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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE CASE OF THE SUVIGNANO ESTATE: A STORY OF MAFIA, ANTI-MAFIA AND POLITICS

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ABSTRACT: The article reconstructs the events of the Suvignano farm, in the Sienese area, confiscated in 1996 to an entrepreneur from Palermo considered close to Cosa nostra and assigned in 2018 to a company owned by the Tuscany Region. Unlike other studies on confiscated assets, mainly focusing on quantitative aspects or their management, the paper proposes a case study based on an integration of techniques and sources, from interviews with qualified witnesses to the consultation of institutional documents. The analysis aims to explore the social and political significance that Suvignano assumes for the local community and the political class. After the definitive confiscation in 2007, Suvignano becomes a political resource disputed between different actors, local and national. Around this political resource take place two challenges, led and won by a Tuscan leftist institutional network, distant heir of the red subculture. The first challenge is against a similar Sicilian institutional network. The second is against local political actors: the traditional (Forza Italia) and the new (Salvini-Lega) centre-right, as well as the emerging 5 Stars Movement. The article shows how these two challenges are won thanks also to the Tuscan civil society, ready to mobilize against a "public evil", as the mafia is usually represented. In a phase in which the political consensus becomes uncertain, the centre-left parties find in the fight against the mafia a powerful source of political legitimacy.

KEYWORDS: Antimafia, Confiscated assets, Local politics, Social movements, Tuscany, Valence issues

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1. Introduction

The issues dealt with in this article revolve around an asset confiscated from the mafia, in the shape of a large farm (*azienda agricola*) situated in the Crete Senesi area of Tuscany. The estate in question was confiscated, in 1996, from a Palermo businessman who was believed to be close to a powerful Cosa nostra (Sicilian mafia) clan. The farm in question – the *azienda agricola di Suvignano* – is one of the largest assets ever confiscated from the mafia, in terms of its financial value, located in a region other than those where the Italian mafias are historically rooted. Its financial importance increased its public visibility as well as its political significance, making the issues surrounding it more interesting, and more easily explored, from a social scientist's point of view. Its geographical location, on the other hand, makes it possible to observe the workings of an associative and institutional network that is traditionally strong in this area characterised by a significant left-wing subculture. This network took action in an effort to maintain control over the confiscated property, and by doing so succeeded in challenging the claims of another network of institutional actors, based in Sicily, and efforts to sell the property led above all by national political and administrative actors. Thus for the local community, and for local politicians in particular, the Suvignano estate not only represented an important economic and social resource, but also a significant political one. In a historical era characterised by weaknesses in the traditional ideological sources of political legitimisation (Lippi 2019), the anti-mafia issue can be viewed as a formidable political resource to be taken full advantage of at various levels of government and in electoral terms (Mete 2013; Blando 2019a; 2019b). More generally, like corruption (Curini 2018), the antimafia forces and the recovery of property confiscated from the various mafias, can be considered a “valence issue” which the country's political forces try to appropriate for themselves in order to gain consensus among the electorate. In fact, this issue is characterised by values and ideals that are broadly shared, and in regard to which political forces and voters tend to adopt the same position, strictly speaking, either for or against (Evans and Chzhen 2016; Whiteley et al. 2016). With regard to corruption, for example, Stokes argues that: “If we are to speak of a dimension at all, both parties and all voters were located at a single point: the position of virtue in government” (Stokes 1963, p. 372).

Unlike the quantitative studies based on data provided by the law enforcement agencies, and aimed above all at obtaining an estimate of the economic value of the wealth confiscated from the diverse Italian mafias¹, our research has taken a different route by focusing on a case study and locating ourselves within a methodological tradition that has proved to be particularly fruitful in recent years (Sciarrone 2011; 2019; Martone 2017; Belloni and Vesco 2018; Mete 2018). Hence, the principal aim of this article relates to the description of the social and political dynamics that a significant asset confiscated from the mafia is capable of activating in an area that does not have a native mafia-associated presence. We believe that by focusing on the political significance of the process of assignment and management of an asset confiscated from the mafia, we have adopted an original approach to the socio-political analysis of Italy's mafias and anti-mafia movements.

The study was divided into two stages. The first had the purpose of surveying confiscated assets in Tuscany. This stage was based on data from the Italian agency for the recovery and management of seized and confiscated assets (the ANBSC), together with other information obtained from the local press and a secondary analysis of institutional documents and research reports. According to this information, up to 2018 135 real estate properties and 11 corporate assets had been transferred to local institutions or were held by

¹ See Transcrime 2013; dalla Chiesa 2017; Pellegrini 2018, ch. 7. Another way of approaching this topic is by reconstructing the events surrounding certain confiscated assets, from the seizure to the management thereof (Martone 2015, 2020; Pellegrini 2017; Cabras and Meli 2017). With regard to the ANBSC, see the volume edited by Alberto Cisterna (2012).

the State in the Tuscany region, while 426 estates were managed by the ANBSC (383 properties and 43 companies) in that same region.

Following this exploratory reconstruction, one case was identified as being particularly significant, not only due to the value and size of the seized estate, but also in view of the public and political debate that had emerged in connection to the case over the course of time. Our research was carried out using diverse methods and sources of information, including: reports in the local and national press for the entire period in question (1982-2020); a documentary analysis of the debate in Parliament and in the Regional Council; a reconstruction of the legislative and consultative framework of the acts relating to the legal proceedings associated with the case study. In addition, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted, between 2018 and 2020, with qualified witnesses who had followed the matter during the various phases from a variety of different perspectives: local, regional and national politicians, members of associations and the third sector, public officials and employees of the farm company. Using a snowball sampling method, the individuals to be interviewed were selected based on a mix of formal aspects, concerning the jobs they did, for example, and other informal aspects concerning their actual knowledge of, or direct participation in, the events that are the subject of our analysis.

Before illustrating and discussing how local society mobilised around this important confiscated asset, we should offer a brief outline of the local geographical area and the characteristics that make the Suvignano estate such a significant resource. The next section will be dedicated to these questions. In section 3 we present and discuss the issues that unfolded concerning the estate after it had been confiscated. The main actor here was the Monteroni d'Arbia local council, which patiently developed an institutional and associative network capable of winning the aforementioned battle. In our concluding section we take stock of the aims we introduced above. We then discuss the social and political implications of the dispute over the confiscated asset, and the weight of the local context in the successful application of this policy tool.

2. The Suvignano estate

2.1 The geographical context: the Crete Senesi and the "red" area

Extending over approximately 700 hectares, the Suvignano estate accounts for a significant portion of the area of the Municipality of Monteroni d'Arbia. This small Municipality in the province of Siena has a population of just under 10,000, centred around a typical urbanised country village located close to the city.

From a political viewpoint, the area falls firmly within what has been traditionally referred to as "Red Tuscany". The Italian Communist Party (PCI) built strong support in the region, and this has been preserved by the heirs to Socialist and Communist tradition at local, provincial and regional levels. Like other areas in Tuscany, it is characterised by a local political subculture and by a profound synergy between the political powers that govern the area, the other actors involved in its economic development, and a close network of satellite associations and institutions such as the Camere del Lavoro (Trade Union Offices), Case del Popolo (People's Meeting Houses), ARCI (an Italian cultural and recreational association) and ANPI (the National Association of Italian Partisans) (Trigilia 1986; Caciagli 1988; Baccetti and Caciagli 1992). The Italian Communist Party's connection with these associations guaranteed it the support of new social categories, such as those of women and young people, and ensured the party's presence in the various socio-economic and cultural spheres of local communities. The People's Meeting Houses, for example, guaranteed the party solid organisational support, despite their "conflictual symbiosis" with the party (Fanelli 2014). ARCI involved communist militants at the cultural level in particular, while the Trade Union Offices dealt with

socio-economic issues. The relationship between the PCI and the General Italian Trade Union Confederation (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro – CGIL), on the other hand, was characterised by the superimposition and circulation of union members and officers. For many years this solid network operated as a driver of relations between the party and civil society, and for this reason the aforementioned actors were constantly involved in establishing political policies and settling questions of local importance (Baccetti 1997, Baccetti and Messina 2009).

This structure underwent gradual decline from the 1980s on: relations between the party and the associations changed, as did the identities of the stakeholders at local political level (Ramella 2005). However, according to certain researchers, political traditions as such were not totally relinquished, and the model of governance based on consultation remained in effect, despite the fact that the parties entitled to take part in the decision-making process were changing, while the values and practices associated with participation and association continued to be widespread (Floridia 2011). This "heritage" has helped us understand the issues relating to the confiscation of the Suvignano estate.

From a socio-economic perspective, Monteroni d'Arbia is a predominantly agricultural area that has become a top destination for owners of second homes over the years. Since the 1990s, there has been a steady growth in the numbers of foreign living in the area, some of whom having moved there "for its scenic beauty and the quality of life in general" and "for its leisure opportunities" (Romano and Tudini 2014, p. 298). As a consequence of this demographic trend, most of the numerous villas and estates in the area now belong to non-Sienese owners from the rest of Italy and from other European and non-European countries. This is of importance for the purposes of our analysis, since as we will see, the fact that the Suvignano estate was purchased by a Palermo businessman was not newsworthy at the time. If there were any members of the various mafias living in the area, as was the case in other geographical areas due to the large numbers of southern immigrants present (dalla Chiesa and Panzarasa 2012, 22), this phenomenon was well concealed.

2.2 The judicial administration and the assignment of Suvignano

After changing hands many times², in 1982 the estate was sold by an agricultural entrepreneur from the Veneto region to Vincenzo Piazza, officially through the estate agency Immobiliare Strasburgo owned by Piazza's wife.

This is not the appropriate place to analyse Piazza's criminal record in detail, but certain essential facts need to be pointed out nevertheless. In 1985, the Court of Palermo upheld an application submitted by Giovanni Falcone, and ordered the first seizure of Piazza's property and corporate assets. In 1994, Piazza was arrested and accused of involvement in a mafia organisation while he was in Monteroni d'Arbia. After the seizure of Piazza's property and assets, the judicial administrator Gaetano Cappellano Seminara, was appointed by the Preventive Measures Section of the Court of Palermo.

Unlike what often happens in the case of business assets seized or confiscated from the mafia, things seemed to go well for Suvignano while Cappellano Seminara was administering the estate, as various improvements were made to its agricultural, cattle-raising, tourism and hospitality-related activities (interview 9, Suvignano employee). According to our interviewees' reconstruction of events, it was thanks to Cappellano Seminara that a cooperative relationship was established in the period 2006-2007 between the Istituto Sperimentale Zootecnico per la Sicilia (the Sicilian Experimental Livestock Institute) and the Siena Provincial Administration (interview 4, local politician; interview 2, Association representative; interview 8,

² For information about Suvignano before the arrival of Piazza, see Rossi, S. "E in Val d'Arbia ora circola una voce: «Quanti regali ha ricevuto Freato?»", published in the Italian daily «l'Unità», 06/11/1980; and Rossi, S. "Una, due, quattro: quante le aziende di Freato?", in «l'Unità Firenze», 02/11/1980.

Suvignano employee). The Institute and the Provincial Administration stipulated a protocol agreement whereby the azienda agricola Suvignano agreed to care for various animals from Sicily, and was paid for each animal it looked after. This was greeted positively by the company's employees because it guaranteed a constant source of revenue for the company (interview 8, Suvignano employee). However, according to other local actors, the agreement with the Institute caused an "imbalance and lack of clarity" (interview 2, Association representative).

In 2007, a little more than 10 years after it had been seized, the definitive confiscation of the azienda agricola was decided, and the estate was then destined for social purposes. Cappellano Seminara remained, however, as the ANBSC made him its assistant and the sole director (coadiutore and amministratore unico).

During this stage, according to the witnesses interviewed (interview 9, Suvignano employee), the company's financial situation deteriorated. In 2012, when the regulatory framework changed following the creation of the ANBSC, Cappellano Seminara was replaced as sole director by a Sienese accountant, although he continued to act as the latter's assistant. This decision was taken by the Director of the ANBSC, the Prefect Giuseppe Caruso, suggesting that there were economic grounds for the decision together with dubious appointments at the Palermo Court's Preventive Measures Section. In 2015, Cappellano Seminara, together with the Presiding Judge of the Palermo Court's Preventive Measures Section (Silvana Saguto) and her husband, were all investigated for the crimes of corruption, incitement to extortion and abuse of office³.

For Suvignano, which was only small fry compared to the business and interests at the centre of the Saguto affair, the consequent legal proceedings led to the estate's management being assigned to a Roman lawyer, assisted by a Sienese agronomist.

In October 2018, following a complex process of legislative adjustments and an intense campaign of awareness-raising and pressure on the part of local and regional politicians (which we will discuss in the next section), the ANBSC resolved to transfer the shares from the azienda agricola to the Ente Terre Regionali Toscane, an entity owned by the Tuscany Region. From the time of the transfer, this entity appointed the assistant who had managed the property as Sole Director during the previous phase. The Ente Terre mainly dealt with checking on prior measures to protect the real property assets and the planned work to be done out on the estate, including the creation of a legal advice centre and the introduction of organic agriculture, and received significant funding from the Region.

The issues we have briefly described in this section paint a picture of the origins, characteristics and management of the azienda agricola which will now enable us to establish, more precisely, the connection between the social and political dynamics that developed in the area centred on this valuable asset, which we shall analyse in greater depth in the next section.

3. The challenges concerning Suvignano. Actors, resources and outcomes

3.1 A coalition for Suvignano

Suvignano's new life, which began with the estate's seizure from Piazza in 1984, can more or less be divided into four stages. The first stage lasted from the initial seizure in 1984 until 2007 when it was finally

³ A recent ruling of the Court of Caltanissetta confirms the existence of illegal ties between the Judge and certain judicial officers, and finds numerous people guilty of corruption, including Cappellano Seminara. Palazzolo S., *Caltanissetta, l'ex giudice Silvana Saguto condannata a 8 anni e 6 mesi per lo scandalo dei beni sequestrati*, in *la Repubblica Palermo*, 28/10/2020.

confiscated and its management could be competed for. The second phase lasted from 2007 to 2011-12, when the ANBCS came on to the scene, the rules of the game changed again, and the actors who were interested in managing the property emerged: a Sicilian institutional syndicate on the one hand, and a Tuscan one on the other. The initial applications by these two actors were rejected, and the third phase, from 2012 to the final transfer of the property to the *Ente Regionale Terre Toscane* in 2018, then began. The fourth and final phase is under way at present, and involves the management of the property under this new regime. Leaving aside the first phase, when the property was transferred to the Public Property Agency, and the last phase, which has only just begun, the phases that are of interest for the purposes of our analysis remain the second and third ones. It was during this period that a complicated process took place, with many actors agreeing, arguing, cooperating and, (with some difficulty) liaising, in the process of taking over the estate's management. During the course of this affair, the legislative framework relating to assets seized from the mafia changed, and the mafia/antimafia question alternated between phases of great public interest, and others of limited visibility. At a local level, too, the Suvignano estate enjoyed moments when it was the centre of attention and of collective ferment, followed by periods of deadlock.

During the second and third phases, the autonomous and coordinated actions of local and regional institutions took centre stage. This institutional grouping showed itself to be receptive to the demands from the various branches of the anti-mafia movement and from the broader civic associations, which sought to keep the management of the property located in Tuscany, and to enhance its social utility. The cooperation between associations and local institutions – and among the different levels of such – can be considered one of the heritages of the left-wing political subculture, as we previously mentioned.

A political and associative coalition was therefore created that took on, and won, two separate battles between 2007 and 2018.

Representatives of the political wing of the coalition comprise a number of local politicians from the Siena area, together with several regional and national politicians. They are: the former mayor of Monteroni, Jacopo Armini, who held office from 2005 to 2014; Gabriele Berni, the town's current mayor; and President of the Siena Provincial Government; the President of the Tuscany Regional Government and the officers responsible for citizen safety and the culture of legality for the period 2005-2020, together with several regional councillors, mostly from left-wing parties. Finally, at the national level the coalition comprised a number of Tuscan MPs, who focus their political activities in the Italian parliament. The associations within the coalition, on the other hand are as follows: Arci, Libera Toscana and at a later point also Libera Siena, Avviso Pubblico, Legambiente, Coop Centro Italia, together with a number of other local associations. Among these associations, the provincial branch of ARCI and the national and regional branches of Libera have been of key importance, whereas according to certain interviewees, Libera Siena has only played a minor role (interview 4, local politician; interview 12, association member).

Despite the cohesion between the various actors involved, the coalition appears to be led by the elected members – the representatives of the local and regional political classes – while the associations (anti-mafia or otherwise), although important, constitute one of the resources that said politicians avail themselves of at critical times only. As a rule, as one Siena MP stated: “The battle became a battle of the whole local area. It wasn't about one mayor or another falling in love with the case” (interview 7).

Going back to the challenges faced by the coalition, the first of these was against a similar Sicilian institutional network which, based on ambiguous legal provisions, sought to hand over management to an entity controlled by the Region of Sicily; while the second was to oppose an idea first developed by the Public Property Agency, and subsequently by the ANBSC, that of selling the estate to private concerns. The Tuscan coalition managed to win both these battles, by engaging with parties at various different levels, which although they can be distinguished are in fact closely interconnected. The work the actors from this coalition carried out was essentially of an institutional nature, whereby they undertook formal and informal

actions together with lobbying at both parliamentary and ministerial level. This intense activity was symbolically supported by highly-visible, well-supported forms of local mobilisation at Suvignano and in Monteroni. What was at stake in regard to these two challenges was not simply the management of the property, but also a new image and renewed political legitimacy for the actors themselves.

3.2 The first challenge: defeating the Sicilians

In February 2008, shortly after the final confiscation carried out in 2007, the Tuscan institutional group, with the cooperation and support of *ARCI* and *Libera Toscana*, presented a management proposal to the Public Property Agency. The Prefect had already received an application from the *Istituto Zootecnico Siciliano* that wrong-footed what the then-Mayor of Monteroni called an "institutional alliance" (interview 4, local politician). This alliance sought and organised local mobilisation aimed at giving local and national visibility to the "Suvignano affair". In October 2008, pending a response from the Public Property Agency to the management proposal delivered by the parties mentioned above, Suvignano became one of the stops for the National Anti-mafia Caravan promoted by *ARCI* and *Libera*, as a member of the Siena branch of *ARCI* describes in this extract:

In October 2008, the caravan made a stop at Suvignano, and the project [to manage Suvignano] was presented on this occasion, this embryonic project, in the presence of the then-Prefect, the Mayor of Monteroni, the President of the Province, the Region, represented by Gelli [the Regional Councillor for Policies for the Safety of Citizens and the Culture of Legality] and me, representing ARCI Siena and Libera Toscana. The first press conference to present this project was held during this event (interview 3).

This occasion, which enjoyed a certain level of recognition at national level, witnessed the first proposal made for the development and management of the estate which included both the development of its remaining agricultural activities, and other activities designed to raise awareness of legality issues⁴. This was the first time that cooperation between local institutions and the associations involved in promoting various causes, including the battle against the mafia, in regard to the Suvignano estate, produced a real result aimed at keeping the management of the confiscated property in Tuscany. As we shall see, this synergy between movements and institutions, which is a characteristic of the anti-mafia movement in Italy (dalla Chiesa 1983), was to remain a constant feature of the Suvignano affair. This mutual support and cooperation involving the anti-mafia movement and the institutions concerned, facilitated the identification of a solution to the problem of managing the confiscated property, and significantly helped the running of the Suvignano estate following its assignment.

During this same period, the conflict between Tuscany's institutions and their Sicilian counterparts was made public. Similarly to what was happening in Tuscany, a number of regional and national politicians in Sicily were also working on the Suvignano cause, and were highly critical of any transfer to Tuscan parties, proposing on the contrary that the estate be transferred to the Sicilian Regional Government and public entities (including the Zootechnical Institute)⁵. The spokesperson for such interests was a member of the

⁴ *Mafia: Fattoria legalità nel senese in terre confiscate*, ANSA, 30/08/2008.

⁵ As a DP Member of Parliaments from Tuscany put it: "I remember having a personal meeting with the then-Sicilian Regional Councillor [...] because they had expressed a certain resistance to the idea of transferring the property to the Tuscany Region because they were afraid of losing this project [with the Zootechnical Institute]. I tried to explain to him that they weren't losing anything, because it would be enough if an agreement were reached" (interview 7, national politician).

Regional Government and the Anti-mafia Commission, who sought the transfer of the property to the Sicilian entity despite the fact that it was located outside the Region itself. He first addressed a number of local figures⁶, and then a few months later the Minister of the Interior, Roberto Maroni, and the President of the Sicily Region, both of whom were part of the same centre-right political coalition⁷. The Tuscan side fought back against this attack by claiming that it was necessary to ensure that local institutions managed the property and the farm enterprise.

While the dispute was initially of a local nature, it gradually became the centre of a debate at national level (interview 4, local politician).

At the end of 2009, in the very midst of this dispute between the Tuscan and Sicilian sides, a new circumstance emerged that led the two sides to put a stop to hostilities. The circumstance in question was a request from the State Property Agency for an opinion from the State Advocate-General on the possibility of auctioning off the farm enterprise. The Advocate-General's office believed such a sale to be feasible – even though it agreed that there was a risk the property could be reacquired by criminal undertakings – and also believed in the idea of a transfer to the Tuscany Region, provided that the latter took over the estate's debts. The Advocate-General's office entrusted the decision on the matter to the newly-created ANBSC.

The attempt to get the Tuscan and Sicilian sides to cooperate emerged with the establishment of the ANBSC. The Agency identified the synergy between the two sides as the solution for resolving the dispute over the property and concluding a transfer (interview 4, local politician). This led to a memorandum of understanding between the two Regions, the Province of Siena and the Municipality of Monteroni d'Arbia. In this document, the Tuscan institutions proposed that the property be used both from a productive standpoint – in regard to existing agricultural and livestock activities – as well as socially by developing projects centred around the question of legality and of the struggle against the mafia. They also worked on enhancing existing relations between the estate and the Sicily Regional Government.

In Tuscany, as a prelude to the second challenge the institutional and social coalition was soon to face, there was a strong reaction against the idea of selling Suvignano.

At the Regional level, the President of the Agricultural Commission of the Regional Council (who was a member of the left-wing party *Rifondazione Comunista*) took on the role of spokesperson for those petitioning against a sale; petitions were promoted through draft resolutions, motions and press releases. These documents justified the opposition to the sale of the estate on grounds relating to the dynamics of the mafia – the need to prevent the assets from returning to criminal spheres by other routes – and on social, cultural and economic grounds. The Region's purchase of the estate was seen as necessary in order to continue its on-going business operations, and also to transform it into "centre where activities of a social nature and educational activities relating to the culture of legality would be carried out"⁸. The documents discussed by the Regional Council and the Agricultural Commission, enjoyed support from all centre-left parties. The centre-right parties, on the other hand, either abstained from expressing their views, or came out against these documents⁹, aligning themselves, as we shall see in greater detail below, with the positions adopted by the national government led by Silvio Berlusconi, which at that precise moment in time was discussing the possibility of selling off the assets confiscated from the mafia.

⁶ *Mafia: Caputo, Azienda Suvignano a Istituto zootecnico Sicilia*, ANSA, 11/05/2009.

⁷ *Mafia: Caputo, Non vendere all'asta aziende confiscate*, ANSA, 02/11/2009.

⁸ Regional Council of Tuscany, public session no. 189, 30/09/2009.

⁹ Regional Council of Tuscany, public session no. 196, 24/11/2009.

At the same time, Siena's local politicians¹⁰ managed to discuss matters with the national decision-maker. Jacopo Armini, the Mayor of Monteroni d'Arbia, and Gabriele Berni, who was a Provincial Councillor at the time, met the President of the Parliamentary Budget, Treasury and Planning Commission, Giancarlo Giorgetti¹¹, and together they examined a possible amendment that would enable the real estate to be separated from the company's other assets. This amendment was presented by three Democratic Party MPs – two of whom were Sienese – but was not approved by the Commission.

Faced with this scenario, which seemed to be getting increasingly complicated and was viewed as a change for the worse, the Sicily Regional Government pulled out of discussions. Its departure was associated with the changes taking place at both national and regional governmental levels at the time, whereby both governments fell in 2012, before their mandates had expired, which led to a collapse of Sicily's institutional network.

A local politician described events as follows:

This topic disappeared off the table with the change in the regional and national governments [...]. There was a Sicilian elite that had an interest in the successful conclusion of this project, and those from the Zootechnical Institute enjoyed political protection – because they were Regional appointees – and could enjoy the support of Lombardo, who might have called Maroni to tell him that [the Sicilians interested in the matter] wanted to stay in. What the Sicilian elite shared with the national government was that they were from the centre-right. When the government fell, it lost its ability to prevent things (interview 4, local politician).

In order to prevent the estate being put up for auction, the Tuscany Regional Government confirmed its interest in its being transferred free of charge through the above-mentioned *Ente Terre Regionali Toscane*.

To sum up then, the alliance of Tuscan institutions and associations proved more resilient than its Sicilian equivalent, and in the end prevailed. While the Sicilian network, as a result of internal issues, at a certain point ceased to exist, the Tuscan network organised public demonstrations drawing the attention of the nation's decision-makers, and managed to exercise constant pressure on the nation's central institutions. We would argue that this greater cohesion and solidity of the Tuscan network compared to that in Sicily, was no mere coincidence, but was the result of the radical left-wing sub-culture present in Tuscany, two fundamental pillars of which were the region's stable political environment, and the cooperation between local government and Tuscany's diverse associations.

3.3 The second challenge: avoiding the estate's sale to private concerns

Having averted the danger of Suvignano coming under the control of a consortium of Sicilian institutional and para-institutional actors, the Tuscan coalition now had to contend with another serious threat: the sale of the estate to private concerns. In July 2013, the ANBSC's Executive Council put the company up for sale. It

¹⁰ A central role in the area was also played by the local Democratic Party, which organised the collection of signatures for a petition to block the sale by auction. Various well-known political figures supported this initiative, including Rita Borsellino, Pierluigi Bersani, Walter Veltroni and Rosy Bindi. See *Mafia: Bersani firma per no a vendita azienda Suvignano*, in *La Nazione*, 10/12/2009.

¹¹ At the time, the Secretary-General of the Province of Siena had good relations with various figures from the Northern League. According to witnesses, his intervention facilitated the meeting between the administrators and the parliamentarian (interview 4, local politician).

was estimated to be worth 20 million euro. The Agency's Director, Prefect Caruso, set out the reasons why the Agency would be forced to sell up¹². Without going into the details, the reasons given were of a technical nature resulting from the wording of the rules governing the management of confiscated assets.

The actors comprising the Tuscan institutional front opposing the sale of the estate, tried to take advantage of this interpretative ambiguity by moulding it in their favour: to this end, they put pressure on national decision-makers and the ANBSC's senior management, and involved both the Regional Government and the local authorities. In addition to the institutional leverage that had prevailed until then, these actors now also relied on the dense fabric of associations and unions that is a feature of this part of Tuscany. Given the context, the mobilisation of the various factions of the anti-mafia movement at local, regional and national levels proved especially valuable.

As far as the institutional sphere was concerned, two particularly relevant and noteworthy events occurred. In early 2013, a meeting took place between the Minister of the Interior, Annamaria Cancellieri, and a large Tuscan delegation that included the Mayor of Monteroni d'Arbia, the President of the Siena Provincial Administration, the President of the Tuscany Regional Government, the Prefect of Siena and the Director-General of the Region¹³. On this occasion, the Tuscan actors submitted a proposal regarding the management of the land to the Minister of the Interior: this proposal had been drafted in 2012, and suggested that the property be assigned to the relevant local and regional institutions, and that the day-to-day running of the estate be the responsibility of the *Ente Terre Regionali Toscane*. However, in the Spring of 2013 the Monti government gave way to a new government led by Enrico Letta, with Angelino Alfano replacing Annamaria Cancellieri at the Ministry of the Interior. The Tuscan institutional group immediately tried to contact the new Minister, sending him all the documentation regarding Suvignano through the President of the Regional Government. In addition to this documentation, a meeting was held between local politicians and Deputy-Minister Filippo Bubbico, who immediately showed interest in, and openness to, the group's proposals.

In addition to these institutional-level initiatives, the coalition working on the reallocation of the confiscated asset also lent its support to the anti-mafia movement, in order to provide further exposure to the problems at Suvignano. In early September 2013, the Tuscany Regional Government, the Siena Provincial Administration and the Municipality of Monteroni, together with ARCI, Libera, Avviso Pubblico, Cgil and Coop Centro Italia, together organised a "Riprendiamoci Suvignano" ("Let's take back Suvignano") rally that was covered by the national media and drew more than 1,000 demonstrators to the estate¹⁴. Local politicians were able to mobilise their extensive political and institutional networks, resulting in the participation of representatives from numerous municipalities both inside and outside of Tuscany, as well as politicians from various centre-left parties, local MPs, trade unions, cooperatives and associations from the diverse anti-mafia movements. Following the rally, Deputy Minister Bubbico rejected the idea of an auction

¹² See the ANBSC's destination decree of 2013; parliamentary anti-Mafia commission, shorthand account, no. 15, session held on 05/02/2014.

¹³ *Mafia, la delusione di Suvignano*, in la Repubblica, 05/04/2013.

¹⁴ This is how a member of Siena's third-sector movement described the origin of this important rally: "This situation (the sale) worried everyone, and in the meantime the local parliamentarians had also become involved. There were questions, and there was interest at a parliamentary level. The then-mayor Armini and I decided during a very short telephone call that we had to make a move, so I immediately issued a press release to launch a mobilisation against this dreaded decision [...]. So, on 13 September 2013, we held the Let's Take Back Suvignano rally. There was massive participation, larger even than our most optimistic expectations: every institution, every mayor from the Province of Siena with their banners, individuals I have already spoken of, but especially citizens themselves. [They] began to see Suvignano as an asset of their own, an asset of the community, an asset that belonged to this land. (Interview 3, member of an association).

that the ANBSC has threatened¹⁵, and declared his commitment to promoting a legislative amendment that would allow the allocation of the property to the local authorities, thereby avoiding a sale to any private concerns. In December 2013, legislative amendments with precisely this aim in mind were introduced into the so-called “Save Rome” decree, but this was not countersigned by the President of the Republic due to the heterogeneous nature of the laws contained therein. As can be seen, the alliance of local and regional institutions on the one hand, and various actors from the anti-mafia movement on the other, managed to get the country’s national institutions to make a real undertaking to resolve the “Suvignano” problem, even though the operation in question ultimately failed for reasons that went well beyond the political force of the Siena consortium and their political contacts at national level.

The objective, which people thought had been all but reached, went up in smoke, and the initial disappointment was followed by a phase of deadlock that was compounded by a turnover of the actors involved. In February 2014, there was a change in leadership at the ANBSC which, as we have seen, still favoured the sale of Suvignano. In May of the same year, the Mayor of Monteroni ended his two terms in office and his place was taken by a former Provincial Councillor who had closely followed the events concerning Suvignano in that capacity. Above all, in September 2015 a scandal broke out in Palermo regarding the management of properties confiscated from the mafia, in which Cappellano Seminara was implicated. Furthermore, Matteo Renzi’s appointment as Italian Prime Minister in February 2014, was to lead to a degree of “Tuscanisation” of national politics (Allegranti and Ventura 2014; Corica 2017), and this consequently opened new windows of opportunity for Suvignano. In view of the possible reallocation of the property, local politicians once again acted, and in July 2016 a memorandum of understanding was signed by the Minister of Agricultural Policies, the Tuscany Regional Government, and the Municipalities of Monteroni d’Arbia and Murlo. The aim of the management plan on which the agreement was based was the pursuit of socio-ethical, employment, cooperative and educational objectives, and the collective utilisation of the property. The regulatory barrier that had swayed the ANBSC was finally removed in October 2017, following the approval of the new Anti-Mafia Code which now allowed the lease or gratuitous lending of assets seized from the mafia to the institutions, associations and other beneficiaries envisaged by the Code. In October 2018, as a result of this change, the Executive Board of the ANBSC finally decided to confer the estate’s shares to the *Ente Terre Regionali Toscane*. Having neutralised the Sicilian consortium and thwarted any sale to private concerns, the Suvignano affair then entered a fourth phase, with its management placed entirely in the hands of a body controlled by the Tuscany Regional Government.

4. The anti-mafia as a Political Resource

The involvement of the Tuscan political and institutional coalition in the aforementioned dispute over the Suvignano estate’s control and management cannot simply be seen as an attempt to maintain control over the confiscated asset and avoid its sale to private concerns. The interests at stake were much broader, and in some respects of a higher order. In addition to the legitimate desire to enhance the value of a large agricultural estate and use it for social purposes, Suvignano was also seen by certain leading political actors in “red Tuscany” as a considerable political resource; one that could be deployed in their favour to reaffirm the quality of local and regional political and administrative action, but which risked, on the contrary, being taken over and leveraged by political adversaries for the precise purpose of casting a shadow over the “myth of good government” that had been built by left-wing and centre-left political parties across the region over

¹⁵ Bologni, M., *Uno spiraglio per Suvignano. “Il governo disposto a fermare l’asta”*, in *la Repubblica Firenze*, 07/09/2013.

the course of the years. As was the case in another of Italy's so-called "red areas" (Mete 2019), the anti-mafia movement became a powerful symbolic resource and a source of political legitimation. It became the field on which political and electoral support for parties was played out, and on which personal political careers were built, strengthened or destroyed.

The battle over Suvignano among the diverse political forces in question is also connected to the valence issue of the anti-mafia movement. The diffusion of this theme legitimised, and partly rendered necessary, the involvement of all the main political parties in the issue, regardless of the differing degrees of credibility they had when dealing with the question (Curini 2018).

Suvignano therefore became a political hot potato that could simply not be ignored; one which all local political actors had to contend with. In a different way – because their positions, the objectives they pursued and the resources available to them differed – each political party (or area) played a different game. To simplify matters, three principal categories of actors can be identified in this particular arena: the local and regional centre-left parties and politicians; political forces from the centre-right; and the 5 Stars Movement, which was still in its infancy at the time. Let us now examine how these different actors participated in the Suvignano 'game', and what the results of their involvement were.

The role of the local administrators and the other political figures from the centre-left, emerged fairly clearly from the previous paragraph. Typical examples are those figures who straddle party and government at a regional level, such as the local Councillors responsible for legality and security, and the President of the Council himself who played a crucial role in accessing the national policy arena, which would have otherwise been beyond the reach of a Mayor of a small provincial town like Monteroni. Clearly, however visible it might have been, Suvignano was just one piece of the Tuscany Regional Government's broader attempt to take a firm stance on matters of legality and the battle against the mafia¹⁶. This had been its strategy for some time, and was rooted in the trauma experienced by the Region following the massacre perpetrated in Via dei Georgofili in 1993¹⁷. Predictably, however, the political battle that is most closely linked to Suvignano is the one fought within the Municipality of Monteroni and consequently across the greater Siena area. This was exemplified by the election campaign fought by centre-left Mayor Jacopo Armini in 2009, in which the "rescue" and revival of Suvignano was one of three fundamental cornerstones of his re-election campaign¹⁸.

Local and regional centre-left parties and administrators therefore capitalised on their efforts in regard to the Suvignano affair. Their actions were contested by the traditional centre-right parties, however, which were permanently in opposition in the area, and by new challengers as well, such as the 5-Star Movement

¹⁶ The *Suvignano tenuta aperta* [Suvignano open estate] public initiative held at the farm in July 2019 was a good example of this strategy (<https://www.toscana-notizie.it/-/suvignano-tenuta-aperta-il-bene-confiscato-alla-Mafia-torna-ai-toscani>). In collaboration with ARCI, Libera and other groups, the Region now organises pro-legality youth camps and guided tours of the estate for schoolchildren.

¹⁷ The massacre marked a real watershed, both in terms of the criminal presence in this area (Corica and Di Gioia 2019) and with regard to the legality policies proposed by the regional government. Tuscany was among the first regions in central-northern Italy to adopt a legislative framework concerning the question of legality: the first law on legality, which dates from 1994, was conceived in the wake of the powerful emotional impact of the massacre, and in light of a number of attempts at criminal infiltration that had been made around that time (interview 1, regional official). In recent years, regional measures have set out anti-Mafia policies based primarily on prevention and countering.

¹⁸ "The topic resurfaced during the second part of my first mandate" – recounts the former Mayor when interviewed by us – [...]. "To me, this was an important subject both politically and symbolically, as Suvignano is a noteworthy part of our local territory and economy. When I built the programme for my second mandate, with the centre-left parties that made up our coalition, it was one of my three top priorities (interview 4, local politician).

(M5S)¹⁹. From 2016 on, there is evidence of the M5S's initial attempts at "appropriating" the Suvignano issue. In particular, the party's regional group, including Monteroni d'Arbia's M5S's Municipal Councillor, together with the Sicilian MP Mario Michele Giarrusso, held a meeting on the estate where a proposal was put forward for a participative project and online consultation for residents of the Province of Siena²⁰ under the age of 26. The proposal was channelled, *inter alia*, through formal actions such as a motion submitted by the movement's regional group to the Regional Government in 2017. This document, as well as partly retracing the property's history and the recent events involving Cappellano Seminara, also underlined the absence of any plan for the management of the estate, and the importance of the institutional and social repurposing of assets confiscated from criminal organisations, and demanded that the participative project be implemented (although it never came to fruition)²¹. The Movement was opposed to the proposed sale, fearing that the property would fall into criminal hands once again, and supported its public use along with the development of partnerships with local actors such as the Province of Siena's Agricultural College.

Compared with the steps described in the previous paragraph, the 5-Star Movement's actions unfolded during a phase in which public debate was especially tenuous, and when the pressure from Municipalities and Regional Governments seemed incapable of producing solutions to the problem. According to members of the 5-Star Movement, the actions that had been taken by local government up until that moment were purely aimed at achieving consensus and visibility. For example, the anti-mafia caravan witnessed in 2008 was seen as a means of bringing the electorate closer to the majority political party in view of the upcoming administrative elections in Monteroni (interview 11, local politician). According to the same sources, a period of renewed activism surrounding the Suvignano issue began in 2014, as a reaction to the deadlock that had characterised the situation up until 2013. This was due to new "combative" and interested minorities – the M5S in particular – being voted onto the municipal council (and elected to the Regional Government in 2015). The Movement therefore presented itself as an entity charged with, and capable of, resolving the issue of allocating the estate, by challenging the majority at municipal, provincial and regional levels. The M5S's actions were greeted sceptically and ironically by the centre-left's political and social forces, who had been following the Suvignano matter for years, and who considered the Movement's stance to be naïve and superficial²².

In addition to the M5S, which challenged the local governing coalition "from the left", account must also be taken of the centre-right's representatives and parties. Unlike the Sicilian centre-right, which as previously mentioned urged that the property be used for public purposes through its assignment to Sicily's own institutions, Tuscany's local representatives of Forza Italia in particular took a stance in keeping with the national positions adopted by the party and its coalition. These positions were in favour of the sale of these assets, and against their reallocation for social purposes, as can be inferred from the following passage taken from an interview with a local centre-right politician:

This is an estate that could have been sold for 25 million Euro, and what do you do? You turn it into a little theatre where every now and again a politician can stand up and say "We will give the mafia a slap in the face"?

¹⁹ The M5S's "banner-free" participation in the 2013 rally emerged from their Siena website, following the second proposal for a sale. See <https://siena5stelle.it/2013/09/13/il-pdmnoelle-gioca-la-citta-il-gatto-il-topo>.

²⁰ <https://www.movimento5stellatoscana.it/consultazione-online-giovani-rilancio-suvignano>.

²¹ Tuscany Regional Government, the 5-Star Movement's Council Group, motion 752 of 2017.

²² A representative of Libera expressed the following harsh opinion: "In January, the 5-Star Movement in Siena was saying: "We will resolve the Suvignano situation". I was thinking: "You are a fool (*un bischero*) to even make statements like this." (interview 2, association member).

The anti-mafia needed this money like they need water. You're going to build a campsite on a 25 million Euro asset? (interview 10, local politician)²³.

This was the polar opposite of the position held by the centre-left social and political coalition that had formed around the question of Suvignano. The centre-right was consistent insofar as it again pushed for the sale of the estate²⁴, using the Region's inability to take on the financial burden of an estate that was struggling from a financial viewpoint, in order to justify its position²⁵.

Owing to its weak position in Tuscany in general, and in the area around Siena in particular, the centre-right also found itself being forced to play second fiddle in the Suvignano affair, and had very little say in the matter. The situation changed, however, when the Tuscan centre-right saw its popularity rise – as was also the case in neighbouring Emilia-Romagna – and it now believed it had the numbers to win the regional vote. Following the general election of 2018, and even more so with the establishment of the first Conte government, the League (Lega) was the newly emergent party in the region, with its leader Matteo Salvini acting as its battering ram. One aspect of Salvini's "outsider" leadership style (King 2002; Barr 2009), which he adopted in spite of being both Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior, was his involvement in numerous local initiatives, which represented opportunities for him to put his own personal brand of political non-conformity across. One of the controversial areas he was engaged with was that of the mafia. His clashes in the press with Roberto Saviano, one of the best-known, most trusted observers of mafia affairs, who called Salvini the "Minister of the Underworld", regularly made the headlines of Italy's national newspapers. As a result, in an effort to curb accusations that he underestimated the issue of organised crime, and perhaps even had individuals with mafia associations within his own party²⁶, the leader of the League began to use any opportunity he was given to reaffirm his commitment to fighting the mafia. One such occasion was that of a visit to Siena to watch the famous *Palio* (a traditional horserace in costume) and celebrate the centre-right's victory in the municipal elections of 2018. With a dive into a swimming pool that was part of an estate formerly owned by the mafia, for the benefit of the cameras, Salvini symbolically claimed credit for years of hard work carried out in the local area, and for the patient weaving of an anti-mafia fabric carried out over the years by the centre-left's social and political coalition²⁷.

5. Conclusions

The seizure and confiscation of assets from the mafia is one of the most important and effective anti-mafia policy tools deployed by the State against such criminal organisations. The sociological debate on the topic of the mafia and anti-mafia actions has proven totally inadequate, despite the extreme relevance of the topic

²³ The clash between a social philosophy in favour of the asset being used for collective purposes, and a financial/business-focused approach, is also evident in the accounts given by some of the farm's employees. There were moments of tension, in particular when it came to the management of the farm, on occasions when political figures or associations asked to use the space for events and rallies during times when the space was rented to tourists: "Are we working at Suvignano or engaging in politics?" was the question posed by travel agencies to an employee of the farm, referring to days when normal tourist activities were suspended (interview 9, Suvignano employee).

²⁴ Tuscan Regional Government, Public Session no. 189, 30/09/2009

²⁵ Tuscan Regional Government, Public Session no. 196, 24/11/2009

²⁶ There are many articles on this topic, but the case really came to light after it was covered by the popular TV programme *Report* <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2018/12/Report-656aa89b-5fc3-4658-b2d7-c456a59a7343.html>.

²⁷ <https://www.lanazione.it/siena/cronaca/salvini-bagno-tenuta-confiscata-suvignano-1.4014305>.

and the magnitude of its repercussions. It has been legal experts and economists in the main who have tackled various aspects of the process of seizing the mafia's illicitly-gained assets and subsequently managing them. When they have concerned themselves with this topic, sociologists have focused more on the phenomenon's quantitative aspects (what the assets are, where they are confiscated and from whom, how many properties of this nature survive, etc.) than on any significance an asset may have for the local community, or the social and political processes it may be capable of setting in motion.

In the present article, by contrast, we have adopted a case-study technique in order to pursue this latter avenue of research, through exploring some of the roles a large agricultural estate seized from the mafia has played in a small Municipality on the outskirts of Siena. Having described the seized asset's characteristics, and having illustrated the ways in which a farm can take on a social and political importance it previously did not possess, we have identified the various stages of the Suvignano affair, from the initial phase during which the local community took little interest in the asset, to subsequent phases during which battles for its control were waged on multiple fronts. Interest in the management of Suvignano emerged when the time came for it to be assigned to a specific body. This also corresponded with renewed interest in general in the question of Italy's various mafias, sparked more by public storytelling which peaked with the success of Roberto Saviano's book *Gomorra* (Dal Lago 2010) than by any escalation in the sort of violence that had raised public interest and indignation and triggered mobilisation between the early 1980s and the early 1990s. The mafia became a "public evil" (Sciarrone 2010), and in times of both great political disaffection and a crisis in the traditional sources of political legitimacy, fighting a public evil is unquestionably a powerful political resource. With regard to a question of such importance as the fight against the mafia, the nation's political forces not only have to actively participate in the corresponding public debate, but also need to be seen by the electorate as the most credible and legitimate actors in the pursuit of a solution to the problem (Clarke et al. 2010).

In addition to the practicalities and proper management of, and the desire to preserve, a significant economic and occupational resource, we believe it is also important to analyse these symbolic aspects in order to gain a better understanding of the social and political dynamics that blossom during the second life of a seized asset like Suvignano. The stubborn actions of what we can call the Tuscan "institutional chain" and, in broader terms, the "socio-political coalition" that mobilised itself to win the battle for Suvignano, can also be explained as an attempt to avoid the estate's management falling into the hands of the "Sicilians", and to prevent the sale of the estate to private concerns. The political activism that emerged in relation to the seized asset on the part of the centre-left, centre-right and M5S, can be explained in the same way: each political grouping adopted its own style, and catered to the expectations of its own electorate. In the view of the centre-left parties, the focus was on good management and a commitment to the public good; the M5S challenged the inadequacies of the political establishment and placed faith in the healing powers of participative projects; and in the case of the centre-right parties, what was witnessed was an exaltation of the virtues of the free market and a challenge to 'red' Tuscany's sedimented framework of power. Finally, the Minister of the Interior's "public" dive into a swimming pool seized from the mafia was the most symbolically effective answer to the ferocious criticism being levelled at him at that precise moment by the anti-mafia icon Roberto Saviano. The contested asset was only incidentally a confiscated asset. The real contested resource is that of taking credit for fighting the mafia, which due to our country's tragic history is still capable of generating political and electoral consensus.

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