

## Palermo 1992-2002

### From the Mafia massacres to the culture of legality ... and back again?

by *Leoluca Orlando*, President of the Sicilian Renaissance Institute and former Mayor of Palermo

Ten years since the terrible season of the massacres. Ten years since that terrible 23 May and 19 July 1992 when Giovanni Falcone with his wife and three men of his escort were killed at Capaci, and Paolo Borsellino with five agents in Via D'Amelio at Palermo.

What remains of the sacrifice of these and many other human lives?

Only the name given to a street here or there, to some square or Palermo's airport, which now bears the name of both Falcone and Borsellino?!

There certainly remains a tormenting memory, laden with fear and anguish, there remains a patrimony of values, there remains an example that sometimes one is not mistaken in considering more respected in distant places, outside rather than in Italy.

There remains for all of us the certain knowledge that a culture of legality exists, can exist, can be promoted, and that its promotion can also be advantageous.

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Culture of legality seems a play on words, words that express different realities: wholesome and warm the former, cold and angular the latter. An astounding play on words.

It is the priority choice of the United Nations Organization in the matter of crime prevention in the world in 2002 and for the next four years.

But the astonishment goes further. The United Nations indicate the rebirth of Palermo as model and symbol for the promotion of the culture of legality in the five continents.

What happened in Palermo and, more generally, in Sicily during the last few years of the century and the millennium?

The citizens sought to oppose a violent and uncivil phenomenon like the Mafia without themselves becoming violent and uncivil.

Their NO to the death penalty to the point of conferring honorary citizenship upon the condemned (of any country and no matter what the reason: nobody may kill, not even a state!) and honorary citizenship for the 14th Dalai Lama, the concert of solidarity for the oppressed Kurdish people and honorary citizenship for David Trimble and John Hume, both winners of the Nobel Peace Prize, but also the re-opening of the Massimo Theatre and the construction of tens of new school buildings, and the rehabilitation of the city's immense and most beautiful centre, completely abandoned for so many years ... all these, far from being episodes of protagonism of a peripheral administration, were part and parcel – like the tesserae of a mosaic – of a precise and harmonious cultural project.

Our experience proved to be a theory and a model, and not only a vitalistic and precarious experience made up of unemployed asking for work by protesting on the roofs of the palaces of power, or of garbage bins overturned by demonstrators, made up of traffic jams and continuous exhortations to do better (a kind of "io speriamo che me la cavo"<sup>1</sup>; or as we would put it in our Sicilian dialect, "agghiur nò... ora speriamo ca scura"... "we have seen the day break ... let's hope we'll manage 'til the evening").

That experience is today making the rounds of the world, a foundation – The Sicilian Renaissance Institute – has come out of it and promotes positive leadership towards the tandem democracy-legality.

If it is true that there is a relationship between democracy and peace, it is also true that peace is far too important for it to be entrusted solely to the military. Palermo reminds us that there is a relationship between democracy and legality, but that legality is far too important to be entrusted only to policemen and public prosecutors.

The model is the Sicilian cart, the traditional Sicilian cart with its two wheels, the wheel of culture and the wheel of legality.

Two wheels that have to turn at the same speed, otherwise the cart won't move forward, will simply wheel in circles.

If only the wheel of culture is turning and the wheel of legality remains still, there is the risk of organizing a fine

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<sup>1</sup> A schoolboy's completely ungrammatical, but also untranslatable way of saying "let's hope I'll get by" rendered famous by the book of a teacher published in Italy some years ago.

concert of Sicilian music in honour ... of some Mafia boss.

At the beginning of my work as mayor (in the second half of the 'eighties) I seemed to be – just like many other mayors of Sicilian cities – a policeman, a public prosecutor: I almost invariably talked about crime and trials ... the cart stood still, both its wheels had sunk deep into the bog of fear and collusion .. but a start had somehow to be made, the cart had to be got moving again.

Thanks to the dedication of courageous policemen and magistrates, the wheel of legality eventually started moving again and I could therefore concern myself with the other wheel, making sure that the two wheels would turn at the same speed.

And so it was, the two wheels began to turn at the same speed, and Palermo, once a handicap, became a resource, something shameful was turned into a model.

Midway through the 'eighties we had some 240/250 Mafia killings in Palermo (and solely in Palermo!) each year. In 2000 we had just eight murders in Palermo, none of them connected with the Mafia.

Midway through the 'eighties they said there was democracy and free market in Palermo. I don't know what kind of democracy and what kind of free market they had in mind, seeing that the whole of the economy was controlled by the Mafiosi and that every Palermitan had either a relative or a friend who had been killed by the Mafia, either because he opposed that criminal organization or was actually a member of it!

In 2000 we can really speak of democracy and free market in Palermo: democracy in Palermo lives the hopes and the ills – and the latter unfortunately are not by any means few – of Italian politics as a whole and in Palermo it has become possible to live, work and do business without coming up against the Mafia.

At the beginning of my term as mayor, midway through the 'eighties, the municipal administration neither had a regular budget nor an inventory of public property; in 2000 Palermo's municipal administration obtained an Aa3 rating from Moody's, an international financial reliability rating that put it on par with the administrations of Stockholm, Boston and San Francisco, and better than such cities as New York or Chicago, to say nothing of Rome, Milan and Turin.

Am I saying that the Mafia no longer exists in Palermo? Certainly not!!!

The Mafia exists, even in Palermo.

But today the Mafia no longer controls – as it did in the past – the heads and the purses of Palermo's citizens.

Though the Mafia – I am referring to the new and winning Mafia – still seeks to control both heads and purses, it no longer does so by invoking and distorting such traditional values of culture as honour and family, but rather by evoking and distorting liberty and success, the emerging values of Italian culture

This experience is today becoming a model and surpasses the confines of the reality conditioned by the Mafia.

In the past the Mafia was a "genus"; and this genus coincided with the Sicilian Mafia.

The Mafia was the Sicilian Mafia – the Mafia was Sicily, Sicily was the Mafia.

Today it is being realized that the Sicilian Mafia is only a "species"; the Russian Mafia is another, so is the Chinese variety, and the Colombian one is yet another.

Reflecting about the different Mafias in the world today, we can affirm that the genus is not Mafia, but rather what is called "identity illegality", i.e. an illegality connected with a cultural identity.

When we are attacked by a robber who wants to deprive us of our money, all we have to do is to call the police, the public prosecutor. But when we are attacked by a robber who wants to deprive us of money by invoking Corsican pride, Basque identity, the teachings of Mahomet or the words of Christ or of Yahweh ... it is no longer enough to call the police or the public prosecutor ... what we need is the second wheel of the Sicilian cart, the wheel of culture.

In other words, school, the world of information, the men of religion, civil society.

And thus every time we think of violation of human rights by bandits and terrorists, no matter what their cultural identity, we always come back to the wheel of culture, the wheel that at Palermo contributed to freeing the heads of the citizens from the hegemony of the Mafia.

Culture, as should be clear by now, is music, is dance, but first and foremost is consciousness of one's individual and community identity and its link with the respect of the human person, every human person.

Every cultural identity is exposed to the risk of mortifying (humiliating) the human person, the fundamental rights of every human person. It is the phenomenon, the theory that, basing myself on Salman Rushdie's famous book and the experience of Palermo's renaissance, I call "satanic verse".

When a value, a cultural sign is used to mortify human rights, that value, that cultural sign is turned into satanic verse. Honour and the family were thus used by the Mafia as satanic verse to kill and rob ... in the name of honour, in the name of the family.

And likewise Basque, Catholic-Irish or Corsican pride have been used by Basque, Catholic-Irish and Corsican

terrorism to kill and to rob ... in the name of that selfsame pride.

And in just the same way the German people's respect for the law was used by Nazism to obtain obedience for the racial laws ... in the very name of that traditional German respect for the law.

And in just the same way freedom, security and wellbeing can be used as satanic verse whenever they are invoked to kill, to rob, to violate rights of the human person.

It is Palermo's experience that tells us all this.

And we Sicilians have a great experience that we ought not to boast about ... indeed, George Bernard Shaw reminded us that experience is the name we give to our mistakes ... and we Sicilians have great experience because we have made many great mistakes.

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Ten years since the terrible season of the massacres.

And where is Italy today, where is the country going, how does it remember that terrible season and how does it promote the values of those who believed and still do believe it to be possible to combine democracy and liberty?

Having suffered the terrible challenge of illegality thrown down by the deadly mixture of Mafia and corruption in the South and corruption and Mafia in the North, the country gave itself a regulatory system that has become normative throughout Europe. We have lived the wealth of expressions of civil society that manifested itself in the many marches, torch processions and human chains that German and French citizens, Spanish and Danish citizens have organized to affirm respect for the rights of the human person in the face of the attacks on civil co-existence that are now coming from so many quarters.

Recent times have given us confirmation in Italy, a confirmation that is becoming clearer with each passing day, that the government institutions tend to close themselves, almost as if they wanted to belie and disown the positive fallouts that these positions have been increasingly producing in European legislation and jurisprudence.

The resistance opposed to the so-called European warrant of arrest (wanted by all our fourteen European partners and refused only by Italy) and the refusal to endorse an important convention with Switzerland (ever more a symbol of a capitalism become ethical) regarding international judiciary cooperation, the amnesty accorded to promote the return of illegally exported capital held abroad, the proposal for the reform of justice with its disquietening attempts to weaken the independence and autonomy of the magistrature, all these are negative aspects and imply the risk of triggering a cultural deterioration, loss of leadership, international isolation.

And thus at a moment when the culture of legality, born in Sicily from affliction and fear, from anger and hope, is gaining ground as strategic choice for the prevention of crime in the world, the Italian government institutions are running the risk of rejecting and mortifying that patrimony – wholly Italian as we are proud to say – of values and credibility.

These last few months have seen an authoritative member of the Italian national government (the Minister of Infrastructures, responsible for almost all the major public works in the country) declare the Mafia to be something you have to live with (in the name of business?!); these last few months have seen a member of the Sicilian regional government (the Alderman for the Territory, responsible for all the government choices regarding Sicilian territory) refer to policemen and carabinieri as "sbirri"<sup>2</sup>, repeating a typical Mafia expression. This way of acting not only disperses the accumulated patrimony of values of legality, but also implies the risk of creating the conditions of a capitalism without rules, of a savage profiteering and speculation that has always constituted the terrain of culture of all the Mafias and which in Sicily could mean a return to the terrible season of massacres.

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<sup>2</sup> Most dictionaries render "sbirro" as "policeman", sometimes by the good-natured "cop", but the term is extremely derogatory and hostile and the meaning could be much better conveyed by something like "police traitor or spy", somebody who interferes with your life.