

# The Syntax of Social Movements: Jam, Boxes and other Anti-Mafia Assemblages

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**Abstract:** This contribution calls attention to the values of assemblage thinking for the study of contentious economies. Such a syntactical perspective can make visible social arrangements that are otherwise difficult to represent in traditional social movement categories. With the help of a jar of jam, an object that has meaningful entanglements in anti-camorra activism in Campania (Italy), the article beings by empirically illustrating instances of mobilization that disrupt relationships of mafia dependency. The focus lies on the force of composition, the syntax of contention. The second section moves on to explore the theoretical backdrop of the analysis, and does so by suggesting some possible points of dialogue between SM studies and assemblage thinking. These are the themes of network, conflict and identity. In various ways, assemblage thinking might be seen as diametrically opposite to many SM theories. However, these traditions share many interests: both are essentially concerned with grasping how different orders come to be, what makes them last and what makes them fall apart. Despite these similarities, these two traditions have not spoken systematically to each other. As divergences in SM studies have significantly revolved around hierarchies (i.e. do political opportunities, personal gains or culture matter most to SM development?), I conclude by suggesting that assemblage approaches might have something to offer: they shift the perspective from 'what matters most' to 'how it comes to matter'.

**Keywords:** affordance, conflict, dependency, economic practice, identity, network, power.

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In 2016, I watched “Biutiful cautri”, a documentary that shocked me with its macabre tones and drew me towards Campania (Italy). It told the story of criminal economies that are polluting a region beyond repair. I asked myself what strategies anti-mafia activists were using to interrupt and navigate the pollution of their territory, and set off with my recording devices to investigate. When I entered the field, I automatically started using my modernist lenses (Latour 1993): I separated environmental activism from other forms of anti-mafia practices. Once I began to follow different groups, I soon found that it was not easy to separate ‘The Environment’ from ‘The Economy’ or for that matter ‘The Social’ (Miller 2015). This made my two weeks of fieldwork messy and overwhelming. But instead of forcing these distinctions onto the groups and designing my field-activities accordingly, I asked activists to show me what their most challenging and important anti-mafia activities were. They led me to interact with 9 social cooperatives, 2 labour unions, 1 environmental organisation, 2 artists, a school committee, 2 social movement organisations, a priest, a neighbourhood committee, and countless relatives of victims of mafia-related murder.

In trying to make sense of the different ways these actors were connected, I faced the challenge of describing the activities of these activists using terms that could render the modes of contention justice. This struggle is in fact difficult to represent because it transcends categories (environment, health, economy, culture, justice), forms of expression (demonstrations/marketing/research/commoning/choice of lifestyle), and types of protagonists (humans/buildings/flora/legislation). Furthermore, upon realising that some of the most interesting intersections between these hybrid actors rotate around economic practices, I found a relative absence of discussions on the relationship between the economy and social movements (SM) (Hetland & Goodwin 2013; della Porta 2015), and a propensity to consider the economy as parallel, functional, or as a hindrance to political practices (Jerne 2016).

These challenges echo broader theoretical discussions. The first relates to the critique of event-centred analyses of social movements and the related growth of interest towards “everyday” aspects of collective action. Although Alberto Melucci’s work vitally set this agenda for social movement scholarship a while ago (1985), and the fact that the term ‘social movement’ has been theorised as promoting/opposing change at different scales and modes (Diani 1992; McAdam et al. 2001), the concept still resonates most strongly with the scale of action where power is represented by the state, and resistance by the street. Indeed, more recently, important work has highlighted the identity building, mobilising force of everyday practices within social

movements, challenging ‘loud’ visions of collective action tied to the idea of the protest event as the focal point of contention (e.g. Haenfler et al 2012; Portwood-Stacer 2012; Yates 2015; Wahlen & Laamanen 2015).

An even more forceful push in this direction has come with a ‘symmetrising’ move: on the one hand, with the expansion of the political sphere to the most ordinary locations, but also, most radically, with the acknowledgement that thing-human and thing-thing interactions shape politics as much as human-human ones. I am referring broadly to the work that has emerged out of non-linear thinking initiated<sup>1</sup> by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), and out of the more empirically-friendly approaches of Latour (1988), Callon (1986) and Law (1986) (actor-network-theory/ANT), and more recently, DeLanda (2006). These streams of thought, which, despite numerous divergences<sup>2</sup> I shall refer to as *assemblage thinking*, have successfully brought bacteria, metronomes and logos into political analyses with much resonance in the past decades, in spite of their highly philosophical temperament. Importantly, they have suggested that, instead of defining categories in the absence of actors and their relations *a priori*, research should focus more on how relationships between things are built and made durable/precarious.

In fact, this tradition has fostered much work dedicated to disrupting mundane acts that divorce and isolate the political, the cultural, and the economic as separate realities (Butler 2010). Of interest to this context is particularly that line of thought that has worked to deconstruct ‘the Economy’ as a unified, singular and totalising realm, highlighting instead the need to prioritise analyses of the processes whereby collective life is economised, valued and ordered (Callon 1998; Latour 2013; Muniesa 2014; Roelvink et al 2015). This has opened up a space for thinking of the ‘economic’ as a practice rather than an empty space, and thus a lively mode of collective life where contention can and already does take place.

Despite this theoretical tornado, SM studies remain firmly grounded. Nonetheless, thinkers from diverse disciplines have prolifically used assemblage thinking in relation to collective action, ranging from geography (McFarlane 2009; Davies, 2011; Roelvink 2016; Levkoe & Wakefield 2014) sociology (Chesters & Welsh 2006; Rodríguez-Giralt 2012), media and communication (Knudsen & Stage 2015; Micali 2015) and anthropology (Marrero-Guillamón 2013). Given the promising nature of this research, and the need to further the still minor, but

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<sup>1</sup> The first sociological example of this line of thought is Gabriel Tarde’s work, which the authors strongly draw on.

<sup>2</sup> For a review of some of the core differences between assemblages and actor-networks see Müller (2015).

fundamental realm of the everyday within SM analyses, I draw on assemblage thinking to discuss grassroots economic mobilisation. I begin by digging into a case study, which highlights anti-mafia hybrids (Callon & Law 1995) that interrupt relations of mafia dependency. My intention is to make explicit certain strategies that have been successful in effectuating anti-mafia relationships. In doing this I highlight the benefit of working syntactically with movements, that is, of tracing how heterogeneous composites relate to a given issue (here, anti-mafia) without pre-determining which order matters most (e.g. micro or macro, human or non-human, emotions or rationality, culture or politics). Specifically I trace how activists rearrange objects that are composed in orders that potentiate mafias, into orders that make possible non-mafia relations. The second part addresses the theoretical basis of the analysis, tracing some points of convergence between SM and assemblage thinking. My overall aim is to emphasise synergies and suggest some outlets for cross-pollination, which I see as both possible and necessary.

### **Meet the Jam**

Following others who have worked empirically with assemblages, I shall discuss how some of these realities are associated through an object. The thing at hand is a jar of jam that is produced on mafia confiscated land, and is part of a larger chain of distribution that resists mafia type relationships. The jam has an analytical function: it helps me trace the formation of different anti-mafia alliances. Yet, not only does the jam allow for the empirical tracing of an organisation, it also actively takes part in the making of that political organisation. This is not to say that it is the jam that alone determines how the political movement manifests: rather, it tells that taking the perspective of the jar can help see that, together with other objects, its assemblage can be disruptive. It acts as an entry point. Thus the jar is a necessary, yet never sufficient, ingredient of disruption.

I chose the jam in particular because I stumbled upon it repeatedly throughout my fieldwork and it showed me associations that activists had not spoken of. However, this could have happened with a leader, a logo, a chant or a heroic figure for the movement. In theory, one could choose to take any object as a point of departure. What makes the jam relevant for this case is that it is plugged into different arrangements that increase the affordance, the *potentia*,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Puissance*, a Spinozian inspired concept of power (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: xvii).

or the ability to act, of the movement in relation to its object of contestation: the Camorra. It is not the jam, but these arrangements that I wish to call attention to.

Notably, the power of the mafias (of which Camorra is a specific species) has been theorised as lying outside of the mafias (Dalla Chiesa 1983). As terms such as inside and outside can be misleading, as they are often used to describe spatial relations or worse, monolithic totalities, here I need to specify. Indeed, following assemblage thinking (Delanda 2006), the identity of the Camorra is not defined by the parts that constitute it, but rather by a series of repeated *types* of interactions between parts. These are connected by relations of exteriority: relations in which the whole (Camorra) does not constitute the identity of the single parts (e.g. affiliates, drugs, cement, trash), and in which it is not the single parts' properties, but rather the particular exercise of their capacities (e.g. the way land is utilised) that constitutes the whole. Mafias are thus heterogeneous organisations that have historically contingent relations. In this sense, it is possible to think of mafia power in Latourian terms (1988:201), not so much as a strength, but rather, as an array of weaknesses. This means that mafias thrive because objects around them (corrupt public officials, waste legislation and abandoned agricultural assets) are configured and expressed in a manner that increases its movement and influence.

This idea has become central to the anti-mafia movement itself, and informs its contentious practices. For obvious reasons, activists do not tackle criminal organisations upfront: this task is relegated to executive and judicial forces. Instead, grassroots anti-mafia practices rotate around three main activities today; education, commemoration, and enterprise (Dalla Chiesa 2014). Jointly these aim to shift the 'weak' links that strengthen mafia organisations, into anti-mafia relationships. Coherently, Italian law defines mafia type associations as exploiting 'the force of intimidation of the *associative bond* and of the conditions of subjection and *omertà*<sup>4</sup> that it yields'<sup>5</sup> in order to carry out their activities. Contemporary anti-mafia practices aim to shift, or make possible, alternative associative bonds. Archaeologist Ian Hodder (2012) reminds us that dependencies are not inherent in things, but are contingent to the relationship between things. With the aid of the jam,<sup>6</sup> I shall take you through some of these shifted chains of dependencies.

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<sup>4</sup> *Omertà* is a particular cultural code which is often associated to the mafia. It implies a passive, tacit behaviour that refuses interference with the legal or illegal activities of others.

<sup>5</sup> Art. 416 bis of the penal code, 3rd comma. Own emphasis.

<sup>6</sup> Due to the scope of this article I omit the equally disruptive transformation phase (when the jam becomes jam) and only highlight the phases of production and distribution.

## Cumulative Mafias: Contracts, Debris, Poison, and Fire

For readers not familiar with the ‘waste emergency’, I shall dedicate some lines to setting the scene.<sup>7</sup> In 1980, the Irpina earthquake radically transformed the Campanian landscape and the speculative interactions with its components. Land became increasingly deployed to construct public infrastructure, schools, hospitals, and private enterprises. The ‘economy of the catastrophe’ (Becchi 1988) was made of cement, sand, and other aggregates. At that point in time, these materials had far more potential in generating wealth than agricultural products. Land played a pivotal role in this cement cycle, as it often became not only a source of aggregates but also a site of transformation, transport, or construction. As the scope and site of this transformation was under public management, contracts were the main point of access to these activities. Thereby, public contracts became increasingly attractive for entrepreneurs. Monopolising these was a way to control the most flourishing labour market in the territory. Controlling labour relationships has been a historical strategy employed by mafias to control a territory (Catanzaro 1992; della Porta & Vannucci 1999; Lupo 2004). Thus the earthquake sparked a series of dependencies between land, public contracts, workers, sand, roads, politicians, and Camorristi that made cement cycles particularly appropriate or fitting (Hodder 2012: 113).

As the reconstruction expanded throughout the 1980s, other national and international partners joined the enterprise. The role of transport companies thus grew in importance. An apt development for such mobile enterprises is to move across space and connect to more markets. Concurrently, European legislation became more rigid in terms of urban and industrial waste disposal regulations, causing heightened costs in waste management. As a response, several Northern industrial enterprises, public officials, and organised crime groups formed speculative alliances and illegally traded waste.

Indeed, while these events fit well into the cement cycle, in various ways they also proved to be foundational to the establishment of the *waste* cycle. Other than convergences linked to the mobile nature of the two enterprises (waste and cement), it was the roads themselves that proved beneficial. For instance, roads facilitated transportation, but they also allowed entrepreneurs to blend waste into the asphalt that the roads were made of. This also occurred with bricks that

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<sup>7</sup> For in depth accounts see: Barbagallo et al (1989); Armiero (2008); Armiero and D’Alisa (2012); Caggiano and De Rosa (2015); Cantoni (2016).

were employed in the construction of public and private buildings. The highly convertible properties of land lent themselves well to this type of industry. The sites of excavations and the pits that were employed to produce concrete and construct new buildings were, for instance, well equipped burial spots for masses of hazardous waste. Their size and extension were ideoneous for storing and dumping dangerous and expensive materials. Furthermore, the monopolisation of the real-estate market allowed entrepreneurs to purchase land at low costs, which expanded the territorial area that could be employed for burial.

Given the level of infiltration in institutional settings, the chain of dependencies linked to this toxic cycle grew to paradoxical levels: by the early 1990s Camorra was not only managing the transport and transformation of industrial and urban waste, but was also being hired by the state (in many cases, embodied by itself) to treat it, as it had the power to purchase and manage the large waste plants and the labour connected to their operation. As a result of this, public waste plants were declared saturated in 1994 and a state of emergency was imposed.

The official emergency lasted for 15 years, under which the government's primary policies were preoccupied with constructing and reclaiming waste treatment facilities. One of the largest failures was the concession of a public tender to a conglomerate of enterprises (FIBE) that were entrusted with the management of the regional waste cycle in 1998. The overall mismanagement of the cycle resulted in periods where domestic waste filled the streets, causing urban guerrillas. Different governments tackled the problem either by sending waste to unfit treatment plants, shipping it abroad, or opening new incinerators. This infuriated the local communities who had clashes with the police on various occasions, culminating with the militarisation of treatment facilities. The 'emergency' ended officially in 2009, when the Berlusconi government removed 170,000 tonnes of trash from the streets (Cantoni 2016), coherently crowning a season marked by 'sweeping under the rug' policies.

The damages to the Campanian ecology are great. Not only are flora and fauna contaminated to levels beyond repair, but child mortality, cancer, and congenital malformation have been found to be linked to the levels of pollution (Senior & Mazza 2004; Comba et al. 2006). These factors have had harsh consequences for the reputation of Campania (now internationally

known as the *Land of Fires*<sup>8</sup>), and particularly for the local agriculture, the most intoxicated of all the human-nonhuman entanglements.

Grassroots reactions to these intoxicating conditions have been both numerous and varied in kind since the beginning of the crisis: national and international petitions, legal accusations, non-violent resistance to the construction of incinerators, and street demonstrations. Yet in the past four years, anti-Camorra activism has shifted towards collective forms of territorial re-appropriation, through commoning practices (Caggiano & DeRosa 2015; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, & Healey 2013:125-158). Here, I focus on political actions that do not speak to powers that represent them but rather that present their own power (Tormey 2006; Jerne 2016). In particular, I aim to show how diverse forms of action have reshuffled the arrangement of things, the syntax, around three nodes of Camorra power: land, labour, and reputation.

### **Production: Reclaiming Land and Labour**

“You are lucky enough to be standing on the only occupied Camorra estate in Italy,” were S.’s words when I asked him where I was. 15 years ago, the terrain was the building site of a luxurious apartment complex named *Vomero 2*. During the construction phase, there was a methane explosion that raised the authorities’ attention to the nature of the building site. It was managed by the Simeoli family, which was affiliated with some of the leading building speculators in Italy during the 1970s. After the incident in 1997, the state seized the asset and confiscated it effectively in 2001. Until 2008, the land remained abandoned and un surveilled, allowing for illicit economies to keep proliferating on it. The Simeoli family was in that period working, among other things, on the construction of an illegal landfill, digging a 270 m deep hole using European funds.

### ***Fruitful Awakenings***

S., the president of the an anti-Camorra association that has been active in the area since 2008, decided to take matters into his own hands, and occupied it in 2012. This dictated novel arrangements of power and control over the land. S. wanted to empower one of the actors that is most entangled in Camorra power: their work force. As I have discussed, one of the main sources of territorial control is the management and monopoly of labour relationships. In this

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<sup>8</sup> The name derives from the practice of burning domestic and industrial waste that fills the landscape with smoke and bonfires. It was coined by Giuseppe Ruggiero, and popularised by Saviano in *Gomorra* (2016:309-336).

specific territory, much of the labour is concerned with drug dealing, so S. began to experiment with ways of creating alternative livelihoods to drug related ones. Today his project employs 6 young detainees with the aim of reintegrating them into the work market, but differently. Two of them have become worker-members and will continue to work there when they finish their term in jail. Moreover, the confiscated asset is being used as a training ground for two juvenile justice centres, whose detainees are taken to the asset to learn how to farm. The estate has become both a training centre and the terrain for a mafia-alternative market.

Here they produce grapes, lemons and peaches. Peaches are the fruits that are then turned into jam and juice, and which have the larger distribution chain that I shall delineate shortly. Though these peaches have been living on this land for a long time, they have not played a mobilising role in the lives of those interacting with them until recently. Reconfiguring things' capacities, connecting them to others, has the power to transform relationships that cause constraints, to ones that instead open up potentials. Power, as noted by Hodder (2012), is tightly connected to questions of dependency. The web of relationships in which an object is immersed, the so-called entanglement of which it is a part, can in other words either constrain or potentiate the object's ability to act. The irruption of the association on this land initiated a chain-reaction that reconfigured the role of things on this land. As the target of the association is the 'disadvantaged subject'<sup>9</sup>, the weakest actor of this social arrangement, here I discuss how the reconfiguration potentiates them in the production site.

Initially, the criminal (now serving time in jail by working on the estate) had no direct relationship to the land. The land was a site for recycling the money that his employer, the Camorrista, would spend. The drug profit generated by the criminal was reinvested in the land and was transformed into a construction site. In this sense, he was entirely alienated from the final product, as any faithful Marxist might note, as he was excluded from valuation process that occurred on the terrain. In my view, the drug dealer is not oppressed because the product of his work (drugs) veils the relationship to its final usage (alienation), but rather because the relationship detaches him from the plurality of values that *could* be exchanged for his labour. He is rendered immobile. Therefore, this is more a question of potentiality than of authenticity. The dealer is simply constrained from *becoming other* that what he currently is in that configuration of relations.

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<sup>9</sup> *Soggetto svantaggiato*

As I shall investigate later, assemblage thinking stresses that the stability of an identity is not merely given by the conscious associations we make to specific goals/ideas/tastes, but rather by the repetition of these associations (DeLanda 2006:50). The identity of the dealer is in fact highly stable in the Camorra relationship, as he is immersed in a web of relations that confirm that his only way forward is to deal drugs. Drugs constrained the worker in a very narrow network that repeated itself: dealing-drugs-buyer-money-boss. He had no access to *networks* in which that value was transformed into another (real-estate/public funding/food) as he was so dependent on the previous network to survive. Drugs were thereby, in that configuration, valued by him as the most important object, because in that equation, they are the objects that carried the highest level of potential: money. S. and his association interrupted this formula with their action. The occupation of the terrain reconfigures the land-labour relationships. In the new configuration, the worker's identity is destabilised as he acquires new skills, and is in contact with different networks (DeLanda 2006:50). Further, transforming the fruit of this labour into jam makes these more portable for trade, permitting thereby the financial sustainment of more reconfigured labour.

### ***Shaking up Syntactical Capacities***

Importantly it is the specific syntax (the order in which things are arranged) that plays a central role in enabling this new political enterprise. This space of production is in fact linked to a series of material and expressive elements that augment the potential for the inmates to reconfigure their action.

Technically speaking, confiscated assets are granted a specific status by law 109/96. They are given in custody to associations (or institutional actors) that have 'social aims' that then might receive particular benefits from holding such a responsibility. For instance, S.'s association managed to stipulate a contract with the Department of Juvenile justice that entails that the workforce deployed in transforming the peaches is serving time in jail. This makes it then possible for inmates to exit the walls of jail and encounter alternatives that they were previously even unaware of: different people, different forms of labour, and, importantly, different skills that they are trained in. Thus, this new configuration confronts the prisoner (that has been employed by or is prone to work for Camorra) with difference. Importantly, it does so by using the same nouns in the formula (the Camorra's connection to the land, its use of it, and the criminal as part of the entanglement) but extends it to include different actors (the state/activists and their connection to the land, their use of it, and the detainee/potential labourer as part of

the valuation process). If the inmates had been employed in, say, a shoe factory, which could potentially employ more people, the association between labour and Camorra would not have been disrupted. If the Camorra workers would have been employed in a shoe factory, they would not have been *present* in the opposition, because that configuration would not produce novel associations between pre-existing terms of which they were generative.

The material properties of the land also determine what type of difference can be enforced. The fact that fruit trees and vines are already present determine the enterprise that can take place on the land. Due to the law, the property continues to be in the hands of the state, so these become private investments in the public. The costs of renovating agrarian land are high, especially when the land has been abandoned for many years. Because fruit requires constant attention due its physical properties, it also determines the type of labour needed to requalify the asset. Furthermore, competing with the mass production of fruit from big corporations would be impossible, so the better alternative for this enterprise is to concentrate on a niche that values quality and the labour relations implied in its production — in other words, fair-trade markets. This entails utilising traditional farming methods and no “artificial” fertilisers. This type of production requires a major human work force, which in turn allows the asset to be a resource for more detainees. The properties of this asset thus afford (or are most capable of enacting) the cooperative form (Hodder 2012).

Furthermore, the law itself recognises the association as the manager of the terrain. This official appointment recognises the power of non-institutional parties. Other than granting the association a series of liberties, it enforces a discursive shift in the collective imaginary. Potentially anybody could have this type of power. And everybody ‘should’. The fact that the land is confiscated and loaded with an ethos of legality makes this space play a different role in this social arrangement. It is a space of critique, a central node of semantic conflict that allows for the reiteration of meaning. This semantic critique is however, as I have traced, accompanied by a pragmatic critique: a mobilisation of material resources, such as peaches, that increases the potential for non-mafia relationships of labour and territorial control.

## Distribution: Struggles of Reputation and Influence

Many activists that work with confiscated assets address them as having the potential for '*territorial redemption*'.<sup>10</sup> This land and its peaches is but one of many examples of confiscated assets being employed to counter the mafias in Italy today. Since the early 2000s, the administration of mafia confiscated assets has become a growing mode of collective opposition (Jerne 2015). While not all assets are agricultural, many of the more successful enterprises deal in food. Here I shall zoom out in scale and discuss some strategies that are used to make these food chains desirable for the market, in turn allowing the networks connected to products such as our peaches to sustain their struggle in larger fora. While the first part the peach network analysis focused primarily on the material properties that interrupted certain chains of dependencies, at this scale it is the *expressive* properties of the assemblage that matter more to the development of the conflict. Therefore, I focus on how particular anti-mafia expressions (linguistic and non) articulate the material components of the networks, keeping in mind that these are however not independent of one another.

While activists have for decades been demonstrating against the toxicity of the area, the ecological disaster effectively remains unresolved. In particular, the reputation of the territory has been devastated, severely impacting the livelihoods of small- and large-scale farmers. Since 2012 there has been a growing shift towards collaborative forms of material and symbolic territorial re-appropriation (Caggiano & DeRosa 2015). Coalitions between environmental organisations, cooperatives, scientific communities, municipal committees and farmers are increasingly common. These are providing support of the most vulnerable groups, while also effectively monitoring the area, preventing its further contamination.

One of the largest networks is RES (*Rete di Economia Sociale*/ Social Economy Network) which was officially stipulated in 2015, and unites 29 different private and public subjects. The network has an ambitious political agenda to enforce infrastructures that can serve as 'antidotes to a criminal economy' (Caggiano & DeRosa 2015; DeRosa & Baldascino 2016). One of its key strategies is to work with confiscated assets, which they see as powerful communicative tools. Indeed, an entire part of the network is solely dedicated to communication. ETIKET, a branch

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<sup>10</sup> *Riscatto territoriale*

of a social enterprise, diffuses the network's activities through a web-radio, a recording studio, a data-archive, photographs, text and brand-design.

F., one of ETIKET's communicators, explains that their enterprise is not about giving people a voice, but rather a platform to express it. The idea of communicating these experiences is directly drawn from the Camorra, which, according to F., increases its power not only by communicating its territorial control through murders, but also by directly libelling anybody who opposes their activities through printed media and rumours.

“(...) until a couple of years ago [when the Camorra's power was stronger], a lot of gadgets circulated during the Christmas season, which gave them money... Like a sort of masked protection fee,<sup>11</sup> let's call it that. And they ordered a lot of pens, for instance, or calendars or things of this sort... because they like...veiled the racketeering activity through these things (...)”. (Personal interview, F. ETIKET employee, 16 June 2015).

Gadgets and publicity were thus also used to create dependency. Sometimes they would force print shop owners to produce for free. This meant that not only would the business' activity be deferred, causing a loss of money, but that the enterprise would be associated to that of the Camorra, as the printed items carried their logo. Other times they would force businesses who wanted to market themselves to use specific channels that were controlled by them. Likewise, Camorristi often forced businesses to exhibit products they controlled in their shop, such as calendars of pens, not unlike dictators that impose the display of their self-portrait or statue. These market relations would thus *depend on*, be constrained by, Camorra.

In a sense, RES and ETIKET are mimicking their enemies by communicating their presence on the territory. The difference is that they are sharing, rather than imposing, their vision of social organisation, thereby making it possible to freely take part in them.

T., one of the founders of the first, smaller network of social enterprises, NCO (*Nuova Cooperazione Organizzata*/ New Organised Cooperation), shared the evolution of his communicative strategy. Initially they started by creating a common box, where they placed the various goods (e.g. pasta, wine, legumes, detergents, sauces, our peach jam, see figure 1) that are produced by the businesses in the network in order to sell them online and in shops that support cooperatives. They called it, 'pacco letterario', or literary package, due to the inclusion of books

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<sup>11</sup> *Pizzo mascherato*

in the box. The first year, they sold 1600 boxes. The second year, they aimed at 2000, but then something unexpected happened, which T. defined ‘an unsolicited stroke of luck’.<sup>12</sup>

During the public presentation of the box, one of the speakers accidentally made a pun. “Il *pacco* letterario é in realtà un grandissimo *pacco* alla Camorra. Facciamoglielo sto pacco!” /“The literary package is, in reality, an enormous blow to the Camorra. Let’s blow them off!” While the word play does not have much force in translation, it had a strong effect on the crowd at the launch. They all cheered and laughed and stood up to clap. T. was called up and told to interrupt the production immediately.

The punned rebranding increased sales by the hundreds. This discursive shift tapped to something that allowed for their market to open up. What was at work? T. describes this event as something that triggered a new phase in the life of his networks.

“Until then, people brought our products because we were “the good guys”. Now people are buying them because we make a good product”. (Personal interview, T., RES founder, 11 June 2015)

What T. underlines is that the market for solidary, ethically driven buyers, is far smaller than the market that recognises a clever wordplay. This new image was far more successful: by 2012 they managed to make €300,000 in revenue, selling over 24,000 packages.



Figure 1 Jam and box

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<sup>12</sup> *Botta di culo non richiesta*

While the content of the box remained unaltered, this new syntax gave it a new force. It was thus inherently not the meaning (the anti-mafia ethic) that made this box seductive, but its form (the disposition of the words). Indeed, as Kølvråa (2015) points out, affective discourses work on bodily dispositions, and have little relation to ‘truth’, that is, deeper cognitive interpretations of coherence. In order for these types of effects to be reached, however, the signs that circulate need to be shared and familiar: only then can a meta-communicative relation be achieved between emitter and receiver. Tarde called these “syllogisms of action” (1902:132). In this case, the pun expresses a sense of humour and wit that can be shared by a broader crowd than the one specifically disposed against the Camorra. The new concatenation of objects enables a different disposition of the box and its content: now the peaches and all the other food chains in it afford a larger audience.

Importantly, this novel disposition has retro-active effects on the organisations that relate to the box assemblage. Indeed NCO was formalised as a consortium only in 2012, *after* the expansion of the market, as it required stronger ties between the cooperatives. In fact this resulted in the establishment of common logistical frames that facilitated information exchange and coordination, and has allowed them to employ about sixty people (Caggiano & DeRosa 2015: 543).

2012 was also a terrible year for the *Terra dei fuochi* stigma: Deaths, tumours, intrigues and mutated organisms were increasingly represented by various media, making sales drop drastically. As the intensity of the toxic discourse grew, so did the need for different marketing strategies that could support the farmers and the surrounding grassroots networks.

Firstly, the farmer changed status from mere producer, to guardian of the territory. Monitoring the area, reporting on the status of the lands, became part of daily activity. Indeed, as the region gained media prominence, it also became the playground of scientific researchers who officially declared that only 5% of the soil is not safe for agricultural purpose. This technical attention to these soils became a possibility, as there is no land that is more monitored in the entire nation. In turn, lands that were found to be unfit for farming were not abandoned but rather, reformulated. The network has in fact begun to foster the experimentation of different types of crops in risky areas: hemp, flowers, poplar and soil cleansing/nutrient creating plants. Crops that are not ingestible but nonetheless valuable.

Consequently, the content and form of the box became more researched and sophisticated; the transformation of products began using increasingly archaic recipes, marketing strategies became increasingly dialectal and playful, and the cardboard used for the box was entirely made of recycled materials. This entailed a further expansion in the number and kind of actors involved in the struggle. Thus the reactive communicative strategy, the ensemble the words, images and materials, actually had effects on the practices and relationships that the *networks of activists* engaged in and their relationship to the territory.

### **Social Movement Terms that Speak to Assemblage**

The jam and its networks have made visible how this struggle transverses categories such as economy/social/environment/health. Tracing their organisations has made it possible to work across these, and instead seek out the details of the strategies that have worked; the arrangement between a legislative formula and certain types of property usage, the use of wit and the strategy of mimicking for territorial resonance, and the transversal types of network formation connected to producing new (and protecting existing) resources. All of these increased the possibility of establishing relations that are not Camorra dependent.

The theoretical tradition that has inspired this type of analysis is the one which is perhaps most adamantly dedicated to countering *a priori* orderings and hierarchies in social analysis: assemblage thinking. In many ways, assemblage thinking might be seen as diametrically opposite to many SM theories. However, these traditions share many interests. Both are keen to uncover diverse understandings of political organisation. Both are essentially interested in grasping how different orders come to be, what makes them last, and what makes them fall apart. Importantly, they both demonstrate a fascination with the theme of power.

Despite being called upon directly<sup>13</sup> by these approaches, SM theories have not fully engaged with this type of thought. However, assemblage thinking's opposition to the idea that the world is predisposed according to one specific principle (be it Nature, Allāh or Capitalism) and the consequent acknowledgement of non-humans as worthy social protagonists, can be of particular relevance to SM studies. Indeed many points of divergence within the field rotate around questions of hierarchy: do activists mobilise to maximise their personal interest or because they feel solidarity for others beyond themselves (does rationality or emotion order the world)? Are

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<sup>13</sup> DeLanda, for instance, speaks directly to the seminal work of Charles Tilly (2006:58-63).

waves of protest results of particular political opportunities, or of new values and collective identities (do institutions or cultures order the world)? Is it the internal organizational ties that determine social movement outcomes or their relationship to external organisations (do micro or macro factors order the world)? Assemblage approaches propose to put these questions aside and rather focus on how specific combinations of things form, potentiate and collapse different groupings.

Due to the scope of this article, I have picked out a few, in my view, useful terms that might be of interest to this readership. Instead of picking one SM approach over another, I compare some of the most common themes that different scholarships share, to assemblage thinking. Similarly, I take the liberty of picking ideas that derive from assemblage thinking instead of highlighting the diverse takes on these, as this type of debate is already bubbling in other arenas.<sup>14</sup>

Let me begin the comparison by using a social movement definition that was originally proposed to synthesise divergent views on the concept, namely Mario Diani's (1992:13):

“A social movement is a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity”.

Of this definition, I use three words in particular: network, conflict and identity.

### ***Network***

Networks have for a long played a central role in describing the formation, propagation, maintenance and success rate of movements. Authors have highlighted the coagulating role of pre-existing relationships, common goals, ideologies and enemies, strong leaders, but also of certain media or organisational structures. An assemblage analysis would not distinguish between these entry-points *a priori*. Establishing and strengthening links between groups through the diffusion of resources, ideas and information could be operated by railways as well as by skilled PRs. Likewise, a high level of resonance in interpretative frameworks could explain the emergence of a movement but so could a tsunami. Common goals could emerge from grieving a repressive regime as well as from a shocking aesthetic rupture. Not only would these

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<sup>14</sup> See (Bennett 2012; Hodder 2012; Harman 2016) for some of the deeper disagreements.

factors not require different analyses, but they *would have to be* combinable in a single one, as a network *is* precisely the assemblage of all these things rather than just the result of them.

Coherently with what Diani argues (2011), ‘networks are not just precursors or building blocks of collective action: they are in themselves organisational structures that can transcend the elemental units or organisation and individuals’. Yet, as Krinsky & Crossley (2014:3) have remarked, SM analyses have often been focused on ‘certain types of tie and the strength of those ties, over questions of how these types of tie form’. Assemblage thinking would precisely insist on what lies in between the ties and, also, on the effects that the specific combination of elements has on the ties themselves, as well as on other ties. The focus of analysis would not be the network, but the network’s formation (Latour 2005a).

For example, in my analysis I traced how the box in which the jam was contained allowed the underlying communities to generate new resources. This allowed for the creation of new jobs, the expansion of the connected enterprises, and the visibility of the phenomenon. In turn, this increased their control of their territory, and consequently, a reduction of area that is prone to Camorra control. A characteristic of assemblages is in fact that the whole acts upon the parts in ways in which the single parts could not act upon each other (DeLanda 2006). Thus the whole either *constrains or enables* the parts that compose it to act differently. This means that there is at once an ‘upward’ relationship given by how the parts relate to the whole (the micro to macro relation), and a ‘downward’ relationship that the whole has to the parts (the macro to micro relation). Furthermore, not only does a whole have effects on its subcomponents, but the togetherness of the parts has the power to create new parts. This is exemplified by the box’s shift in aesthetics in relation to the shift in the media discourse. The accidental humorous twist to the box (the part), resulted in novel types of *activities* the activists (the whole) engaged in; the interaction with non-edible crops, the expansion of private and public subjects associated to the network, the inclusion of recycling enterprises, and the use of cultural heritage to transform the products. Thus, in this understanding the network is *hybrid* (composed of different types of objects) and it is specific combinations that are *generative* of other networks.

### ***Conflict***

Social movements are generally thought of as being aimed at changing a situation or voicing an injustice, and in some way mobilising others to do the same. Authors disagree on whether movements are opposed to large scale ‘systemic’ factors or whether they can be against

particular policies, specific malpractices or codes of conduct. Relatedly, they disagree on whether movements are organised in physical communities, looser networks that culminate in mass protests or if they have little or no physical interaction with others, operating for instance entirely on blogs. These disagreements are however, questions of scale, not kind: SM scholars agree that a movement is in conflict, or in opposition to something else.

As early as the 1930s, collective action was interpreted as a distinct social phenomenon, characterised by the participant's *will* to transform a certain order in society (Blumer 1939). As this was a reaction to streams of thought that saw collective action as a slack, irrational and feminine outburst, the rational element became distinctive to collective behaviour, and later, social movement thinking (Borch 2012). Thus conflict is strongly tied to intentionality. While assemblage thinking does not equate opposition to intentionality, it also considers social action that matches means to ends, and takes these seriously.

DeLanda notes that 'rational' activities, those that match means to ends, entail carrying out a series of actions that involve complex interactions and assessments with the surrounding environment (2006: 22-25). Solving a means-matching end dilemma will involve the actor using a set of diverse skills to deal with the situations he encounters on his way to achieving his goal. These are thus not merely in an actor's head, but are a result of concrete interactions. Thus, the relation between goal and action is neither linear nor abstracted from a context. It is embedded in a context that requires the activist to evaluate his movement, speech and behaviour in relation to others *and* their end.

Similarly, Yates' work (2015) has highlighted the nuanced nature of prefiguration, a term most commonly used to describe activities that match means to ends. Yates argued that the term prefiguration should not be used as an empty descriptor that assesses the level of homology between the movement's goals and ends, but as an analytical tool that investigates the practices, interactions and expressions involved in the *process* of matching means to ends. This implies not treating a movement's intention as a seamless and transcendent whole, but rather, highlighting the material and expressive components partaking in the achievement of a set of goals. Similarly, an assemblage analysis might trace actions aimed at matching means to end, without limiting itself to tracing the coherence or the meaning of the goals (the semantics of the conflict), but rather tracing the way goals relate different things and people (the syntax of the conflict).

One example of the syntax in this conflict is traceable in the development of commoning strategies. The anti-camorra issue was at first primarily expressed through demonstrations, but activists found that these were not producing sufficient results. This pushed many to seek out ways to impede the spreading of noxious economies, such as alternatively deploying elements that are constitutive to waste and cement cycles. In the specific confiscated asset I discussed, the combination between the legal formula and the fruit activated novel arrangements between previously unmonitored land and labour, and between previously unconnected actors such as farmers, juvenile detention centres, associations and jam manufacturers. Because managing public property is so costly, many activists form social cooperatives *in order to* keep up with expenses. It is not that the ‘movement’ as a transcendent whole, saw the establishment of social enterprises on confiscated assets as a mean to resolve ‘the mafia system’ on a micro-scale. Rather, it is an on-going process where institutions, legal frames, activists, and types of assets interact, learn, and develop different strategies to cope with diverse mafia-type relationships. In fact, confiscated assets are increasingly used as commoning sites, where knowledge, experience and skills are exchanged across territories. Thus, it is the *type* of engagement with assets that travels to other sites and other relations, permitting experimentation with diverse strategies for diverse mafias. The interesting element of the opposition lies precisely in the dynamic shift of practices and actors that become involved in opposing mafia relations: it is the conflict’s development- how it comes to matter across scales- that is in focus.

### *Identity*

The concept of collective identity has been foundational to explaining what keeps a movement together and what defines its boundaries. Indeed, identity is a highly relational concept as it involves a counter-part (what we are not). Uses and views on what identity is differ greatly.<sup>15</sup> Some authors use it to describe how individuals connect to SMs. Others prefer to use it to describe the identity of the movement from a birds-eye view, namely how the whole relates to the outside. Identity has become a particularly relevant concept for scholars who oppose the more ‘rational’ views that for instance, attribute an individual’s adherence to a movement to his personal cost-benefit evaluations (Fominaya 2010: 393). In opposition to this, these tend to focus on the emotions, symbols and frames of meaning that unite adherents.

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<sup>15</sup> See Fominaya (2010) for a thorough overview.

Assemblage thinking espouses all these views at once. The individual's propensity to identify with a collective is just as important as the group's inclination to relate to, and thereby identify with, other groups. Indeed these two parameters are co-constitutive; a tiny individual shift in identification could have effects on the entire group's attitude to other groups, and likewise, a generalised shift in the external coalitions could radically transform an individual's behaviour. For example, since many activists have reclaimed land they have had to form novel coalitions with enterprises and cooperatives. Likewise, these alliances have implied that environmentalists have had to learn how to farm and effectively market their produce.

Furthermore, an assemblage's causal (rational) and catalytic (emotional) components are not in contrast but are complementary. Indeed, an assemblage is held together, and thus defined, by two distinct but overlapping tendencies; one material, the other expressive (DeLanda 2006:12-14).

Components playing a material role involve bodies and their disposition and ordering. These are for instance specific legislations that restrict movement or grant the possibility to vote, certain types of media such as radios or online platforms that facilitate communication between bodies, but also food shortages or available campaign funds that limit or increase the bodies' energy and movement. In the case at hand, this is represented by the toxic ecology. The need to cope with the pollution of the flora and fauna brought institutions, entrepreneurs, and farmers together to develop strategies to halt and transform this form of criminal enterprise.

Components playing an expressive role include linguistic and non-linguistic elements. These could be shared discourses that resonate in the community, such as 'immigrants are stealing our jobs', but also shared norms that are embodied through self-regulatory practices, such as wearing different types of clothes for different occasions, or stopping in front of a red light. In our case this is represented by the use of humour that allowed anti-camorra products to be appreciated beyond a fair-trade niche. The way these components are expressed and mixed in an assemblage, can either increase the internal homogeneity of the movement (territorialisation) or destabilise its boundaries (deterritorialisation). The identity of an assemblage is strongly tied to how often a certain association (of ideas or materials) is repeated. To repeat an association of ideas does not necessarily mean to consciously reflect over them: repetition is not the same as self-perception. As I discussed with the use of the pun on the box, if a movement taps into discourses that already resonate within the broader community, the identity of the group might more easily spread and homogenise. But the same could happen if a highly heterogeneous group

of people is repeatedly lacking water, and coalesce around the sensation of thirst or fear. This is represented by the farmers who are losing their livelihoods due to the intoxication of their produce and thus join the movement. The habitual associations between things and ideas can of course be disrupted, and these instances would cause a loss of identity and stability. However, these processes are not rooted to one particular territory: it is possible that the identity of a group even strengthens if the members disperse and flee the country.

Underlying this is the idea that the parts of assemblages are not fused together in a seamless web (2006:10) but rather, the whole which they compose, its identity, is a result of certain types of interactions. Thus parts have a certain level of autonomy, and are characterised by relations of *exteriority*. DeLanda distinguishes between the properties of components, which are given, and their *capacities to interact* with other entities, which are open and undefinable a priori. Here there is a distinction between the potential and the actual. Assemblages are not united by fixed properties but rather by *dispositions*. While the dispositions of the parts are related to their properties (anti-Camorra politics is aimed at requalifying waste-treatment plants *because* Camorra profits on the destruction of flora and fauna) they cannot be *reduced* to them because in order to be exercised, they need to refer to the dispositions of other entities (the public management of the waste-cycle is so catastrophic that activists being using economic strategies to protect their territory). This means that a part of an assemblage can be put into another context and act differently, *without this necessarily implying a loss of identity* of the part or the whole (the identity of the anti-Camorra movement is still anti-Camorra if it is expressed through economic organisation rather than through demonstrations against waste-treatment facilities).

This implies that instead of thinking of social movements as seamless wholes that define the *nature* their component parts,<sup>16</sup> we grant the component properties of social movements (e.g. pamphlets, ideologies, coordinated networks) the ability to interact with other entities without these interactions changing the terms of association. It is the repeated oppositional identity of a group (in whichever form) and the disposition to invite other similar groups to do so (network formation) that is of importance. The relationships through which this is expressed are not central to the *nature* of the whole and should not be determined in absence of actors. The benefit of this move is simply to allow diverse forms of contention to be taken seriously, and more

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<sup>16</sup> “There is a broad understanding (...) that recognizes social movements as essentially reticulate in structure, and therefore amenable to analysis through metaphors and formal operations that capture the properties of their networks”. (Krinsky & Crossley 2014:1). This is a common example of this type of thinking, where the whole (SM) cannot have emergent properties because its parts are defined by their properties rather than their dispositions.

broadly, to transfer the vast knowledge that has been generated on SMs to different forms of organisation.

### **Working with piles of everything**

As I have traced, assemblage and SM theories share many interests; after all, they are both, in different manners, sociologies of association. However, running through these key terms to SM scholarship shows how many of the discrepancies in the literature revolve around the question of ‘which principle orders the world’ (political systems, cultures or personal gains)? On the other hand, assemblage approaches do not provide *a priori* hierarchies and do not reduce reality to one ‘category’ of object. Until here, the solution would seem simple: these types of approaches to SM might benefit from ontologically democratising their field of inquiry.

This democratisation, or ‘dingpolitik’ (Latour 2005b), however poses challenges in terms of point of access. Thinking of any phenomena as a pile of everything clearly requires different engagements with empirical material. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari themselves noted how there is no beginning or end to rhizomatic<sup>17</sup> forms of research (such as assemblage thinking), but how they instead, by definition, lie ‘in the middle’ of things (1987:25). While this may be theoretically compelling, it poses challenges when working empirically, which is why, for instance, ANT has received many critiques for being methodologically poor. One of the most common questions is: how does one draw the boundaries of a field, and express it in a form that somebody other than oneself can use and understand? Inevitably, Deleuze and Guattari are not remembered for their clarity. Clearly, mapping a network based on representations of the network (the shared values that organisations might share, or the connections activists might feel to other organisations) poses this challenge to an entirely different degree.

So why make life difficult when SM theory has already developed nuanced and highly technical models of reality? The entire point of rhizomatic thinking is not to reproduce an assemblage with fidelity (how would one draw it?), nor to trace its lineage (where and when would one begin?) but rather to dig out less visible connections between things. Why is this important? Because it allows to make difference, rather than sameness, visible (Gibson-Graham 2006). If knowledge is a productive and constitutive force rather than a detached reflection of reality

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<sup>17</sup> Deleuze and Guattari notably compare rhizomatic thinking, which has multiple entry and exit points to data representation and interpretation, to arborescent thinking, which follows linear, hierarchical and binary paths of thought which have clear-cut beginnings and ends (1987).

(Gibson-Graham 2000), then it matters what we ally ourselves to as researchers. Assemblage thinking could help us move away from debating ‘matters of fact’, to sharing solutions to common ‘matters of concern’, as Latour elegantly put it (2004). My choice here has been to dig out the details of some techniques that are making non-mafia relations possible.

My engagement with anti-Camorra activists taught me that not only is it difficult, but also counterproductive to distinguish between what is environmental, what is social, and what is economic. Instead, I learned to open up to the complexity of this struggle and allow different elements to play their part in shaping the identities, networks and conflicts involved in the field. Here, non-human elements played a part in both shaping mafia relationships but also in rearranging them. This is not to say, as is sometimes assumed, that working with assemblage approaches implies the necessary inclusion of non-human elements, but rather, it implies that they should not necessarily be excluded. This case also suggests that mobilising things and economising them became relevant to this movement after years of experimenting diverse forms of collective action. Many of the people involved in earlier waves of protest are the same: they are merely mobilising differently because they have learned from and adapted to their surrounding environment in order to achieve political results. Economising is thus a shift in the anti-Camorra repertoire (Tilly 1982).

Moreover, assemblage theories have a lot to offer any field of study dedicated to understanding non-institutional politics and societal transformation in increasingly interconnected, layered, and blurry times. While my interest lies in the boundaries between politics and economy, this tradition is apt for exploring any type of boundary. For instance it could further insights on non-western movements, which are not only under-researched, but also often over-bearing of political models and concepts that flatten diversity (Fadaee 2016). Likewise, the addition of non-human actors allows us to include media in a way that avoids technological reductionism (Treré & Mattoni 2015), as assemblage thinking is adamantly irreductionist (Latour 1988:151-263). This tradition deserves attention from SM theory, particularly in a time where human-thing relationships are rapidly transforming. But opening up to this approach would require letting go of quick-fixes and universally applicable categories, which makes it a ‘slowciology’ (Latour 2005a:165). This is no easy task. This paper has simply suggested some possible starting points for SM studies.

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