need only think of the centrality of the Hobbesian narratives of the state of nature in justifying the very existence of the state, which in turn upholds punitive practices such as policing. In the same way, I suggest that investigating COs' claim to political authority through a narrative framework illuminates the stories that are told to "make sense" of practices of criminal governance, and contributes to understanding COs' political imagination. Put differently, since narratives work as a 'behavioural guide',[28] a narrative approach contributes to understanding how the world of COs 'hangs together'[29] and illuminates their claims to political authority beyond the everyday practices of criminal governance.[30]

To build such a narrative approach, this article addresses a key characteristic of COs which distinguishes their study from that of state and rebel governance, i.e. 'their embeddedness' within

[18]Monica Massari and Vittorio Martone, *Mafia Violence: Political, Symbolic, and Economic Forms of Violence in Camorra Clans* (London: Routledge, 2019).

[19]Paolo Campana and Federico Varese, 'Organized crime in the United Kingdom: Illegal governance of markets and communities', *British Journal of Criminology*, 58 (2018), pp. 1381–400.

[20]Anja Shortland and Federico Varese, 'State-building, informal governance and organised crime: The case of Somali piracy', *Political Studies*, 64:4 (2016), pp. 811–31.

[21]Dennis Rodgers, 'Living in the shadow of death: Gangs, violence and social order in urban Nicaragua, 1996–2002', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 38 (2006), pp. 267–92; Enrique Desmond and Nicholas Barnes, 'Crime and plural orders in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil', *Current Sociology*, 65:3 (2017), pp. 448–65; Anjuli N. Fahlberg, 'Rethinking favela governance: Nonviolent politics in Rio de Janeiro's gang territories', *Politics & Society*, 46:4 (2018), pp. 485–512.

[22]Roxanne Lynn Doty, 'Foreign policy as social construction: A post-positivist analysis of U.S counterinsurgency policy in the Philippines', *International Studies Review*, 37:3 (1993), pp. 297–320 (p. 298).

[23]David Lake, 'Rightful rules: Authority, order, and the foundations of global governance', *International Studies Quarterly*, 54:3 (2010), pp. 587–613 (p. 587).

[24]John Gerard Ruggie, *Constructing the World Polity: Essays in International Institutionalization* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 64.

[25]Rodney Bruce Hall and Thomas J. Biersteker, *The Emergence of Private Authority in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 4–5.

[26]John Gerard Ruggie, 'Territoriality and beyond: Problematizing modernity in International Relations', *Internatonal Organizations*, 47:1 (1993), pp. 139–174 (p. 157).

[27]Alexander Spencer, *Romantic Narratives in International Politics: Pirates, Rebels, and Mercenaries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), p. 1.

[28]Spencer, *Romantic Narratives*, p. 2.

[29]John Gerard Ruggie, '"What makes the world hang together?" Neo-utilitarianism and the social constructivist challenge', *International Organization*, 52:4 (1998), pp. 855–85.

[30]Christian Bueger, 'Practice, pirates and coast guards: The grand narrative of Somali piracy', *Third World Quarterly*, 34:10 (2013), pp. 1811–27.

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the state; these groups are 'simultaneously born of, shaped by, in opposition to – but in subtle ways complementing – state power'.[31] This point imposes two interrelated considerations for the narrative approach developed in this article. First, since these groups live within the socio-political context of the state, their narratives must be studied in relation *to the state*. 'Born of' and 'complementing/contesting' the state in narrative terms requires conceptualising the relational ontology of these narratives, conceptualising COs' narratives of authority as a 'response' to states. Second, the very process of criminalisation of such groups is a constitutive feature of state authority. Therefore, methodologically, the dimensions which I put forward to build the narrative framework mirror the state's traditional narrative of authority construction – time, space, and identity.

To develop such a framework, I draw on the work of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, which allows me to develop a specific understanding of narrative that – as I explain later in the article – emphasises its monological character but also its intertextual and dialogical structuration. Through such a reading, I show that COs exercise and construct their narratives of political authority by reappropriating states' key constitutive narratives of space, time, and identity. By reflecting the same *form* of (statist) political imagination via alternative spatial, temporal, and identity configurations, these groups simultaneously reject and reproduce modern articulations of political authority in their spatio-temporal and identity dimensions.

As I expand on further in the conclusion, approaching the study of COs' claims to political authority through narratives also has important implications for countering these groups. In the case of the Sicilian Mafia, this article shows how their authoritative narratives at once mimic and contest the state's narratives. This requires us to think critically about how states narrate their fight against CO groups in two ways. First, the reliance on de-humanising these groups (by labelling COs as 'cancers', for instance), which usually legitimises the use of emergency legislation, can fuel COs' own narratives. Second, if states' narratives do not acknowledge the fact that COs live within the state, there is a risk of reproducing the fight against such groups as a morality play between two opposing sides. This obscures, rather than illuminates, the dynamics of institutional and everyday coexistence (and at times symbiosis) between parts of the state and COs.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I locate the research problem within the broader debate on COs, then I proceed to build my theoretical and methodological framework on Mikhail Bakhtin's literary theory. I then illustrate the insights such a framework can generate via a case study of the Sicilian Mafia.

## COs in international security

COs have taken longer to attract the attention of international security and IR than other VNSAs, such as terrorists, insurgents, and private military and security companies, and have largely been studied within the fields of sociology and criminology.[32] However, driven by the security concerns generated by COs' ubiquitous effects, their relevance for international security is increasingly recognised.[33]

This attention is echoed by two burgeoning literatures *on* the transnational governance of organised crime, on the one hand, and the governance *by* COs, on the other. While the former focuses on key mechanisms by which states respond to COs, specifically concentrating on global governance, the limits of and opportunities for security cooperation, and the role of transnational institutions and norms,[34] the latter analyses how COs exercise territorial and population control. However,

[31] Lessing, 'Conceptualizing criminal governance', p. 855.

[32] Ian Loader and Sarah Percy, 'Bringing the "outside" in and the "inside" out: Crossing the criminology/IR divide', *Global Crime*, 13:4 (2012), pp. 213–218.

[33] Natasha M. Ezrow, *Global Politics and Violent Non-state Actors* (London: Sage, 2017), p. 133.

[34] Alessandra Russo and Eva Magdalena Stambøl, 'The external dimension of the EU's fight against transnational crime: Transferring political rationalities of crime control', *Review of International Studies*, 48:2 (2022), pp. 326–45; Anja P. Jacobi, *Crime, Security and Global Politics: An Introduction to Global Crime Governance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan/Red Globe

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rather than focusing on those groups which directly contest the state, such as rebel groups, for example, this body of literature focuses on those groups that deliver criminal governance within the 'larger domain of state power'.[35]

This orientation focuses on COs' practices of governing with(in) and against states.[36] As Barnes puts it, 'criminal organizations negotiate (sometimes violently) with the state … over who is the dominant authority on a local level: who controls violence, provides order, and makes the rules that govern society'.[37] The key questions are therefore *why, when*, and *how* these groups exercise political authority. This means analysing, through the lens of criminal governance, the ensemble of practices imposing 'rules or restriction on behaviour by criminal organizations'.[38] Criminal governance combines the threat and exercise of violence 'as a crucial resource'[39] with strategies of legitimation, including the ability of these groups to provide alternative forms of social control and order in prison,[40] the coexistence of criminal and state forms of control in urban areas,[41] the influence of COs on electoral processes,[42] and their ability to compete for drug markets and challenge the state directly.[43]

Yet political authority is arguably not exhausted by practices of governance, since at a higher level it also involves the ability to shape political imaginations, which confer meaning on these practices. This concern is central to constructivist literature in IR, which has often turned to discourse analysis to grapple with the meaning-making process of discourse to study the processes of enabling/limiting political possibilities.[44] This point is expressed in Paul Ricoeur's suggestion that 'a life is no more than a biological phenomenon as long as it has not been interpreted'.[45] Approaching COs from this angle requires that we rephrase the problem of their claims to political authority by raising the crucial question of *how* practices of criminal governance are enabled, how their meaning is constructed, and what forms of political imagination – ways of being and acting politically – are sustained by them.

A narrative approach provides the tool with which to do this. The narrative works so that 'a sequence of human actions is given connection and an overall sense'.[46] By doing so, narratives enable and constrain our thinking about the possible; by 'constituting reality, narratives can define the limits of common sense, what is considered possible and logical and what is placed outside of the sensible or acceptable'.[47] Put differently, narratives shape our imagination of political possibilities. Below, I develop a narrative framework with which to investigate COs' political imagination and how it informs claims to political authority.

Press, 2020); Anja P. Jacobi, 'Governing illicit finance in transnational security spaces: The FATF and anti-money laundering', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 69:2 (2018), pp. 173–90; Anja P. Jacobi, 'Global norms and US foreign policy change and norm emergence: The governance of transnational crime', *International Politics*, 54:6 (2017), pp. 683–97.

[35]Lessing, 'Conceptualizing criminal governance', p. 868.

[36]Lessing, 'Conceptualizing criminal governance', p. 861.

[37]Nicholas Barnes, 'Criminal politics: An integrated approach to the study of organized crime, politics, and violence', *Perspectives on Politics,* 15:4 (2017), pp. 967–87 (p. 967).

[38]Lessing, 'Conceptualizing criminal governance', p. 856.

[39]Campana and Varese, 'Organized crime in the United Kingdom', p. 1383.

[40]Benjamin Lessing and Graham Denyer Willis, 'Legitimacy criminal governance: Managing a drug empire from behind the bars', *American Political Science Review*, 113:2 (2019), pp. 584–606.

[41]Lessing, 'Conceptualizing criminal governance'.

[42]Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley, 'Why did drug cartels go to war in Mexico? Subnational party alternation, the breakdown of criminal protection, and the onset of large-scale violence', *Comparative Political Studies*, 51:7 (2018), pp. 900–37.

[43]Angélica Duran-Martinez, 'To kill and tell? State power, criminal competition, and drug violence', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59:8 (2015), pp. 1377–402.

[44]Spencer, *Romantic Narratives*, chapter 1.

[45]Jenny Rankin, 'What is narrative? Ricoeur, Bakhtin, and process approaches', *Concrescence: The Australasian Journal of Process Thought*, 3:3 (2002), pp. 1–12 (p. 4).

[46]Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 5.

[47]Spencer, *Romantic Narratives*, p. 36.

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## Narrating political authority: Mikhail Bakhtin and the dialogical monologue

Narrative analysis is situated within the broader constructivist orientation towards discourse analysis, focusing on the constitutive power of discourse.[48] Since the field of narrative studies is vast and comprises different epistemological and ontological dispositions,[49] this contribution's specific interest in narrative lies in its 'means of structuring discourse'[50] so as to provide a unitary story which makes sense of the world.[51]

To build my narrative framework, I draw upon the 'philosopher of dialogue'[52] Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work is gaining traction in IR.[53] Drawing on his notion of dialogism,[54] my subsequent discussion shows that a narrative is a specific form of discourse structuration which is at once inherently relational while also aspiring to exclude any alternative voice to that of its author. To unpack this, let us consider how Bakhtin defines a monologic form of discourse:

> With a monologic approach (in its extreme or pure form) *another person* remains wholly and merely an *object* of consciousness, and not another consciousness. No response is expected from it that could change everything in the world of my consciousness. Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any *decisive* force. Monologue manages without the other, and therefore to some degree materializes all reality. Monologue pretends to be *the ultimate world*. It closes down the represented world and the represented person.[55]

The discursive form of narratives corresponds to this Bakhtinian monologue, since '[a] narrative is a representation that arrests ambiguity and controls the proliferation of meaning by imposing a standard and standpoint of interpretation.'[56] As such, a narrative excludes others' perspectives and assumes the authority of the narrator because a 'narrative suggests the speaker's view of what is canonical. What is ordinary and right is discussed as the matter of fact.'[57]

And yet, building on Bakhtin, it is possible to understand how narratives, while monological in their aspiration, are inherently relational in their structuration. Indeed, from a dialogical point of view, 'a monologue still participates in a dialogue with difference from a processual point of view';[58] 'it is impossible to have the last word in a dialogue, we expect this utterance to provoke others.'[59] As Bakhtin suggests, any narrative work stands in relation, both temporally and spatially, to all

[48] Jennifer Milliken, 'The study of discourse in International Relations: A critique of research and methods', *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:2 (1999), pp. 225–254 (p. 231).

[49] Dominique Robert and Shaul Shenhav, 'Fundamental assumptions in narrative analysis: Mapping the field', *The Qualitative Report*, 19:38 (2014), pp. 1–17.

[50] Spencer, *Romantic Narratives*, p. 4.

[51] Spencer, *Romantic Narratives*, p. 4.

[52] Iver B. Neumann, 'International Relations as emergent Bakhtinian dialogue', *International Studies Review*, 5:1 (2003), pp. 137–40.

[53] Xavier Guillaume, *International Relations and Identity: A Dialogical Approach* (London: Routledge, 2011); Xavier Guillaume, 'Foreign policy and the politics of alterity: A dialogical understanding of International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 31:1 (2002), pp. 1-26; Xavier Guillaume, 'Unveiling the international: Processes, identity and alterity', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 35:3 (2007), pp. 741-758; James Der Derian and Michael J Shapiro, *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics* (Lexington, KY: Lexington Books, 1998).

[54] Following Holquist, 'dialogism' as a term was never used by Bakhtin – it is aimed at being something of a 'synthesis' of his work. Michael Holquist, *Dialogism* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 14.

[55] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (1984), pp. 292–3, emphasis in the original.

[56] Michel J. Shapiro, 'Introduction: Textualizing global politics', *International/Intertextual Relations* (1989), edited by James Der Derian and Michael J Shapiro, Lexinghton MA: Lexinghton Books p. 11.

[57] Molly Patterson and Kristen Renwick Monroe, 'Narrative in political science', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1 (1998), pp. 315–331 (p. 316).

[58] Xavier Guillaume, *International Relations and Identity*, p. 47.

[59] Julian Holloway and James Kneale, *Mikhail Bakhtin, Dialogics of Space*, in *Thinking Space* (2000), edited by Mike Crang, Nigel Thrift, Routledge: London p. 12.

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other narratives. Thus, from the moment of its structuration, the narrative is always dialogical, since its meaning always exists in relation to others, never in isolation.

To further conceptualise the dialogical structuration of the narrative, the concept of intertextuality comes to our aid. Pioneered by Julia Kristeva, intertextuality refers 'to the ways in which one text invokes another … thereby drawing the other text's meaning into the understanding of the focal one.'[60] Therefore – despite attempting to unilaterally (i.e. monologically) establish a standard of interpretation – a narrative acquires its meaning in relation to other texts, and intertextuality captures the emergence of the 'polyphony of voices'[61] upon which a narrative depends for its 'process of signifying'.[62]

This concept of the narrative – at once monological in its aspiration but dialogical in its structuration – effectively expresses the way states have historically constructed their claims to political authority by excluding violent nonstate actors (VNSAs). Indeed, an established literature in historical IR has shown how the progressive exclusion and de-legitimisation of VNSAs has been central to the constitution and affirmation of claims to state sovereignty and the international system.[63] The exclusionary character of states' claims to political authority articulates a unitary narrative that defines what something is – a legitimate monopoliser of violence – vis-à-vis what it is not. Such exclusions are still a key feature of states' claims to political authority. A significant example is the narratives of criminalisation of COs expressed through domestic and international law.[64] And yet it is the inherent relationality of these claims that confers their meanings on these narratives.

Put differently, a state's narrative of the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a particular territory only makes sense in relation to the possibility of alternative narratives; 'to assert a monopoly is to acknowledge (at least implicitly) the existence of the competitors … Take away the competitors, the rebels, anarchists, criminals, subversives etc. and the state loses its very raison d'etre.'[65] Within this narrative, both aspects of a Bakhtinian analysis coexist: on the one hand, the 'centripetal' tendencies that would impose a single interpretation (the monologic aspiration of the narrative which affirms the monopoly) and, on the other, the 'centrifugal' structuration of the instability and relational nature of such a construction (the dialogical structuration of the narrative whose meaning can only make sense in relation to what is excluded[66] – the violent non-state).

This understanding of narratives as a form of discourse, which is monologic in its aspiration but dialogical and intertextual in its structuration, allows us to interrogate the forms of political imagination at play in COs' claims to political authority. Since COs are simultaneously embedded in the social, cultural, and political structures of states, how do they relate to states' narratives of authority? Indeed, if states determine what is criminal, which is a precondition for the rise of COs,[67] do COs respond, and how?

To investigate this contestation, I suggest focusing the narrative analysis on three key dimensions: space, time, and identity. The selection of space and time draws on Bakhtin's attention to

[60] P. Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow, *Interpretative Research Design: Concepts and Processes* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 86.

[61] Julia Kristeva, '"Nous deux" or a (hi)story of intertextuality', *Romantic Review*, 93:1–2 (2002), pp. 7–13 (p. 9).

[62] Kristeva, '"Nous deux"', p. 9.

[63] Janice E. Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns: State-Building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press); Patricia Owens, 'Distinctions, distinctions: "public" and "private" force?', *International Affairs*, 84:5 (2008), pp. 977–90; Alejandro Colás, 'Barbary Coast in the expansion of international society: Piracy, privateering, and corsairing as primary institutions', *Review of International Studies*, 42:5 (2016), pp. 840–57; Malte Riemann, '"As old as war itself"? Problematizing the eternal mercenary', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6:1 (2021).

[64] Peter Andreas and Ethan Nadelmann, *Policing the Globe: Criminalization and Crime Control in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[65] John Hoffman, 'Postmodernism, the state and politics', in Jane Dowson and Steven Earnshaw (eds), *Postmodern Subjects/Postmodern Texts* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), pp. 101–115 (p. 105).

[66] Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London and New York: Routledge 1990), p. 70.

[67] Kendra L. Koivu, 'Illicit partners and political development: How organized crime made the state', *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 53 (2018), pp. 47–66.

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the *chronotope*.[68] As a space-time configuration, the chronotope expresses two constitutive and interrelated narrative dimensions, which are 'central to our perception of the world'.[69] The centrality of the spatial and temporal dimensions of a narrative is particularly important because it avoids understanding authority claims by COs as limited to claims about identity versus difference, which has attracted criticism in relation to narrative-based analysis.[70] Instead, the analysis of spatio-temporal configurations is central to the articulation of modern forms of political imagination. Indeed, the construction of physical territory is a central dimension articulating states' claims to political authority. State sovereignty 'expresses the claim by states to exercise legitimate power within strictly delimited territorial boundaries'.[71] This spatial configuration, however, is socially constructed.[72]

Together with space, the dimension of time also assumes a central role. Temporal and spatial dimensions are integrated by shaping the realm of the state as the spatial and temporal precondition for the political community to develop: 'temporally these demarcations work to secure a primary distinction between the realm of progress "inside" and a realm of immutable violence, warfare and barbarism "outside"'.[73] As post-colonial scholarship has argued, key to the production of these spatio-temporal narratives was the European encounter with the non-European. 'Hobbes's depiction of a condition of war, without commerce or agriculture, where the "life of men" is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short", is directly linked to the savage people in many places of America.'[74] Thus the temporal dimension works to locate the spatialised political community defined by the modern state on a linear temporal trajectory, making it possible to 'leap across the divide from pre-modern to modern, from a state of nature to a state of civil society and civilization'.[75] Yet the 'time of the state' does not go uncontested, and different subaltern temporal representations can challenge it.[76] Crucially, for Bakhtin, 'the chronotopes of a narrative are also "bridges" that engage with parallel space-time frames'.[77] While their substantiation is a question for empirical analysis, alternative chronotopes allow the theorisation of the discursive structuration of how COs produce alternative epistemes of political authority by 'responding' to states. As Väyrynen puts it, 'when speech is acquired by those whose right to speak is not recognised they can produce spatiality and temporality that disturbs hegemonic representations of time-space constellations, namely "who are we?" and "where are we?"'.[78]

This last consideration leads directly to the last narrative dimension, the 'we' that these narratives evoke. This third narrative dimension focuses on the social construction of the identity of the political community from which the COs seek legitimation. Historically, narratives of national identity have been central to claims of political authority, and the idea of the nation has been

[68]Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination*, ed. and trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 84.

[69]Holloway and Kneale, *Mikhail Bakhtin, Dialogics of Space*, pp. 73–4.

[70]Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47.

[71]Robert B. J. Walker, 'State sovereignty and the articulation of political space/time', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 20:3 (1991), pp. 445-461 (p. 449).

[72]Mathias Albert, David Jacobson, and Yosef Lapid, *Identities, Borders, Orders: Rethinking International Relations Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

[73]Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'The generalised bio-political border? Re-conceptualising the limits of sovereign power', *Review of International Studies*, 35:4 (2009), pp. 729–749 (p. 730).

[74]Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 86.

[75]Robert B. J. Walker, 'Lines of insecurity: International, imperial, exceptional', *Security Dialogue*, 37:1 (2006), pp. 65–82 (p. 71).

[76]Tarja Väyrynen, 'Rethinking national temporal orders: The subaltern presence and enactment of the political', *Review of International Studies*, 42:4 (2016), pp. 597–612.

[77]James Lawson, 'Chronotope, story, and historical geography: Mikhail Bakhtin and the space-time of narratives', *Antipode*, 43:2 (2011), pp. 384–412 (p. 385).

[78]Väyrynen, 'Rethinking national temporal orders', p. 600.

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deployed to articulate who 'we' are.[79] Rather than taking national identity for granted, considering identity to be a key dimension for analysis exposes how alternative claims can contest the state's account. This dimension recalls the question of the audience – to whom do COs 'narrate'? In approaching this question, I examine how the audience is constructed within the narrative rather than presuming the audience to be an entity existing 'prior to speech'.[80] In Bakhtin's words, this refers to the principle of 'addressivity', for which 'an essential (constitutive) marker of the utterance is its quality of being directed to someone'.[81] Therefore 'the main phenomena to be examined are how the structure of the talk in progress can shape its audience'.[82] This is in line with how post-structuralist literature has shown that for political authority to work, 'what must be done … is to control how its people are "written" or constituted – how their meaning is fixed'.[83] Therefore, the narrative of identity focuses on the construction of a 'we', as emerges from the COs' identity narratives.

This approach to the problem of the audience also speaks to a broader methodological problem of the literature investigating COs, for which 'distinguishing between true members, affiliates and sympathizers, and uninvolved "civilians" can be theoretically and empirically difficult'.[84] This implies that the study of the audience – often referred to as 'bottom-up legitimacy'[85] – is problematic. However, within the approach advanced here, a way to mitigate this issue is to focus on how the same narrative constructs multiple addressees. Bueger's analysis of piracy is illustrative, showing that narratives are addressed to recruits and affiliates as well as to the broader population.[86] Together, these two addressees of the identity narrative interrogate how the 'people' who are supposed to accept COs' claims are constructed within the narrative.

Space in which 'we' live, time in which 'we' proceed, and 'people' that 'we' are thus constitute three key narratives for investigating COs' claims to political authority. Before illustrating this framework, the next section introduces the case study and explains the selection of the empirical material.

## Methodological reflections on the case study of the Sicilian Mafia

There are several reasons why the Sicilian Mafia is particularly relevant for illustrative purposes. First, Italian mafias are a primary reference point for the study of the relationship between COs and politics, and the Sicilian Mafia is often considered the 'ideal-type' CO.[87] Second, the Sicilian Mafia also possesses a strong social capital.[88] Third, as Barnes claims, the Sicilian Mafia, rather than being a unique anomaly, is 'a form of social organization whose structure and functions have been replicated across much of the world'.[89] Therefore, while the empirical results of such a study and its specific narratives are highly contextual, the case illustrates the insights that can be generated through a narrative-based analytical framework.

The Sicilian Mafia's significance is also related to its exercise of complex patterns of criminal governance, including organic and, at times, symbiotic relations with state institutions and

[79] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006).

[80] Lane Hansen, 'The politics of securitization and the Muhammad cartoon crisis: A post-structuralist perspective', *Security Dialogue*, 42:37 (2011), pp. 357–369 (p. 360).

[81] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004, 1986), p. 95.

[82] Charles Goodwin, 'Audience: Diversity, participation and interpretation', *Text*, 6:3 (1986), pp. 283–316 (p. 284).

[83] Cynthia Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 28.

[84] Lessing, 'Conceptualising criminal governance', p 858.

[85] Lessing, 'Conceptualising criminal governance', p. 858.

[86] Bueger, 'Practice, pirates and coast guards'.

[87] Letizia Paoli, 'Organised crime in Italy: Mafia and illegal markets – exception and normality', in Cyrille Fijnaut and Letizia Paoli (eds), *Organised Crime in Europe* (Netherlands: Springer, 2004), pp. 263–302 (p. 264).

[88] Rocco Sciarrone, 'Mafia e potere: processi di legittimazione e costruzione del consenso', *Stato e Mercato*, 78:3 (2006), pp. 369–401.

[89] Barnes, 'Criminal politics', p. 972.

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political parties.[90] This fact is important for an approach that investigates the role of competing narratives of authority, even in contexts in which state institutions and COs have been both complicit in profit-seeking activities and symbiotic in the exercise of local governance. This point speaks to the broader concern of narrative analysis in exposing the difference between actors' self-representation and others' perspectives.[91]

The empirical material includes a plurality of document typologies, including reports of parliamentary committee hearings, published autobiographical memories, academic texts, television interviews, private letters seized by the Italian authorities, and dictionaries, but also fictional stories grounded within popular culture. The selection follows Bakhtin's principle of the heterogeneity of speech genres.[92] This heterogeneity reflects the intense dialogical structuration of the narrative, whose meaning 'draw[s] on culturally embedded story genres' and is 'intersubjective'.[93] Selected sources therefore include both 'high' and 'low' data,[94] placing the emphasis on intertextuality or 'the ways in which one text invokes another'.[95] *Invoking* does not necessarily mean a direct quotation; rather, intertextuality looks at the way narratives are performed by referencing highly specific cultural contexts, connecting a variety of texts, 'emotional appeals, historical analogies', and various forms of symbolism.[96] This allows us to ask how the same text can be mobilised by multiple, competing, and opposed narratives – revealing the narrative contestation between the Italian state and the Sicilian Mafia.

This source selection also includes a temporal dimension, as the selected texts are analysed synchronically and diachronically.[97] This means that a selected text under study is considered not only in relation to contemporaneous texts; its intertextuality is also analysed in reference to present and past texts. Therefore, the documents selected for analysis cut across a long time span, referencing texts produced prior to Italian unification (15th–17th centuries), in the post-unification context (mid-19th century), and in the current period (second half of the 20th and 21st centuries). Placing the emphasis on the diachronic dimension accounts for the 'relative stability' of the chronotopes; 'at any point in space and time it is possible to see a chronotope (time and space) which is more or less fixed'.[98] This reflects the general observation that, while narratives can also adapt and change, some become embedded and even dominant.[99]

A final methodological reflection concerns the specific difficulty of studying COs, such as the Sicilian Mafia, whose organisation is based on secrecy. *Omertà*, for example, is the code of silence prohibiting mafiosi to speak about the mafia.[100] This point raises the question of how to apply a narrative-based approach to groups that often deny their own existence in public. Rather than discouraging such an investigation, however, this prompts the empirical question: what role does *omertà* play in shaping mafia narratives? Put differently, it allows us to ask how *omertà* 'narrates'. To account for this central issue, the selected documents comprise statements from mafiosi who refused to cooperate with the state after arrest – with *omertà* informing their narratives – and from

[90] Nando Dalla Chiesa, *La convergenza: Mafia e politica nella Seconda Repubblica* (Milan: Melampo, 2010), p. 36.

[91] Brent J Steele, 'Recognising, and Realising, The Promise of the Aesthetic Turn', *Millennium,* 45:2 (2017), pp. 206–13.

[92] Mikhail Bakhtin, 'The problem of speech genres', in Adam Jawosrski and Nikolas Coupland (eds), *The Discourse Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 121–2.

[93] Spencer, *Romantic Narratives*, p. 27.

[94] Jutta E. Weldes, 'High politics and low data: Globalization discourses and popular culture', in Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (eds), *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), pp. 176–86.

[95] P. Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow, *Interpretative Research Design: Concepts and Processes* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 86.

[96] Holger Stritzel, 'Securitization, power, intertextuality: Discourse theory and the translations of organized crime', *Security Dialogue*, 43:6 (2012), pp. 554–555.

[97] Guillaume, *International Relations and Identity*, p. 30.

[98] Holloway and Kneale, *Mikhail Bakhtin, Dialogics of Space*, p. 10.

[99] Spencer, *Romantic Narratives*, chapter 1.

[100] Salvatore Di Piazza, *Mafia, Linguaggio, Identità* (Palermo: Centro di Studio ed Iniziative Culturali Pio La Torre, 2010).

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others who cooperated and broke with the code of silence by becoming informants (the so-called *pentiti*). Every step of the analysis signposts this distinction.

Before starting the analysis, it is important to note that the dimensions of space, time, and identity are kept analytically separate for illustrative purposes only. Nonetheless, the analysis shows how these are intertwined, since it is within the space-time configuration – the chronotope – that an alternative identity can be imagined.

## Topos: Insiders and outsiders

An analysis of chronotopes starts from *the topos-space*. Spatial narratives are central to understanding the Sicilian Mafia's claim to political authority. Though global trafficking is a key activity for the organisation, it is integrated with capillary local territorial control.[101]

The articulation of an alternative spatial narrative that challenges the Italian state underpins practices of territorial control. Antonio Calderone, a former mafioso who turned state informant, articulated this spatial dimension in military-like terms: 'Cosa Nostra is made up of soldiers … there are the heads of a group of soldiers [capodecina], then there are the vice representatives, then the councillors, and then the representatives.'[102] Leonardo Messina, another mafioso turned state informant, is even more explicit, declaring that 'the family *is sovereign* over everything that happens in its territory' and 'in Sicily a pin cannot be set down without the agreement of the local representative [of the mafia]'.[103]

These texts show how the spatial narrative constructing the Sicilian space as a domestic space in which the mafia provides an alternative form of political authority reflects the monological aspiration but also the dialogical structuration of the Bakhtinian narrative. Indeed, while the narrative excludes any other source of authority in Sicily (emphasised by the affirmation of the mafia's exclusive control over what happens in Sicily), the very meaning-making process of this narrative relationally depends on terms that symbolise state authority, such as sovereignty and soldier, implicitly evoking the statist political imaginary of the legitimate monopoly of violence. Though reliant on state-centric imaginations, the state's spatial narrative is turned on its head, since it is this very spatial narrative that affirms the Sicilian Mafia's authority. As observed elsewhere, this portrayal of almost absolute physical territorial control does not accurately reflect the successes of anti-mafia law enforcement since the early 1990s.[104] Yet 'stories are stubborn and resist change even in the face of contradictory empirical data'.[105]

This spatial narrative is not based solely on physical control, but also acquires a moral dimension. In the words of the *pentito* Gaspare Mutolo: 'mafiosi were the people who commanded, the wise … if you heard that someone had been killed, you would think that the person who died was evil, that he could not have been a good person.'[106] This statement shows how mafia violence constitutes 'a social and cultural resource',[107] which is part of the articulation of a spatial narrative, expressed by the moral distinction between good and evil. Through this opposition, the spatial narrative of political authority acquires a moral connotation, from which the state is excluded.

[101]Anna Sergi and Luca Storti, 'Shaping space: A conceptual framework on connections between organised crime groups and territories', *Trends in Organized Crime*, 24 (2021), pp. 137–51.

[102]'Mafia Politica, Pentiti: atti della commissione d'inchiesta sulla mafia. La Relazione del Presidente Luciano Violante e le deposizioni di Antonio Calderone, Tommaso Buscetta, Leonardo Messina, Gaspare Mutolo', *Atti della Commissione Parlamentare d'inchiesta sulla mafia*, ed. Orazio Barrese (Messina: Rubettino, 1993), p. 131. Translations from the Italian primary sources are my own.

[103]'Mafia Politica, Pentiti', pp. 304 and 389, emphasis added.

[104]Letizia Paoli, 'The decline of the Italian Mafia', in Dina Siegel and Hans Nelen (eds), *Organized Crime: Culture, Markets and Policies* (New York: Springer, 2008), pp. 15–28.

[105]Bueger, 'Practice, pirates and coast guards', p. 1817.

[106]'Mafia Politica, Pentiti', p. 406.

[107]Massari and Martone, *Mafia Violence*, p. 11.

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To further illustrate this point, a diachronic reference can be made to letters written by the mafia boss Matteo Messina Denaro, dated between 1 December 2004 and 28 June 2006. Denaro was arrested in January 2023 and placed in solitary confinement because he refused to cooperate; he died in September of the same year. In these letters, he deploys a spatial narrative by defining Sicily as 'our land',[108] while he simultaneously renders 'abject'[109] state officers as well as state informants; 'I do not see men, only opportunistic molluscs'.[110] Reducing his adversaries to the status of animals shows how the spatial narrative functions as a relational process of differentiation that enables othering. This resonates with IR literature on how states construct their narratives of political authority on the basis of a moral distinction between inside and outside.[111] As Campbell claims, 'the construction of social space that emerges from practices associated with the paradigm of sovereignty thus exceeds a simple geographical partitioning … the social space of inside/outside is both made possible by and helps constitute a moral space of superior/inferior'.[112] Similarly, the mafia's accumulation of the means of violence and control of territory is part of a spatial narrative of legitimate control based on the moral exclusion of that which is external to it.

The analysis above shows how the Sicilian Mafia's spatial narrative mimics (while contesting) key aspects of state narratives, in terms of both territorial control and the construction of such territoriality in moral terms. The next section will further this analysis by completing the investigation of the chronotope through a focus on time.

## Chronos: The civilised and the Indians

To analyse the Sicilian Mafia's temporal narrative, it is imperative that it be contextualised both synchronically and diachronically within the process of southern Italy's temporalisation since the nineteenth century. Temporalisation is a discourse that assigns some contemporaries to an anterior time rather than the time they belong to, which simultaneously corresponds to portraying them as morally bankrupt and fundamentally different in comparison to their contemporaries.[113] This section shows how the mafia's temporal narratives emerge out of a response to a temporalising narrative of Sicily (and more broadly southern Italy) which is diachronically constituted across several centuries and intertextually constructed through a variety of texts of different literary genres.

Italy's South has often been portrayed as a space left behind by civilisational progress. Already in the sixteenth century, Jesuits described this region as the 'Indies of here', which made it an ideal training ground for missionaries travelling to the New World.[114] This view remained prevalent during Italian unification when, in 1861, the southern part of the peninsula was described as trapped in an obscure past and in need of enforced modernisation.[115] This barbarism versus civilisation narrative became central to representations of the relationship between southern and northern Italy. A letter written after national unification by Luigi Carlo Farini, then chief administrator of the South, is exemplary: 'My friend, what kind of country is this! … what Barbarians! This is anything but Italy! This is Africa! The Bedouins, in comparison with these boors, are exemplars of civic virtue.'[116] Such opinions were anything but uncommon in the governing elite of the constituting

[108]Matteo Messina Denaro (author) and Salvatore Mugno (editor), *Lettere a Svetonio: il capo di Cosa Nostra si racconta* (Viterbo: Stampa Alternativa, 2008), p. 60.

[109]Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

[110]Denaro, *Lettere a Svetonio*, p. 70.

[111]David Campbell and Michael Shapiro, *Moral Spaces: Rethinking Ethics and World Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

[112]David Campbell, *Writing Security* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 85.

[113]Barry Hindess, 'The past is another culture', *International Political Sociology*, 1:4 (2007), pp. 325–338 (p. 326).

[114]Nelson Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 11.

[115]Nelson Moe, '"Altro che Italia!" Il Sud dei Piemontesi (1860–1861)', *Meridiana*, 15 (1992), pp. 53–89 (p. 64).

[116]Moe, 'Altro che Italia!', p. 64.

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Italian state.[117] And the mafia soon became the embodiment of this backwardness. In his report to the Italian parliament in 1874 on the approval of emergency security legislation, Prefect Rasponi emphasised that the mafia was 'opposed to the norms of civilised society'.[118]

Southern Italy's civilisational backwardness has also left a legacy in IR. Huntington's *Clash of Civilisations*, for example, draws upon the work of Robert Putnam, who used northern and southern Italy as a case study with which to draw a distinction between civic and un-civic forms of historical development. In Putnam's analysis, which Huntington uses to determine the 'distinctive characteristics' of Western civilisation, the south of Italy, trapped in feudal times, becomes the negation of the civilised north.[119]

The Sicilian Mafia has embraced this narrative of temporalisation to portray the organisation as a benign, though traditionally backward, form of social organisation. The literature on the mafia shows how the organisation also legitimises itself through forms of cultural appropriation, by using Sicilian traditions to increase its own social capital.[120] As the following analysis shows, this cultural appropriation feeds off the construction of an alternative temporal narrative that contests the authority of the Italian state by accusing it of inverting the path towards development and progress. To explore this, the memoirs of Michele Greco offer an exemplary illustration. Greco was considered to be the head of the Commission, the supreme regional organ of Cosa Nostra. These memoirs were written while he was awaiting trial. Analysing mafiosi memoirs is an important tool for understanding how these actors make sense of their own experiences in the organisation.[121] Greco was sentenced to life imprisonment and died in jail in 2008. He never became an informant. Indeed, as I demonstrate below, Greco's temporal narrative is informed by the code of silence (*omertà*).

To construct an alternative temporal trajectory, Greco begins his account by denying the mafia's existence, and instead describes Sicily as a traditional space and identity that was disrupted by the Italian state. Greco uses the temporalisation of southern Italians by subverting its meaning. This becomes most evident when he contests the accusation that an 'underground city' was discovered beneath one of his properties. This space, labelled 'Greco's kingdom', served as a venue, so the police narrative goes, for mafia meetings.[122] According to Greco, however, the 'underground city' was just an ancient cave his father used during the Second World War to provide shelter and refuge for villagers: 'people came and asked for permission, and my father housed them in sheds in front of the cave, indeed it looked like *a village of Indians*. When the alarm went off, they left the sheds and went inside the cave.'[123] Here Greco invokes an 'intertextual metaphor',[124] by evoking a culturally salient text, to turn the temporal narrative on its head.

Greco uses the metaphor of the Sicilians as Indians against the Italian state to reverse the meaning of the temporal narrative of progress which the Italian state professes. To do so, he embraces the temporalisation of Sicily but, contrary to the state narrative, turns it into a value. Sicilians are indeed Indians, but good ones, with Greco's father being their chief: 'my father put women and children on one side and men on the other'.[125] Greco's father becomes the protector of the social order,

[117] Moe, 'Altro che Italia!, p. 64.

[118] Gioacchino Rasponi, 31 July 1874. 'Rapporti Sulla Mafia dei Prefetti di Palermo, Trapani, Agrigento e Caltanissetta nel 1874', in Nando Russo (ed), *Antologia della Mafia* (Palermo: Il Punto, 1964), p. 14.

[119] Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civil Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), cited in Samuel. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 71.

[120] Alessandra Dino, *Gli Ultimi Padrini: Indagine sul governo di Cosa Nostra* (Roma: LaTerza, 2012).

[121] Thomas A. Firestone, 'Mafia memoirs: What they tell us about organized crime', *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 9:3 (1993), pp. 197–220.

[122] Giuseppe Cerasa, 'Città sotterranea della mafia ospitava I vertici dei clan', *Repubblica*, (15 February 1985).

[123] Michele Greco (author) and Francesco Viviano (editor), *Il Memoriale* (Rome: Alberti Ed., 2008), p. 133, emphasis added.

[124] Zinken Jörg, 'Ideological imagination: Intertextual and correlational metaphors in political discourse', *Discourse & Society*, 14:4 (2003), pp. 507–23 (p. 509).

[125] Greco, *Il Memoriale*, p. 133.

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which he enforces by ensuring respect for the gender division. This mirrors the way the protection of 'women and children'[126] has been a constitutive narrative of state authority.

Yet the state's temporal narrative is inverted through an alternative temporalisation, from progress to regression. Indeed, Greco writes that even members of the Italian *carabinieri* and the police visited the cave. He further notes that numerous inspections were conducted up until the late 1950s, yielding no findings of particular significance. However, at the time he was writing, things had changed and 'someone needed to make this infamous fuss'.[127] This portrayal suggests that the Italian state, instead of progressing temporally, is regressing, having distanced itself from the traditional world it once embraced.

What is more, the Italian state destroys not only the traditional world, but the modern world as well. This clearly emerges from the description of his son's arrest, which he says 'caused horror in the civilised world … they accused him of drug trafficking: that is truly absurd, barbaric and uncivilised'.[128] This description represents a discursive double move: on the one hand, Greco inverts the accusations of barbarism and moral bankruptcy, which he redirects towards the Italian state. On the other, Greco's family simultaneously embodies the traditions of Sicily and its modernity, both betrayed by an unjust Italian state. Greco's family is portrayed as the richest family in a small village of honest workers. Indeed, after describing in detail the complex cultivation process required to make the land arable, he concludes that since the Italian state began issuing arrest warrants for the Greco family, this agricultural activity has come to a halt.[129] Greco's narrative accuses the Italian state of being opposed to the temporal path of progress and development, because it stands against the honest and laborious workers of the village. In this inverted temporal narrative, the state becomes an obstacle to, rather than an enabler of, progress. Through this temporal narrative, Greco turns the accusation of being a mafioso against the Italian state itself. This happens in two ways. First, he uses these accusations to claim that the Italian state is the cause of the destruction of a world, Sicily, which he constructs in a temporalised but positive way. Second, he deploys the categories of development and modernisation to accuse the Italian state of being an obstacle to the temporal progression of Sicily.

In Denaro's letters, similar elements of an inverted temporal narrative can be found. For example, as regards the Italian state, he infers that 'this is anything but a *civilised* country'.[130] Denaro exploits the narrative of modernisation and backwardness by using it to contest the Italian state's authority. This leads to his call for 'action', which also relies on a temporal narrative: 'If I'd been born two centuries ago, I would have started a revolution against this Italian State and I would have succeeded. Nowadays, affluence, progress and globalisation have changed the world and my methods seem archaic, making me nothing more than a deluded idealistic dreamer.'[131] Here, the temporal narrative of progress assumes the negative meaning of preventing a revolution, while presenting Denaro as an idealist from a past age.

I have shown above how the temporal narrative subverts the Italian state's claim to represent modernisation and progress. On the one hand, this relies on inverting the temporal narrative by turning the state into a tool of regression rather than progress. The denial of the existence of the mafia produces an alternative temporal narrative of progress that is threatened rather than enabled by the Italian state. On the other hand, narrating Sicily as a space trapped in an anterior past is used to assert its value, while simultaneously presenting the state as an intrusive and disruptive force within a traditional world. Both temporal aspects contradict the state's claim to authority, yet they are dialogically constructed through the distinction between those 'going forward' and those

[126] Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, 2nd ed. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014).

[127] Greco, *Il Memoriale*, p. 133.

[128] Greco, *Il Memoriale*, p. 128.

[129] Greco, *Il Memoriale*, p. 32.

[130] Denaro, *Lettere a Svetonio*, p. 66.

[131] Denaro, *Lettere a Svetonio*, p. 60.

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understood as belonging to an anterior time in need of modernisation, which informs the statist claims to political authority.[132]

The temporal inversion of this narrative shows how accounts in IR that associate the presence of VNSAs with the return to a premodern stage of development, such as the literature on neo-medievalism,[133] reproduce state-centric narratives. As for the spatial narrative, this section showed that the temporal narrative is also monologic in its aspiration, since it authorises an exclusionary scheme of interpretation through which the mafia is the ultimate temporal(ising) authority while being a dialogical 'response' to long-standing temporalising narratives.

The final empirical section turns to the problem of the identity of the audience which this competing spatial-temporal articulation (chronotope) constructs.

## Addressivity: The identity of the audience

This section will focus on the analysis of the Sicilian Mafia's founding myth and the contestation of the meaning of the word 'mafia' to show how the identity narrative simultaneously constructs its addressees – the affiliates – and the rest of the population.

On 26 September 1876, *The Times*, in describing the Sicilian Mafia, referred to the tale of the Beati Paoli: 'These evils are of an old date and may be traced to the beginning of the 18th century, when the *Beati Paoli* held their nightly meetings to judge insolent nobles and corrupt magistrates. The Mafia assumes its name.'[134] Different accounts of the secret society were written in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the popular imagination, the Beati Paoli became an 'emblem of the fight against tyranny'.[135] One account is instructive. An old Sicilian man seeks help because his 16-year-old son is languishing in prison, accused of killing the dog of a powerful local *signore*. '"You excellent old man," the Chief of the sect responds. "You will have justice … Our voice as you know is secret, but our hand is ready and implacable: it will be lifted in your favour and woe betide the perverse lord … the sword of justice is already poised above his head" … Two tears of happiness and hope rolled down the old man's cheeks.'[136]

To understand why this 19th-century text is central to the construction of the identity of the Sicilian Mafia, it is important to consider its diachronic importance in the subsequent accounts of various *pentiti*. Exemplary is the case of Gaspare Mutolo, who states: 'I remember, for instance, that in the long period I spent in prison I read the Beati Paoli … [where] the mafioso is always the person who helps.'[137] As Marco Santoro has argued, the Beati Paoli constitute 'expressive symbols' of the mafia, whose deployment works as 'an act of (re)creation' crucial to making sense of the mafia's identity for its members.[138]

This myth also constructs an alternative collective identity which symbolises Sicilians as a people rebellious to any form of external control. The *pentito* Antonino Calderone embodies this aspect, claiming that the Sicilian Mafia was created 'at the time of the Sicilian Vespers. When the people revolted, the Beati Paoli were born.'[139] The term *Sicilian Vespers* recalls a historical event of successful popular revolts, when Sicilians rebelled against the French-born king Charles I in 1282.

The evocation of the Sicilian Vespers links the myth of the Sicilian Mafia's origins to a Sicilian revolt against external domination, and by doing so, the myth contests the Italian state's claim to authority over the island. This emerges clearly from another iteration of the Beati Paoli written in 1873, 12 years after Italian unification. In this account, the Beati Paoli are defined as follows:

132 Hindess, 'The past is another culture'.

133 Bruce Hostinger, 'Neomedievalism and International Relations', in Louise D'Arcens (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 165–279.

134 'Southern Italy', *Times* (London, England) (26 September 1876), 4. *The Times Digital Archive*.

135 Francesco Renda, *I Beati Paoli*. Storia, Letteratura e Leggenda. Palermo: Sellerio, 1988) p. 64.

136 Renda, *I Beati Paoli*, p. 17.

137 'Mafia Politica, Pentiti', p. 406.

138 Marco Santoro, *La voce del Padrino* (Milano: Ombre Corte, 2007) , p. 451.

139 Calderone in Pino Arlacchi, *Gli Uomini del Disonore* (Milan: Il Saggiatore SPA 2010), p. 54.

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'[it] was an armed protest which challenged the laws and the cruel impositions of a foreign government … who wanted to make *us* Spanish, make *us* Piedmontese, make *us* German, in every possible way'.[140] This excerpt shows how Piedmont, the region from which the royal family of the Savoy began the process of Italian unification and made the province of Turin the kingdom's first capital, becomes externalised and framed as a foreign identity. This narrative resonated widely within the Italian state. Indeed, the first domestic deployment of the Italian army since the end of the Second World War to combat the Sicilian Mafia (1992–8) was conducted under the name of 'Operation Sicilian Vespers'.[141]

Mafiosi who did not cooperate do not refer directly to the myth of the Beati Paoli, since they deny the mafia's existence. Nevertheless, they deploy an identity narrative based on the meaning of the word *mafia*. Here the dialogical contestation is revealed through the working of linguistics, specifically in the intertextual opposition between the 'local' dialect and the 'national' language. If one searches for the meaning of the word 'mafia' in an Italian dictionary, the common definition would refer to it as a 'secret organised crime group'.[142] Yet the meaning of the word *mafia* in the original Sicilian dialect is used to contest the existence of the mafia as a criminal organisation, while simultaneously asserting a positive identity for those accused of being mafiosi.

In 1889, Sicilian ethnologist Giuseppe Pitrè published a seminal study entitled *Customs, Beliefs and Prejudices of the Sicilian People*. In it he elaborated upon the origins of the word *mafia*, claiming that this term indicates a positive moral characteristic of Sicilians: 'The word mafia together with its derivatives means *and always has meant beautiful and gracious, perfect excellence … together with the idea of beauty the word mafia also combines that* of superiority and value in the highest sense of the word … awareness of one's manliness, self-assurance and an excess of these … but never [used] in the negative sense of *braveria*, never arrogance.'[143]

This linguistic interpretation is still used to deny the mafia's existence as an organisation, while praising the identity of being a mafioso. An interview with Luciano Leggio (a mafioso who never turned state witness) on Italian national television is a prime example of how this claim has powerfully contributed to the identity narrative of the mafia, turning the accusation of being 'mafioso' on its head in an attempt to build a positive identity for those accused of being mafiosi. When asked to explain what the mafia is, Leggio claimed: 'Reading different authors, who spoke about this word mafia, I recall Pitrè who is one of the great experts [cultore] on the ancient Sicilian language, [he describes] the word mafia as referring to beauty, *beauty that is not only physical beauty but also spiritual beauty*.'[144]

Asked if he took offence at being called a mafioso, he added: 'No, no, I only regret that I do not believe I have all the spiritual and physical wealth required to be one, to be a mafioso, in the beautiful meaning of the word.'[145]

Leggio's narrative directly evokes the authoritative position of Pitrè's study to construct the mafioso's positive identity. This position is echoed in Michele Greco's memoirs. Talking about his father, Greco maintains that 'he was a mafioso, but because of his beauty', explaining that this word was understood in the local dialect as synonymous with both moral and physical attractiveness.[146] In this way, the denial of the mafia's existence enables the articulation of a narrative which provides an alternative identity for its members and the people who want to identify themselves as 'mafiosi'.

[140] Renda, *I Beati Paoli*, p. 250 (emphasis added).

[141] 'Operazione "Vespri Siciliani"' Esercito Italiano. Available at: {http://www.esercito.difesa.it/operazioni/operazioni_nazionali/Pagine/vespri-siciliani.aspx}.

[142] Available at: {https://dizionari.corriere.it/dizionario_italiano/M/mafia.shtml}.

[143] Giuseppe Pitrè (author) and Aurelio Rigoli (editor), *Usi, costumi, credenze e pregiudizi del popolo siciliano* (Palermo: Il Vespro, 1978 [1889]), pp. 289–90.

[144] Enzo Biagi, 'Interview with Luciano Leggio', *Linea Diretta* (1989), available at: {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dg64VSDj3PI}.

[145] Enzo Biagi, 'Interview with Luciano Leggio'.

[146] Denaro, *Lettere a Svetonio*, p. 126.

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## Conclusion

Although asserting the relevance of COs for international security and IR has become almost commonplace, the implications and consequences of understanding how their role should be understood, particularly in relation to the challenge they pose to state authority, is a debate far from concluded.

By opening COs to narrative analysis, this article deepens our understanding of how alternative claims to political authority are articulated beyond a focus on the practices of criminal governance. The suggested framework shows that COs can exercise political authority by 'responding' to states' key constitutive narratives of space, time, and identity to construct their own claims to political authority. In reflecting the same *form* of (statist) political imagination, these groups simultaneously reject and reproduce modern articulations of political authority in their spatio-temporal and identity dimensions. As R. B. J. Walker writes, 'in the modern world, states have managed to more or less monopolize our understanding of what political life is and where it occurs'.[147] Accordingly and paradoxically, this study shows how COs' narratives of contestation of such a monopoly on political life is also a reaffirmation of its coordinates. This claim has important implications for the study of COs and more broadly for demonstrating the validity of a narrative approach to studying contested forms of political authority in contemporary IR. A few aspects require further reflection.

First, empirically, I showed how the Sicilian Mafia challenges the Italian state's claim to political authority by utilising key alternative narratives (space, time, and identity) through which states have historically constructed their claims to political authority. While the assertion that the Sicilian Mafia relies on symbolic and normative claims to exert its authority is not novel, this analysis shows that these narratives are part of a complex political imagination which simultaneously co-constitutes and contests the state's political authority. Its spatial imagination is largely territorially bound to Sicily and contests the authority of the Italian state. Its temporal claim, like that of the state, is characterised by linear progression. This narrative of progress follows an inverted path compared to the Italian state, however, whose authority is portrayed as leading to degeneration. Within this alternative spatial-temporal configuration – the chronotope – the foundational myth of the Beati Paoli and the linguistic contestation of the meaning of the word *mafia* construct alternative identity narratives for two addressees – the affiliates and also the wider subject(ed) population – in opposition to claims of national identity.

Second, from a theoretical and methodological perspective, drawing on Bakhtin, the suggested framework makes it possible to grasp both the monological aspiration of the narratives as well as their dialogical and intertextual structuration. This captures the way COs' competing narratives simultaneously contest and mirror the states' own narratives. Therefore, the Sicilian Mafia at the same time undermines the state's claim to political authority while reaffirming statist forms of political imagination. This means that the Sicilian Mafia draws upon the social episteme of state sovereignty to articulate its competing claims. Put differently, COs' claims to political authority can mimic statist forms of political imagination in the very act of their contestation.

Moreover, at the methodological level, the use of this narrative framework provides important openings to grapple with the political dimension of COs, even if their ways of articulating claims to political authority are often more implicit or less public than those of other VNSAs. For example, unlike terrorist groups which thrive on public acknowledgement of their contestation of the state, this approach is attentive to VNSAs, such as street gangs, whose authoritative claims are not necessarily based on public opposition to the state.[148] Specifically, in the case under examination, I showed how the mafia's denial of its own existence does not constitute a negation of its authority but rather is co-opted into shaping alternative spatial, temporal, and identity

[147] R. B. J. Walker, 'Security, sovereignty and the challenge of world politics', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 15:1 (1990), pp. 3–27 (p. 6).

[148] Robert Garot, *Who You Claim* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); John Leverso and Ross L. Matsueda, 'Gang organization and gang identity: An investigation of enduring gang membership', *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 35 (2019), pp. 797–829.

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narratives which contest the state. Therefore, rather than undermining its authority, *omertà* contributes to building it. This modality contradicts the link between political authority and the public recognition of existence, so fundamental to states' claims to political sovereignty.[149] More broadly, therefore, this observation contributes to questioning the 'logocentric order' in security and IR,[150] by showing that silence is not necessarily a symptom of weakness.

Third, this consideration has important practical implications when evaluating states' responses to COs. As this article has shown, the Sicilian Mafia responds to state narratives by deploying alternative but specular narrations. This consideration sheds a critical light on states' discourses on COs which often rely on 'biological metaphors' such as viruses, parasites, or cancers, and metaphors of war. Literatures on both criminal governance and critical criminology have criticised the use of such discourses, which present the opposition between states and COs as a 'morality play'[151] between good and evil while being 'fundamentally misleading' and used to hide symbiotic relationships between states and COs.[152] To further this critique, a narrative approach shows that COs build their own responses by drawing on these narratives to construct their own. Denaro's use of the mollusc metaphor to refer to state officials is exemplary in showing how the use of biological metaphors can also be used to build the narrative of COs, amplifying concealment of the symbiotic relationship with the state while also furthering de-humanising discourses and further justifying the use of exceptional legislation to fight COs.[153] In addition, acknowledging the centrality of narratives in shaping the political imagination of COs also demands that we pay attention to the way regimes of solitary confinement (such as the hard prison regime known as 41 bis in Italy to which Denaro was subjected) can inadvertently amplify the mafia's narrative. As Fernando Salla writes, 'harsh solitary-confinement regimes can become badges of honour for leaders'.[154]

Ultimately, by opening the space of investigation to the context-specific examination of how different COs articulate competing claims to political authority through spatial, temporal, and identity narratives, this contribution advances a relational and anti-essentialist conceptualisation of VNSAs[155] and focuses on their relations to states. By analysing the Sicilian Mafia, this article has shown how statist categories are constitutive of non-state claims to political authority. In turn, by contesting states' claims, forms of non-state sovereignty like those expressed by the Sicilian Mafia call statehood into question. Exposing how narratives of space, time, and identity are intrinsically contested turns the state into a 'disputed being'[156] rather than a given object of analysis. This supports Leander's claim that the investigation of VNSAs demands that we continually question the categories that are constitutive of states' claims to political authority and our ways of studying them.[157] A greater focus on the relationship between VNSAs and political authority in IR therefore provides us with the means to 'de-naturalize the state and sovereignty'.[158] This entails conceptualising the competition for political authority between states and VNSAs in terms of their relational constitution, rather than as a zero-sum game.[159] Studying such processes cannot take for granted

[149] Jens Bartelson, 'Three concepts of recognition', *International Theory*, 5:1 (2013), pp. 107–29.

[150] Xavier Guillaume, 'How to do things with silence: Rethinking the centrality of speech to the securitization framework', *Security Dialogue*, 49:6 (2018), pp. 476–92.

[151] A. Dal Lago, *Eroi di carta, Roma* (Milan: Manifestolibri, 2010), p. 20.

[152] Lessing, 'Conceptualising criminal governance', pp. 865-864.

[153] Norma Rossi, 'Extremely loud and incredibly close', pp. 107–32.

[154] Fernando Salla, 'As rebeliões nas prisões: Novos significados a partir da experiência brasileira', *Sociologias*, 8:16 (2006), pp. 274–307.

[155] Anna Leander, 'From cookbooks to encyclopaedia in the making: Methodological perspectives for research of non-state actors and processes', in Andreas Kruck and Andrea Schneiker (eds), *Researching Non-state Actors in International Security: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 233–44.

[156] Costas Constantinou, *States of Political Discourse: Words, Regimes, Seditions* (London: Routledge, 2006) p. 6.

[157] Leander, 'From cookbooks to encyclopaedia'.

[158] Alejandro Colás and Bryan Mabee, *Mercenaries, Pirates, Bandits and Empires* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 4–5.

[159] Jens Bartelson, *Sovereignty as Symbolic Form* (London: Routledge, 2014).

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statist territorial demarcations of domestic(ated) space, nor temporal configurations of progress, nor markers of national identity.

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