

# EDITORIAL

---

by Ernesto U. Savona

Why talk about perception of organised crime? It should be specified whose perception, of what, or even better of which form of organised crime, and where. These are three fundamental elements to identify the problem because perception produces consequent attitudes and behaviors. If media perception could be separated from police forces perception, as well as from policy makers perception, the analysis would be enhanced because it would be possible to understand who influences who. This is quite difficult since it would require detailed analyses, which often lack adequate sources.

In this issue of the Journal, entirely devoted to the perception of organised crime, the fact that perception is different depending on the type of organised crime and on "where", which means in which country this perception is perceived, is taken for granted. Reading the essays of this issue gives an idea of the different points of view of the authors, who employ different analytical schemes. The result should be read taking into account all these differences. Putting all of them together allows to reconstruct a mosaic of perceptions of the different criminal organisations in some countries. I am sorry we could not have the essay on the Italian mafias in the United States in time, because in this country the history of the different perceptions is in some way useful to understand also their role in other countries.

In fact, it is following the evolution of La Cosa Nostra in America, from the 1960s up to the end of the 90s, that we can find information useful to understand how the "external enemy" syndrome characterised the perception of organised crime of Italian origin in that country. It is the same mechanism that characterised Colombians for cocaine trafficking in the 1990s and Arabs for terrorism after the attack of the twin towers on 9/11. This information included well-developed descriptions of how these organisations infiltrated in the country following traditional migration routes and, in other cases, descriptions of generalisations resulting in ethnic prejudices.

Little by little American people realised that Italian mafias were more American than they thought, and just like Colombians and Arabs exploited their connections with their motherland for drug trafficking and terrorism.

The social labeling process made the Americans feel non responsible for their involvement in traditional and new criminal organisations, thus legitimizing the repressive action. This caused several declarations of war, among them the one made to the Colombians, who were accused of flooding the county with cocaine in 1990. No reflection was made on the possibility that the supply of drugs, as well as the supply of organized crime, might be determined by an internal demand contributing to their development. Islamic terrorism is quite different. Labeling and generalisations are similar, but the United States are not involved in the phenomenon. Behind all these different perceptions lies the social reaction of the Police forces, whose investigations framed the Italian mafias, as well as Colombian mafias and Islamic terrorism. The “external enemy” syndrome helped and helps having more resources to fight it and to have, in many cases justifiably, new legislative resources to dismantle it. It also produced a social control violating citizens’ privacy by moving from time to time on the edge between security and rights, according to the ongoing debate on the problem.

Similar dynamics could be observed in nearly all the countries where criminal organisations were identified as an “external enemy”. This is true for Italian mafias in Europe, for Russian mafias in the US and in Europe, for Chinese mafias in Asia and elsewhere. This is true also for small criminal groups. In general, acts of violence like the ‘ndrangheta massacre in Duisburg (Germany) in 2007 highlighted the problem of the growth of this organisation beyond the Italian borders. People knew this already, but the news reported by the Italian media was magnified. In the debate following the event it seemed that the German investigators knew less about it than the Italian ones. It makes no difference whether Germany discovered the presence of the ‘ndrangheta within its borders thanks to the Duisburg massacre or whether the Italian media magnified the problem to underline the internationalisation of the Italian mafias. The Duisburg massacre added nothing new to what was already know on the ‘ndrangheta and its internationalisation.

In the public perception this was the proof that the ‘ndrangheta is dangerous and relevant at international level, therefore it should be fought accordingly. As always, in public perception the truth is exaggerated. For sure, there is a final benefit, which is defining more effective investigating tools and adequate regulations to solve the problems and their evolution.

On the same level lies the perception that everything is considered organized crime, from the big mafias to small gangs operating at local level. The importance of great criminal organisations in different continents, and in particular in the two mainly involved countries (USA and Italy), accelerated and later defined the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime signed by several countries in Palermo back in 2000. Since then the experiences were limited to the two mainly involved countries, but, from 2000 on, the problem of organised crime has become by default transnational and many - but not all the - countries ratified this convention, despite having some doubts. Some resistance came from those countries that, interpreting the concept of organized crime as referring to structured criminal organisations and not experiencing them on their territory, were unwilling to support a model which was tailored on other countries' experiences. However, the advantage produced by the Convention is to have uniform remedies based on the successful experiences of fight against organized crime in the USA and in Italy, which, thanks to the Palermo Convention, have become known and exportable to other situations. They are ready to be used just in case of need. This is the demonstration that the mechanism linking problems and their perception, even though sometimes distorted and exaggerated by different interests at stake, works.

Still today, the debate keeps referring to the dialectic between perceptions and reactions. An event happens, or maybe a chain of events, like the traffic of atomic waste, and Europol is given the mandate to take care of the situation. All of this to find out that the problem does not exist but for an episode. This happened in 1994 and since then the list of illicit traffics kept growing longer. When we want a problem to be added in the priority list, we call it organized crime. How much it really is organized crime is another matter. We know little about who does what and where and any activity turns in organized crime even though, as in the case of cybercrime, there are many criminal individualities also together with criminal organisations.

Although previously the problem was constituted by the different mafias, which were labeled for the public opinion's market (Sicilian, Colombian and Russian mafias, yakuza, Chinese triads and then 'ndrangheta and camorra and so on), now the problem is given by the different criminal activities. The focus has shifted from "who does" to "what is done". It would be an appropriate change if this was part of a strategy aimed at understanding the different criminal activities and their drivers, as well as dismantling them. The problem is that this change hides a lack of knowledge on the criminal organisations and their structure, in fact data and constant analysis are required to understand their evolution. Today this analysis is lacking in favor of clichés, above all the turnover of criminal activities. This factor,

which keeps enlarging more and more without any scientific backing, indicates that the problem is serious. So people give exaggerated information to gain more objectives: to say that the problem is important and receive more resources to fight it. In Italy everyone talks about a turnover of mafia organisations worth 150 billion euros per year. Transcrime's researches estimated a turnover ranging from 8.3 to 13 billion euros per year. We might also add foreign mafias, but they account for less than 10%. We said it and wrote it and nobody contradicted us. The 150 billion euros litany went on and on, resulting in someone saying it, another one repeating it and everyone believing it is true. And how can the resources to fight a problem costing 150 billion euros be denied?

To make perception correspond exactly to the real dimension of the problem it is necessary to understand the problem and its evolution in different forms and geographical and social contexts. It is necessary to monitor its changes and to estimate its impact on the economy and society in order to find the right solutions. This research is useful to reconstruct the phenomena, to understand the interrelations between the different context variables; it is useful to reason, together with Police forces analysts, on the vulnerabilities of these organisations and on the most appropriate methods to dismantle them. This is good research and these are its useful policy implications.