

**Puccio-Den, Deborah, *Mafiacraft: An Ethnography of Deadly Silence*. Chicago: Hau Books. 2022. 273 pages**

Rodrigo Peña González

Volume 66, Number 1, 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1115003ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica66120242715>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

0003-5459 (print)

2292-3586 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Peña González, R. (2024). Review of [Puccio-Den, Deborah, *Mafiacraft: An Ethnography of Deadly Silence*. Chicago: Hau Books. 2022. 273 pages]. *Anthropologica*, 66(1), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica66120242715>

© Rodrigo Peña González, 2024



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

# Book Review

---

**Puccio-Den, Deborah, *Mafiacraft: An Ethnography of Deadly Silence*. Chicago: Hau Books. 2022. 273 pages.**

Rodrigo Peña González  
*El Colegio de México*

In *Mafiacraft*, Puccio-Den provides a novel, thoughtful, and innovative methodological approach to understanding the Sicilian mafia and anti-mafia movement within one ethnographic frame. She asks: How do we hear the noisy silence of Cosa Nostra? Her answer derives from an ethnographic analysis of the cultural continuum and political intersection between mafia and anti-mafia spheres in Sicily. Silence matters, *Mafiacraft* suggests. Whether it be through the *omertà* (the mafia code of silence), the cover-up silencing of the state actors that permit the mafia to operate and intrude into the public sphere, or the anti-mafia strategy to “break the silence” around mafia worlds. Indeed, by framing the mafia as a constitutive social process, *Mafiacraft* explores how the Cosa Nostra crafted a criminal organization shaped by power, rituals, and symbolism, but also how the mafia and the anti-mafia have shaped the Sicilian social order.

When it comes to researching criminal groups and violent social actors in general, fieldwork and data collection are challenging and, at times, dangerous. Nevertheless, observing and gathering data is as important as in other contexts where the researcher’s visibility is not as consequential. *Mafiacraft* provides a model for how to collect and interpret ethnographic data through the fog of social silence. If silence binds the Cosa Nostra together within the Sicilian social order, breaking that silence renders the mafia visible and provides political agency to those who take a stand against it. Puccio-Den proves that silence gives way to meaningful noise if the correct analytical lens is used. Silence, both a sensory and an analytic experience, enables her to develop a comprehensive understanding of the Sicilian mafia, but, more generally, of crime and violence as social and cultural phenomena. Ethnographic work provides an ideal approach to unpacking the presence and absence of mafia actors in Sicilian private and public spheres.

The book is divided into two parts. Part one, “Naming the Mafia,” recounts, over five chapters, how the mafia has been canonically represented and, therefore, understood in terms of these representations. The second part, “Judging the Silence,” also contains five chapters that narrate the author’s fieldwork experiences and ethnographic data. Chapter 1, “Does the Mafia Exist?,” elaborates on the difficulties of the modern Italian state in defining the mafia, especially, but not only, from a legal perspective. Breaking the silence around the mafia has been, in that regard, a huge opportunity to clarify this struggle. By integrating her analytic of silence into her account of the political dimensions of the mafia, Puccio-Den provides a novel historical narrative of what the mafia is—in conceptual, legal, and political terms—as well as of the densely articulated power relations between mafiosi, civil society, and public officials. Her discussion provides ethnographic detail on notions of justice, memory, violence, crime, and social resistance in this setting, with relevance beyond.

Chapter 2, “The Mafia as a Plague,” elaborates on a substantial political victory of the anti-mafia movement: the ability to switch the dominant narrative around the mafia. Indeed, the anti-mafia not only breaks the silence around the Cosa Nostra but also manages to promote the metaphor of a plague, reinforcing the sense of contagion within civil society and the public sphere. The following chapter, “How to Photograph Something That Does Not Exist?,” elaborates on the photographic exhibitions’ relevance to the mafia since the 1970s. These exhibitions were particularly effective in making the anti-mafia struggle visible. Above all, the exhibitions provided a narrative framework that allowed citizens to position themselves in relation to mafia and anti-mafia narratives. Chapter 4, “Bearing Witness,” explores the importance of the symbolic display of anti-mafia symbols. Given the significance of Catholic scripture and iconography in Sicilian society, the portrayal of victims of the mafia as “martyrs” who died for their faith served as a potent and religiously coded evaluation of the mafia as a force inimical to the dominant moral order of Sicilian society.

Following this notion, the book traces a transformation in the relationship between the Catholic Church and the mafia. Initially, the Church rendered the mafia invisible. However, the deadly attacks suffered by magistrates Giovanni Falcone, Paolo Borsellino, and many others accelerated the recognition of the sacrifice they had made in order to build a Sicily free from organized crime.

The book’s second section begins by reflecting on the difficulties Falcone encountered in his efforts to investigate the mafia for the *Maxiprocesso*, the

biggest and most successful trial against the mafia in Italy and, possibly, worldwide. The challenge was to investigate an allegedly invisible criminal organization. Breaking the *omertà* was, in that sense, a unique opportunity to portray the mafia in the course of legal proceedings. Subsequent chapters tell the story of how Tommaso Buscetta's confessions, making him the first *pentito* (repentant, collaborator) to break the *omertà* for Falcone, represented a decision crucial to the possibility and success of the *Maxiprocesso*. Puccio-Den analyzes at least two angles that highlight the importance of the rupture of silence within Cosa Nostra. First, the internal conflicts that could be seen for the first time in an organization that, historically, had been cohesive and silent; and second, the impact on the citizenry that had seen so clearly, perhaps for the first time, from a legal point of view, the existence of the Cosa Nostra.

*Mafiacraft* explores how statecraft intersects with mafiacraft, but also proposes a methodology to conduct research and promote understanding in noisy but silent contexts. This book is quite helpful for mafia studies in Italy, but also for many other contexts worldwide in which criminal groups are expanding their political influence. That intricate interweaving of authority and coercion between mafia and state, eloquently described by Puccio-Den, is reminiscent of the analysis of corruption in cultures elsewhere, from the blurred boundaries described by Gupta (1995) to the "grey zones" proposed by Trejo and Ley (2020). Each case demonstrates the paucity and flexibility of institutional boundaries, but also the emergence of an articulated social field of coercive power. Scholars and students interested in researching contexts in which organized crime is or has been producing, influencing, or indeed constituting the local social order will find *Mafiacraft* a thoughtful and engaging ethnographic account. In other words, Puccio-Den's methodological proposition will be of interest to those looking for strategies and insights into conducting research and producing knowledge in contexts where cohesive, organized crime groups display political influence.

## References

- Gupta, Akhil. 1995. "Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State." *American Ethnologist* 22 (2): 375-402. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/646708>
- Trejo, Guillermo and Sandra Ley. 2020. *Votes, Drugs, and Violence. The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.