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MAINTAINING STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY FOR PROTECTION: STRUGGLES OVER OPACITY, EQUIVOCALITY, AND ABSURDITY AROUND THE SICILIAN MAFIA

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In spite of an increasing interest in ambiguity, our knowledge of how organizations maintain strategic ambiguity to protect themselves from public scrutiny is still in its infancy. Through an in-depth historical study of the Sicilian Mafia between 1963 and 2018, we develop a model of strategic ambiguity maintenance. We focus on three struggles between the Mafia and state representatives, and show how these struggles centered on different types of ambiguity: ambiguity as opacity, equivocality, and absurdity. We elaborate on the strategies enacted by the Mafia and the responses by state representatives and their implications for ambiguity over time. The main contribution of our paper is that it advances understanding of the maintenance of strategic ambiguity by organizations that need to protect themselves from public scrutiny. More specifically, it enriches our knowledge of the key process dynamics, the types of struggles, and the discursive and nondiscursive strategies employed in the process. Our analysis also extends research on clandestine organizations and illuminates the relationship between (strategic) ambiguity and secrecy.

Ambiguity poses major challenges to organizations (Feldman, 1989, 1991; March & Olsen, 1975; Weick, 1995). Internally, ambiguity has been shown to lead to immobility and resistance to change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Denis, Dompierre, Langley, & Rouleau, 2011), and externally, to loss of reputation (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000), devaluation (Ruef & Patterson, 2009), and weak positioning in the market (Zuckerman, 1999). Nevertheless, evidence has started to accumulate on the strategic use of ambiguity, such as unclear or multiple meanings, for the benefit of the organization (Eisenberg, 1984). For the most part, ambiguity has been seen in this literature as enabling organizations to mobilize actors in strategy making or in support of organizational change (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Jarzabkowski, Sillince, & Shaw, 2010; Sillince, Jarzabkowski, & Shaw, 2012). However, contributions originating in different fields have indicated that ambiguity can also perform a protective function by allowing organizations to conceal themselves from public scrutiny and negative evaluations by external actors. This has been shown to be the case in times of organizational crisis and scandal (Sellnow & Ulmer, 1995), for nascent businesses or innovations (Funk & Hirschman, 2014), stigmatized organizations operating in controversial sectors (Hudson, 2008; Vergne, 2012), and clandestine organizations such as gangs, hate groups, and criminal groups (Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2012; Scott, 2013a; Vaccaro & Palazzo, 2015). Nevertheless, despite increasing interest in such cases, we lack a theoretical explanation of the process through which organizations maintain strategic ambiguity for protective

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purposes. This is the theoretical conundrum we concentrate on in this study.

To address this puzzle, we focus on clandestine organizations as a case in point. In particular, we study the revealing case of the Sicilian Mafia, a clandestine organization that has remained ambiguous until today and has largely protected itself from law enforcement (Lodato, 2012; Nicaso, 2016). Importantly, the capacity of this organization to maintain ambiguity has resulted from the deployment of active strategies as external actors—primarily state representatives—have engaged in efforts to dissipate such ambiguity. We adopted a historical approach to reconstruct the process of strategic ambiguity maintenance by the Mafia over more than 50 years (1963–2018). Our analysis reveals that an organization can maintain strategic ambiguity by moving through a series of interlinked struggles involving different types of ambiguity: opacity, equivocality, and absurdity. We elaborate on the organizational strategies and audience responses in these struggles and explain the effects of their interplay for ambiguity maintenance. In particular, we find that, first, organizational strategies fostering opacity hampered elaboration of a conceptual schema around the organization. As external audiences tentatively elaborated an initial interpretation, the organization shifted to strategies fostering equivocality, which exposed audiences to the greater difficulty of dealing with multiple, equally plausible interpretations. Finally, as audiences attempted to prioritize one interpretation, the organization moved to strategies fostering absurdity with paradoxical, outright illogical interpretations. We show how attempts to merge paradoxical interpretations failed, leading audiences to a state of paralyzing confusion. Thus, our analysis demonstrates that neutralizing the efforts of external audiences ultimately allows an organization to maintain ambiguity.

The main contribution of our paper is that it advances understanding of the maintenance of strategic ambiguity by organizations that need to protect themselves from public scrutiny. Running counter to the view of organizations as passively subjected to external evaluation, we propose a process model of strategic ambiguity maintenance based on struggles between organizations and external audiences. We also extend understanding of the strategies used by organizations to actively shape this process; in particular, we theorize the role of strategies of silence and silencing, which have remained undertheorized and underexplored in organization research. Finally, our analysis also adds an important element to research on clandestine organizations by elaborating on the relationship between (strategic) ambiguity and secrecy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Strategic Ambiguity in and around Organizations

The topic of ambiguity has been addressed in several disciplines, such as political science (Shepsle, 1972), communication studies (Eisenberg, 1984), literary analysis (Empson, 1949), and linguistics (MacDonald, Pearlmutter, & Seidenberg, 1994). It is also a long-standing concern in organization theory and a core concept for understanding processes of organizing (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; March, 2010; March & Olsen, 1975; Weick, 1995). The concept of ambiguity encompasses both a lack of clarity regarding a phenomenon or situation (Feldman, 1991; Weick, 1995) and the "state of having many ways of thinking about the same circumstances or phenomena" (Feldman, 1989: 5)—that is, the presence of multiple, even conflicting, interpretations of the same phenomenon (Daft & Weick, 1984). Hence, ambiguity is both an inherent property of organizational reality and something that arises through interpretation of this same reality by observers (Giroux, 2006; Merkus et al., 2017; Sillince et al., 2012).[1]

Traditionally, scholars have viewed ambiguity as a problem for organizations. When arising inside organizations, ambiguity can constrain action and change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Denis, Langley, & Cazale, 1996; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; March 1994) and lead to organizational immobility (Denis et al., 2011). When perceived by outside audiences, ambiguity can cause harm through losses of legitimacy (Zuckerman, 1999), reputation (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000), and stakeholder trust (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). Organizations that provide ambiguous cues to the outside by either disclosing little about themselves or disclosing themselves in an unclear manner may engender doubts about the integrity of their activities and purposes (Bernstein, 2012).

[1] Ambiguity differs from uncertainty. While ambiguity is a matter of signification and quality of information, uncertainty relates to the sheer amount of information available to observers (Weick, 1995). This distinction is of particular relevance as it implies that ambiguity and uncertainty lead to very different processes. Uncertainty triggers attempts to collect more facts and data and fill the informational gap; ambiguity, instead, stimulates acquisition or creation of interpretative frames or "explanatory knowledge" (Zack, 2000).

Similarly, organizations defying clear categorization and univocal assessment by external audiences such as investors, analysts, or the media are likely to suffer devaluation (Ruef & Patterson, 2009) and to have limited access to resources and difficulty positioning themselves in the market (Vergne & Swain, 2017; Zuckerman, 1999).

However, scholars have increasingly studied and documented the benefits of ambiguity for organizations (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Reinmoeller & Ansari, 2016; Sillince et al., 2012). This perspective suggests a notion of ambiguity as not merely beneficial for organizations, but *strategic*, based on the observation that organizations can leverage ambiguity to accomplish their goals (Eisenberg, 1984). In particular, drawing on Eisenberg (1984) and Eisenberg and Witten (1987), recent studies have shown that managers and other organizational members may need to foster a degree of ambiguity to mobilize support in strategy work (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Jalonen, Schildt, & Vaara, 2018; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Sillince et al., 2012) or to proceed with organizational change (Davenport & Leitch, 2005; Gioia, Nag, & Corley, 2012; Sonenshein, 2010; Sorsa & Vaara, 2020). For instance, Jarzabkowski and colleagues (2010) have demonstrated the use of ambiguity as a discursive resource in strategy making, capable of attending to constituents' interests and, at the same time, enabling them to contribute collectively to strategic action. In turn, Abdallah and Langley (2014) found that strategic ambiguity played a mobilizing role by allowing organizational actors to come together in pursuit of change, but that over time the same ambiguity led to internal contradictions. Finally, Jalonen et al. (2018) pointed to the inherent ambiguity of concepts used in strategy making and the fact that ambiguity may increase as concepts are used over time. Thus, a degree of ambiguity has been shown to provide a common direction to organizational actors without limiting their creative elaboration of multiple and diverse interpretations (Eisenberg, 1984; Leitch & Davenport, 2007). In all these cases, strategic ambiguity displays a generative function; it is able to encourage the engagement of organizational actors in strategy and change (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1997).

However, organizations also have another strategic use for ambiguity that is less well-understood: to protect themselves from negative outside evaluation and the potential harmful effects of public scrutiny. According to this perspective, ambiguity can be strategically leveraged by organizations to defend themselves from excessive constraint or the potentially damaging assessments of external audiences. For example, firms leverage the ambiguous nature of their innovations (Funk & Hirschman, 2014) and practices (Reinmoeller & Ansari, 2016) to impede intense examination by competitors and regulators (Ozcan & Gurses, 2018). In situations of crisis or scandal (Eisenberg & Witten, 1987; Sellnow & Ulmer, 1995), ambiguity may allow organizations to avoid being blamed and held accountable for controversial conduct (Mena, Rintamäki, Fleming, & Spicer, 2016; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). For example, organizations might stay ambiguous with respect to their involvement in a problematic event by denying the very happening of such event, or distort it to alleviate its negative consequences (Elsbach, 2003; Reuter & Ueberbacher, 2019).

Finally, for some organizations staying ambiguous vis-à-vis external audiences is critical not only for their reputation (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000) but ultimately for their survival (Scott, 2013a, 2015). This is particularly evident for stigmatized and clandestine organizations. The literature on organizations operating in controversial industries (e.g., arms producers, legal brothels, sex shops, and backstreet businesses [Jensen & Meisenbach, 2015; Scott, 2013b; Vergne, 2012; Wolfe & Blithe, 2015]) has shown how ambiguity might be employed by these organizations to avoid being thoroughly stigmatized (Devers, Dewett, Mishina, & Belsito, 2009; Hudson, 2008; Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009; Vergne, 2012) and devalued by external audiences. Backstreet businesses (Scott, 2013b), for example, keep activities and conduct difficult to decipher (Briscoe & Murphy, 2012; Hannan, Pólos, & Carroll, 2003) and prevent audiences from elaborating a clear interpretation of what the organizations are about (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009; Vergne, 2012). This, in turn, dilutes awareness and devaluation by potentially stigmatizing audiences and, at the same time, secures clients and funds (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009; Jensen & Meisenbach, 2015; Wolfe & Blithe, 2015).

Similarly, clandestine organizations (Scott, 2013a, 2015) conceal key parts of organizational identity (Scott, 2013b) such as "valuable informational assets" and "social aspects of organizational life" from external audiences (Costas & Grey, 2014: 1430; Dufresne & Offstein, 2008). Even if partial, the invisibility of such organizations makes them largely undecipherable and hence ambiguous to external stakeholders. For instance, informal economy organizations such as sweatshops (Beckert & Dewey, 2017; Webb, Tihanyi, Ireland, & Sirmon, 2009) and secret societies and collectives (Askay & Gossett, 2015; Erickson, 1981)

restrict and control information flows to the outside about their members and activities in order to continue operations and to do so without constraints (Anheier, 2010). Recent studies (Beckert & Dewey, 2017) have pointed to how clandestine settings are often populated by "actors participating with their actions in both a legal and illegal system" (Mayntz, 2017: 45), leading to confusing mixes of illegitimate but legal practices and illegal but legitimate ones. It is exactly the ambiguous "greyness" (Mackenzie & Yates, 2017) clandestine organizations maintain around themselves that allows them to span the legal and illegal worlds away from public scrutiny.

Criminal organizations represent a special case of clandestine organizations as they cultivate anonymity and conceal their members' affiliation for illegitimate purposes, to avoid scrutiny of their activities and law enforcement (Bean & Buikema, 2015; Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2010; Stohl & Stohl, 2011; Zaitch, 2005). Besides concealing their members, criminal organizations use means such as secretive communication, as shown for the case of gangs (Conquergood, 1994) or the Mafia (Gambetta, 2009; Vaccaro & Palazzo, 2015). The choice by these organizations to stay under the radar and provide cues incomprehensible to outsiders creates ambiguity in both internal and external conversations (Stohl & Stohl, 2011).

In summary, evidence about the strategic use of ambiguity by organizations has started to accumulate. By now, we know of instances and settings in which organizations may leverage ambiguity to avoid constraint, scrutiny, or stigmatization by external audiences. Yet, there is a paucity of knowledge regarding *how* organizations manage such ambiguity in a strategic way, and in particular how they succeed in maintaining it vis-à-vis external audiences.

Maintaining Strategic Ambiguity

To understand the dynamics involved in the maintenance of strategic ambiguity, it is important to focus attention on the relational nature of ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984; Giroux, 2006; Merkus et al., 2017). Organizations aiming to maintain ambiguity are bound to do so in interaction with external audiences. In this they may face significant challenges, as external audiences seek to gather information, disclose their activities, and reduce the ambiguity surrounding them. For instance, in the case of clandestine organizations, external audiences have been shown to construct "plausible interpretations" and "try to structure the unknown to create coherent narratives of illegal behaviors" (Kenney, 2007: 84), while organizations resist this type of scrutiny. Some external audiences—such as state representatives going after criminal organizations—also imply a need for *active* efforts on the part of organizations to maintain strategic ambiguity. As Kenney (2007:167) suggested, interactions might develop over a long period as organizational members and external actors "gather information about each other and modify existing practices and technologies and develop new ones" in a cyclical manner.

Dealing with such active efforts to maintain ambiguity implies a need for specific organizational strategies. However, we know little about the strategies that organizations utilize to maintain ambiguity. Recent literature has started to provide some insight in this direction. A few studies (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Leitch & Davenport, 2007; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Sellnow & Ulmer, 1995) have unraveled discursive and rhetorical strategies that allow managers—and, more broadly, organizations—to create ambiguity vis-à-vis internal and external audiences. Abdallah and Langley (2014) argued, for instance, that the combination in the text of strategic plans of vaguely expressed content, opposite terms, and equivocal words make strategic plans ambiguous for organizational members.

Another stream of studies has shown the role of some nondiscursive actions in creating ambiguity. For instance, organizations may hide as much as possible from outside scrutiny by minimizing their visibility and that of their members (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009; Jensen & Meisenbach, 2015; Wolfe & Blithe, 2015) by choosing discrete locations or architecture and employing limited or targeted advertising (Askay & Gossett, 2015; Webb et al., 2009). Alternatively, organizations may generate confusing expectations in external audiences. For example, organizations such as arms producers (Vergne, 2012), competitive intelligence firms (Reinmoeller & Ansari, 2016), and dietary supplement producers (Ozcan & Gurses, 2018) tend to develop several versions of their practices, some of which are associated with less controversial organizational categories and promote multiple coexisting interpretations of their identities. In particular, Vergne (2012) showed how arms producers simultaneously have activities in the civilian and military segments, and how they strategically present both "faces" to audiences in order to dilute those audiences' disapproval.

Despite evidence of some of the strategies that organizations may deploy to create ambiguity, we lack understanding of the relational process through which strategic ambiguity can be maintained over

time. In other words, we know little of how organizational strategies are combined and evolve, and how external audiences affect the choice of such strategies and the overall process dynamics. This leads us to formulate our research questions as follows: *How do organizations that need to protect themselves from outside scrutiny maintain strategic ambiguity? How do they interact with external audiences and change their strategies over time?* In what follows, we will focus on clandestine organizations as a case in point and draw on the revealing case of the Sicilian Mafia.

EMPIRICAL CONTEXT AND RESEARCH METHODS

The Case of the Sicilian Mafia

The Sicilian Mafia is an ideal case to address our research questions. First, it exemplifies a clandestine organization that leverages ambiguity to protect itself from outside scrutiny. The Mafia (also known as "Cosa Nostra") first emerged in Sicily in the nineteenth century. Originally, the Mafiosi worked for Sicilian landholders to maintain control over tenants and properties through violence (Blok, 1974). By the 1960s the Mafia had become a full-fledged criminal organization and a powerful economic actor due to illegal activities, notably drug trafficking and extortion (the "*pizzo*" [Vaccaro & Palazzo, 2015]), and legal activities, for instance in the building sector (Arlacchi, 1983; Paoli, 2002). The Mafia, for the most part, remained scarcely visible to the outside (Gambetta, 2009) while cyclically revealing its violent nature through thousands of assassinations (Lodato, 2012; Nicaso, 2016). Primarily, the ambiguity around the Mafia lay in its apparent capacity to seamlessly span the criminal and non-criminal worlds, and to assume both negative and positive connotations.

Second, this organization has been able to stay ambiguous vis-à-vis external audiences for a very long time. As early as the nineteenth century, the historian Mosca (1900: 5) noted that "many people who talk about the Mafia in Italy till today lack a precise and exact understanding of what thing or things they want to indicate with that word." The capacity to stay ambiguous was manifest in the "deep confusion the mind falls into when trying to make distinctions" around the Mafia (Franchetti & Sonnino, 1877: 54). One hundred and fifty years later, such ambiguity has yet to be dissipated, as explained by the national antimafia prosecutor:

> We have been doing things against the Mafia only in reaction to moments of emergency, [...] without wanting to recognize that legal measures are not enough to make sense of the Mafia. [...] In the meantime, the Mafia, silently, has become a constitutive, endemic part of Southern Italy's societal fabric and, soon, of many parts of the country. It has become very difficult to distinguish who is who. *We are back in a state of paralyzing confusion* [emphasis added]. (Roberti, Interview, 2016)

Third, the ambiguity around the Mafia has been challenged by external audiences, in particular by the state. According to historians and Mafia experts (Dickie, 2004; Lupo, 2004; Nicaso, 2016), the year 1963, with the first instance of the Mafia assassinating seven police officers (i.e., in the "Ciaculli killings"), marks an important discontinuity in the relationship between state representatives and the Mafia. In fact, after 1963 a minority among politicians, judges, and investigators (Dickie, 2004) started to direct their efforts to making sense of the Mafia and identifying tools to take the Mafiosi to justice. Despite these efforts, however, it has been widely recognized (e.g., Lodato, 2012; Nicaso, 2016) that by the 2000s the Mafia had maintained, if not increased, the ambiguity that surrounded it and had progressively neutralized the efforts of state representatives.

Empirical Material

Our empirical material consists of a variety of sources covering the period between 1963 and 2018, including laws and related texts, judicial documents concerning trials, parliamentary reports, letters and diaries, and media material. Altogether, this material comprises more than 25,000 pages. Table 1 offers a summary of this material organized chronologically based on the main events characterizing our historical account. A full list of the empirical sources by type is provided in Appendix A.

We collected: (a) oral sources such as confessions by Mafiosi defectors ("*pentiti*") and testimonies by Mafiosi and *pentiti* during the main Mafia trials and the hearings of public servants and *pentiti* at the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia and at the High Judicial Council (6,109 pages); (b) judicial documents (i.e., indictments, sentences, and prosecutions related to the main Mafia trials, 12,994 pages); (c) parliamentary reports written by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (826 pages); (d) laws about the Mafia passed in the period 1963–2018 (127 pages) and the transcripts of parliamentary

TABLE 1
Main Chronology of Events and Related Data Sources

Year	Main Event	Main Documents
1963	• Ciaculli killings	Text of indictment of the Ciaculli trial (1965)
	• Start of discussion around the Mafia in *ad hoc* Parliamentary commission	Four reports by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia: two intermediate reports, first final report (1968), second final report (1972)
		Selected annexes of commission reports (transcripts of hearings and documents prepared by public servants about the Mafia)
1965	First law mentioning the word "Mafia" is passed	Text of parliamentary debate about law proposal (Law 575/1965)
		Text of law (Law 575/1965)
1967	Trials ending with absolution of alleged Mafiosi (1967–1969)	Text of final sentence of the Ciaculli killings trial (1968)
		Two texts of final sentences of additional trials for homicides attributed to the Mafia (1967, 1969)
1971	Murder of Pietro Scaglione (prosecutor in Palermo) who had instructed trials above	
1976	Contrasting positions of the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia about the definition of Mafiosi	Two reports by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia: one majority report and one minority report (1976)
1979	• Murder of Cesare Terranova (prosecutor in Palermo) who had instructed trials above	
	• The antimafia pool is created in Palermo by Rocco Chinnici (head investigating judge), and includes judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino	Four interviews with the media and selected public speeches of R. Chinnici; One hearing of R. Chinnici at the Supreme Council; Diary of R. Chinnici (1981–1983); essays and speeches by P. Borsellino ("*Oltre il muro dell'omertà,*" 2011)
	• Murder of two policemen (Giuliano and Basile) supporting the antimafia pool (1979–1980)	
1980	• Murder of Piersanti Mattarella (president of the Sicilian Regional Government)	Seven selected public speeches, interviews, and documents written by P. Mattarella on the Mafia
	• Murder of Gaetano Costa (prosecutor of Palermo) who had instructed the first trial on Mafia and international drug trafficking	Hearing of G. Costa at the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia
	• Law criminalizing the Mafiosi is proposed and then passed (1980–1982)	Text of parliamentary debates about law proposal (Law 646/1982)
		Text of law proposal (Law 646/1982)
		Text of law (Law 646/1982)
1982	• Law creating the High Commission against the Mafia	Text of law (Law Decree 629/1982)
	• Murder of Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa (prefect of Palermo)	Three diaries and letters of C. Dalla Chiesa; interviews with the media; hearing at the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia
	• Murder of Pio la Torre (MP proponent of law above)	Three newspaper articles, speeches at funeral
1983	• First trial tracing financial relationships between Mafiosi (instructed by judge Giovanni Falcone)	Text of the indictment of the Chinnici trial written by judge Falcone
	• Murder of Rocco Chinnici (Head Investigating Judge), who had created and led the antimafia pool	
1984	Prosecutors in Palermo send to trial 475 alleged Mafiosi in the so-called Maxi Trial (1984–1985)	Judicial report (of the 161 Mafiosi)
		Text of the indictment of the Maxi Trial (1st degree)
1985	Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia releases new report stressing connections between the Mafia and the political world	Report by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia
1985–1987	• Two Mafiosi confess and testify at Maxi Trial	Two confessions of Buscetta and Contorno to prosecutors
	• Mafiosi engage with judges in Maxi Trial	Two transcripts of testimonies in court of the two *pentiti*
	• Court opinion (1st degree) of Maxi Trial	Book interview with Buscetta (*Il Boss è solo*, 1986); book by Caponnetto, who replaced Chinnici at the head of the antimafia pool (*I miei giorni a Palermo*, 1992); essays and speeches by Borsellino (*Oltre il muro dell'omertà*, 2011)
		Text of confrontation between Buscetta and Calò
		Three texts of testimonies of Mafiosi (Greco, Calò, Leggio)
		Closing speech by prosecution; text of sentence of the Maxi Trial (1st degree, 1987)

TABLE 1
(Continued)

Year	Main Event	Main Documents
1988	Murder of judge Antonino Saetta, nominated chair of the court of the Maxi Trial 2nd degree	
1989	• Second degree of the Maxi Trial (1989–1990)	Two texts of confessions of Calderone and Mannoia to prosecutors; two transcripts of testimonies in court of the two *pentiti*; book interview with Calderone (*Gli uomini del disonore. La mafia siciliana nella vita di un grande pentito Antonino Calderone*, 1992)
	• Two additional Mafiosi confess	Sentence of the Maxi Trial (2nd degree, 1990)
	• Court opinion partially contradicts the first-degree sentence	Four public interviews and speeches by antimafia judges (Falcone, Borsellino, Caponnetto); book by G. Falcone (*Cose di Cosa Nostra*, 1991); excerpt of diary of G. Falcone (1991)
1991	• Set of laws against the Mafia are passed in the Italian Parliament (1991–1992)	Five texts of laws concerning trial procedures, treatment of *pentiti* (Law Decree 8/1991), creation of the DIA and DNA (Law Decrees 367/1991; Law 30/1991), and solitary imprisonment for Mafiosi (Law 356/1992)
	• Third degree of the Maxi Trial (1991–1992)	Sentence of Maxi Trial (3rd degree, 1992)
	• Court opinion confirming 1st-degree sentence and convicting 346 Mafiosi	
1992	Murder of judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino	Text of speeches by A. Caponnetto at both funerals
1993	• Totò Riina, considered the boss of Cosa Nostra, is arrested	Seven newspaper articles about murders
	• Bomb attacks in Milan, Rome, and Florence (1993–1994)	Text of debates at the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia about the bomb attacks Three sentences of "1993–1994 bomb attacks" trials (1st, 2nd, and 3rd degree) Five newspaper articles about these events
	• Mafiosi start accusing important members of the State of supporting or being part of the Mafia (1993–1994)	Five texts of testimonies of Mafiosi *pentiti* (Buscetta, Ciancimino, Mutolo, Marchese, Cancemi); text of hearings at the Parliamentary Committee on the Mafia
	• Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia releases new report on the relationship between the Mafia and the political world, with contrasting positions	Three reports by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia: one majority report, two minority reports
1996	Prosecutors in Palermo led by judge Giancarlo Caselli start a series of trials against prominent state representatives: Trial against Bruno Contrada, member of the police and secret services (1996–2007)	Three sentences (1st degree, 1996; 2nd degree, 2006; 3rd degree, 2007) Text of invalidation document (2017) Several court statements by, and public interviews with, B. Contrada Three public interviews with judges Caselli, Ingroia, Di Matteo; book interview with A. Ingroia (*Io so*, 2012); book by N. Di Matteo (*Collusi*, 2015)
1998	The DIA starts publishing annual reports on the Mafia (1998–2018)	21 reports from 1998 to 2018
1999	Trial against Giulio Andreotti, ex-prime minister (1999–2004)	Text of the indictment (1999) Three texts of sentences (1st degree, 1999; 2nd degree, 2002; 3rd degree, 2004) Several court statements by, and public interviews with, G. Andreotti
2000	Trial against Corrado Carnevale, judge of Supreme Court (2000–2002)	Two texts of sentences (2nd degree, 2001; 3rd degree, 2003) Court statements by, and public interviews with, C. Carnevale
2001	Trial against Calogero Mannino, politician and ex minister (2001–2010)	Two texts of sentences (2nd degree, 2003; invalidation, 2005; 3rd degree, 2010) Several court statements by, and public interviews with, C. Mannino
2004	Trial against Marcello Dell'Utri, manager and politician (2004–2014)	Four texts of sentences (1st degree, 2004; 2nd degree, 2010; new 2nd degree, 2013; 3rd degree, 2014) Several court statements by, and public interviews with, M. Dell'Utri Testimonies and interviews by prime minister Berlusconi

TABLE 1
(Continued)

Year	Main Event	Main Documents
2006	• Bernardo Provenzano, considered the boss of Cosa Nostra, is arrested	
	• Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia releases new report on the relationship between the Mafia and the political world, with contrasting positions	Three reports by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia: one majority report, two minority reports
2007	The DNA starts publishing annual reports about the Mafia and its evolution (2007–2018)	Eight reports from 2007 to 2018; hearings of the national antimafia prosecutor at the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia
2007	Trial against Salvatore Cuffaro, politician and ex-president of the Sicilian regional government (2007–2011)	Text of final sentence (3rd degree, 2011) Several court statements by, and public interviews with, S. Cuffaro
2014	Trial against Raffaele Lombardo, ex-president of the Sicilian regional government (2014–ongoing)	Several court statements by, and public interviews with, R. Lombardo
Total corpus	Oral sources (6,109 pages), judicial documents (12,994 pages), parliamentary reports (826 pages), laws and related parliamentary debates (216 pages), letters and diaries (195 pages), public speeches and interviews (302 pages), book interviews and essays (8 books), reports of DIA and DNA (8,129 pages)	

debates around these laws (89 pages); (e) letters and diaries written by state representatives and related to the Mafia (195 pages); (f) media material in the form of public speeches, interviews (302 pages), or book interviews (8 books) released by state representatives about the Mafia and by Mafiosi; (g) annual reports of the National Antimafia Investigative Police (*Direzione Investigativa Antimafia* [DIA]; 1998–2018; 1,281 pages) and of the National Antimafia Prosecutor Office (*Direzione Nazionale Antimafia* [DNA]; 2007–2018; 6,048 pages).

Studying clandestine organizations is notoriously difficult (Scott, 2015), as for the most part conversations among members are inaccessible to researchers and communication with the outside may be incomprehensible or plainly deceitful (Conquergood, 1994; Gambetta, 2009). Consequently, although legal proceedings and parliamentary reports select what was said by the Mafiosi and *pentiti* during, for instance, a trial, they nevertheless report the direct words of insiders and thus constitute a valid primary source of data. Furthermore, a historical approach requires collecting primary sources from the time at which they were created, avoiding retrospective reconstructions of actions as much as possible (Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014). We complemented our textual analysis with data on convictions of suspected Mafiosi obtained from public sources (e.g., the Italian Ministry of Justice and the archive of the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia).

Most of our primary data were publicly available through the institutional databases of the Italian Parliament and the Commission on the Mafia, or through online collections of trial documents and recordings (e.g., the Archivio Antimafia, Radio Radicale) and public speeches of state representatives (e.g., the archives of the Sicilian Regional Government). Whenever the data were not publicly available, we contacted those private foundations and centers - e.g., Fondazione Falcone, Fondazione Costa, and the International Documentary Center of Mafia and the No Mafia Movement (CIDMA Corleone) - that have digitalized a number of relevant judicial documents related to Mafia trials over the years. Because of the high confidentiality of the material, the confessions of the first *pentiti* were originally not typed but handwritten. In addition, several texts referring to the 1960s were poorly typewritten. We performed hand coding on this material. All texts, besides books, were organized with the help of the software Atlas.ti and categorized based on year of release, type of document (e.g., trial sentence, parliamentary report, or interview) and related event (e.g., Maxi Trial 1st Degree, 1st Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia). In trial documents, only pages with lists of accusations were selected. Atlas.ti was also used for the first-order coding of text, as described below.

Data Analysis

We adopted a historical process perspective (Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014; Rowlinson, Hassard, & Decker, 2014; Vaara & Lamberg, 2016). Thus, an analysis of micro-level events, actions, and strategies

allowed us to reconstruct key dynamics of strategic ambiguity maintenance over time. Our analysis proceeded in iterative steps, as is usually the case with historical organizational research aiming to uncover process dynamics (Kipping & Lamberg, 2017; Langley, 1999).

Step 1: Historical reconstruction of key events and actions. In the first step, we examined the main historical accounts published on the Sicilian Mafia and its evolution from 1963 to 2018**.** We created a detailed 76-page chronology in which we recorded as many details as possible concerning the main historical events, what preceded and followed the events, and the actors involved. The historical events included the passing of a law against the Mafia, the appointment of the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia, the unfolding of trials, the acts of violence perpetrated by the Mafia, and the confessions of Mafiosi *pentiti.* Next, we retrieved the original texts produced by all the relevant actors associated with each event. Such texts could be, for example, a transcript of the testimony of a Mafioso during a trial or of a confession by a Mafioso *pentito*, an interview released to media, or the text of a law defining the Mafia (see Table 1). Actors comprised (suspected) Mafia members, including *pentiti*, and representatives of the Italian State (i.e., judges, politicians, members of Parliament, prefects, and other public servants). While we included in our dataset interviews that had been released to the media by Mafiosi or state representatives, we did not take into consideration other forms of journalistic commentary as it has been widely recognized that the media did not begin to elaborate independently on the Mafia until relatively late (Lodato, 2012).

Step 2: Preliminary analysis of strategic ambiguity. In the second step, we performed a line-by-line reading of the entire corpus of data related to each event, coding all passages on how the Mafia portrayed itself and how external audiences perceived it. For example, we extracted passages such as "the Mafia does not exist" or "the Mafia is multiform and ever-changing." Consistent with our theoretical framing of ambiguity as socially constructed and arising through interpretation by observers, we specifically sought text extracts where external audiences articulated their interpretation of what the Mafia is about. Essays or book interviews in which prosecutors (e.g., Falcone, Borsellino, Chinnici, Caponnetto, Caselli, Ayala) or policy makers (e.g., La Torre, Mattarella) elaborated at length on their perceptions around the Mafia were particularly useful in providing hints as to how the Mafia is perceived by this relevant audience. We then created a list of these text extracts, noting the claim being made, and who (Mafiosi or state representatives) articulated it. By arranging the text excerpts chronologically, we started to gain systematic evidence of clarity or confusion, agreement or disagreement in the portrayal and interpretation of what the Mafia is. This list of descriptive codes constituted our first-order evidence for ambiguity around the Mafia. By the end of this stage, we also became aware of different types of ambiguity around the Mafia, which we conceptualized and made sense of more comprehensively as the analysis unfolded.

Step 3. Identification of organizational strategies and audience responses. In step three we performed a second round of analysis of the texts, seeking evidence of all actions undertaken by the Mafia during each event, and the reactions by state representatives. Examples of actions by the Mafiosi were "keeping silent during trials" or "portraying the Mafia as cruel," while for state representatives they were "outlining a profile of the Mafiosi" or "using otherwise legal activities as means to define the Mafiosi as criminals." Next, we started drawing relationships between actions, reactions, and the descriptive codes of ambiguity identified in the previous stage, and we asked ourselves whether this was a strategic effort by the Mafia to maintain ambiguity (i.e., in the form of the descriptive code previously identified), and in what way, and whether the reaction by state representatives was linked to ambiguity. In this exercise, we repeatedly referred back to the literature on ambiguity in general (Daft & Weick, 1984; Feldman, 1989, 1991; Weick, 1995) and strategic ambiguity in particular (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Eisenberg, 1984; Sillince et al., 2012). An interesting and unexpected outcome of this step is that we found evidence of organizational strategies leading to the disambiguation of the Mafia, instead of directly fostering ambiguity. We made sense of this finding later on when we elaborated the overall process model of strategic ambiguity maintenance.

We progressively aggregated the codes describing the Mafia's actions in more abstract categories of organizational strategies. In conducting this aggregation, we also engaged with literature outside of management research. For example, we discovered that being silent or forcing silence on others played a key role. In this case, we drew from research on linguistics and communication studies (Brummett, 1980; Ephratt, 2008; Kurzon, 2007; Schröter, 2013; Zerubavel, 2006) to understand how silence is related to ambiguity. This led us to aggregate all strategies related to keeping silent as "protective

silence," and those enforcing silence on others, including killing, as "silencing." At the end of this process we aggregated codes in eight categories of strategies used by the Mafia: "protective silence" (keeping silent to protect the organization from disclosure), "targeted or untargeted silencing" (enforcing silence using means such as killing), "one-sided disclosing" (disclosing information about the organization in a selected manner), "obfuscating" (increasing the confusion by offering alternative interpretations of the organization), "hyperbolic disclosing" (making exaggerated statements about the organization), and "stereotyping" (using well-known characterizations to add to the confusion). Likewise, we aggregated the actions of the state in the following categories of responses: "elaborating a tentative interpretation" (developing a preliminary, shared characterization of the organization), "prioritizing one interpretation" (deliberately focusing on one out of several interpretations), and "merging paradoxical interpretations" (combining interpretations that seem outright illogical).

Step 4: Bracketing of struggles over ambiguity. Once they had been ordered chronologically, in the fourth step we sought evidence of patterns of strategies and responses that centered on groups of similar descriptive codes of ambiguity. We made representations of our codes and their relationships using visual maps (Langley & Ravasi, 2019). Given the conflictual nature of the interaction between the Mafia and the state, we labeled each pattern "struggle." In this process, we were able to distinguish three types of ambiguity; we named these opacity (lack of a conceptual schema for interpreting what the organization is), equivocality (plurality of possible interpretations of the organization), and absurdity (unreasonable, foolish-sounding, or even paradoxical interpretations of the organization). While the first two appeared to be consistent with the extant understanding of ambiguity (Feldman, 1991; McCaskey, 1982; Weick, 1995), we identified a novel type of ambiguity in absurdity. Thus, we analytically bracketed three distinct struggles, each centering on a different type of ambiguity. We constructed tables for each struggle (see Tables 2–4) to provide evidence of the aggregation of descriptive codes in second-order categories and to report how the strategies affected the correspondent type of ambiguity.

Step 5: Development of a process model. In the final stage, we closely examined the process dynamics to understand the shifts from struggle to struggle. Examining the patterns of alternation between strategies and responses, we understood that shifts originated from a change in strategies of the Mafia due to progress in dissipating ambiguity by the state. We theorized these conditions ("progress in dissipating ambiguity" and "attempts to neutralize progress") as triggers of the shifts between struggles and incorporated them in a final process model of ambiguity maintenance, as elaborated in the "Discussion" section.

FINDINGS

Our analysis elucidates the process of strategic ambiguity maintenance by the Sicilian Mafia over 55 years (1963–2018). We focus on the three struggles between the Mafia and State representatives and show how they centered on different types of ambiguity: ambiguity as opacity (1963–1983), equivocality (1984–1993), and absurdity (1994–2018). We elaborate on the strategies enacted by the Mafia and the responses by state representatives and their implications for ambiguity over time. In Appendix B (Figures B1–B3), we illustrate in detail the unfolding of strategies and responses and relate them to the main events of each struggle.

Struggle over Opacity (1963—1983)

The first struggle took place between 1963 and 1983. During this struggle, ambiguity was manifested in *opacity*; that is, the lack of a conceptual schema for interpreting what the Mafia was. The Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia well-exemplified such opacity by stating that "it is impossible to have a clear and univocal interpretation of the Mafia and its evolution" (Majority Report, Commission on the Mafia, 1976). In what follows, we focus on the sequential alternation of strategies of the Mafiosi—" protective silence" and "targeted silencing"—and the responses of state representatives—"elaborating a tentative interpretation"—and their implications for the maintenance of strategic ambiguity (see also Table 2).

Protective silence. Following the Ciaculli killings in 1963, a number of trials (1967–1969) attempted to charge hundreds of suspected Mafiosi with violent crimes. All trials, however, irremediably ended with acquittal of the vast majority of accused individuals. The ability of the Mafiosi to escape scrutiny was due to a sustained strategy of protective silence, based on three sets of actions.

First, many Mafiosi kept physically hidden, and these trials occurred while most Mafiosi were on the run. For example, the three prime suspects of such trials—Salvatore Greco, Gaetano Badalamenti, and Luciano Leggio—were unavailable for the

TABLE 2
Struggle Over Opacity: Mafia's Strategies and State Representatives' Responses (1963–1983)

Mafia's Strategies and State Representatives' Responses	Implications for Ambiguity	Type of Ambiguity
Mafia's Strategies		
Protective silence	Strategies providing few cues about the organization and keeping it undecipherable	***Opacity:*** "It is impossible to trace a history of the Mafia and its manifestations [. . .] the fact that a formal organization does not exist prevents having an overall and ordered understanding of the phenomenon." (Report of the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia, 1976) "While we can be certain of the existence of the Mafia, we don't have a precise understanding of the composition of the organization, of the position of each member with respect to the others, nor of how their criminal activities develop or how they are related to other crimes." (Indictment 236, 1965)
Keeping silent during trials		
"After his arrest, the Mafioso Luciano Leggio has kept stubbornly in complete silence and has refused to respond to any of the questions we posed him in several interrogatories." (Sentence, 1968)		
Keeping hidden		
"The ineffectiveness of judges' actions is also due to the fact that most Mafiosi are on the run; most trials were celebrated in the absence of the accused and for the most ended with their absolution." (Report of the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia, 1976)		
Forcing silence on people		
"Forcing silence on the population represents one of the pillars of the Mafia, the Mafiosi's strength lies in the awareness that their victims will not report them to the police, the spectators of their crimes won't disclose what they have seen and, ultimately, that they will remain unpunished." (Trial Indictment, 1964)		
Targeted silencing	Strategy selectively disambiguating to the outside the most violent and powerful face of the organization	
Killing judges and law proponents		
"In this period we have witnessed numerous murders that have hit the important protagonists of our public life, exactly those [state representatives] that in various ways and at different levels had attempted to understand and stop the Mafiosi and their activities." (Report of the 161, 1982)		
State Representatives' Responses		
Elaborating a first, tentative interpretation	Response to opacity based on the attempt to dissipate ambiguity by reaching a unitary, tentative definition of the Mafiosi as criminals	
Sketching a profile of the Mafiosi (as organized, violent criminals)		
"Whenever we talk about the Mafiosi we refer to a series of criminals, moved by a variety of criminal purposes, and operating in a variety of illicit sectors." (Indictment, 1964)		
Expanding the profile of the Mafiosi (to becoming rich through legal activities)		
"Mafiosi have become businessmen, they own firms that operate in the building sector, in agriculture and in commercial activities." (Judge Chinnici, Public Speech, 1982)		
Using otherwise legal activities or conducts (e.g., becoming rich) to define the Mafiosi as criminals		
"The proponents of the law know very well that to eliminate the Mafia it is necessary to criminalize the fundamental aspect of this criminal association, that the Mafiosi want to gain profits out of their activities and for this reason they organize together." (Bill Proponents, Speech, 1982)		
Including "using intimidation" in the definition of Mafiosi as criminals		
"The Mafiosi aim to exercise control over a productive area or an economic activity. To do so, they use the force of intimidation provided by them being together. This force is there both if they want to commit a crime and if they are searching for economic and political hegemony [. . .] Intimidation, as such, needs to be included in this law as an essential element of being Mafiosi." (Parliamentary Debate, 1982)		

entire decade. More generally, our analysis of the indictments and sentences related to these early trials revealed that between 25 and 30% of all suspected Mafiosi were on the run. Thus, Mafiosi avoided the state representatives, who therefore lacked anyone to interrogate or interact with. Second, whenever taken physically to trial, Mafiosi kept completely silent and never engaged verbally with judges. Silence was an "attitude of hermetic reticence assumed by all the suspected Mafiosi," and became "a major obstacle to understanding who the Mafiosi really are" (Indictment

236, 1964). Up to 1983, indeed, all suspected Mafiosi refused to answer judges' inquiries.

Third, protective silence also took the form of silent local community. In those years, very few people dared report on the Mafiosi and their activities, and, if they did, they were often intimidated and retracted their accusations during the trial. The capacity to force a code of silence ("*omertà*") on the Sicilian population heightened the Mafiosi's ability to evade identification or accountability for crimes. "Omertà" took the form of "a wall of impenetrable silence, caused by the scarce sense of civic engagement of the population, the fear of retaliations, and the lack of trust in the power of the State" (Indictment 236, 1964).

Together, strategies of protective silence fostered opacity around the Mafia. State representatives admitted that "proving that someone is a Mafioso is extremely hard due to the barrier of silence that systematically divides the work of investigators and the criminal activities of Mafiosi" (Indictment 509, 1965). Protective silence remained a highly effective strategy for a long period: in 1976 politicians still acknowledged that "the silence and reluctance of the Sicilian community blocked the work of the Commission, which had to overcome many obstacles and sometimes failed to reach the set goals" (Majority Report, Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia, 1976).

Response: Elaborating a tentative interpretation. The strategy of protective silence made the work of state representatives very difficult because it did not provide enough cues to understand the nature of the Mafia. In the absence of such cues, state representatives responded by elaborating a tentative interpretation in the form of a legal definition of the phenomenon.

A handful of judges started outlining a profile of the Mafiosi in trial documents, underlining two attributes that in their mind best differentiated Mafiosi from other criminals: their organization into gangs able to exercise control over large parts of Sicilian society, and their pervasive use of violence and intimidation. At the time, a prominent judge of Palermo wrote the following: "Mafioso is the synonym for the most hateful type of criminal" (Indictment 509, 1965), "a cunning and bloodthirsty criminal, able to terrify entire communities in Sicily" (Sentence 590, 1968).

Progressively, various actors—both lawmakers and judges—expanded this profile, and pointed to additional attributes that could describe the Mafiosi, in particular rapid acquisition of wealth and possession of an important stake in a number of sectors of the Sicilian economy. Mafiosi came to be described as powerful economic actors, "not just organized criminals but organized criminals with an aim: becoming rich wrongfully" (Chinnici, speech, 1981). In 1980, a group of politicians submitted a bill to Parliament advocating the need to define the Mafioso as a distinct type of criminal. They suggested the use of otherwise legal activity or conduct (e.g., becoming rich and gaining profit) as a means to define the Mafiosi as criminals.

At the same time, to acknowledge what judges and others had managed to understand, they proposed to include the use of intimidation in this definition. The attribute of intimidation, later called the "Mafioso method," came to be considered the common denominator for committing crimes and becoming rich:

> The creation of an autonomous Mafioso definition makes sense when one establishes a common denominator across actions, *based on the modality with which these actions are conducted* [emphasis added]. Otherwise, if it includes both actions that are crimes and others that are *not* [emphasis added] in principle crimes [becoming rich], it loses all its meaning. (Parliamentary Discussion before Approval of Law 646/82, 1982)

Overall, the elaboration of a tentative characterization of the Mafioso as a criminal by state representatives represented an initial attempt to deal with opacity surrounding the Mafia. When the bill passed, some progress in dissipating the ambiguity about the Mafia seemed to have been achieved. The tentative interpretation, as presented in the text of the law, read as follows:

> A criminal association can be said to be among Mafiosi when it uses the force of intimidation and exploits the condition of fear [of injury or death] and subjugation that this intimidation generates, for the purposes of committing crimes, of acquiring, directly or indirectly, the control of economic activities, of public contracts, tenders or services either to make a profit or to gain an improper advantage for oneself or others. (Law 646/82, 1982)

Targeted silencing. While the Mafia prioritized the strategy of protective silence, toward the end of this struggle it enacted a different strategy that we labeled "targeted silencing." In the span of seven years (1977–1983), the Mafia killed a number of most prominent state figures; that is, chief prosecutors and prefects (Terranova, Scaglione, Costa, Dalla Chiesa, Chinnici), investigators (Giuliano), and politicians (La Torre, Mattarella) who had actively compiled profiles of Mafiosi and elaborated a tentative interpretation of what the Mafia was about.

The modality of this silencing strategy was distinctive. Mafiosi shot their victims in the streets and

left the bodies displayed in public. Most of the killings took place in the morning when victims were driving to work, and they resembled pure executions, with point-blank shootings. Journalists and media, for the first time, reported such killings with vivid pictures, which came to populate the headlines of local and national newspapers, frequently associated with titles such as "barbaric killing by the Mafia" (*L'Unità* newspaper), "ferocious defiance of the Mafia" (*L'Ora* newspaper), or "Dalla Chiesa killed by the Mafia" (*L'Unità* newspaper). Hence, such extreme violence came to be attributed to the Mafia. Therefore, while attempting to silence state representatives who had challenged the ambiguity surrounding the Mafia, the organization also used selective disambiguation and manifested itself with a specific identity—that of a violent criminal organization.

Overall, during the first struggle, the Mafia attempted to foster ambiguity and hamper elaboration of a conceptual schema about the organization through strategies of protective silence. The only act of clarification by the Mafia was the use of violence through a strategy of targeted silencing. When state representatives managed to assemble an initial interpretation of what the organization was about, the Mafia changed its strategies and engaged state representatives in a different kind of struggle.

Struggle over Equivocality (1984–1993)

Moving away from strategies of protective silence, between 1984 and 1993 the Mafia produced a surprisingly high quantity of speech in contrasting formats. This happened mainly in the context of the "Maxi Trial," when prosecutors in Palermo arranged the biggest trial ever envisioned against the Mafia, charging 475 individuals altogether. During this period, the Mafia and the state representatives engaged in a struggle over a type of ambiguity that differed from the opacity of the previous struggle. We label this type of ambiguity *equivocality*. While state representatives had previously lacked a conceptual schema about the Mafia, they now had to deal with a confusing plurality of possible interpretations of what the Mafia was about. Specifically, the Mafia appeared to have, at the same time, a legal and illegal, as well as a violent and innocuous, nature. As one of the prosecutors commented,

> We understood that the Mafia was multiform; there was the violent Mafiosi, the businessman who got rich with illegal and legal means, the one who sat in public offices or was closely connected with politicians; but we struggled to understand how these pieces could fit together. (Borsellino, Essay, 1984)

In what follows, we focus on the Mafia's strategies–"one-sided disclosing," "obfuscating," and "untargeted silencing"—and the responses of state representatives—"prioritizing one interpretation"—and show how these contributed to maintaining the strategic ambiguity. Table 3 offers evidence of such strategies and their implications for ambiguity.

One-sided disclosing. On the one hand, the so-called Mafiosi *pentiti*, all belonging to the high ranks of the organization, painted a detailed picture of the Mafia as violent and bloodthirsty in lengthy confessions. Tommaso Buscetta, the first ever *pentito*, and, later on, three other *pentiti* (Contorno, Calderone, and Mannoia) admitted being Mafiosi, revealed the names of other affiliates and disclosed the internal structure in "families" and the practices of the organization. Nevertheless, their disclosure was one-sided as it focused only on the violent nature and criminal activities of the Mafia. All other possible interpretations of the Mafia as nonviolent were set aside. Buscetta, when asked to talk about the interconnections between the Mafia and the political or economic worlds, ordered the prosecutors "not to ask those questions" (Buscetta, Confession, reported in Caponnetto, "*I miei giorni a Palermo*," 1992). Similarly, Mannoia argued this would be his only act of disclosure:

> I have referred information to you [prosecutor] that could be useful to clarify certain homicides; I might go back to other topics in the future when my mind will be clearer, but at the moment I do not intend to talk about anything else. (Mannoia, Confession, 1989)

All four *pentiti* mainly talked about the "abject, cynical and greedy" Mafiosi, capable of ordering and executing the most brutal homicides, and who had become enormously rich through drug trafficking. Buscetta, for instance, defined the Mafia as "a gang of ferocious assassins moved only by their self-interest" (Buscetta, Confession, 1984) and, in what has been labeled the "Buscetta theorem," indicated that the top of the Mafia hierarchy, reunited in a Commission ("*la Cupola*"), was able to mandate all the homicides that had occurred in the recent past. Buscetta stated the following:

> When the Commission decides on a homicide, it also decides on the group of executioners without having to inform anybody else down the hierarchy. This group must execute the Commission's orders [. . .]. No homicide is committed without the approval of the Commission. (Buscetta, Confession, 1984)

TABLE 3
Struggle Over Equivocality: Mafia's Strategies and State Representatives' Responses (1984–1993)

Mafia's Strategies and State Representatives' Responses	Implications for Ambiguity	Type of Ambiguity
Mafia's Strategies	Contrasting strategies increasing equivocality and the possibility of multiple interpretations of the Mafia: as violent and criminal versus harmless and respectable	***Equivocality:*** "The Mafia has multiform manifestations, it is getting rich with operations in international drug trafficking, it can be ferociously violent, and, let's not forget it, it has connections with public offices and the legal world." (Report of the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia, 1985) "The Mafia is a complex and articulated phenomenon, well beyond its criminal, violent manifestation. A political organism that commands the Mafia what to do does not exist, a 'third level' above the criminals [in the political and economic legal worlds] but there are relationships that link the Mafia to these worlds, there are interests that are converging [. . .] As such the Mafia can only be elusive." (Falcone, Interview, 1990)
One-sided disclosing		
Emphasizing the violent and greedy nature of the Mafia		
"The Mafioso today is full of weapons, of exaggerated self-importance, and able to kill also his mother if necessary." (Mafioso Buscetta, Confession, 1984)		
Insinuating that the Mafia can be good		
Journalist Biagi: "Do you think a Mafioso can be good, calm and sentimental?" Mafioso Buscetta: "Yes, I am like that and I have met many other [likeminded Mafiosi]." (Mafioso Buscetta, Interview, 1987)		
Connoting confessions as truthful		
"I am fully convinced by what I declared and I am ready to support my declarations in the future because what I said is the truth." (Mafioso Contorno, Confession, 1984)		
Obfuscating		
Denying the existence of a hierarchical organization		
"Many defendants correctly argued that one cannot accuse an individual of being a Mafioso based only on family relationships or mere connections with other individuals." (Mafiosi's viewpoint reported in Sentence, Maxi Trial 1st degree, 1987)		
Attributing the reconstruction made by pentiti to the world of fiction		
"I have been considered the incarnation of the 'real Mafioso,' but I do not know anything. How can I respond to the accusations made to other individuals or even to myself, if I am not aware of anything. . .to me all these things are real only in fantasy, or if they are real I am not aware of them." (Mafioso Leggio, Testimony, 1986)		
Portraying the Mafia and Mafiosi in a positive light		
"I refused [to be involved in a *coup d'ètat*] as I had lived a time in which things were bad. . . and it is clear to everybody what happens when military people run a country. So I did not feel right about this and said: no! [. . .] I don't care about money, or my own freedom, I just don't want to have this country on my conscience. My refusal was definitive!" (Mafioso Leggio, Testimony, 1986, describing an instance when he was contacted to take part in a *coup d'état*)		
Untargeted silencing	Strategies selectively disambiguating to the outside the most violent and powerful face of the organization	
Killing judges		
The killing of Judge Falcone was part of a defense tactic of Cosa Nostra. Mafiosi aimed to hit the image of Judge Falcone, the most prominent antimafia judge, who constituted a threat for the Mafia (DIA Report, 1993)		
Killing ordinary citizens		
"The 1992–1993 killing aimed at creating outcry, disconcert and disorientation among common citizens. By doing so the Mafiosi wanted to undermine the support by civil society of the State's repressive action over the Mafia." (DIA Report, 1993)		
State Representatives' Responses		
Prioritizing one interpretation	Response to equivocality based on the attempt to further dissipate ambiguity by embracing the most plausible of interpretations, among several	
Incorporating the Mafiosi's confessions in prosecutors' narratives		
"In building up the accusations we included the collaboration of some Mafiosi *pentiti* which enabled us to verify the validity of the results already achieved, offering at the same time an insider's key interpretative lens." (Maxi Trial, Indictment, 1985)		

TABLE 3
(Continued)

Mafia's Strategies and State Representatives' Responses	Implications for Ambiguity	Type of Ambiguity
Criminalizing Mafiosi for being permanent members of an organization "One of the distinguishing features of the Mafioso is the hierarchical tie, which implies a formal distinction of roles within the family up to the top that coordinates the activities of the single Mafiosi." (Maxi Trial, Sentence, 1987)		
Holding Mafiosi leaders responsible for crimes not directly committed "Marchese Filippo is the head of 'Corso dei Mille' family and it is therefore possible to ascribe to him many killings and minor crimes committed in that area." (Maxi Trial, Indictment, 1985)		

All four *pentiti* contrasted the Mafia taken to trial at that moment to an older Mafia that followed rules of behavior and moral principles, insinuating that the Mafia could be good. Buscetta, interviewed by one of the best-known Italian journalists, described the traditional Mafioso in noble terms:

> The Mafioso in the old times never boasted about weapons, did not arrogantly exhibit guns. He was not aggressive [...], he did not take advantage of others' disgraces, he did not destroy the peacefulness of families, he did not ask for money if he could not return it, he did not overpower or oppress anybody. . ..the opposite, he would punish thieves. (Buscetta, Reported in Biagi, "*Il boss è solo*," 1986)

The *pentito* Contorno even insinuated that the organization that had killed judges, politicians, and policemen was not the "real" Mafia (Contorno, Confession, 1986). The *pentiti* accompanied their statements with continuous assurance about the truthfulness of their words and representations, making them even more pregnant. First, they argued that the prosecutors' understanding of the Mafia was fallacious, to signify that only they could be valid sources for understanding the Mafia. For instance, *pentiti* pointed to how even the labels of Mafia and Mafioso used by state representatives did not correspond to the truth: "The word Mafia is a literary invention. We call the organization Cosa Nostra and we are not Mafiosi but Men of Honor" (Buscetta, Testimony, 1986). Second, the *pentiti* supported their statements with the weight of their own charismatic personality and moral standing. The *pentito* Mannoia, for instance, emphasized to the prosecutor that, "as a Mafioso should be" he was "no liar," so everything he said was "sacrosanct truth" that the prosecutor could easily verify (Mannoia, Confession, 1989). Similarly, Calderone described his confessions as "truthful" and motivated by "a search for intimate dignity and respect for his Christian beliefs in having to tell the truth" (Calderone, Confession, 1987). Overall, these confessions offered to state representatives the first plausible interpretation of the Mafia through the voice of prominent insiders.

Obfuscating. Conversely, other Mafiosi bosses interacted with state representatives by portraying themselves and the Mafia as harmless and contributing positively to society. Faced with the questions of prosecutors and the confessions of the *pentiti*, these Mafiosi denied the existence of the Mafia as a violent, hierarchical organization, and rejected both the notion of a Mafioso "family" and of a commission mandating assassinations. They also attributed the reconstruction made by the *pentiti* to the world of fiction. For instance, the boss Calò, when asked if he knew of Cosa Nostra, had the following to say:

> The [*pentito*] Buscetta talks about a commission, of bosses and under-bosses. I know of this stuff only because I have read the book "*The Godfather*." (Buscetta–Calò Confrontation during the Maxi Trial 1st degree, 1986)

Similarly, Michele Greco, nicknamed the Pope, accused of being the leader of the commission, replied as follows:

> I know of Mafia only what everybody knows. Newspapers and TV talk only about Mafia. The Cupola [i.e., the commission]? I only know the cupola [dome,] of a church. (Greco, Testimony, 1986)

These Mafiosi contributed to the trial by proposing an interpretation of the Mafia as a positive cultural mindset:

> The word mafia does not have a negative connotation. At home, it is typically used to make a compliment. For example, we say "look at how beautiful that girl is; she is 'mafiosa.'" This is to say that she is a dignified and proud woman. (Leggio, Testimony, 1986)

They also portrayed themselves as good citizens, contributing to the efficient functioning of society through respected professions, and morally irreprehensible. Luciano Leggio, depicted by the *pentiti* as one of the most violent Mafioso, stated the following:

> I am a farmer by birth. I always traded cattle and agricultural products. I have always been a *great* farmer and when I say *great* I really mean *great* [emphasis added]. I know in depth every branch of this sector, from olive trees to vineyards, from vegetables to cattle. And as a good farmer I follow with concern the evolution of environmental problems. (Leggio, Testimony, 1986)

Similarly, Michele Greco stressed his deep religious faith:

> Violence is not part of my way of being [. . .] I cannot compare myself to Popes for intelligence, culture or knowledge of the doctrine. But for my clean conscience, for the depth of my faith, I can even feel on par if not superior to them. The bloodthirsty character that has been attributed to me is false. (Greco, Interview, 1986)

Together, strategies of one-sided disclosing and obfuscating fostered equivocality by providing state representatives with multiple, confusing cues resulting in a portrayal of the Mafia as at once violent and innocuous.

Response: Prioritizing one interpretation. At the beginning of the 1980s, prosecutors in Palermo (Caponnetto, Falcone, Borsellino) found themselves having to deal with a confusing plurality of interpretations of what the Mafia was about. In this context, state representatives attempted to deal with equivocality by prioritizing the most plausible interpretation—that of the Mafia as a violent and illegal organization, which was put forward by the *pentiti* and on which prosecutors had focused their investigative efforts.

Prosecutors incorporated the *pentiti*'s confessions to build their accusations and charge the highest possible number of people for executing, mandating, or even just contributing to the criminal program of the Mafia. Caponnetto, head of the prosecutors' pool, explained this as follows:

> We started from the horrible homicides, from the core of the organization, from the illegal activities. We left the connections with the economic and political worlds aside. If the *pentiti* had talked, things could have been very different. But they did not and accusing a businessman or a politician without indisputable evidence would have meant slipping on the banana skin. (Caponnetto, Public Interview, 1986)

During the Maxi Trial, the prosecutors exploited the information provided by the *pentiti* to criminalize Mafiosi for being permanent members of an organization. Hence, the prosecutors proposed that Mafioso was "not just [. . .] an individual attribute," but instead implied a "willingness to participate in the same organization, to create a bonding with all the other affiliates and pursue a common illicit goal" (Sentence, Maxi Trial 1st Degree, 1987). Furthermore, because the *pentiti* described the Mafia as a unitary and hierarchical organization prosecutors were also able to hold Mafiosi leaders responsible for crimes not directly committed. In other words, it was deemed sufficient to prove a Mafioso's leadership role to charge him with responsibility for criminal acts perpetrated by the lower ranks. For state representatives, being an affiliate of Cosa Nostra became the main criterion for making an individual accountable for being a criminal. The sentence at the end of the first stage (i.e., 1st degree) of the Maxi Trial put it as follows:

> It is necessary and sufficient, in order to prove the responsibility of the individual for the crime, to prove his conscious adherence to the organization and its criminal program. (Sentence, Maxi Trial 1st Degree, 1987)

The strategies adopted by the prosecutors were deemed controversial and at the limit of juridical acceptability. Critiques arose from various parts of the press, the judiciary and political systems. The prosecutors nevertheless succeeded in getting more than 70% of the individuals they had originally indicted in 1985 convicted in 1992, at the end of the Maxi Trial, with all members of the commission receiving life sentences. The final sentence of the Maxi Trial confirmed the interpretation supported by the prosecution and, implicitly, the truthfulness of the *pentiti*'s confessions.

For the prosecutors of Palermo, far from been the "solution to understand the Mafia in all its manifestations," the trial represented further progress in dissipating the ambiguity surrounding the organization, by validating at least one interpretation of what it was about. It showed that "the Mafia, the *criminal* [emphasis added] organization, exists!" (Caponnetto, Interview, 1992) and, most importantly, that "the Mafia can be tried and its bosses convicted. It shows that the Mafia is not invulnerable, and the Mafiosi are men like any other man, criminals like any other criminal and they can be fought with effective repressive measures." (Falcone, Interview, 1991).

Untargeted silencing. The Mafia reacted to the convictions of the Maxi Trial with strategies of escalating violence. In a span of four years (1991–1994), the Mafia

killed not only the main prosecutors (i.e., Falcone and Borsellino) who had played a key role in the Maxi Trial but also targeted civilians in three Italian cities, in churches and museums. The style of the assassinations and of the attacks differed from the previous struggle. They were immediately labeled "massacres" by the press as, even when directed at single individuals, they involved bodyguards, sometimes relatives of the victims and bystanders. All of them were carried out through massive explosions. In the case of the assassination of Falcone, the newspapers stressed how the explosion was caused by "1,000 kilos of TNT" (Corriere della Sera, newspaper) and that it opened a "20-meter wide hole in the motorway close to Palermo" (Repubblica, newspaper). The character of these assassinations and attacks immediately appeared to be very similar to those of terroristic groups and they were interpreted as "a state of war of the Mafia against the State, aimed at reducing it to a situation of chaos and potentially make it surrender to the criminal organization" (*Corriere della Sera*, newspaper). The fiercely violent reaction by the Mafia further disambiguated the portrayal of the organization as mainly violent and capable of the most abject criminal acts.

Overall, in the second struggle the Mafia, through strategies of one-sided disclosing and obfuscating, attempted to foster ambiguity by offering state representatives multiple interpretations of the Mafia as violent and criminal or respectable and harmless. Untargeted silencing reinforced the former of these interpretations. Trying to deal with such confusing equivocality, state representatives prioritized the interpretation offered to them by the *pentiti*. They did so through responses that were in several ways problematic. As state representatives succeeded in dismantling part of the organization, by convicting its leaders and validating one interpretation, the Mafia changed its strategies once more and engaged state representatives in the next crucial struggle.

Struggle over Absurdity (1994–2018)

Between 1994 and 2018, the Mafia again changed its strategies; by using unreasonable, foolish-sounding or even paradoxical statements, it effectively succeeded in disorienting the audience and fostering ambiguity. The Mafia mainly deployed its strategies in the context of a series of trials in which prominent state representatives were accused of being Mafiosi themselves or supporting of the Mafia. The type of ambiguity around which the Mafia and state representatives engaged during this struggle differed from the equivocality of the previous one. We label this type of ambiguity *absurdity*. While state representatives had previously to deal with a plurality of possible interpretations of the Mafia, now they faced seemingly paradoxical interpretations. Specifically, the violent organization that they had succeeded in making sense of was now portrayed as closely intertwined and supported by the same state that was supposed to dismantle it. The absurdity of the juxtaposition of these interpretations is clearly exemplified by the words of the prime minister at that time:

> This idea that [Andreotti, ex-prime minister] and his party were close to the Mafia cannot be true. It is just crazy! And the prosecutors are crazy [if they believe it]! (Berlusconi, Public Statement, 2003)

In what follows, we focus on the sequential alternation of strategies deployed by the Mafia ("hyperbolic disclosing," "stereotyping," and "protective silence") and by state representatives, ("merging paradoxical interpretations") and their implications for ambiguity as absurdity. Table 4 offers evidence of such strategies and their implications for ambiguity.

Hyperbolic disclosing. During the 1990s, the Mafia produced a new wave of speech through a multitude of new and old *pentiti* that spontaneously started revealing to prosecutors in Palermo details about the legal face of the Mafia. In so doing, they shifted the attention from a "military Mafia," the focus of the previous struggle, to what had already been defined the "gray area"—that is, "the broad sphere of contiguity and complicity that surrounds each Mafioso" (Buscetta, 1984). Effecting a *U*-turn with respect to the previous struggle, *pentiti* once again proposed to state representatives the original ambiguity about the Mafioso as double-faced—that is, capable of spanning the legal and illegal worlds. Yet, they did so by associating prominent state representatives with the Mafia and pushing the parallel between the two worlds to the limit of paradox. The *pentito* Buscetta explained this during a hearing with the Parliamentary Commission on Mafia:

> We talk all the time about Mafia, Mafia, Mafia, but there are people at the highest level of society that collaborate with the Mafiosi and their contribution is of the greatest importance [to Cosa Nostra]. (Buscetta, Hearing, 1994)

Pentiti like Mutolo, Marchese, Brusca, Spatola, and Cancemi shockingly pointed the finger of suspicion at "excellent" individuals such as an ex-prime minister (Andreotti), members of Parliament (Dell'Utri, Mannino), former presidents of the Sicilian Region (Cuffaro, Lombardo), judges of the Supreme Court (Carnevale), and top bureaucrats of the

TABLE 4
Struggle Over Absurdity: Mafia's Strategies and State Representatives' Responses (1994–2018)

Mafia's Strategies and State Representatives' Responses	Implications for Ambiguity	Type of Ambiguity
Mafia's Strategies		
Hyperbolic disclosing	Strategies juxtaposing contradictory interpretations of the Mafia	***Absurdity:*** "The Mafia, the Mafiosi, are not those with the 'coppola' and the 'lupara' that we see in the Godfather. They have a school diploma, they have a university degree. . .and they have extended relations, exchanges and joint interests with part of our institutional, political, economic, financial, information systems. Many seem not to be able or do not want to believe this." (Prosecutor Caselli, Interview, 2012) "A State that is accusing Andreotti of being the boss of the Mafia and that keeps in prison innocent people like Contrada or Mannino for years is at best doing something absurd, if not instrumental and political." (Politician Sgarbi, Speech in Parliament, 2001)
Associating prominent state representatives with the Mafia		
"Traditional Mafiosi had become, together with the entire Cosa Nostra, a sort of scapegoat for all the bad things happening in Italy, but the State should scrutinize itself and its own representatives to find the real culprits of many of the crimes." (Mafioso Riina, Public Statement, 2004)		
Narrating absurd anecdotes		
"I remember when he [boss Riina] was saying that we needed to protect these people [politicians] who were not part of us, as they would bring to Cosa Nostra only good things...for instance, they could have helped cancelling a law or for other requests we had." (Mafioso Cancemi, Sentence, Trial for Judge Falcone's murder, 2000)		
Stereotyping	Strategies amplifying the illogicality behind the juxtaposition of some interpretations of the Mafia	
Highlighting the absurdity of pentiti's accusations		
"The fact that this person was known to the accused or that this person won public bids does not mean that the defendant favored a Mafioso." (Lawyer's Statement, Sentence 2nd Degree, Trial against Mannino, 2003)		
Stressing irreconcilable differences with the Mafiosi		
"The issue of what favors I have concretely done to this people [Mafiosi] remains unclear because the issue does not exist at all! [. . .] What exists is that, together with the Minister of Justice Vassalli I have faced one of the fiercest battles in Parliament so that a decree could be converted into law and the freeing of all the Mafiosi tried during the Maxi Trial could be impeded." (Andreotti's Statement in Court, Trial Against Ex-Prime Minister Andreotti, 2013)		
Protective silence	Strategies providing no cues to further assess the plausibility of certain interpretations, and thus amplifying absurdity	
Refraining from confessions		
"The lack of new *pentiti* prevents the understanding of Mafia today and of its strategies of invisibility." (DIA Report, 2001)		
Refraining from violence		
"Starting with the year 2000 we can say that the Mafia has stopped almost all its violent manifestations and opted for being progressively 'submerged' and 'clandestine.'" (Head of DIA, Hearing, 2015)		
Forcing silence on people		
"The survival of the Mafia is favored by a social context in which despite the positive action of associations such as Addiopizzo and Libera, a mix of convenience and real fear leads to a blanket of indifference in which the Mafia is allowed to continue to operate and gain in power." (DNA Report, 2011)		
State Representatives' Responses		
Merging paradoxical interpretations	Unsuccessful attempt to respond to absurdity and reconcile paradoxical interpretations of the organization; final paralyzing ambiguity	
Relying on the Mafiosi's confessions as main source for accusations		
"The *pentito* Messina has been the first to communicate relevant news regarding the relationship between Andreotti and Mafiosi. [. . .] His confession, together with those of other 26 *pentiti*, has been used to build up the indictment against Andreotti." (Indictment, Trial against Andreotti, 1999)		
Criminalizing individuals for contiguity with known Mafiosi but no permanent affiliation		
"Judge Carnevale is accused of finding procedural errors in trials against Mafiosi so [as] to nullify the conviction. He was also considered available to be contacted by some politicians [close to Cosa Nostra] to solve potential problems with these trials." (Sentence 2nd Degree, Trial against Judge Carnevale, 2001)		

TABLE 4
(Continued)

Mafia's Strategies and State Representatives' Responses	Implications for Ambiguity	Type of Ambiguity
Expanding the initial definition of Mafioso without law support "To prove the fact that someone 'belongs' to Cosa Nostra it is not necessary to search for the proof of a formal initiation ritual or other practices of this sort that might not occur at all and are just some picturesque representation of the organizational bonding of the Mafiosi (for instance, the '*punciuta*'). Demonstrating that someone is part of Cosa Nostra means proving his active participation in the organization, similarly to the what the look-out does for other crimes." (Sentence 1st Degree, Trial against Dell'Utri, 2004)		

secret services and of the special antimafia police forces (Contrada). They described these prominent state representatives as "in the hands" or "at the disposal" of the Mafia, or as "bridges between the Mafia and politicians sitting in Rome." They indicated that these individuals entertained frequent and friendly relationships of reciprocal benefit with the leadership of the Mafia, and were involved in serious criminal acts, from mandating the assassination of a journalist to disclosing secret information about investigations, from manipulating trials to introducing known Mafiosi to lucrative businesses.

These revelations, which already seemed far-fetched, appeared even more exaggerated when accompanied by anecdotes. In the case of Andreotti, for example, one of the *pentiti* described a meeting in which the prime minister was greeted by the boss Riina, considered the leader of Cosa Nostra and at that time on the run, with a kiss, as was usual among the Mafiosi:

> When I accompanied Totò Riina to the living room, Ignazio Salvo [a businessman] came to greet us. There were Senator Lima and Senator Andreotti and when Riina entered, they got up from their chairs. Then Riina got close to them and gave them a kiss; a kiss on their cheeks, one on the right cheek and one on the left. (Di Maggio, Confession, 1995)

While, in the previous struggle, the *pentiti*'s confessions appeared truthful, here their credibility was often at stake. Cases accumulated in which such statements eventually proved false; in some instances, *pentiti* contradicted themselves or each other.

Response: Merging paradoxical interpretations. The prosecutors in Palermo who took the place of Falcone and Borsellino after their assassinations were the main recipients of the *pentiti*'s confessions. In principle, the fact that the Mafia could also have the legal face of businessmen, politicians, or professionals was nothing new. Nevertheless, this was the first time that such known and powerful public figures were associated with the Mafia and were brought to trial. Later on, the national antimafia prosecutor commented that this was indeed a rare event, "as we [judges and prosecutors] probably could not even believe ourselves that this could be the case" (Roberti, Hearing, 2015).

Merging interpretations that appeared paradoxical under the same label of "criminal organization" appeared a daunting task. As one of the prosecutors recalled, "finding concrete proofs that such people were responsible for those specific acts seemed impossible," and "clearly when one goes so high up the risk that the informant might want to purposefully mislead you increases" (Ingroia, in "*Io so*," 2012). By building on the *pentiti*'s confessions, prosecutors employed two strategies to charge these "excellent" defendants with Mafia-related crimes. First, they criminalized them for contiguity with known Mafiosi. To do so they partially contradicted their previous interpretation and argued that being a Mafioso did not only mean being a permanent affiliate of Cosa Nostra. What mattered was to be "willing to contribute in a direct causal way to the maintenance and strengthening of Cosa Nostra" (Sentence 1st Degree, Contrada Trial, 1996; Sentence 2nd Degree, Carnevale trial, 2001). To corroborate the contiguity of these individuals with Cosa Nostra, prosecutors emphasized all close relationships between them and known Mafiosi. Individuals who had met frequently with Mafiosi or were friends with them were held accountable for their conscious proximity to known criminals:

> The signature of Mannino—at that time a member of the Italian Parliament and of the Parliamentary Commission on Public Finances—was found on the wedding certificate (of Caruana, Mafioso) and he was identified as the best man. (Sentence 2nd Degree, Mannino Trial, 2003).

Furthermore, to incriminate these "excellent" defendants, prosecutors instrumentally expanded the initial definition of Mafioso to include an additional criminal figure equivalent to a lookout for common crime (i.e., an external contributor to a crime). In the absence of a law that would define such criminal figures specifically in relation to activities of the Mafiosi, they created a purely juridical definition.

Both strategies aroused fierce criticism and divided state representatives into factions. A number of politicians, the head of the Parliamentary Committee on the Mafia, and the prime minister publicly emphasized the absurdity of bringing such people to trial for Mafia-related crimes. Part of the judiciary, instead, attacked prosecutors on the juridical legitimacy of their strategies. They claimed "a judge cannot, on his own, create a criminal category and substitute himself for lawmakers" (Sentence 2nd Degree, Mannino Trial, 2005) and that the concept of external contributor was in itself "generic and vague," and thus capable only of adding "vagueness to the definition of the Mafiosi as criminals" (Maiello, Essay, 2014).

Stereotyping and protective silence. The strategies of the Mafia in response to state representatives were twofold. On the one hand, the "excellent" defendants brought to trial argued their innocence skillfully. Through a strategy of stereotyping they further amplified absurdity by making explicit the illogicality of the *pentiti*'s revelations. On the other hand, the Mafiosi progressively returned to a situation of protective silence.

"Excellent" defendants highlighted the absurdity of the accusations directed at them by both the *pentiti* and the prosecutors. For instance, when accused in court of having met the boss Riina during one of his visits in Sicily, the ex-prime minister, Andreotti, sarcastically commented:

> Some considerations are just about plain logic and common sense. If I had really gone in full light to meet [the] boss Riina [as the *pentito* suggests] you should just not convict me but send me to a psychiatric hospital! (Andreotti, Final Statement in Court, 2004)

In a similar vein, Dell'Utri explained the paradox of being Mafioso and the person that everybody could see and knew:

> There is no man close to the Mafia and one close to normal life. . .this is not possible, it is structurally impossible, it does not exist that one can do one thing and also the other. (Dell'Utri, Public Interview, 2009)

Second, "excellent" defendants stressed the differences between themselves and the "real" Mafiosi. They described themselves as being "respectable and respected" individuals and having qualities such as intellectual prestige, business acumen, and political standing, which set them far apart from the "violent and uncouth Mafiosi." Dell'Utri, for instance, ironically commented at the end of the testimony in court of the Mafioso Spatuzza, convicted for more than 40 homicides:

> It turns out that he, with all his convictions, is a saint and myself and Berlusconi the ferocious assassins! Spatuzza said just absurd things! (Dell'Utri, Public Interview, 2009)

Defendants also claimed to be "antimafia" and to have always openly fought the Mafiosi in their professional activities. Examples include Andreotti, who claimed to have been one of the strongest promoters of legislation against the Mafia, and Contrada, who listed the investigations and arrests against the Mafiosi he had conducted during his professional career:

> During my police activity, no other Mafioso family has been investigated as I did with the family Partanna-Mondello. (Contrada, Reported in Sentence 1st Degree, Contrada Trial, 1996)

In the end, the majority of trials against these "above-suspicion Mafiosi," as one of the prosecutors defined them, lasted over 10 years, were marked by conflicting decisions by the courts across the trials, and frequent acquittals of the defendants.[2] All

[2] Most prominent examples of court opinions, by degree, in trials against "excellent" defendants:

- Bruno Contrada (secret services): convicted 1st degree (1996), absolved 2nd degree (2001), invalidated 2nd degree and new trial (2002), convicted 2nd degree (2006), convicted 3rd degree (2007), invalidated (2017)
- Marcello Dell'Utri (manager and politician): convicted 1st degree (2004), convicted 2nd degree (2010), invalidated 3rd degree (2012), convicted again 2nd degree (2013), convicted 3rd degree (2014)
- Salvatore Cuffaro (former president of Sicilian Region): convicted 1st degree (2007), convicted 2nd degree (2008), convicted 3rd degree (2011)
- Raffaele Lombardo (former president of Sicilian Region): convicted 1st degree (2014), absolved 2nd degree (2017)
- Calogero Mannino (politician and former minister): absolved 1st degree (2001), convicted 2nd degree (2003), invalidated 2nd degree and new trial (2005), absolved 2nd degree (2008), absolved 3rd degree (2010)
- Corrado Carnevale (judge): absolved 1st degree (2000), convicted 2nd degree (2001), absolved 3rd degree (2002)
- Giulio Andreotti (ex-prime minister): dismissal of accusation as statute-barred (2004)

acquittals were met with outraged comments by part of the political world, indicating a profound divergence among state representatives. At the same time, the Mafia ceased all forms of violence against the state, entering a phase of "*pax mafiosa*," or "deep concealment" (DNA, Report 2007–2008). The new *pentiti* progressively diminished in number and came from the low ranks of the organizations, and those already known to state representatives kept silent when interrogated during trials. As in the first struggle, silence created a protective shield around the Mafia as "the lack of new *pentiti* and their reluctance to speak prevents us from discovering the details of what is happening in Cosa Nostra after it has again decided to be so deeply concealed" (Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia, Report, 2001). In the end, the progressive concealment of the Mafia meant that state representatives were once again at an impasse.

This is evidenced by a considerable decrease in the capacity of prosecutors to obtain convictions for "being Mafioso." Between 2000 and 2008, 78% of indictments issued by the antimafia tribunal in Palermo were set aside due to a lack of evidence. Recently, the Parliamentary Commission on Mafia effectively described not only how the Mafia has been able to strategically maintain ambiguity around itself, but how it has further deepened it:

> The Mafia is not something other with respect to the gray area [. . .]. The reason is that the gray area is not an extension of the illegal world in the legal one, but the union between the two, due to the existence of mobile, blurred, and porous boundaries between the licit and the illicit. (Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia, Report, 2018)

Overall, during this struggle the Mafia, through strategies of hyperbolic disclosing, attempted stereotyping and protective silence to foster and amplify ambiguity by offering paradoxical interpretations of the Mafia as both violent and criminal and at the same time intertwined with the legal world of the state. In trying to deal with this absurdity, state representatives, although deeply divided, attempted to merge these paradoxical interpretations, but eventually failed. This led to a state of paralyzing confusion and the ultimate maintenance of ambiguity around the Mafia until today.

DISCUSSION

In spite of an increasing interest in ambiguity, our knowledge of how organizations maintain strategic ambiguity to protect themselves from public scrutiny is still in its infancy. Thus, drawing on historical analysis of the Sicilian Mafia, we have traced the dynamics through which this organization has succeeded in doing so. The main contribution of our paper is that it advances understanding of the maintenance of strategic ambiguity by organizations that need to protect themselves from public scrutiny. More specifically, it enriches our knowledge of the key process dynamics, the types of struggles, and the discursive and nondiscursive strategies involved. By so doing, our analysis also extends research on clandestine organizations per se and illuminates the relationship between (strategic) ambiguity and secrecy.

Contributions to Research on Strategic Ambiguity

Our study contributes to research on strategic ambiguity (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Eisenberg, 1984; Eisenberg & Witten, 1987; Reinmoeller & Ansari, 2016; Sillince et al., 2012) by elucidating the process through which organizations maintain it over time. Prior research has tended to focus on how ambiguity can be used in strategy making or in organizational change (Gioia et al., 2012; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Sillince et al., 2012; Sonenshein, 2010). In contrast, our study shows how ambiguity can be a long-lasting feature of organizations that need to protect themselves from potentially negative scrutiny by external audiences. This suggests that, contrary to the view of organizations as passively subjected to the evaluation of external audiences (Vergne & Swain, 2017; Zuckerman, 1999), organizations actively contribute to shaping such assessment. Strategic ambiguity represents one of the ways through which organizations can manipulate, confuse, and control audiences' perceptions and evaluation of themselves.

Based on the analysis, we have developed a process model that centers on a key theoretical insight: maintenance of strategic ambiguity is the result of an active process in which organizations and external audiences engage in interlinked struggles, each focusing on a progressively harder-to-dissolve type of ambiguity and ultimately leading to neutralization of efforts by audiences. Below, we discuss the key elements of our model—struggles over ambiguity, types of strategic ambiguity, and discursive and nondiscursive strategies. We also theorize how struggles concatenate in an overall process and how the shifts from one to the other occur. Figure 1 offers a summary of these elements and their relationships.

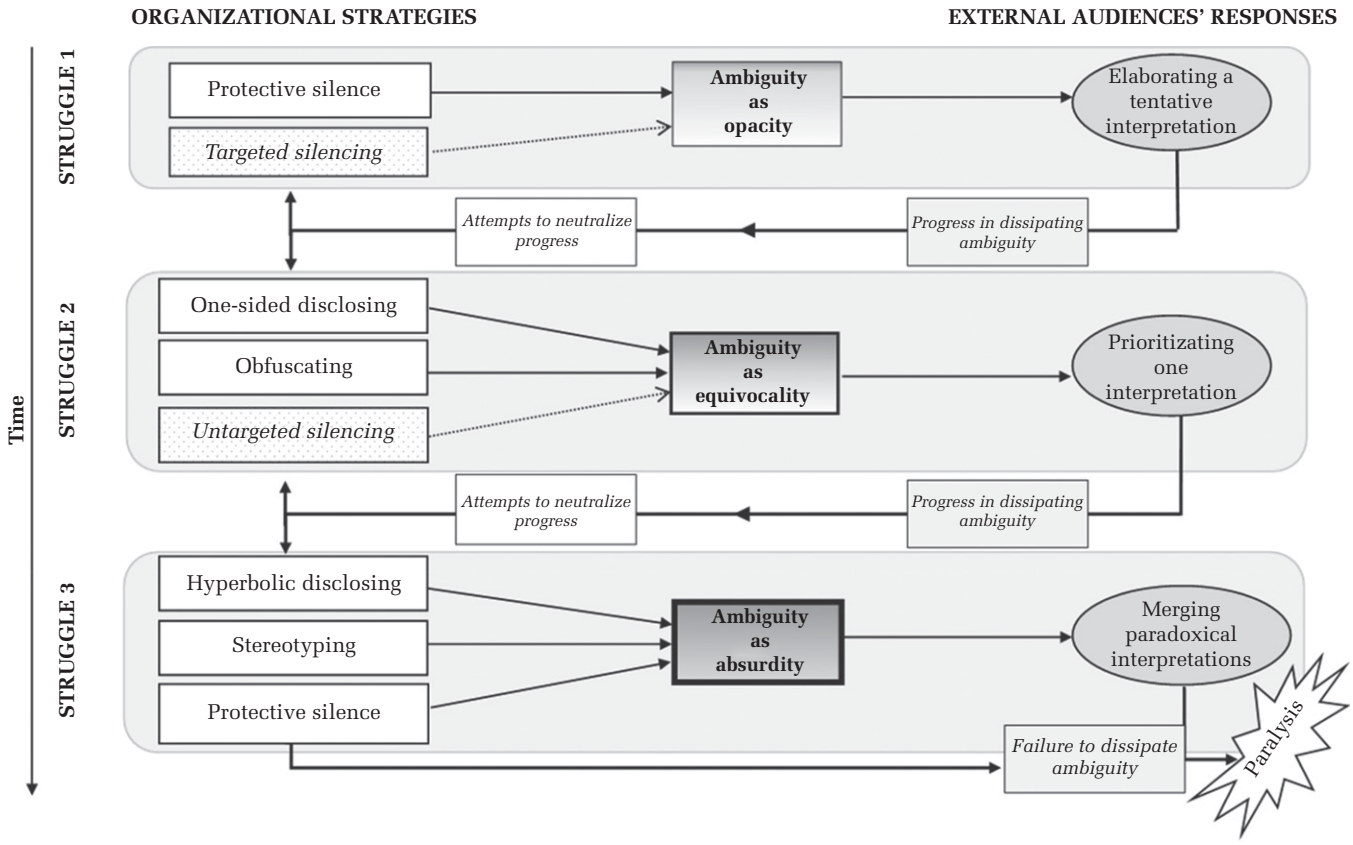
Process dynamics in maintaining strategic ambiguity. First, our study identifies a series of interlinked struggles. As shown in Figure 1, struggles emerge and develop based on a repertoire of

strategies employed by organizations and of responses by external audiences who attempt to dissipate the ambiguity surrounding organizations. A model based on struggles supports a relational perspective advanced by previous studies (Eisenberg, 1984; Kenney, 2007; Ozcan & Gurses, 2018), but at the same time enriches it in important ways. While previous work has theorized the relationship between organizational strategies and audiences' responses as one of mutual learning (Kenney, 2007), or as based on dialectics in which organizations and external audiences advance different perspectives on an issue (Ozcan & Gurses, 2018), our focus on struggles resonates with a political understanding of the interaction between organizations and external audiences (March 1962). The maintenance of strategic ambiguity for protective purposes is, in fact, intrinsically antagonistic, and marked by two parties that want to advance conflicting interests and goals (De Bakker, Den Hond, King, & Weber, 2013; Hindess, 1982). More importantly, the struggles over ambiguity involve power games over the control of organizations. Indeed, our case suggests that while the state representatives wanted to dissipate the ambiguity around the Mafia to be able to exercise control over it, and ultimately dismantle it, the organization leveraged ambiguity to resist audiences' efforts and maintain control over its own activities, resources, and members.

Second, our study shows how struggles differ on the basis of the type of ambiguity involved—opacity, equivocality, and absurdity—and how maintenance, in the end, results from the ability of the organization to make external audiences turn to types of ambiguity that are progressively more difficult to tackle. By focusing on different types of ambiguity and their relationship over time, our study introduces a dynamic perspective on the construct. In contrast to previous studies in which ambiguity led to escalating indecision (Denis et al., 2011) or shifted from an enabling to a constraining role for organizational actors (Abdallah & Langley, 2014), our study provides an account of how different types of ambiguity, leveraged in the process by organizations, can progressively and ultimately paralyze the counterpart (Figure 1). Specifically, we show how these different types of ambiguity are associated with more cumbersome and convoluted responses by external audiences. Ambiguity as opacity derives from the lack of interpretative cues or schemas (McCaskey, 1982) and manifests in the incapacity to formulate interpretations of what the organization is all about (Weick, 1995; Zack, 2000). External audiences deal with opacity by attempting to fill the gap of "explanatory knowledge" (Zack, 2000) that they perceive, and may come to an initial, tentative interpretation or synthesis. Instead, ambiguity as equivocality is created by the coexistence of multiple interpretations (Daft & Weick, 1984). From a lack of a widely agreed upon interpretive schema, audiences are forced to deal with plurivocality (Boje, 1995; Ferraro etzion, & Gehman, 2015; Sonenshein, 2010), to which they react by embracing the most plausible interpretation. Finally, ambiguity as absurdity involves a situation in which external audiences are presented with contradictory interpretations that appear irreconcilable, paradoxical, or outright illogical (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016; Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016). Our analysis shows how absurdity may lead external audiences to repeated attempts to reconcile contradictory interpretations, and, once failed, to a state of almost paralyzing "total ambiguity" (Wilkinson, 2006). By introducing absurdity as a novel type of ambiguity not recognized in existing typologies (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Eisenberg, 1984; Sillince et al., 2012; Weick, 1995), our findings extend understanding of the effects of the use of strategic ambiguity by organizations.

Third, we propose that the shifts between struggles are linked to the progress in dissipating ambiguity made by external audiences in the previous struggle (see arrows in Figure 1). Without external audiences being a small step ahead in the effort to deal with ambiguity, organizations would not be prompted to change strategies and, ultimately, shift to a different type of ambiguity. In our case, for example, the Mafia could have continued to maintain its opacity through strategies of silence, had state representatives failed to collect explanatory knowledge around it and elaborate an initial, albeit tentative, interpretation of what the organization was about. It was at this point that the Mafia upgraded strategies and started engaging verbally with external audiences, and moved from not providing interpretive cues to providing multiple cues for interpretation to the outside. Similarly, it was only when, despite the confusing equivocality, external audiences succeeded in prioritizing one interpretation of the Mafia that the organization forced audiences to reopen to additional, and even more confusing, interpretations in the last struggle. Overall, our findings contribute to an understanding of strategic ambiguity maintenance as a long-term endeavor with protracted periods in which strategies such as hiding (Jensen & Meisenbach, 2015; Wolfe & Blithe, 2015) may be sufficient to achieve the goal, alternating with other periods during which the

FIGURE 1
Model of Strategic Ambiguity Maintenance by Organizations for Protective Purposes



Note: Dotted boxes and arrows indicate strategies of selective disambiguation.

activism of external audiences forces organizations to intensify their efforts.

Discursive and nondiscursive strategies to maintain ambiguity. In addition to illuminating the process dynamics of strategic ambiguity maintenance, our work breaks new ground in elaborating on strategies that organizations deploy to maintain ambiguity vis-à-vis external audiences. Largely influenced by the seminal work of Eisenberg (1984), prior research has so far mainly focused on discursive (Abdallah & Langley, 2014) and rhetorical devices (Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Sillince et al., 2012) able to generate ambiguity. Vagueness of language and juxtaposition of contrasting concepts in expressing the goals, missions, or identities of organizations have been shown to provide confusing cues to audiences (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Sillince et al., 2012). In our work, the combination of strategies of obfuscating and one-sided disclosing resonates with this literature. We show, indeed, how these strategies created a confusing mix of interpretations of the Mafia. Similarly, stereotyping, by portraying Mafiosi in a caricature-like manner and state representatives as true contraries, helped transform the tension between conflicting interpretations of the Mafia into paralyzing absurdity. These strategies confirm that it is through the words, their arrangement, and the tone of speech that organizational members choose in communicating organizations to the outside that ambiguity can be created and maintained.

Importantly, our study adds a novel set of both discursive and nondiscursive strategies, in particular, those of silence, targeted or untargeted silencing, and hyperbolic disclosing, which have been relatively undertheorized and unexplored in the organizational literature. Consistent with the political nature of the struggles, the study shows how each strategy, by affecting the ambiguity surrounding organizations, is instrumental in tilting the balance of power and control between organizations and external audiences.

Silence, as in the absence of speech or mutism, is able to create mystery rhetorically (Brummett, 1980). The ability of silence to foster ambiguity is mainly attributed to the omission of interpretative information and the hiding of cues that "the unsaid" can

generate (Kurzon, 2007; Schröter, 2013). Faced with silence, external audiences have only limited capacity to judge the motivations and intentions of "the silent ones," and often end up elaborating confusing interpretations of what or whom they observe (Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003). Our story shows that the Mafia employed silence as the default strategy to effectively keep external audiences in a condition of ambiguity and deprive them of any reasonable interpretative schema (Kurzon, 2007; Schröter, 2013) to make sense of the organization. In addition, we show how silence can be deployed dynamically to actively foster strategic ambiguity. Organizations may in fact abandon a strategy of silence when it begins to lose its effectiveness, engage external audiences in finer speech-based strategies, and then revert to silence, in combination with other tactics, for renewed effectiveness. In our case, the Mafia returned to silence only at the end of the process of active maintenance of strategic ambiguity, and did so in order to amplify the sense of absurdity into which external audiences had fallen. This indicates that more than *a* strategy of silence we should be talking about *strategies* of silence, deployed by organizations with different timing and impact on external audiences.

Strategies of silencing represent an extreme version of those of silence as they are aimed at suppressing the voices of scrutinizing external audiences (Ephratt, 2008; Zerubavel, 2006), preventing them from speaking up (Brown & Coupland, 2005), and forcing a collective state or "climate" of silence (Clemente & Roulet, 2015; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). In our case, silencing occurred through violence in a progressive escalation from violence targeted at specific individuals to more symbolic and theatrical acts that aimed to intimidate a broader and undefined audience. While violence may appear idiosyncratic to our empirical setting, in the organizational literature instances in which firms employ offensive strategies such as threat and intimidation to "silence" critical external audiences are becoming more frequent (Mena et al., 2016; Reuter & Ueberbacher, 2019). From publicly criminalizing activists as terrorists to spying on them in order to impede their divulgence of critical opinions, corporations have been shown to employ, especially once the conflict becomes fiercer, discursive and material strategies able to keep critical external audiences "under close control" (Reuter & Ueberbacher, 2019). Our findings show how silencing, by making the sheer power of organizations manifest to the outside, also forces one unambiguous representation onto external audiences—that of potent, ruthless organizations. In other words, strategies of silencing provide strong, univocal cues to the outside and catalyze the attention and interpretive efforts of external audiences in one direction. This suggests that organizations, while aiming to maintain strategic ambiguity, may purposefully and temporarily relinquish part of it and disambiguate, revealing themselves with an identity (Scott, 2013a) that, even if partial, is instrumental to the exercise of power in the relationship with external audiences (Carlos & Lewis, 2018; Kim & Lyon, 2011).

Finally, strategies of *hyperbolic disclosing* overwhelm external audiences with self-revealing narratives, some of which exaggerate reality to a point of appearing confusingly implausible. In addition, hyperbolic disclosing suggests that alternative interpretations, even when absurdly conflicting and seemingly mutually exclusive, are all equally possible. In our case, the Mafiosi disclosed to judges that the Mafia had not merely a legal face—in addition to the illegal one—but that it could even adopt that of its more natural opponents—that is, state representatives. Confronted with absurdity, external audiences struggle to make sense of apparently irreconcilable interpretations (Putnam et al., 2016) and to assess their veracity, and may keep oscillating between interpretations that appear both right and wrong and thus seem impossible to choose between (Putnam et al., 2016). This may result, on the one hand, in vicious spirals (Weick, 1979) and the paralysis (Lewis, 2000) of external audiences; on the other hand, it may create dissension among them, their division into factions (Bonardi & Keim, 2005), in a strategy of "*divide et impera*" that has been observed among corporations with respect to critical external audiences (Bonardi & Keim, 2005). At the same time, coping with absurdity has been shown to lead to actions that are "surprising, unexpected, or form the opposite of what was originally desired" (Putnam et al., 2016: 81). Indeed, in our study, prosecutors, in the attempt to cope with the absurdity of the Mafiosi's revelations, stretched their interpretation to a point deemed by most illegitimate and, as a consequence, partially discredited their own actions.

Implications for Research on Clandestine Organizations

Our analysis also has specific implications for research on clandestine organizations (Scott 2013b, 2015; Vaccaro & Palazzo, 2015) by demonstrating that the secrecy (Costas & Grey, 2014; Dufresne & Offstein, 2008) associated with such organizations is closely linked with ambiguity. Our study suggests, on the one hand, that ambiguity and secrecy can be mutually reinforcing—the more secret the organization, the more ambiguous it will be considered by external observers; vice versa, the more ambiguous the

organization keeps itself, the more "secret" and inscrutable it will be. On the other hand, it posits that breaches of secrecy, for instance by organizational members speaking up or manifesting themselves with visible acts, are bound to have repercussions for the degree of ambiguity perceived by outsiders. Finally, the study enables conceptualization of secrecy as a state of being that is far from static, one that shifts fluidly over time based on the interplay of attempts by external audiences to unveil these organizations and of the organizations themselves to stay surrounded by ambiguity.

In addition, our analysis illuminates the process by which specific external actors shift consideration of a clandestine organization from being just "unknown" to being illegitimate and in the end formally illegal. The study, therefore, uncovers the dynamics of one of the main processes that can be stimulated by clandestine organizations, that leading to "criminalization" of its members. Research on criminology (Ball & Curry, 1995; Brennan, 1987; Jenness & Grattet, 2001) has long shown how pinning down clandestine organizations is indeed a matter of (often cumbersome) interpretation and negotiation among a plethora of actors. While, in the majority of these accounts, categorization of a behavior as a crime, once affirmed, is extended to new instances in a relatively unproblematic way (e.g., Jenness & Grattet, 2001), our case indicates that identifying criminals can involve a high degree of arbitrariness, even after the line of illegality has been drawn and validated. In our case, while at the beginning state actors classified only those Mafiosi who had directly committed crimes as criminals, individuals who had not committed crimes directly (but might have mandated them) were eventually also criminalized, until the next step when individuals who may have merely contributed to the criminal objectives of others were also included. This pattern has also been observed in the case of gangs (Ball & Curry, 1995) and stigmatized organizations in the sex industry (Weitzer, 2007).

This suggests that clandestine organizations, given the high degree of ambiguity that surrounds them, provide great latitude to external actors for continuous reinterpretations of what should be deemed illegal or illegitimate. Some of these reinterpretations can be particularly "creative," and themselves exist at the limit of credibility and legitimacy. These reinterpretations are tested for acceptability in collective arenas (i.e., courts), in interaction with alleged criminals, and are then either affirmed or rejected. Research in the criminology and the sociology of crime (Bennett & Feldman, 2014; Gambetta, 2009; Jacquemet, 1996) has underlined how, in this context, discursive, rhetorical, and argumentative devices employed by opposing parties assume critical importance not only for settling where the boundary of (il)legality or (il)legitimacy can be drawn but also, more generally, for making sense of the clandestine organization. The strategies that we have identified enrich this stream of literature, especially in the case of silence, silencing, and hyperbolic disclosing as discussed above.

Boundary Conditions, Limitations, and Avenues for Future Research

In this study, we have explored the process of maintaining strategic ambiguity by using clandestine organizations as a case in point and focusing on the Sicilian Mafia as a revealing empirical case. While this choice limits the possibility to automatically extend our findings and theorization to all organizations, we believe that the "extreme context" (Hällgren, Rouleau & De Rond, 2018) of clandestine organizations has made them particularly revealing. As Hällgren et al. (2018: 112) suggested, extreme settings are particularly suitable for exploratory studies such as ours, given that "they provide a unique platform for the study of hard-to-get-at organizational phenomena" and "are likely to be more generous with information than what one would derive if taking the average of ordinary cases."

Given the distinctive process dynamics that we have uncovered in this study it is important to consider the boundary conditions that may make our conclusions valid in our case but not, or to a lesser extent, in others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, in our study, ambiguity was used strategically by the Mafia organization to accomplish a specific purpose: to protect itself from the scrutiny of state representatives. As such, we believe our model applies to a broader set of organizations that aim to maintain ambiguity for protective purposes. The fact that the organization's interests were opposite to those of external audiences makes the process and strategies we found unlikely to apply to situations in which ambiguity is used instead to mobilize the support and engagement of stakeholders. For instance, a hybrid organization—such as a social enterprise or a public–private partnership (Cappellaro, Tracey, & Greenwood, 2020)—may remain ambiguous to the outside with respect to its social, commercial, or public nature to gain at the same time the support of diverse investors and stakeholders and align, as much as possible, their interests to its own.

The second boundary condition concerns how big a stake organizations have in maintaining ambiguity. In our case, state representatives aimed to gain full control over the Mafia and its members in order to dismantle it. By contrast, when the survival is not at stake, organizations may avoid engaging in

repeated struggles with external audiences and risking triggering potentially excessive and never-ending conflicts. In such cases, organizations might select only some of the strategies we have identified. For example, Volkswagen, during the 2015 emissions scandal, employed protective silence as main strategy, keeping public communication to a minimum (Stiegliz et al., 2019). Alternatively, organizations can turn to other types of strategies to manage interaction with external audiences, in a manner more similar to image impression-management tactics (Elsbach, 2003; Fombrun & Rindova, 2000).

In addition, our analysis is subject to limitations that open up avenues for future research. The first limitation of our study is that clandestine, and especially criminal, organizations display an extreme degree of secrecy (Costas & Grey, 2014; Dufresne & Offstein, 2008) in comparison with more "traditional" organizations. The omnipresent need in clandestine organizations to hide key operations and identity may not apply as such to other types of organizations for which extreme secrecy may mean irreversible reputational and performance repercussions (Gioia et al., 2012). Furthermore, criminal organizations such as the Sicilian Mafia have also developed an in-built capacity to pursue these needs in more straightforward and effective ways than many others. Secrecy, therefore, may have amplified the dynamics and strategies that we have identified. For instance, secrecy may facilitate faster and more durable adaptation of strategies by organizations than would otherwise be possible, to counteract audiences' responses. If illegal or illicit strategies (e.g., violence, intimidation) can also be deployed, this adaptation might be even faster and more flexible (Kenney, 2007). Future research could compare our case with other institutional and organizational settings that have varying degrees of secrecy but still need to protect themselves from the public eye or critical scrutiny.

Second, our study focuses on a particular external actor, the state, which counteracted the efforts of the organization to maintain ambiguity by progressively defining it as illegal and leading to its criminalization (Ball & Curry, 1995; Brennan, 1987; Jenness & Grattet, 2001). In other settings, there may not be such powerful authorities or the audiences may appear more passive. Thus, depending on the context, external actors may play a less important role, which may be evident in more moderate responses, such as denouncing or disapproving. Future research could investigate the legitimacy and relative power of external actors as key parameters.

Finally, its specific characteristics made the Sicilian Mafia a challenging object to study "from within." Our focus on speech produced by the Mafia for an external audience did not allow us to study the more informal, day-to-day conversations among Mafia members. Hence, it would be very valuable to complement our insights with those of studies taking the perspective of insiders of clandestine organizations (Bourgois, 2003; Venkatesh, 2008). Such analyses could draw on methods such as discourse analysis or ethnography that would allow a focus on the processes leading to the choice of strategies or their repercussions inside the organization.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE A1
List of Data by Type and Examples of Titles

Type of Data (Pages)	List of Documents and Examples of Titles
Primary Sources *(28,463 pages)*	
Judicial documents (12,994)	Indictment of the Ciaculli Trial *"Sentenza di rinvio a giudizio emessa l'8 maggio 1965 dal giudice istruttore del tribunale di Palermo, nel procedimento penale contro Pietro Torretta ed altri, imputati di numerosi fatti di sangue commessi a Palermo e culminate nella strage di Ciaculli del 30 giugno 1963"*
	Final sentence of the Ciaculli killings trial (1968): *"Sentenza, emessa il 22 dicembre 1968, dalla Corte di Assise di Catanzaro, nei confronti di Angelo La Barbera ed altri, imputati di vari omicidi, sequestri di persone, violenza privata ed altri reati"*
	Final sentences of additional trials for homicides attributed to the Mafia (1967)
	Final sentences of additional trials for homicides attributed to the Mafia (1969)
	Indictment of the trial on international drug trafficking written by judge Falcone (1983)
	Judicial report of the 161 Mafiosi (1984)
	Indictment of the Maxi Trial (1st degree) (1984)
	Sentence of the Maxi Trial (1st degree) (1987)
	Sentence of the Maxi Trial (2nd degree) (1990)
	Sentence of Maxi Trial (3rd degree, 1991)
	Sentence of "1992–1993 bomb attacks" trials (1st degree)
	Sentence of "1992–1993 bomb attacks" trials (2nd degree)
	Sentence of "1992–1993 bomb attacks" trials (3rd degree)
	Sentence of Contrada trial (1st degree, 1996)
	Sentence of Contrada trial (2nd degree, 2006)
	Sentence of Contrada trial (3rd degree, 2007)
	Text of invalidation document of Contrada Trial (2017)
	Indictment of Andreotti trial (1999)
	Sentence of Andreotti trial (1st degree, 1999)
	Sentence of Andreotti trial (2nd degree, 2002)
	Sentence of Andreotti trial (3rd degree, 2004)
	Sentence of Carnevale trial (2nd degree, 2001)
	Sentence of Carnevale trial (3rd degree, 2003)
	Sentence of Mannino trial (2nd degree, 2003)
	Sentence of Mannino trial (invalidation, 2005)
	Sentence of Mannino trial (3rd degree, absolution, 2010)
	Sentence of Dell'Utri trial (1st degree, 2004)
	Sentence of Dell'Utri trial (2nd degree, 2010)
	Sentence of Dell'Utri trial (new 2nd degree, 2013)
	Sentence of Dell'Utri trial (3rd degree, 2014)
	Sentence of Cuffaro Trial (3rd degree, 2011)
Oral sources: confessions, testimonies, hearings (6,109)	Hearing of Costa at the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (1980)
	Hearing of Chinnici at the Supreme Council (1982): *"Audizione del dott. Rocco Chinnici Consigliere Istruttore del Tribunale di Palermo, 25 febbraio 1982"*
	Hearing of Dalla Chiesa at the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (1982)
	Confessions of Buscetta to prosecutors (1984–1985)
	Confessions of Contorno to prosecutors (1984–1985)
	Testimony in court of Buscetta (1985–1986)
	Testimony in court of Contorno (1985–1986)
	Text of confrontation between Buscetta and Calò (1985–1987)
	Testimony of Boss Greco (1985–1987)
	Testimony of Boss Calò (1985–1987)
	Testimony of Boss Leggio (1985–1987)
	Confessions of Calderone to prosecutors (1989)
	Confessions of Mannoia to prosecutors (1989)
	Testimony in court of Calderone (1989)
	Testimony in court of Mannoia (1989)

TABLE A1
(Continued)

Type of Data (Pages)	List of Documents and Examples of Titles
	Texts of testimonies of Mafioso *pentito* Buscetta at the "1993–1994 bomb attacks" trial
	Texts of testimonies of Mafioso *pentito* Ciancimino at the "1993–1994 bomb attacks" trial
	Texts of testimonies of Mafioso *pentito* Mutolo at the "1993–1994 bomb attacks" trial
	Texts of testimonies of Mafioso *pentito* Marhese at the "1993–1994 bomb attacks" trial
	Texts of testimonies of Mafioso *pentito* Cancemi at the "1993–1994 bomb attacks" trial
	Hearings of Mafioso Buscetta at the Parliamentary Committee on the Mafia (1993)
	Court statements of Carnevale
	Court statements of Mannino
	Court statements of Dell'Utri
	Testimonies and interviews by Prime Minister Berlusconi on Dell'Utri
	Hearings of the national antimafia prosecutor at the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (2006)
	Several court statements of Cuffaro
	Several court statements of Lombardo
Parliamentary reports (826)	Intermediate Report I by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (1963): "*Commissione parlamentare d'inchiesta sul fenomeno della Mafia in Sicilia. Relazione e Proposte della Commissione al termine della prima fase dei lavori"*
	Intermediate Report II by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (1965): *Commissione parlamentare d'inchiesta sul fenomeno della Mafia in Sicilia. Relazione sulle risultanze acquisite del Comune di Palermo"*
	Report by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (1968): *"Relazione conclusiva della Commissione parlamentare d'inchiesta sul fenomeno della Mafia in Sicilia. Presidente: Pafundi"*
	Report by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (1972): *"Relazione sui lavori svolti e sullo stato del fenomeno mafioso al termine della V legislatura. Presidente: Cattanei"*
	Selected annexes of commission reports (transcripts of hearings and documents prepared by public servants about the Mafia)
	Majority report by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (1976): *"Relazione conclusiva della Commissione parlamentare d'inchiesta sul fenomeno della Mafia in Sicilia. VI Legislatura"*
	Minority report by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (1976): *"Relazione di minoranza dei deputati La Torre, Benedetti, Malagugini e dei senatori Adamoli, Chiaromonte, Lugnano, Maffioletti, nonché del deputato Terranova"*
	Report by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (1985)
	Majority report by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (1993): *"Relazione sui rapport tra Mafia e politica. Presidente: Violante"*
	Minority report by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (1993)
	Minority report II by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (1993)
	Majority report by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (2006)
	Minority report by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (2006)
	Minority report II by the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia (2006)
Laws and related parliamentary debates (216)	Text of parliamentary debate about law proposal (Law 575/1965): *"Disposizioni contro la Mafia"*
	Text of law (Law 575/1965): *"Disposizioni contro la Mafia"*
	Text of parliamentary debates about law proposal (Law 646/1982)
	Text of law proposal (Law 646/1982): *"Disegno di legge presentato dal Ministro dell'Interno (Rognoni), di concerto col Ministro di Grazia e Giustizia (Darida) e col Ministro delle Finanze (Formica). Disposizioni in materia di misure di prevenzione di carattere patrimoniale ed integrazioni alla legge 27 dicembre 1956, n.1423"*
	Text of law (Law 646/1982): "*Disposizioni in materia di misure di prevenzione di carattere patrimoniale ed integrazioni alla legge 27 dicembre 1956, n.1423, 10 febbraio 1962, n.57 e 31 maggio 1965, n.575. Istituzione di una commissione parlamentare sul fenomeno della mafia"*
	Text of law (Law Decree 629/1982): *"Misure urgenti per il coordinamento della lotta contro la delinquenza mafiosa"*
	Law concerning trial procedures, treatment of *pentiti* (Law Decree 8/1991),
	Law on the creation of the national antimafia investigation division (*Direzione Investigativa Antimafia* [DIA]) and national antimafia prosecution office (*Piano Nazionale Anticorruzione*) (Law Decrees 367/1991; Law 30/1991),
	Law on solitary imprisonment for Mafiosi (Law 356/1992)
	Text of debates at the Parliamentary Commission on the Mafia about the bomb attacks (1992–1993)
Letters and diaries (195)	Diary of Chinnici (1981–1983): *"Il diario del giudice Rocco Chinnici, Allegato alla Seduta pomeridiana di mercoledì 28 settembre 1983"*
	Three diaries and letters of Dalla Chiesa (1982)
	Excerpts of diary of Falcone (1991)

TABLE A1
(Continued)

Type of Data (Pages)	List of Documents and Examples of Titles
Public speeches and interviews in media (302)	Four interviews with the media and selected public speeches of Chinnici; e.g., *"La nostra responsabilità di fronte alla Mafia"* (Title of the public speech at the Law Faculty of Palermo University, December 17, 1981)
	Seven selected public speeches, interviews and documents written by Mattarella on the Mafia: e.g., *"Sicilia, nel buio degli anni 80"* (Public interview released by Mattarella to the Giornale di Sicilia, January 5, 1980)
	Interviews by Dalla Chiesa with the media (1982)
	Three newspaper articles on murder of Chinnici, e.g., *"Terrore Mafioso: Palermo come Beirut. Strage per uccidere il giudice Chinnici"* (L'Unità, 1983)
	Speeches at funeral of Chinnici
	Four public interviews and speeches by antimafia judges (Falcone, Borsellino, Caponnetto)
	Text of speeches by Caponnetto at funerals of Falcone and Borsellino
	Seven newspaper articles about murders of Falcone and Borsellino
	Five newspapers articles about the bomb attacks (1993–1994)
	Several public interviews and court statements of Contrada
	Three public interviews of judges Caselli, Ingroia, Di Matteo
	Several court statements and public interviews of Andreotti
	Public interviews of Carnevale
	Public interviews of Mannino
	Public interviews of Dell'Utri
	Public interviews of Cuffaro
	Public interviews of Lombardo
Book interviews and essays (8)	Book interview with Buscetta: *Il Boss è solo*, 1986
	Book by Caponnetto: *I miei giorni a Palermo,* 1992
	Essays and speeches by Borsellino: *Oltre il muro dell'omertà,* 2011
	Book interview with Calderone: *Gli uomini del disonore. La mafia siciliana nella vita di un grande pentito Antonino Calderone,* 1992
	Book by G. Falcone: *Cose di Cosa Nostra*, 1991
	Book interview with Ingroia: *Io so,* 2012
	Book by N. Di Matteo: *Collusi,* 2015
Reports of Anti-Mafia Investigative Police and Anti-Mafia National Prosecutor Office (8,129)	1998 Report of the DIA: "*Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Investigativa Antimafia. Attività Svolta e risultati conseguiti. 1 e 2 semestre 1998"*
	1999 Report of the DIA
	2000 Report of the DIA
	2001 Report of the DIA
	2002 Report of the DIA
	2003 Report of the DIA
	2004 Report of the DIA
	2005 Report of the DIA
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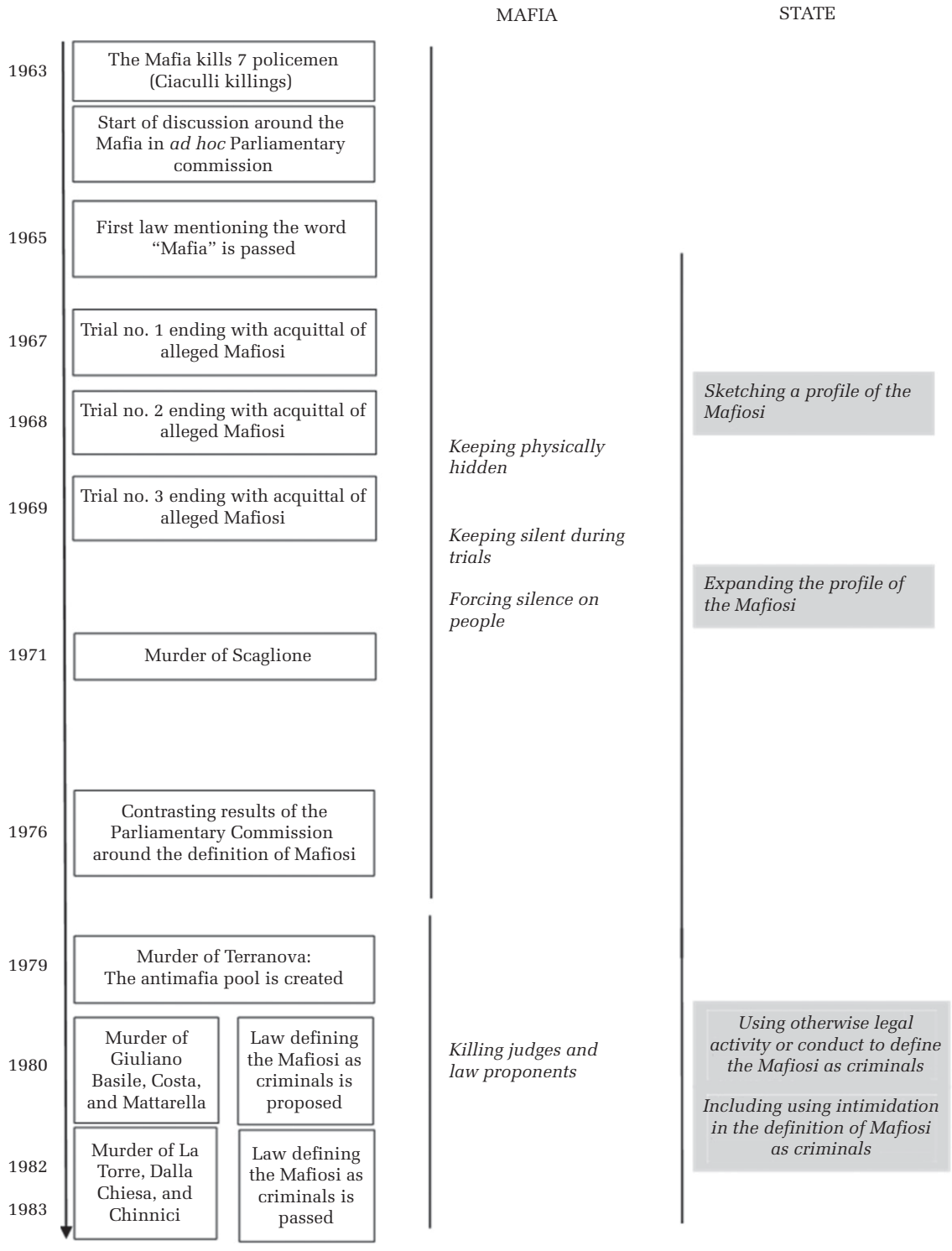
	2010 Report of the DIA
	2011 Report of the DIA
	2012 Report of the DIA
	2013 Report of the DIA
	2014 Report of the DIA
	2015 Report of the DIA
	2016 Report of the DIA
	2017 Report of the DIA
	2018 Report of the DIA
	2007–2008 Report of the Anti-Mafia National Prosecutor Office (*Direzione Nazionale Antimafia* [DNA]): *"Direzione Nazionale Antimafia. Relazione annuale sulle attività svolte dal Procuratore Nazionale antimafia e dalla Direzione nazionale nonché sulle dinamiche e strategie della criminalità organizzata di tipo Mafioso nel periodo 1 luglio 2007-30 giugno 2008"*
	2008–2009 Report of the DNA
	2009–2010 Report of the DNA

TABLE A1
(Continued)

Type of Data (Pages)	List of Documents and Examples of Titles
	2010–2011 Report of the DNA
	2011–2012 Report of the DNA
	2012–2013 Report of the DNA
	2013–2014 Report of the DNA
	2014–2015 Report of the DNA
	2015–2016 Report of the DNA
	2016–2017 Report of the DNA
	2017–2018 Report of the DNA

APPENDIX B

FIGURE B1
Struggle Over Opacity (1963–1983): Timeline of Main Events, Descriptive Mafia's Strategies and State's Responses



Legend: Main events are described in the boxes; strategies and responses are in italics; lines indicate the length of time in which strategies and responses unfolded

FIGURE B2
Struggle Over Equivocality (1984–1993): Timeline of Main Events, Descriptive Mafia's Strategies and State's Responses

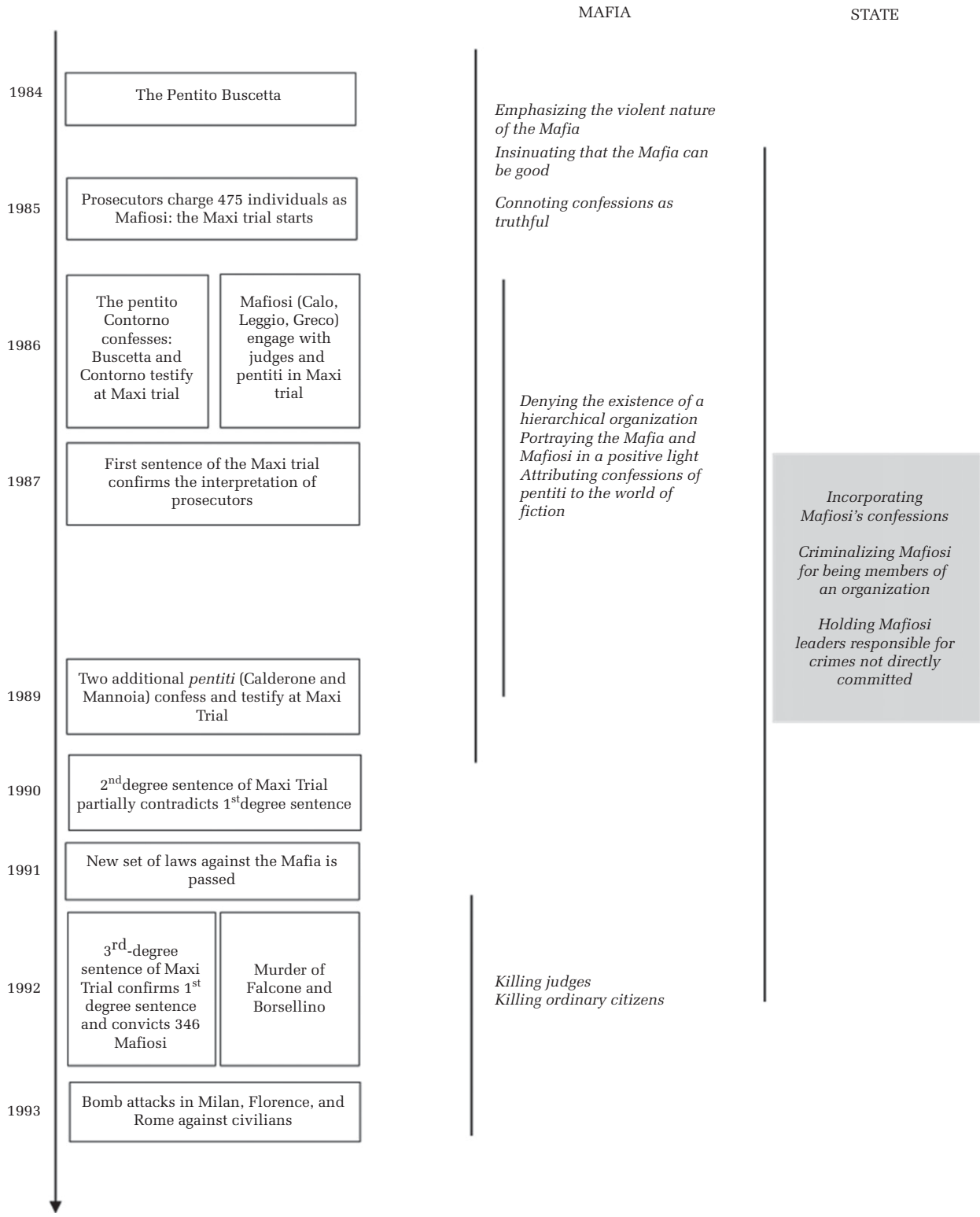


FIGURE B3
Struggle Over Absurdity (1994–2018): Timeline of Main Events, Descriptive Mafia's Strategies and State's Responses