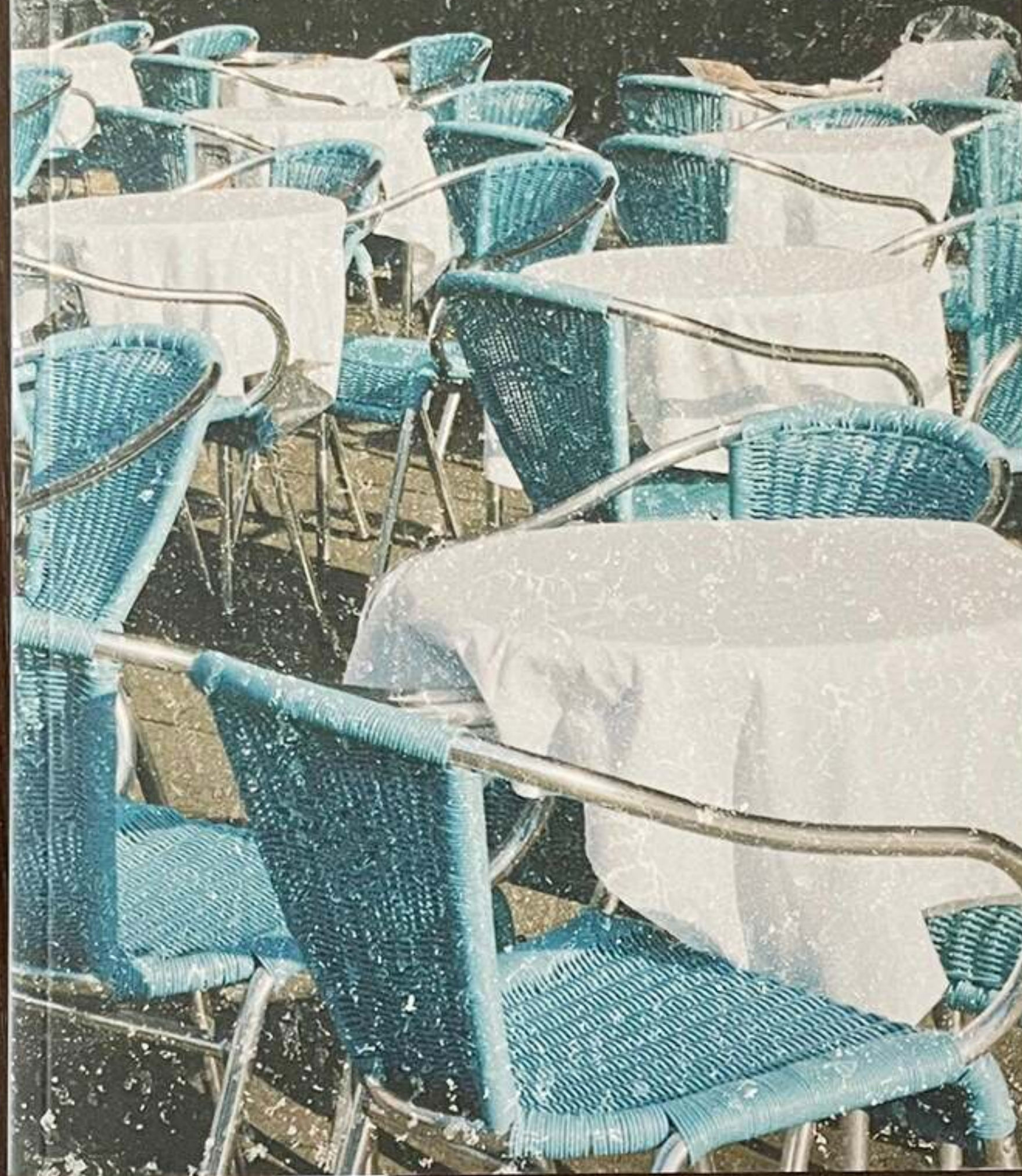


THE EIGHTH ISSUE

EUROPEAN REVIEW OF CULTURE

# BERLIN<sup>1/4</sup>QUARTERLY





Reportage

# LIBERTÀ

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Above, the reception centre at the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria  
 Page 38, Sant'Agata river, the airport runway of Reggio Calabria and the strait of Messina, seen from Aspromonte  
 Page 44-45, The city of Reggio Calabria and the strait of Messina

political scientist Edward C Banfield spoke of an ethos of "amoral familism", which describes a focus on familial interest over the interests of the citizenry in societies that lacked what he called "social capital", or the attitudes and networks that motivate people to work for the common good.

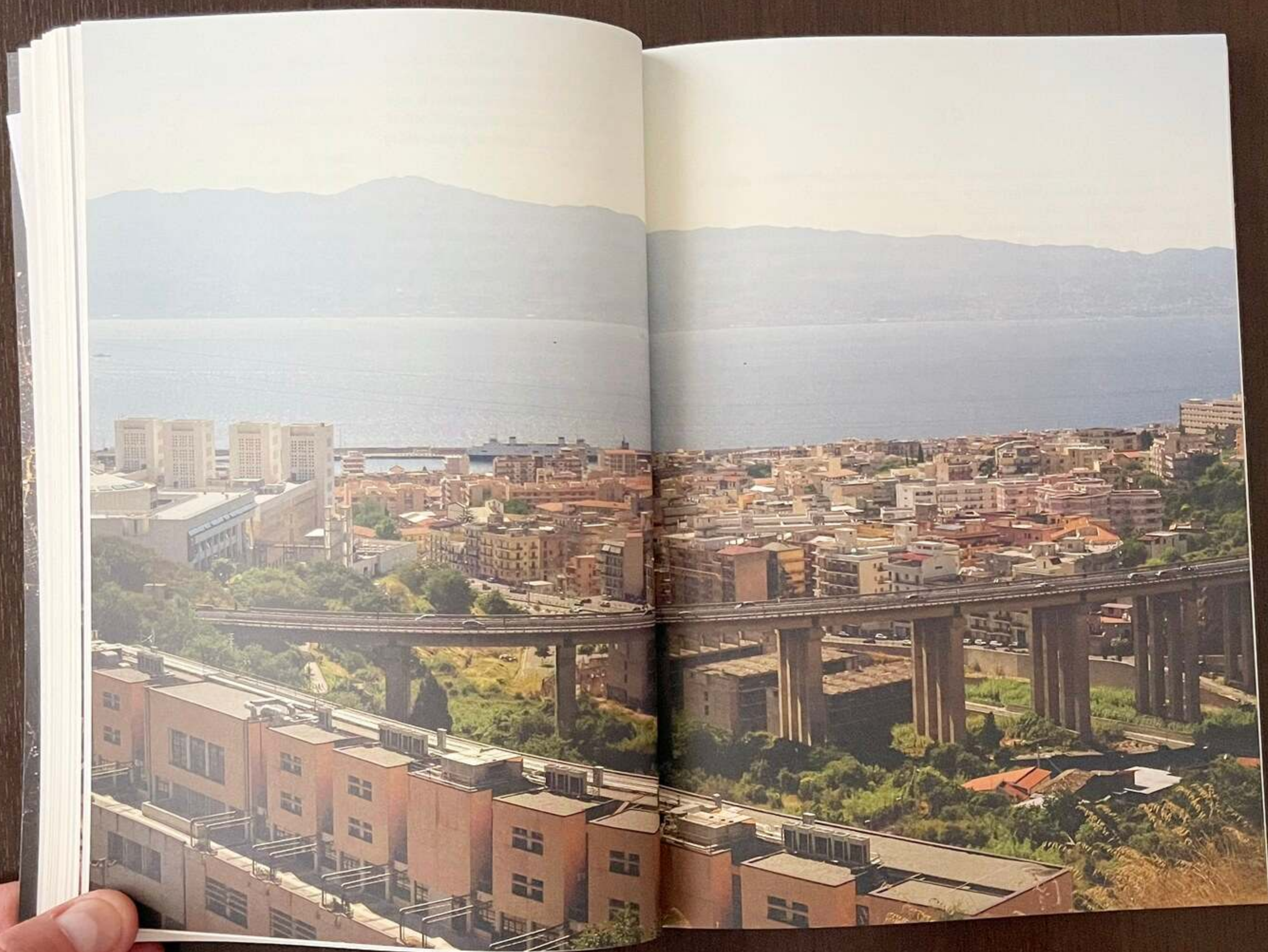
The 'Ndrangheta's co-optation of the family has helped solidify one of Italy's most impenetrable criminal organisations. Because the 'Ndrine, the basic units of the 'Ndrangheta, are made of blood ties, the organisation is rendered nearly immune to informants. Long considered a second-rate phenomenon, the 'Ndrangheta (from the Greek "andragheteia", meaning "a society of men of honour"; and "andragatho", meaning "to do military actions") quietly expanded from its base in Calabria, taking over the European drugs trade and investing the profits in business sectors globally. The 'Ndrangheta today is established in countries including Germany, the United States, and Australia. Meanwhile, its structure back in Calabria has remained virtually unchanged. For the past 150 years, the same families have dominated the same areas, with new generations automatically enlisted into the organisation to maintain familial power.

Censuring the educational model of the 'Ndrangheta, Di Bella realised, would be the only way to put a stop to this endemic phenomenon. The removal of children from homes due to parental drug or alcohol abuse was established practice. The 'Ndrangheta upbringing constituted a threat to the child's welfare. According to the 1989 New Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the Italian constitution in 1991, "the education of the child must be directed to the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations". Education should, according to this mandate, prepare the child for responsible life in a free and equal society. "It should prepare the child to be, as an

adult, a useful member of society," Di Bella explains, "and should help them develop a sense of moral and social responsibility. These principles are antithetical to the values of mafia families."

Large-scale, state-led investigations against the 'Ndrangheta in the 2000s and 2010s, some of which are ongoing, provided the courts with an unprecedented extent of evidence demonstrating the abusive dynamics internal to 'Ndrangheta families. "We had clear cases of 'Ndrangheta indoctrination, where 12-year-olds were taken to the beach by their father to learn how to use a gun," Di Bella explains, "or made to transport weapons from one country house to another, entailing clear risk. We had children whose parents cut batches of cocaine at home, whilst the children played around the table, or who talked about murder and 'Ndrangheta business around 12-year-olds. Clearly the psychological impact, as well as the physical risk, is extremely high—what if an 11-year-old tried some cocaine off the table?"

The judges, compelled to intervene, intensified their involvement. Now, each time there is a degree of mafia education that puts the psychological and physical integrity of children and teenagers at risk, the court steps in "not only when the children commit crimes", Di Bella specifies, "but also when we have proof, through bugging and wiretaps, of educational methods and practices that steer them towards a future which will likely be one of prison, death, or in any case, of pain and suffering". Because the magistrate's court relays any information obtained in their own cases which may be relevant to the well-being of minors, the youth court may be able to intervene more readily. The court also sees this as an opportunity to intervene in the cases of daughters from the families, who are less likely to go to trial, but "often suffer more than the boys, because they are expected to stay at home and are rarely let out of the house unaccompanied".



Children, once removed, are sent to host families or centres for youths outside of Calabria, where they are connected with educators, therapists, social workers, and volunteers, coordinated by anti-mafia associations and the local social services. The goal is help the teenagers break free from the mafia education they have internalised at home. "We try to make them see that a better world exists, where violence and murder are not the ordinary ways of settling personal controversy," the judge explains. "A world where choices are guided by one's conscience and not by the rule of the family. A world where men and women have equal rights. And where the most intimate choices, like relationships and marriage, are not imposed by anyone; they are freely made by individuals."

...  
In Palermo in the mid-1990s, a new field of academic study emerged, which would provide crucial insight into the mafia phenomenon, confirming that it was not just a criminal organisation but a specific psychological-anthropological phenomenon with its own system of values and logics of reproduction.

Mafia Psychology was born in the wake of the 1992 Cosa Nostra bombings in Sicily, when the ensuing state crackdown caused significant turmoil within the mafia community. Many affiliates provided evidence to the state, or were imprisoned. As families sought professional psychological help to deal with these betrayals and separations, they provided previously undisclosed information. This led to seminal scholarship about the psychological dynamics within the Sicilian organisation. Professor Girolamo Lo Verso gathered a team of psychologists at the University of Palermo, convinced that the psychological community had a critical role to play in the dismantling mafia structures. This was the first major, formal psychology

scholarship on Mafia Studies, a field that continues to grow in Italian universities.

In psychological terms, the researchers observed, the members of the Cosa Nostra were operating as non-persons. As learned from interviews with mafiosos in prison and informants, these men had regularly committed murders, and yet experienced no sense of guilt, psychological conflict, or problems with sleep or dreams. They killed with indifference, and did not reflect on their actions. Even on a subconscious level, psychologists found the murderers did not show any traces of consideration for their crimes.

This psyche is what sustains the mafia, Lo Verso and his colleagues concluded. The mafia is a closed system of thought that does not allow for divergence and does not tolerate confrontation. Its reproduction is perpetuated within the family, where children are socialised for continuity, chiefly through a matriarchal model, as the women are responsible for raising the children and are considered the guardians of tradition. They play an active role in realising what the sociologist Renate Siebert has called the "radical intent of the mafia to condition and model in its own image the affective spheres of its members".

Scholars agreed that mafia families make all-encompassing claims on the lives of their members, suppressing the possibility of transgression. The extreme emphasis on family limits children in their aspirations for futures distinct from familial expectations. There is no space to nurture any other perspective: the children of the mafia do not think critically about their family because they never separate their identities from the familial unit. The role of a child is limited, and he or she exists in a gendered binary: sons are educated and trained to join the ranks of the violent mafiosos; daughters are expected to be obedient, then later assume roles as respectful wives and devoted mothers.



Above, a semi-abandoned village in Aspromonte  
Page 50-51, A religious procession on Sant'Agata river, in Aspromonte  
Page 56-57, The city of Reggio Calabria seen from the sea

