

Italian Street Naming Practices and Anti-Mafia Memory Policies

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1. Introduction

The past twenty years have seen a considerable increase in the number of Italian odonyms (street names) that commemorate the innocent victims of mafia violence (Caffarelli, 2015). In the absence of state policies for fostering anti-mafia memory, this phenomenon may be attributed to the commemoration practices of civil society actors (Muti, Salvucci, 2020), especially Libera, a leading Italian NGO that acts as an umbrella for over 1,500 anti-mafia associations.

This essay offers a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the spread of anti-mafia place names in Italy (Section 2), before going on to examine the importance and meaning of this development from two different perspectives. On the one hand, in relation to the broader historical backdrop of Italian street-naming policies (Section 3), on the other, with respect to the contemporary public debate in Italy (Section 4) surrounding the difficulties and contradictions inherent in the anti-mafia place-naming process specifically.

When reinterpreted using the conceptual tools of “critical toponymy” (Azaryahu, 1996; Rose-Reedwood, 2008; Berg, Vuolteenaho, 2009) and through a “public use of history” lens (Ridolfi, 2005; De Luna, 2010; Raffaelli, 2010; Ravveduto, 2018), anti-mafia place-naming proves to be one of the leading symbolic apparatuses of Italian civic identity and key to fostering memory during Italy’s “second republic”, as the phase following the major anti-corruption and anti-mafia trials of the 1990s has been labelled.

However, opposition to commemorative place-naming practices and the bitter public debate surrounding anti-mafia street names shows that, whatever the official rhetoric, anti-mafia ideas and practices remain divisive for a significant proportion of Italian citizens and political leaders. Hence, the crucial role of civic associations, which are uniquely critical of both mafia groups and (certain) public institutions.

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2. *Anti-mafia street names in Italy*

In a recent study of Italian anti-mafia street names, a colleague and I compared a database of over a thousand innocent mafia victims compiled by Libera¹ with the main publicly available databases of Italian street networks², which we combined into a single dataset using geocoding techniques. We cross-checked the results and organized them into a reliable overview of the geographic distribution of anti-mafia toponyms and the level of commemoration accorded to the different victims (Muti, Salvucci, 2020).

To briefly summarize our findings, in 2020, there were 6.540 streets named after an innocent victim of mafia violence. These streets are located in 2.360 municipalities³ spread across all Italian regions and provinces (fig. 1).

Among the regions, Sicily has the most anti-mafia toponyms, accounting for over a quarter of the national total (25,8%), followed by Lombardy (14,3%), Emilia Romagna (9,1%), Apulia (8,4%), Campania (6,2%), Veneto (6%) and Calabria (5,9%).

Among the provinces, Palermo leads with 502 anti-mafia toponyms (7,6% of the total) followed by Agrigento with 289 (4,4%). Twenty provinces have over 100 anti-mafia street names, of which: seven are in Sicily, five in Lombardy, two each in Apulia and Campania, and one each in Calabria, Emilia Romagna, Lazio, and Piedmont.

Among the municipalities, the city of Palermo ranks first with 85 anti-mafia toponyms. Three other Sicilian municipalities (Favara, Vittoria, and Niscemi) have over 30 anti-mafia street names each. Overall, 66 municipalities have 10-30 anti-mafia toponyms; this goes down to three to nine in a further 791 municipalities; finally 1.500 municipalities have only one or two.

The distribution of anti-mafia toponyms is clearly uneven. Anti-mafia street names are common and uniformly spread across Sicily, but this is not the case in all the southern regions with an entrenched mafia presence. Anti-mafia toponyms are also widespread in some central and northern regions, but the coverage there is patchy.

The distribution of anti-mafia street names is completely unrelated to the size or rank of urban centres: small towns of only a few thousand inhabitants can have many more anti-mafia toponyms than do the large metropolises, among which only Rome and Palermo have over 20 anti-mafia streets. Furthermore, the traditional relationship between street names and local history does not seem to hold in the case of anti-mafia names, as shown by the cases of Campania and Calabria where victims of the Sicilian mafia are commemorated but the local victims of local mafia organizations (the Camorra and the Ndrangheta, respectively) have received little or no commemoration.

The key to understanding anti-mafia street naming is not so much the presence of mafia-style groups in an area (which is generally far more widespread

¹ <https://vivi.libera.it/> (last access: 10/06/2023).

² Archivio Nazionale Stradari Comunali, Open Street Map, Api Bing Maps, and Google Maps.

³ Out of a total of 7.900 municipalities.

than anti-mafia street names) but rather the strength of local anti-mafia associations. In this sense, figure 1 may also be read as a measure of the sensitivity of individual local communities to the issue of organized crime⁴.

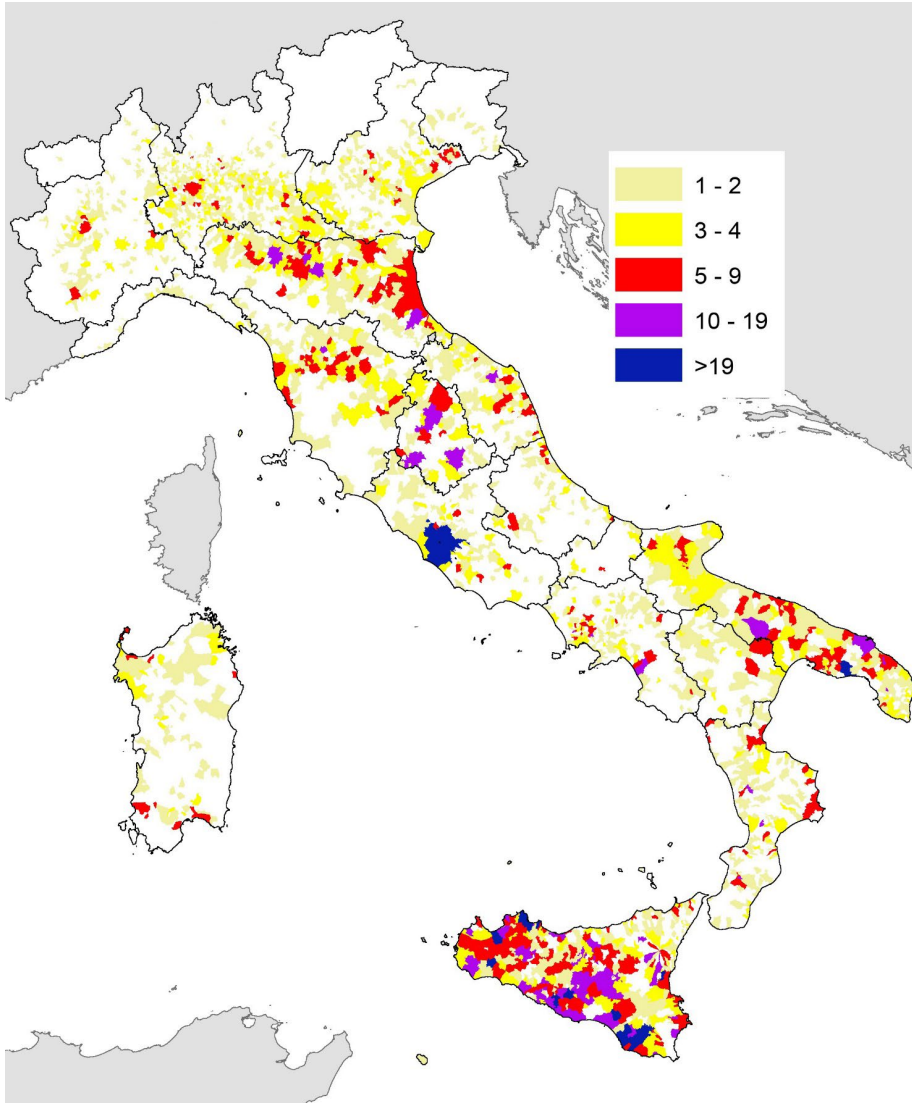


Fig. 1 – Number of anti-mafia street names in Italy by municipality, 2020.

Source: Author.

⁴In Italy, the power to naming places and streets is assigned to the municipal councils of local administrations (under the supervision of the Prefect, with the approval of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, according to the directives of the National Institute of Statistics ISTAT).

From the nineteenth century to the present day, mafia violence in Italy has been responsible for the deaths of over a thousand innocent victims. Nevertheless, it was only after the brutal mafia killings of the 1990s that anti-mafia street-naming became a widespread practice. Over the past 15 years, the number of anti-mafia street names has grown exponentially and today 268 mafia victims have at least one street named after them. But again, the level of commemoration of these victims is highly uneven.

Three victims have had over a thousand streets named after them: these are General Carlo Alberto dalla Chiesa, who was killed in a 1982 mafia attack, and the judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino who were assassinated in two separate attacks in 1992. Given the key historical and institutional roles of these three figures, the shocking manner of their death, and their high profiles in the media, they form «primary framework» (Schwartz, 1996) (that is, the backbone) of anti-mafia memory in Italy.

Three other victims have had over 250 streets named in their honour: the industrialist Enrico Mattei who was killed in 1962, the trade unionist Pio La Torre who was killed in 1982, and the politician Piersanti Mattarella who was killed in 1980. A further six victims have had over 100 streets dedicated to them (the magistrates Rosario Livatino and Rocco Chinnici, the political and anti-mafia activist Giuseppe Impastato, the journalist Ilaria Alpi, the entrepreneur Libero Grassi, and the priest Pino Puglisi). Thirty-one victims are commemorated in 10-99 street names and 62 victims in three to nine⁵. The remaining 60% of the commemorated victims (163) have each had one or two streets named after them.

For ease of recognition, street-naming practices have mainly concerned the best-known victims who have been most popular with the media, thereby enhancing their visibility even further in a circular dynamic. This strategy has had some counterproductive effects: specifically, it has contributed to the majority of the victims being forgotten and, in some cases, has facilitated the instrumentalization of commemorative practices (as was found to have occurred, for example, in some towns whose local councils were disbanded because they had been infiltrated by the mafia).

3. The importance of anti-mafia memory and the role of the civic anti-mafia movement

Mafias are a distinctive kind of criminal organization that build up socio-spatial relationship networks based on their skill in using violence with impunity and in influencing (both legal and illegal) political and economic systems at all scales (Catino, 2014; Muti, 2022).

⁵ At the national level, a given street name is viewed as prominent if it recurs in over 800 localities (corresponding to one commemoration per ten municipalities). About 80 toponyms recur over 1.000 times. About 400 occur over 250 times. Names that have been adopted in less than 100 municipalities may still be viewed as important if most of the occurrences are concentrated in the same region (Caffarelli, 2015).

Although they have been rooted in at least three regions⁶ since the time of Italian unification, the mafias in Italy have been the subject of a long political and social oblivion: they were not effectively countered by legitimate national institutions until the bloody massacres of 1982 and 1992.

Since then, both law enforcement and cultural anti-mafia campaigns have been launched and the contribution of civil society actors and anti-mafia associations has proved to be an indispensable adjunct to the work of the police and the judiciary. Through public practices promoting lawfulness, memory, and support for victims, civic anti-mafia associations have proved to be the only actors with the potential to effectively socially and symbolically undermine mafia relational systems based on intimidation and corruption.

Importantly, civic anti-mafia memory does not just serve to prevent the mafia phenomenon from being repressed within the social consciousness; rather, it is increasingly recognized as playing a key part in the symbolic construction of Italy's present and future national identity as a democratic and republican state. Street-naming practices are at the core of these dynamics (Raveduto, 2018).

Street-naming policies in Italy more generally (and therefore the leading frameworks for the construction of national identity) may be traced back to three foundational periods (De Luna, 2010). Of these, the Risorgimento (the Italian "rising") together with Unification formed the first cornerstone, undergirding a national narrative that lasted from 1861 to the First World War (Gallia, 2018).

Subsequently, the fascist leadership invented and imposed a new self-legitimizing discourse and made aggressive use of place-naming practices (odonomastic territorialisation) to expand its influence over the national territory, culminating in its naming of a series of new towns (Gallia, 2018). In addition to a virtual pantheon of figures spanning the classical era and the Risorgimento, fascist street names were chosen to honour the royal family, the Italian colonial empire and, above all, "il Duce" and the fascist epic (Raffaelli, 2010).

In the second post-war period, constructing a new «republican territoriality» (Ridolfi, 2005) via place names proved to be a complex task. Local demands for change from anti-fascist and anti-monarchist perspectives, especially in the North where the partisan Resistance to Nazi-fascism had mainly been fought, were opposed by a central drive to reconstruct the historical narrative. The Resistance itself was represented as a «second Risorgimento» but failed to take hold as a genuinely shared national symbol (*ibidem*).

These divisions came to a head in the 1990s, when the so-called "first republic" entered a crisis phase and the party system essentially collapsed against the backdrop of major anti-corruption and anti-mafia trials. This period saw the spread of revisionist theories about fascism (heralding the entry into government of neo-fascist parties) and about the Risorgimento (heralding the entry of separatist parties into government).

⁶ Cosa Nostra in Sicily, the Camorra in Campania, and the Ndrangheta in Calabria.

These developments explain the key civic role that anti-mafia place-naming practices have been playing since the 1990s. Commemoration of the anti-mafia movement was a defining characteristic of the transition from the first to the second republic and is often referred to as the “third Risorgimento” because it offers new heroes (martyrs) and new narratives for the consolidation of Italian democracy and national identity. The key question is whether and to what extent such a perspective is universally shared among Italians.

In post-unification Italy, the construction of a national identity via street-naming practices was mainly driven by intellectuals. During the fascist regime, the street (and place) naming was centralized and bureaucratized while with the first republic, the power to name streets were divvied out among political parties (Ridolfi, 2005). After, with the second republic, the influence of civil society actors has increased once more, but, as during the previous phases, profound social tensions remain.

4. Disputed place names: the case of Mussolini Park in Latina

The controversy that arose in 2021 in relation to Arnaldo Mussolini Park in the city of Latina is indicative of the challenges encountered by attempts to commemorate the anti-mafia movement. It also sheds light on the bitter ideological divisions that continue to torment Italian society and (fatally) the relationship between the country’s history and how that history is remembered.

Latina was originally designed and built by the Fascism as the central feature of a larger project to reclaim the Pontine marshes: it was inaugurated in 1932 under the name Littoria and was made a province in 1934. The master plan for the city, which reified the myths and symbols of the fascism, included an urban park to be named after Arnaldo Mussolini, the brother of the dictator.

Between 1944 and 1945, as the country was being liberated from the Nazi and Fascist forces, the council decided to change the name of the city to Latina; many street names were also changed, with a view to endowing the fascist city par excellence with a more democratic face. The name of the park was changed to Municipal Park, a plain title that it kept until 1996, when a neo-fascist council restored the original fascist toponym. A plaque celebrating Mussolini’s brother would remain part of the urban text of Latina for the following twenty years.

Only in 2017, despite protests and demonstrations organized by far-right groups, did a newly elected council re-name the public park in keeping with democratic values, calling it after the two modern heroes and martyrs of the national anti-mafia movement: Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino. This was an inspired choice given the key contribution made by these two men to the Italian Republic and given that their role and stature places them above party political controversies. But yet controversy there was.

In the summer of 2021, the then-Deputy Minister of Economy who had been elected for Latina publicly stated his hope that the fascist title for the park would soon be restored once again. He was obliged to resign due to the heated controversy that ensued upon his statements, but in 2022 he was re-elected as a member of the first neo-fascist government of republican Italy.

The Latina case prompts interesting reflections that are salient to the critical debate on place-naming. First, the minister's resignation confirms that the territorialization process triggered by naming practices «produces places through the simple enunciation of intentions to do so» (Berg, Kearns, 2009). It further suggests that the definitive eradication of fascism from Italian democracy still hangs in the balance, despite the reassuring rhetorical acrobatics of neo-fascist politicians. Finally, it illustrates that, in Italy, the fight against mafia groups remains a politically and culturally divisive issue that points up the political and identity-related disputes that can arise over the choice of place names and the creation of places of memory.

5. Conclusions

The urban landscape is an arena where the struggle between mafia and anti-mafia currents is reflected in symbols and representations. While mafia organizations produce geographies of injustice, violence, and oppression, the civic anti-mafia movement produces spaces of freedom from the criminal yoke and hence geographies of justice and active citizenship. The streets and places of anti-mafia memory, commemorate the sacrifice of victims and combat mafia violence through civic practices of urban resistance.

Although one cannot exclude fictitious anti-Mafia memories functional to criminal interests (real “mafia-washing” strategies in the politics of urban space), anti-Mafia toponyms have an extraordinary symbolic value. Anti-mafia place naming is a practice of active citizenship, political communication, and identity affirmation. It bolsters a new public discourse on the values of lawfulness and democracy and produces new places of memory, which in turn generate new ways of transmitting the anti-mafia message.

Finally, fatefully, in the future evaluation of the first neo-fascist government of republican Italy, the politics of memory will be a critical and relevant parameter of judgement, as will the politics of countering the mafias, not so much from a juridical and military perspective, but more from an economic and above all a social and cultural one.

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The essay reviews the phenomenon of anti-mafia street names in Italy and discusses their meaning within the broader historical context of Italian street-naming policies. A particular focus is brought to bear on the challenges inherent in anti-mafia street-naming process and on the essential role of civic associations. Anti-mafia street naming emerges as key to Italians' civic memory of the "second republic" period that has followed the major anti-mafia and anti-corruption trials of the 1990s. Nevertheless, the opposition and bitter public debate generated by these same street-naming practices show that the "anti-mafia" approach remains divisive.

Pratiche di denominazione delle strade italiane e politiche per una memoria antimafia

Il contributo illustra la diffusione dell'odonomastica antimafia in Italia e ne studia il significato nel quadro storico delle politiche di denominazione delle strade in Italia, mettendo in luce le difficoltà del processo e il ruolo fondamentale dell'associazionismo civico.

L'odonomastica antimafia in Italia si propone come la memoria civica fondamentale della cosiddetta seconda Repubblica, nata dopo i grandi processi antimafia e anticorruzione degli anni Novanta, ma proprio le contestate pratiche di denominazione e l'aspro dibattito pubblico mettono in luce come l'"anti-mafia" sia ancora un'idea divisiva.

Pratiques de dénomination des rues italiennes et politiques pour une mémoire anti-mafia

L'article illustre la diffusion des odonymes anti-mafia en Italie et étudie leur signification dans le cadre historique des politiques de dénomination des rues en Italie, en soulignant les difficultés du processus et le rôle fondamental des associations civiques.

La odonymie antimafia en Italie est proposée comme la mémoire civique fondamentale de la Seconde République, née après les grands procès antimafia et anticorruption des années 1990, mais ce sont précisément les pratiques de dénomination contestées et l'âpreté du débat public qui soulignent à quel point la notion d'"anti-mafia" est encore une idée qui divise.