

King Concrete

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, industry expanded faster in Italy than in any other western European nation. The European Common Market was a stimulus for exporters; cheap power, cheap labour and cheap capital created the right conditions for growth at home, and the north of Italy had traditions of entrepreneurship and craftsmanship to draw on. An agricultural country, much of which had still run on cartwheels in the 1940s, was now motoring into the age of mass production. Factories in the North began churning out scooters, cars and tyres in exponentially increasing numbers. This was Italy's 'economic miracle', the speediest and most profound social change in the peninsula's entire history.

Lifestyles were transformed. As tractors and fertiliser modernised agriculture, peasants abandoned the countryside in droves. Italy contracted the consumerist bug. Television began in 1954, and with it advertising for stock cubes, tinned meat, coffee pots, toothpaste . . . Italians learned to worry about armpit odour, lank hair and dandruff. Washing machines, fridges and food mixers promised an end to domestic drudgery for millions of women. Motorways were built for the legions of new car owners.

Italy even became fashionable. Brand names like Zanussi, Olivetti and Alfa Romeo conquered the continent. The Vespa and the FIAT 500 became icons. The world started to crave the peninsula's handbags and shoes. Soon Italy's much sniffed-at food would begin to win converts too.

During the economic miracle, Italy rapidly made itself into one of the world's leading capitalist economies. Here was a shining success story for the Europe that had risen from the rubble of the Second World War.

But the miracle also opened up roads to riches for the mafias. And the mafias' favourite industries knew few of the problems that would come to dog the lawful economy when the boom eventually subsided. No cycles of surge and recession. No bolshy unions. Little in the way of competition. Through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s the history of the mafias traces an upward curve of relentlessly growing riches. The mafias' economic miracle would long outlast the first spurt of growth in lawful industry.

From the mid-1950s, Italy's three major criminal organisations followed one another into four new businesses – or at least newly lucrative businesses: construction, tobacco smuggling, kidnapping, and narcotics trafficking. The story of the mafias' economic miracle takes the form of an intricate fugue as, following a trend that was usually set in Sicily, each of the mafias moved in turn through the same cycles of greed, and each of these four businesses in turn increased mafia influence.

The two core skills the mafias deployed to exploit the construction industry, contraband tobacco, kidnapping and drugs were both highly traditional: intimidation and networking, which are what mafia crime has been all about since the outset. All the same, the new era of criminal business did not just make bosses more moneyed than they had ever been, it also profoundly altered the landscape of mafia power.

For one thing, wealth beget wealth. The profits from one illegal enterprise were ploughed into the others, and thereby multiplied. From construction, to smuggled cigarettes, to kidnapping, to narcotics: interlocking chain reactions were set in motion over the coming three decades. The mafias became what Italy's 'mafia-ologists' describe using an English phrase: 'holding companies'. In some senses that is what *mafiosi* ever were: 360-degree criminals who, in the nineteenth century, would take money from extortion and invest it in stolen cattle, for example. But from the late 1950s there was a quantum leap in the diversification and integration of mafia commerce.

Burgeoning criminal wealth wrought a whole series of other

changes. The liaison between organised crime and the Italian state grew both more intimate and more violent. The mafias themselves changed too. They experimented with new rules and new command structures. They grew to look more like one another. *Mafiosi* from different regions increasingly moved in the same circles, doing business together, learning lessons and, sometimes, fighting. *Mafiosi* began to operate more internationally. Entirely new mafias were spawned. In the end, these interlocking changes would plunge all of the mafias into violence of a scale and savagery that had never been seen before.

It all began with a commodity that is set hard at the very foundations of the mafias' territorial authority, and continues to this day to build many of their bridges into the lawful economy and the system of government: concrete.



Naples and Palermo have a great deal in common. Both were glorious capital cities in their time. Both are ports. And both are marked by a long-standing struggle to find an economic *raison d'être* in the era of industrial capitalism. In the early 1950s, Palermo and Naples had ancient enclaves of poverty at their heart: the alleys of the run-down quarters were bomb-damaged, crowded, filthy and poor. Typhoid and tuberculosis were regular visitors. Here the poky, precarious housing lacked proper kitchens and lavatories. In the alleys, barefoot children played amid open drains and rubbish. Many breadwinners, male and female, lived from hand to mouth as pickpockets, three-card tricksters, pedlars, prostitutes, chambermaids, laundresses and gatherers of firewood, rags or scrap. The bricklayers and plasterers who got occasional work, or the underemployed cobblers and tailors, were all too few. Child labour was one of the mainstays of the slum economy.

Change was urgently needed. To add to the pressure, Palermo was now Sicily's capital again, with the new regional parliament

and its army of bureaucrats to accommodate. But instead of planned rehousing and strategic urban development, both cities were ransacked. Building speculation was rampant, and local government proved utterly incapable of imposing any order on the savage concrete bonanza. In the process, through the 1960s, the economic axes of both cities were shifted. Once their livelihoods had depended on land (for the wealthy) and improvisation (for the poor). Now they were rebuilt around state employment, meagre benefits, piecework, sweatshop labour, services – and, of course, construction. For the poor, the transformation meant years of waiting, protesting, and begging for a favour from a priest or politician, before finally moving from a city-centre slum to a bleak housing project a long walk from the nearest bus stop. For the middling sort, the reward was a rented apartment in one of many indistinguishably gaudy, jerry-built stacks on what had once been green space.

But when it comes to organised crime's part in the construction bonanza of the 1950s and 1960s, the contrasts between Naples and Palermo were more striking than the similarities.

In Naples, no one seized the mood of the building speculation boom better than film-maker Francesco Rosi, in his 1963 movie *Le mani sulla città. Hands Over the City* (as it was rather clumsily called in English) was both a prize-winning drama and a stirring denunciation of the political malpractice that fed off the construction industry in Naples. Rod Steiger snarls his way through the leading role as Edoardo Nottola, a rapacious councillor-cum-construction entrepreneur. The movie's opening scene shows Steiger barking out his plans as he gestures with both arms in the direction of a parade of brutalist tower blocks:

That over there is gold today. And where else are you going to get it? Trade? Industry? The 'industrial future of the *Mezzogiorno*'? Do me a favour! Go ahead and invest your money in a factory if you like! Unions, pay claims, strikes, health insurance . . . That stuff'll give you a heart attack.

There could be no more vivid encapsulation of the cold-blooded credo of what Italians call an *affarista*: a profiteer, a wheeler-dealer, a cowboy businessman. *Affaristi* shirk the risks involved in real entrepreneurship, usually by working in the shadow of the political system where they can arrange little monopolies and sweetheart contracts.

Gangsters prefer to deal with *affaristi* rather than with real entrepreneurs. Yet, although *Hands Over the City* is a searing portrait of a Neapolitan *affarista*, it is telling that the word *camorra* is never used in Rosi's film; nor does anyone who could be considered a *camorrista* play a front-of-stage role in the story. For once, that absence is not the sign of a cover-up or of moral blindness: rather, it accurately reflects the facts on the ground. In Naples, *camorristi* simply lacked the clout to force their way into a major share in the building boom. At this stage in our story, there were no *camorristi* who doubled as construction *affaristi*.

In Palermo, the situation was strikingly different: here the councillors and construction entrepreneurs were invariably flanked by Men of Honour; *affaristi* and *mafiosi* were so close as to be all but indistinguishable.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, the mafia rebuilt Palermo in its own gruesome image in a frenzied wave of building speculation that became known as the 'sack of Palermo'. There were two particularly notorious mafia-backed politicians who were key agents of the sack. The first was Salvo Lima, a tight-lipped, soft-featured young man whose only affectation was to smoke through a miniature cigarette holder. He looked like the middle-class boy he was – the son of a municipal archivist. Except that his father was also a mafia killer in the 1930s. (That little detail of Lima's background had been buried, along with all the other important information from the Fascist campaigns against the mafia.) In 1956, Lima came from nowhere to win a seat on the city council, a post as director of the Office of Public Works, and the title of deputy mayor. Two years later, when Lima became mayor, he was succeeded at the strategic Office of Public Works by the second

key *mafioso* politician, Vito Ciancimino. Ciancimino was brash, a barber's son from Corleone whose cigarette habit had given him a rasping voice to match his abrasive personality. In the course of their uneasy alliance, Lima and Ciancimino would wreak havoc in Palermo, and reap vast wealth and immense power in the process.

Men like Lima and Ciancimino were known as 'Young Turks' – representatives of a thrusting new breed of DC machine politician which, across Sicily and the South, was beginning to elbow the old grandees aside. In the 1950s, the range of jobs and favours that were available to patronage politicians began to increase dramatically. The state grew bigger. Government enlarged its already sizeable presence in banking and credit, for example. Meanwhile, local councils set up their own agencies to handle such services as rubbish disposal and public transport. Sicily's new regional government invented its own series of quangos. As the economy grew, and with it the ambitions for state economic intervention, more new bureaucracies were added. In 1950, faced with the scandal of southern Italy's poverty and backwardness, the DC government set up the 'Fund for the South' to sluice large sums into land reclamation, transport infrastructure and the like. Money from the Fund for the South helped win the DC many supporters, and put food on many southern tables. But its efforts to promote what it was hoped would be a dynamic new class of entrepreneurs and professionals were a dismal failure. As things turned out, the only really dynamic class in the South was the DC's own Young Turks. The Fund for the South would turn into a gigantic source of what one commentator called 'state parasitism and organised waste'. Government 'investment' in the South became, in reality, the centrepiece of a geared-up patronage system. Young Turks began to inveigle their way into new and old posts in local government and national ministries. Journalists of the day dubbed the Christian Democrat party 'the white whale' (i.e. Moby Dick) because it was white (i.e. Catholic), vast, slow, and consumed everything in its path.

In Palermo, for all these new sources of patronage, it was the simple business of controlling planning permission that gave Young Turks like Lima and Ciancimino and their mafia friends such a large stake in the building boom.

The sack of Palermo was at its most swift and brutal in the Piana dei Colli, a flat strip of land that extends northwards between the mountains from the edge of Palermo. It has always been a 'zone of high mafia density', in the jargon of Italian mafiologists. Indeed, it has as good a claim as anywhere to being the very cradle of the mafia: its beautiful lemon groves were where the earliest *mafiosi* developed their protection racket methods. A century on from those beginnings, the mafia smothered its birthplace in a concrete shroud. The scale of the ruin was immense. The gorgeous landscape of the Conca d'Oro, which for Goethe had offered 'an inexhaustible wealth of vistas', was transformed into an undifferentiated swathe of shoddily built apartment blocks without pavements or proper amenities.

In 1971, when the sack of Palermo was complete, a journalist climbed Monte Pellegrino, the vast rocky outcrop that surges between the Piana dei Colli and the sea. The view below him had once been stunning. Now it was shocking.

From up there you can cast your eyes across the whole city and the Conca d'Oro. Palermo seems much bigger than you would imagine: long rows of houses spreading out from the periphery towards the orange groves. Concrete has now devastated one of the most beautiful natural spectacles in the world. The huge blocks of flats, all alike, seem to have been made by the same hand. And that hand belongs to 'don' Ciccio Vassallo. More than a quarter of the new Palermo is his work.

Francesco Vassallo, known as 'don Ciccio' ('don Frankie'), or 'King Concrete', was by a distance the dominant figure in the Palermo construction industry in the 1960s. Between 1959 and 1963, under

the Young Turks Salvo Lima and Vito Ciancimino, Palermo City Council granted 80 per cent of 4,205 building permits to just five men, all of whom turned out to be dummies. One of the five subsequently got a job as a janitor in the apartment block he had nominally been responsible for building. Behind those five names, more often than not, stood don Ciccio Vassallo.

King Concrete was a fat, bald, jowly man with a long nose, dark patches under his eyes, and a preference for tent-like suits and loud ties. He rose from very humble origins in Tommaso Natale, a *borgata* or satellite village that sits at the northern end of the Piana dei Colli. Reputed to be only semi-literate, he was the fourth of ten children born to a cart driver. Police reports mention the young Vassallo as moving in mafia circles from a young age; his early criminal record included proceedings for theft, violence and fraud – most of them ended in a suspended sentence, amnesty or acquittal for lack of proof. His place in the local mafia's circle of influence was cemented in 1937 by marriage to the daughter of a landowner and *mafioso*, Giuseppe Messina. With the Messina family's muscle behind it, his firm established a monopoly over the distribution of meat and milk in the area around Tommaso Natale. Vassallo and the Messinas were also active in the black market during the war. When peace came, Vassallo started a horse-drawn transportation company to ferry building materials between local sites. His mafia kinfolk would be sleeping partners in this enterprise, as in the many lucrative real-estate ventures that would come later.

Suddenly, in 1952, Vassallo's business took off. From nowhere, he made a successful bid to build a drainage system in Tommaso Natale and neighbouring Sferracavallo. He had no record in construction; it was not even until two years later that he was admitted onto the city council's list of approved contractors. He was only allowed to submit a tender for the contract because of a reference letter from the managing director of the private company that ran Palermo's buses. The company director would later become Vassallo's partner in some lucrative real-estate

ventures. At the same time, Vassallo received a generous credit line from the Bank of Sicily. Then his competitors withdrew from the tendering process for the drainage contract in mysterious circumstances. Vassallo was left to thrash out the terms of the deal in one-to-one negotiations with the mayor. Who would also later become his partner in some lucrative real-estate ventures.

In the mid-1950s, King Concrete started to work closely with the Young Turks. Construction was becoming more and more important to the economy of a city whose productive base, such as it was, could not compete with the burgeoning factories of the 'industrial triangle' (the northern cities of Milan, Turin and Genoa). By the 1960s, 33 per cent of Palermo workers were directly or indirectly employed in construction, compared to a mere 10 per cent in Milan, the nation's economic capital. However temporary the dangerous and badly paid work in Palermo's many building sites might be, there were few alternatives for ordinary working-class *palermitani*. Which made construction workers a formidable stock of votes that the Concrete King could use to attract political friends. Friends like Giovanni Gioia, the leader of Palermo's Young Turks, who would go on to benefit from a number of lucrative real-estate ventures piloted by Vassallo.

The notion of a 'conflict of interests' was all but meaningless in building-boom Palermo. The city municipality's director of works became King Concrete's chief project planner. From his political contacts, the rapidly rising Vassallo acquired the power to systematically ignore planning restrictions. Another Young Turk, Salvo Lima, was repeatedly (and unsuccessfully) indicted for breaking planning law on Vassallo's behalf. During the sack of Palermo, journalists speculated ironically about the existence of a company they called VA.LI.GIO (Vassallo – Lima – GIOia). They were successfully sued. Rather pedantically, the judges ruled that no such legally constituted company existed.

In the mid-1960s, the market for private apartments reached saturation point. By that stage King Concrete had built whole dense neighbourhoods of condominia that were without schools,

community centres and parks. Ingeniously, he then turned to renting unsold apartments and other buildings for use as schools. In 1969 alone he received rent of nearly \$700,000 from local authorities for six middle schools, two senior schools, six technical colleges and the school inspectorate. The DC press hailed him as a heroic benefactor. In the same year he was recorded as being the richest man in Palermo.

It pays to remember that don Ciccio Vassallo was an *affarista* rather than an entrepreneur. His competitive advantage lay not in shrewd planning and investment, but in corruption, in making useful friends, and of course in the unspoken menace that shadowed his every investment. Right on cue, unidentified 'vandals' would cut down all the trees on any stretch of land that had been zone-marked as a park. Any honest company that somehow managed to win a contract from under the mafia's nose would find its machinery in flames. Dynamite proved a handy way of accelerating demolition orders.

In 1957, just as the sack of Palermo was about to enter its most devastating phase, a mafia power-struggle began in King Concrete's home village of Tommaso Natale. His own family was soon drawn in. In July 1961 his brother-in-law, Salvatore Messina, was shot-gunned to death by an assassin who had sat in wait for him for hours in the branches of an olive tree. Another brother-in-law, Pietro, was shot dead a year later. A third brother-in-law, Nino, only saved himself from the same fate by hurling a milk churn at his attacker when he was ambushed; it is thought he then left Sicily. The fact that don Ciccio himself was not attacked (as far as we know) shows that his power now transcended any local base: he was a money-making machine for the entire political and mafia elite.



Mass migration was one of the most important characteristics of Italy's economic miracle. As the industrial cities of the North

boomed, they sucked in migrants. About a million people moved from the South to other regions in just five years, between 1958 and 1963.

Mafiosi also became more mobile in the post-war decades: their trade took them to other regions of Italy. In some places, gangsters went on to found permanent colonies. Those bases in central and northern Italy, as well as in parts of the South not traditionally contaminated by criminal organisations, are one of the distinctive features of the recent era of mafia history. Nothing similar is recorded in previous decades.

Some of the American hoodlums who were expelled from the United States after the Second World War were the first to set up business outside the mafia heartlands of Sicily, Calabria and Campania. Frank 'Three Fingers' Coppola dealt in drugs from a base near Rome, for example.

The earliest signs of mafia colonisation from *within* Italy came in the great North–South migration during the economic miracle. In the mid-1950s, Giacomo Zagari founded one of the first colonies of *'ndranghetisti* near Varese, close by Italy's border with Switzerland. The murder of a gangmaster in the early hours of New Year's Day in 1956 revealed the existence of mafia control among the Calabrian flower-pickers of the Ligurian coast near the French border.

Many northerners resented the hundreds of thousands of new arrivals from the South. Southerners, they said, had too many children and grew tomatoes in the bathtub. News of mafia-related crime, or indeed any crime as long as it was committed by an immigrant, merely served to confirm those anti-southern prejudices. Mafia appeared to be a kind of ethnic affliction that made everyone from 'down there' proud, vengeful, violent and dishonest.

The truth is that mass migration from the South was not to blame for the mafias' spread northwards. *Mafiosi* are a tiny minority of professional criminals; they are not typical southerners. There were plenty of places where immigrants arrived and the mafias did not follow. But migration did create many

new opportunities for *mafiosi* – notably, as the flower-pickers of Liguria illustrate, in gangmastering, when immigrants were forced to work for low wages, untaxed, and without the protection of the law. As Italy grew during the economic miracle and afterwards, such criminal opportunities expanded and multiplied.

The criminal opportunities most conducive to long-term mafia colonisation of the North came from the construction industry. The most notorious case is the winter sports resort of Bardonecchia, in the northern region of Piedmont; it is situated in the Alps just a few kilometres from the French border. Bardonecchia is where the inhabitants of Turin, Italy's motor city and one of the capitals of the economic miracle, go to ski. Eventually, in 1995, Bardonecchia became the first town council in northern Italy to be dissolved by central government in Rome because of mafia infiltration. Strikingly, the mafia that had colonised Bardonecchia long before then was the 'ndrangheta. Italy's least-known mafia, the one most frequently associated with a disappearing world of peasant penury, was quick to spot the illegal profits to be made from construction, and put itself in the vanguard of the new era of expansion in the North.

The story of Bardonecchia is like a sequence of time-lapse photographs in a nature documentary. Narrowly focused, as if on the growth of a single poisonous weed, it nevertheless exposes the secret workings of a whole ecosystem. Played in rapid sequence, the images from Bardonecchia take us far ahead in our story. They illustrate how, from small beginnings, and in the right circumstances, the mafias can establish what they call 'territorial control' from virtually nothing.

The first hint of the 'ndrangheta's arrival in Bardonecchia came at past midnight, on 2 September 1963. A heavy rain was falling as Mario Corino, a young primary school teacher, turned into via Giolitti in the old part of town. He was approached by two men, both of them half hidden by umbrellas. The attack was swift – so swift that Corino did not see what type of blunt instrument flashed towards him. He instinctively parried the first blow

with his umbrella and his forearm; the second grazed his head before smashing into his shoulder. His screams drove the attackers away. Evidently this was only meant to be a warning.

Initial speculation linked the attack with Corino's work as leader of the local branch of the Christian Democrat Party. More specifically, he had denounced what were politely called 'irregularities' in the local construction industry and the town plan. But within days the two men who attacked Corino had confessed, and the press was able to reassure itself that there was no political background to the assault. The culprits were both plasterers, paid by the square metre of wall they finished; they assaulted Corino because they objected to his attempts to enforce rules against piecework on building sites. Case closed. Or so it seemed.

As it turned out, the original suspicions were correct. Moreover, the assault on Mario Corino was only the first symptom of something much more menacing. The problems began, as Mario Corino had suspected, with a building boom in the early 1960s: tourists and second-homers needed places to stay if they were going to enjoy Bardonecchia's mountain air. Building firms needed cheap hands and a way round safety regulations and labour laws: they turned to 'ndrangheta gangmasters, who were more than happy to provide this service by recruiting from among the droves of Calabrian immigrants. The labourers in Bardonecchia, many of whom had criminal records and little chance of finding more regular employment, lived camped out in semi-squalor. By the early 1970s, an estimated 70–80 per cent of labour in the village was recruited through the mafia racket; many of those workers had to kick back part of their salary to the *capo*. Trades unions found it impossible to set up branches.

But long before then, the 'ndrangheta bosses had gone far beyond labour racketeering. First they set up their own companies to carry out subcontracting work: plastering and trucking were favourite niches. 'Ndrangheta-controlled construction firms were not far behind. Shadowy real-estate companies came and went from the record books. Then, at rival building sites, there were

unexplained fires, machinery was vandalised and workers were threatened at gunpoint. Before long most of the honest building companies had been driven out of the market, or driven into the hands of the gangsters.

Meanwhile, the government had done its bit to fill the Calabrian mafia's coffers by building a new highway and a tunnel through the mountains. The 'ndrangheta recruited some local politicians and administrators to help them win contracts and get round regulations. Barely a stone was turned without the say-so of the local *capo*. One city council employee would simply hand out the boss's visiting card to anyone who applied for a licence to start up a new business – just to avoid any messy bureaucratic problems, he claimed. Mario Corino, the schoolteacher-cum-politician who had been attacked in 1963, led a heroic resistance to 'ndrangheta influence over local government when he became mayor in 1972. In 1975 the courts dismissed his alarm-calls as a politically motivated fiction: they said he was using the mafia as a pretext to throw mud at his rivals. Corino's opponents would feign disbelief and outrage when any journalist suggested that there might be a mafia problem in the town. Yet, at the same time, energetic policemen would be mysteriously transferred to other parts of the country. In a phone tap, the local boss was recorded as saying, 'We are the root of everything here, you understand me?'

It was remarkable that Bardonecchia had to wait until as late as 1969 for its first mafia murder. Forty-four deaths would follow between 1970 and 1983. On 23 June 1983, the 'ndrangheta proved how high, and how brutally, it was prepared to strike. Not long before midnight, Bruno Caccia was walking his dog when he was approached by two men in a car; they shot him fourteen times, and then got out to fire three *coups de grâce*. Caccia was an upstanding investigating magistrate who had refused any dialogue with what was now a thoroughgoing 'ndrangheta power system.

It is unlikely that there was a grand strategy behind the mafias'

move north. Rocco Lo Presti, the *'ndranghetista* who led his organisation's rise to power in Bardonecchia during the building boom of the 1960s, had been there since the mid-1950s. It seems he came as a humble migrant, albeit one with some fearsome relatives. But he was less interested in getting a job than he was in handling counterfeit banknotes. Thereafter, *mafiosi* came north for many reasons: to hide from the police or their enemies; to set up temporary narcotics trading posts; to quietly launder and invest their ill-gotten gains, or to capitalise on criminal opportunities opened up by pioneers like Rocco Lo Presti. The full-scale colonisation of a town like Bardonecchia created a pattern to be followed elsewhere. In one bugged conversation, a friend of Rocco Lo Presti's was heard giving him a verbal pat on the back: 'Bardonecchia is Calabrian,' he said. The irony in this remark was that many of the entrepreneurs, administrators and politicians who had helped turn Bardonecchia Calabrian were as Piedmontese as Barolo wine and *agnolotti*.



In the political sphere, organised crime has always been a problem that affected the North and centre as well as the South. From soon after the birth of Italy as a unified state in 1861, coalition governments in Rome had to recruit clusters of supporters among southern MPs; and southern MPs – some of them, at least – used racketeers to hustle votes. Yet after the economic miracle, thanks primarily to infiltration of the construction industry, the mafias became a national problem in two dramatically new ways. On the one hand, as we have seen, the North became a theatre of operations for southern mobsters. On the other hand, the South became a theatre of cooperation between northern big industry and the mafias. For example, companies from the industrialised North were also dealing on friendly terms with the *'ndrangheta* back in Calabria, where concrete proved even more lucrative than it was in Piedmont.

In the 1960s there began a major road-building programme. Its emblem was the so-called 'Motorway of the Sun' that ran down Italy from north to south. The last stretch of that motorway, covering the 443 kilometres from Salerno to Reggio Calabria, carried the burden of enormous hopes: a century on from Italian unification, the 'Salerno–Reggio Calabria' (as it is universally known) would finally end the deep South's isolation from the national transport network. Grand exploits of civil engineering were required to traverse the region's forbidding geology: no fewer than 55 tunnels and 144 viaducts, some of which soar over 200 metres above the forests at the valley floor.

Today the Salerno–Reggio Calabria is notorious – a prodigy of chaotic planning, pork-barrelling and broken political promises. It is still not finished nearly half a century after it was begun. Rather than taking the most logical and direct route along the coast, the Salerno–Reggio Calabria cuts tortuously inland to visit the electoral fiefdoms of long-forgotten ministers. At times the motorway's only purpose seems to be to join a chain of permanent construction sites. Long stretches are so narrow and winding that they have a 40-kilometre-per-hour speed limit. Jams are so frequent that the roadside is permanently lined with chemical toilets to allow desperate motorists to relieve themselves. During peak times, ambulances are parked ready to intervene. In 2002, magistrates in Catanzaro sequestered a whole section of recently modernised motorway because it was so shoddily built as to be acutely dangerous. The Bishop of Salerno recently called Europe's worst motorway a *Via Crucis*. The Salerno–Reggio Calabria shows the Italian state at its most incompetent.

Since the 1960s, the 'ndrangheta has profited handsomely from the mess. Yet very early on in the story of the Salerno–Reggio Calabria it became clear to law enforcement officers on the ground that the 'ndrangheta carried only part of the blame. One senior *Carabiniere* officer stationed in Reggio Calabria was interviewed by a national newspaper in 1970:

When northern entrepreneurs come down to Calabria to get their projects started, the first thing they do is to go to see the man they have been told is the mafia boss. They pay him a visit out of duty, as if they were calling on the Prefect. They solicit his protection, and pay for it by giving the *capomafia*'s friends the sub-contract for earth moving, and by taking on *mafiosi* as guards on their building sites.

Non-Calabrian construction entrepreneurs would offer other favours too: testimonies in favour of *mafiosi* in court; failing to report the many thefts of explosives from their building sites; offering guarantees to the bank when *'ndranghetisti* bought construction machinery on credit. The northern entrepreneurs would then fail to complete their work on time, and blame the local mafia for the delays. Those delays would then allow the entrepreneurs to charge the government more money, money of which the mafia would naturally receive its share. Along the Calabrian stretches of the Salerno–Reggio Calabria, the *'ndrangheta* was educated into the ways of a particularly cynical brand of capitalism.

Construction is acutely vulnerable to the mafia's most rudimentary methods. Buildings and roads have to be built *somewhere*. And in any given somewhere, by merely smashing up plant or intimidating labour, *mafiosi* can force construction companies to sit down and negotiate. Nor, once those negotiations have borne fruit, does it require any great entrepreneurial nous for a boss to buy a few dumper trucks and set up an earth-moving company to take on some generously subcontracted business. More insidiously still, *mafiosi* do not find it hard to convince legal companies of the advantages that a friendship with organised crime can bring. An entrepreneur does not need to be exceptionally greedy or cynical to lapse into collusion with murderers. He just needs a preference for bending the rules, paying his workers in cash, and dodging red tape. And once he starts operating outside the law, who does he turn to when his

machines are wrecked or his builders duffed up? His relief when he does a deal and the harassment stops merges easily with the satisfaction that comes when it is a competitor's turn to suffer. The truth is that there is often a *demand* for the mafias' services – a demand that the mafias themselves are past masters at cultivating.

So muscling in on the construction business is straightforward, up to a point. But success in construction can also be the measure of just how profoundly mafia influence has insinuated itself into the entrails of the state and the capitalist system. Getting zealous policemen moved, corrupting judges, adjusting town plans on demand, manipulating the awarding of government contracts, silencing journalists, winning powerful political friends: these are not activities for mere gorillas whose skills stop at pouring sugar into the fuel tank of a dumper truck. North or South, when a mafia masters these more refined arts, it can vastly increase its power to intimidate. Just as importantly, it can vastly increase the range of services it is able to offer to friendly firms: winning contracts at inflated prices, warding off inspections by the tax authorities, making new friends . . .