

# Neomelodica Music: Formal, Informal and Criminal Dimensions of Naples' Marginalised Entertainment Industry

*Original article*

## Neomelodica Music: Formal, Informal and Criminal Dimensions of Naples' Marginalised Entertainment Industry

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**Abstract:** Neapolitan neomelodica music is popular among listeners in Southern Italy and abroad. Its contents and aesthetic qualities are depicted as a sign of cultural degradation or as an expression of the criminal culture characterising, as the cliché would have it, Naples' marginalised underclass. The dominant paradigm in journalistic and criminological analyses describes its scene as mostly unprofessional and largely embedded in a mafia-run entertainment circuit through which Camorra members reinforce their popular consensus and economic domination over local communities. The aim of this article is to deconstruct this dominant view by using an ethnographic approach to analyse several case studies of neomelodica music. The pre-existing literature mostly criticises moral and cultural aspects of the phenomenon, while the public debate tends to misinterpretate and underestimate the real dimensions of neomelodica music as a professionally organised and structured cultural business. The unrecognised status of neomelodica music complicates a more articulated view of its political-economic modes of functioning and on the role played by dominant criminal actors in the field. This article concludes that, rather than being a product of an endogenous degenerate local political economy, the informal and illicit aspects of the neomelodica business can be read as the consequence of its marginalisation in the Italian cultural landscape and entertainment industry.

**Keywords:** neomelodica music, camorra, popular culture, informal economy, socio-economic marginalisation

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## Introduction

*Neomelodica* is a multiform Neapolitan music genre that embraces a variety of styles and musical features. These include elements from the local tradition, Italian *musica leggera* and international Anglo-American and Latin American pop music. The lyrics are written and sung in the colloquial language spoken in Naples and its peripheries, a mix of standard Italian and Neapolitan dialect including personalised and Italianised expressions (Vacalebre, 1999; Tarli and De Iulio 2009). With few exceptions, Campania is the region where *neomelodica* is produced. In terms of diffusion and circulation, it is principally listened to in Southern Italy's urban peripheries and low-income areas where it has tens of thousands of fans, as well as in those regions in Northern Italy and those countries such as Germany, Belgium or the United States where Southern Italian immigrant minorities are historically present (Pine and Pepe, 2013). *Neomelodica* singers are usually called to perform to weddings and other private ceremonies, *piazza* concerts and playback shows in local television channels.

Since its emergence in the early 1980s, *neomelodica* has attracted criticism over its musical qualities, the themes used in its lyrics and the dynamics of its production and commercialisation. Its aesthetic forms have been described as a degradation of local artistic styles, of Neapolitan musical traditions and of its dialect. More than any other musical style appeared in the city in the last three decades, *neomelodica* has been perceived as an unacceptably inferior expression of the local musical tradition. From the mid-2000s onwards, with the emergence of non-scientific literature, newspaper articles, movies and TV series illustrating the social and cultural characteristics of the Camorra, *neomelodica* has been seen and criticised as a cultural form reflecting the ideas of an endogenously criminal society.

The twofold criticism mentioned above has produced aesthetico-artistic and ethico-legalist stereotypes about *neomelodica* and its milieu. These stereotypes have often overlapped and converged into one forceful discursive order. Indeed, the depiction of *neomelodica* as a culturally and aesthetically inferior genre dramatically merged with the generalised criminal stigmatisation of its authors and audience. From being merely labelled as bad music, *neomelodica* has become the music of the Camorra, the product of popular culture employed by criminals to reinforce their popular consensus over local communities (Mazzola, 2015). Significantly, with few exceptions, the dominant view about this music and its people is scarcely supported by empirical research. Most critics, indeed, focus on analyses of the textual contents of songs, on the aesthetic of video clips and on the public behaviour of some artists<sup>[1]</sup>.

Criminal understandings of *neomelodica* rely upon the paradigmatic identification of producers, singers and listeners as belonging to a homogeneous group of people sharing not only the same social space, but also the same cultural and economic conditions. *Neomelodica* people would be part of an alternative society living on the cultural margins of its legal counterpart, inhabiting neighborhood-states<sup>[2]</sup> where shared moral norms and the state's claim to authority are rejected, while antisocial and criminal practices are commonly accepted (Sales and Ravveduto, 2006). As a consequence, *neomelodica* music is not recognised as a product in the dominant cultural industry, and is marginalised in the local and national creative sector. Rather, it is represented as a largely

nonprofessional practice and as the reflection and the product of a specific political economy based on the intersection of formal, informal and illicit activities that characterise Naples' urban peripheries.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the deconstruction of this dominant view by reporting and analysing some cases in which *neomelodica* can be seen as an extremely commodified object. A product of popular culture taking shape through highly structured—although barely visible—networks of production and distribution made up of professionals including authors, composers and performers, but also venues, managers, agents and brokers. While being recognised as formal actors in the official culture business, they also dominate the *neomelodica* field by employing a series of informal and illicit strategies. The hypothesis is that, rather than a product of an endogenous degenerate local political economy, the informal and illicit aspects of the *neomelodica* business can be read as the consequence of the structural and cultural marginalisation of the genre. The unrecognised status of *neomelodica* music complicates a more articulated view over its political-economic modes of functioning and over the role played by dominant actors in the field. The emphasis on moral and cultural criticism of the genre leads to misinterpretations and underestimations of its real dimension as a professionally organised and structured business. It creates informal spaces in which dominant actors and local élites of organised crime can operate and capitalise on its economic potential.

The information analysed and discussed in the following sections is based on several years of ethnographic research in the *neomelodica* milieu divided into two different phases. Firstly, the author participated as a musician in over 150 *neomelodica* performances between 2010 and 2012, and conducted participant observation following the principles of the *participant-as-observer* strategy. During this phase, the researcher established contacts with participants and gatekeepers and gained direct access to the field. Secondly, the author conducted several non-directive interviews with participants including artists, producers, managers and other key participants between 2012 and 2015. The conversations reported and discussed in this article were from three key informants who were interviewed during the second phase of research.

## **Working in the Scene behind a Normative Wall**

To understand the structural circumstances that caused the progressive marginalisation of *neomelodica music* it is important to highlight that, as well as much of Neapolitan modern musical expressions, the *neomelodica* scene emerged after the economic and structural collapse of the local music industry. Since the second half of the 1800s, over the course of a century, an extremely vibrant musical scene attracting composers, musicians, interpreters and producers had developed in Naples. The city was a renowned place for music schools, auditions, performances and encounters between artists and managers. It hosted the *Piedigrotta* festival, one of Europe's largest and most attractive musical event and was an established pole for music production and

distribution. Music, in all its forms including live shows, publications and recordings was the most lucrative activity of a prosperous entertainment industry in the city<sup>[3]</sup>.

From an economic perspective, Neapolitan music business entered a steep and relentless decline in the mid-1900s, with the affirmation of national Italian labels. Modern Neapolitan music struggled to reach large commercial success and the traditional *canzone napoletana*, while becoming part of the national cultural imaginary, did not stimulate the development of a local system of production. On the contrary, it was gradually absorbed into Italy's cultural landscape and circulated widely through festivals and folkloric ensembles that fostered the repetition of its conventional aesthetic forms to the detriment of artistic innovation.

The early 1970s saw the emergence of instrumentists and composers endowed with outstanding technical ability who integrated the local melodic tradition with American black-music styles and Afro-Caribbean rhythms<sup>[4]</sup>. However, in spite of the fact that the city entered a moment of unmatched musical creativity characterised by the hybridisation of local traditions and international styles, the structures of music production and distribution did not evolve. From a sociological point of view, furthermore, the local music scene gradually lost the transclass appeal which was the principal trait of the *canzone napoletana*, a characteristic that made songs and singers extremely popular and successfully marketable among the international bourgeoisie as well as, for example, among the masses of Italian migrants. Modern Neapolitan music became associated with the traditional dichotomy between the highbrow and lowbrow.

While representing the epithet for quality popular music at the national level, modern musical experiments shaped a deep fracture in the social and cultural composition of the local audience. Besides highbrow popular music, a lowbrow modern music scene emerged in the city in the 1970s. This scene took its roots from a series of productions influenced by the *canzone sceneggiata*, a form of musical drama born in the early twentieth century and revitalised in those years by a famous interpreter, Mario Merola. Compared to the traditional song and the post-1970s international experiments, the *canzone sceneggiata* was characterised by less sophisticated lyricism and compositional forms (Scialò, 2002). Music journalists and critics have seen *neomelodica* as resulting from the popularisation and modernisation of this local musical tradition. The neo-melodic scene, indeed, is considered as an elaboration of the theatrical realism of the *sceneggiata* into a largely commodified product aimed at local popular masses (Aiello, 1997; Vacalebre, 1999; Tarli and De Iulis, 2009).

*Neomelodica* conveys cultural representations of Neapolitan urban marginality. Its textual and stylistic elements are strongly attached to the locality and often perceived by critics as an expression of anti-globalisation and excessive selfreferentialism of Naples' popular masses<sup>[5]</sup>. More precisely, *neomelodica* is perceived as contrasting with mainstream popular music for its aesthetic representations and thematic contents. On one hand, it is regarded as a culturally limited and anachronistic musical expression for its sonic features, including melancholic modulations and melismatic singing. On the other hand, aesthetic criticism merges with sociocultural judgements as

the genre is seen as representing the margins of the mainstream society, the ghettos and the underworld. These criticisms are integral to the historical marginalisation of Naples' underclass (Allum, 1973) and clichéd image of the city and the whole South of Italy as traditionally constructed within Italian public discourse (Schneider, 1998; Moe, 2002).

The sociocultural representations that the aesthetic and thematic features of *neomelodica* convey generated what Aiello refers to as a form of cultural racism, coming from the local and national mainstream society, towards the Neapolitan masses (Aiello, 1997: 42). Forms of conservative cultural criticism produced and reinforced symbolic obstacles to a larger diffusion of the genre and a more linear development of its business. However, this dynamic alone is not sufficient to explain the marginalisation of *neomelodica* in national culture industry. As mentioned above, it is with the affirmation of a criminal stigma that conservative criticism towards the etico-aesthetic elements of *neomelodica* has acquired strong normative power.

In the last ten years, the idea of sociocultural backwardness included in the criticism of *neomelodica* has merged with the affirmation of a discourse about this music as tied with a crime-minded society. This discourse has affirmed itself in a moment in which the reputation of Naples was nosediving and the city's underclass was often criminalised in the press coverage of local news. This trend can be exemplified by the generalised inaccuracy and stereotypical assumptions that informed press reports of the rubbish crisis affecting the city in 2004 and 2008. National media have been criticised for overlooking the complex reality of the problem and maintaining an a priori connection between the problem of waste management and organised crime, and between the latter and the numerous protests organised by the local population at the peak of the crisis (Petrillo, 2009). International media, similarly, have regularly covered Naples' problems with inaccurate and spectacular representations of a crime-minded city (Dines, 2013).

If Naples has continuously been depicted as an 'out of the ordinary' urban setting by journalists and academics, and its peripheries as the hotbeds of an endogenously and homogeneously criminal culture, *neomelodica* became the soundtrack of this underworld. In particular, direct associations of *neomelodica* with organised crime have started to circulate following Roberto Saviano's book *Gomorrah*. *Neomelodica* songs featured high in the soundtrack of *Gomorrah*'s successful film adaptation directed by Matteo Garrone and became an established cultural element of the Camorra milieu in the public imaginary. Following the heightened interest in the social and cultural aspect of the Camorra raised by Saviano's book, local and national mainstream media have started to depict *neomelodica* music not only as an inferior cultural expression of the popular masses, but also as a practice representing and exalting deviant and criminal lifestyles. These representations appeared in the journalistic and media debate, but were often also supported by scholars and politicians. One of the most evident examples of that is the book *Le Strade della Violenza* ('The Streets of Violence') published by center-left politician and writer Isaia Sales and sociologist Marcello Ravveduto in 2006. The authors identified *neomelodica* as the expression of the illegal and criminal attitude that would be typical of Naples' periphery, where this music would give cultural recognition to a deviant urban underclass (Sales and Ravveduto, 2006). The book was

presented by the Minister of Interior, Giuliano Amato, who supported the authors' perspective by accusing *neomelodica* singers of sharing and supporting a positive public image of Camorra members<sup>[6]</sup>.

## Neomelodica professional hierarchies

While the different forms of criticism of *neomelodica* can be seen as a confirmation of long-term cultural stereotypes about the backward and culturally criminal Neapolitan plebs (Teti, 1993; Petrillo, 2014), they prevent an in-depth understanding of the political economy that regulates the business activities surrounding this musical scene. Observers of the *neomelodica* phenomenon, rather than questioning the distribution of power and the role of local élites in the processes of production and distribution, share a generalised understanding of the music business as a direct reflection of the Neapolitan deviant socioeconomic norms. Producers, singers and listeners are deemed to belong to the same sociocultural context and to operate in a largely informal—when not completely illicit—network of relations. In other words, the paradigmatic identification of *neomelodica* actors with a society characterised by criminal attitudes and illicit conventions is often assumed without providing more specific descriptions of the structures of production and the role of participants.

Apart from the generalisations concerning actors and structures of action, another element of the public discourse that complicates the study of *neomelodica* is the lack of recognition of the genre in the dominant music industry (Pine, 2012: 76). This leads to great confusion and uncertainty about what kind of songs, albums or live performances can be identified as *neomelodica*. At the same time, there is no consensus among specialists and in the public opinion over the artistic or professional characteristics through which to identify the singers. As noted by Caiafa (2013: 460), the *neomelodica* scene produces two marketable items: songs and idols. These are produced and promoted following the marketing model of the mainstream music industry. The songs circulate through singles, albums and videoclips, and the singers get airtime in radio and television stations, participate in public events, release interviews and have their websites, fanpages and social media public accounts. At the same time, the *neomelodica* business does not rely on the commercial channels of the mainstream music industry, nor on the sale of physical or digital products such as sound recordings, videos, sheet music, concerts and other large live performances. On the contrary, the most popular songs and albums are pirated and sold on the black market in Italy and abroad (Pine and Pepe, 2013). *Neomelodica* performances are only rarely organised in public concert halls and even more rarely generate profits from tickets purchased by the public.

Within a system of production and distribution that has been reduced to a locally limited and increasingly failing music market, producers and entrepreneurs have found profitable business opportunities in a variety of deregulated and fragmented activities. Among them, the principal source of economic profit is weddings and other private ceremonies, most of which take place in

restaurants and party halls in the region of Naples. The cachet for a thirty minute appearance, significantly called *flash*, ranges from a few hundred euros for young and less known artists to over two thousand euros for the most popular ones. Musicians, technicians, managers and drivers get paid separately, for a total amount that can easily exceed four or five thousand euros for a single *flash*. The frequency of the gigs may vary according to the season, going from a dozen a month in winter to two or three hundred during late spring and summer, when a popular singer can be hired to perform twenty times over a single weekend. It is not unusual to have more than one singer performing at a single wedding, or more gigs to be done by one of them in the same venue.

In the field, professional actors recognise the quality of the singers through a series of factors. Firstly, the quantity of music produced, recorded or copyrighted is a fundamental requisite for a successful *neomelodico* to be identified as such and respected by his peers in the circuit. A veteran can have tens of albums and hundreds of songs to his name, written and arranged for himself or for other singers who can enjoy large popularity while not having such a long-timed professional background. Although *neomelodica* discographies are not integrated in the mainstream industry, they do not exist in the charts and are not classified in record stores or national music magazines, most of the songs produced locally by affirmed artists are registered on the national copyright collecting agency *SIAE*. Another important element to identify a professional singer and to differentiate a successful *neomelodico* is the quantity of ceremony concerts performed in one year.

These conditions often contrast with accounts of *neomelodica* circulating in the public debate and, in particular, when some singers grab the headlines with their real or alleged implications with the Camorra. One meaningful instance is the case of Nello Liberti, a little-known singer who was sent to trial in 2012 for singing the praise of the Camorra boss Vincenzo Oliviero in his song 'O *Capoclan* ('The Clan Boss'). Liberti was identified as a *neomelodica* singer in the press coverage<sup>[7]</sup> and publicly condemned for the moral contents of his musical production. Significantly, neither his artistic background nor his professional career were put into question. In the field, however, Liberti was often labelled as a 'fake *neomelodico*'. This point was noted by Raffaele<sup>[8]</sup>, a popular singersongwriter and producer of *neomelodica* music. Since his debut in 1985, Raffaele released twenty-two personal albums and registered over three hundred songs as arranger, author or co-author with *SIAE*. The singer pointed out that the media overhyped the case of 'O *Capoclan* and reported the facts with significant inaccuracies and omissions:

[...] Who knew Nello Liberti before all the rumours about 'O *Capoclan*? [...] someone who came out of nowhere, someone who barely does ten gigs a year, and says that the mafia boss is a good man, that he's feared and respected. That's his own idea, ok, but does this mean that all *neomelodici* are criminals? That's bullshit, it's only to get publicity, even if I think that this story killed his career instead. But I'd like to ask those who reported the news: did you ask around who Nello Liberti is? Have you checked how many songs he wrote, how many lyrics, how many compositions, how many times he went on stage or how many ceremonies he goes to in one year? I'm a singer, I live off music, I wake up in the morning and work with music. I have a ten-hour session in the studio where I record for me and my customers. I don't think that's his case.<sup>[9]</sup>

While media accounts reproduced and confirmed the commonsensical understanding about *neomelodica* as an unprofessional and improvised practice, the information collected in the field, on the contrary, gives an image of a scene characterised by a specific professional structure and economic hierarchy. The possibility for an artist to occupy a top position is subordinated to his capability to produce songs or albums and, more importantly, to the number of ceremonies he performs to. These conditions are obviously not related to an exclusive symbolic dimension dividing professional singers from amateurs, but rather they are related to the earnings of a successful artist and, inherently, to the structural dominance that he can exert in the field. Ceremonies, indeed, represent a site where enormous capitals circulate:

How do I make money? Forget about selling CDs...I make most of my money from *the* weddings, of course! You can't imagine how much a family can spend for a wedding over here. Same with baptisms, communions or other family parties. I get twelve hundred euros for one show, a quick ten-song gig; double pay for going outside the region. In one year we can do up to one hundred and fifty ceremonies, it depends on the situation. If you make a new album, a bit of television, radio, promotion, etcetera, you will be called more often. It is much harder than doing twenty-odd concerts per year, like big artists do, but I assure you I can compete with the earnings of a famous popstar.<sup>[10]</sup>

Ceremonies are also an interesting site where actors other than the artists can emerge to be dominant in the *neomelodica* industry. While popular names like Raffaele do not need any particular management service and often rely on a relative or a close friend for the organisation of their work, novice singers are commonly managed by well-connected intermediaries, agents and impresarios. One important asset for a singer to be hired in ceremonies is to have access to the relational capital of the *neomelodica* alternative industry. Some actors are particularly influential as they can strongly condition the artistic careers:

When you are unknown, in the very beginning, you need to rely on someone who has the contacts. In that case, you don't really need to be good, I mean, if they want to endorse you as a singer, you don't need anything else but doing what they tell you to do. They can provide everything because they own or control studios, radios, TV stations and restaurants. They can produce your album, find your ceremonies and even drive you to the concert place. This has a cost, of course. It's like when you sign a contract with a big label: you have your cachet but they take all the rest. And when you are working for a manager, it's common to be sold like a package, you know the three-for-two deal? Those who want you for their wedding must take also a couple of other singers from the same agency.<sup>[11]</sup>

Differently from Raffaele, Nello is only an interpreter of *neomelodica* and cannot produce music on his own. He is a singer with over twenty years of experience, but has never been able to emancipate himself from an external management. He has been collaborating with an agency and working together with other singers:

When I started in 1996 I couldn't believe I'd make a living out of music. No big money, of course, but I had my fans and I used to be the support act of a big name. I don't even know how much they asked for my show, but I was happy with the money they gave me.<sup>[12]</sup>

Nello's case is particularly interesting for understanding the factors that shape the professional hierarchies of the *neomelodica* system of production. Throughout his career, the singer released seven personal albums and became popular among a relatively large audience. Nevertheless, his professional activity was always subordinate to the action and interest of other actors:

When the big star left the agency and decided to be independent in the business, I found myself almost unemployed. My manager had another big name to work with but I couldn't work with them cause they had plenty of emerging singers to promote, kids who could ask for half of the money because they didn't have a family to feed.<sup>[13]</sup>

In particular, the singer identified one key factor in the creation and evolution of *neomelodica* careers. In his view:

[...] The most important thing is to make contact with everybody. And you can only succeed if you are able to move things. You have different options: you are a composer and crank out a lot of music, or a songwriter, a good one, and everybody wants you to write lyrics. You can make a lot of contacts this way, and you won't be put aside when you lose popularity. Cos it's normal sometimes to lose popularity, you know. If you write music and lyrics, you can't be put aside, cos you've made yourself indispensable.<sup>14</sup>

From this quote we can see that musical-artistic abilities play an important role in the creation of professional networks and in the definition of power relations in the *neomelodica* scene. By comparing the information collected from Raffaele and Nello, an important fact that emerges is that, apart from artistic qualities, the *neomelodica* professional hierarchy is regulated by other structural elements. On the one hand, only those affirmed artists who hold the means of production, both the artistic/technical know-how and the economic resources to produce and spread music for themselves and other singers, can gain important profit within the *neomelodica* business. On the other, both informants said that artistic qualities and compositional skills are very important factors, but they also maintained that these factors are not essential for dominating the *neomelodica* industry. Those actors who are identified as being economically dominant in the field are those who are able to mobilise important economic resources in a diversified range of activities. Nello, in particular, provided a description of the *neomelodica* business as regulated by an economic élite made of polyedric entrepreneurs:

[...] As well as representing labels, studios and radios, they also have close relations with the restaurants. It is the same business. They can make you famous, the most requested for the weddings, or they can destroy your career. The game is clear and simple: the rich win, the poor lose, it's up to you to choose which team to play for.<sup>[14]</sup>

## Neomelodica dominant actors

The tactics through which *neomelodica* entrepreneurs can rise to a dominant position in the local music business do not differ from those of organised crime. In this sense, it can be useful to draw upon the conceptual framework of a long-time ethnography published by American anthropologist Jason Pine (2012), the most relevant among those rare studies engaging in field research on *neomelodica*. Pine rejects the common understanding of *neomelodica* as completely embedded in a mafia-run entertainment circuit. Drawing on Mary Louise Pratt's terminology (1991), the author employs the term 'contact zone' to describe the alternative political economy where singers, producers and managers operate. According to Pine:

The neomelodica music is one of many instances where the so-called formal, informal, and illicit economies overlap in Campania and beyond. The scene is a contact zone where the art of making do brushes up against organised crime (Pine, 2012: 9).

While providing a clear and sophisticated outline of the social, cultural and economic contexts of *neomelodica*, the findings presented by Pine seem to emphasise the non-professional and do-it-yourself aspects of the music production and distribution. Participants in the processes of music-making are described as being engaged in materially precarious and morally ambiguous tactics that can merge with organised crime at any time. They are seen to be sharing the same social, cultural and even economic conditions of their public. Pine maintains a specific image of the singers, in particular, as reflecting the nonprofessional dimension of *neomelodica* and its milieu, a point highlighted also in following works in which these are described as "[...] often poor and/or unemployed young males (and some females) who seek opportunities to earn an income" (Pine and Pepe, 2013: 1). Rather than describing the precarious spaces characterised by formal, informal and illicit practices in which individuals in search of an improvement in their living conditions accept to operate, the concept of contact zone can be fruitfully applied to explain the action of *neomelodica* dominant actors and entrepreneurs in the field. The nature of this action is varied and includes legal activities, informal activities such as fiscal offences, tax evasion, money laundering, and illicit activities involving forms of territorial influence, intimidation and the exercise of material and personal violence. In this sense, the political economy of *neomelodica* can be read as being located within the so-called 'grey area' in which the Camorra does not always occupy a hegemonic position, but rather it operates as an intermediary and establishes relations between formal and informal activities and actors (Sciarrone, 1998).

The most well-known and influential actors in the *neomelodica* scene are able to operate over a formal and an alternative political economy. Recording studios, labels, radios and restaurants are regularly registered, and many of them do not limit their activities to *neomelodica* music. These businesses may successfully operate in the formal entertainment industry. One significant case is represented by the five-star resort *la Sorrisa* located in the southern province of Naples. According

to Nello, *la Sorrisa* is by far the most popular venue for a *neomelodica* singer to perform:

You can't say that you're a *neomelodico* if you've never sung there. It's like going to the *San Remo* festival for an Italian singer. If you are popular, it's impossible not to go there for ten times every year, I guarantee. [...] In the peak season you have four or five weddings going on at the same time. It may happen that you finish your gig in one room, and have another *flash* in the next room.<sup>[15]</sup>

The importance of *la Sorrisa* in the scene can be observed on both a symbolic and a structural dimension. According to Nello, the resort leads a network of patronage within the *neomelodica* industry:

Well, it's not just a question of popularity, however. If you work with a manager who has connections there, you can be part of the deal they make with their customers...you are included in the wedding package let's say! [...] And it's also better for our fans to organise their ceremonies there. It's easier to hire the singers if you go to *la Sorrisa* as they know almost everybody in the scene, and the customers don't have to lift a finger to have their favourite artists singing for them. They only have to pay, but some singers and impresarios are cheaper for the customers of *la Sorrisa*.<sup>17</sup>

Apart from being a main actor in the *neomelodica* industry, *la Sorrisa* is a recognised place for cultural events also in the mainstream. In particular, it has been the location for several editions of the Neapolitan music festival *Napoli Prima e Dopo* produced and broadcasted by the flagship television channel of the Italian national public service *Rai 1*. In 2014, the pharaonic resort and its owner Antonio Polese became also the protagonist of the reality show *My Crazy Italian Wedding* (original: *Il Boss delle Cerimonie*) produced by *Discovery Real Time* and broadcasted in twenty different countries over three seasons. In the show, Polese played the part of *Don Antonio*, a kitsch crime lord organising extravagant ceremonies for his guests. *Neomelodica* was an important element in the spectacularisation of the excessive and flashy weddings presented as typical of the Neapolitan tradition in the show (Ferraro, 2015).

With no exception, informants among *neomelodica* singers affirmed that a significant part of their yearly performances occurs in *la Sorrisa*<sup>[16]</sup>. This fact is important in understanding how those who control the place can gain and reinforce their symbolic and relational capital in the *neomelodica* field. At the same time, it opens a perspective on how *la Sorrisa* makes significant economic profits through a series of informal tactics, since the *neomelodica* ceremony business is entirely under the table. Most of the performances are organised and managed by a network of individuals informally employed by the resort. They contact the singers' entourage, organise and coordinate the performances. They work as intermediaries between the customer and the artist, and can have limited but substantial autonomy, depending on the prestige of the latter, to decide the final price of each performance. As Raffaele explained, most of the time the final price for a *neomelodica* performance is unknown to the artist himself:

When you go there you don't even know how much the guests are paying for you to sing. And you know what? I don't care, as long as they give me my fee. I don't care if they ask five, ten or twenty thousand euros. The more they ask, the better it is for me. It means that I can increase my cachet for the next concerts.<sup>19</sup>

While a full cachet is always guaranteed to big names like Raffaele, the payment to younger and less known artists is usually negotiated by *la Sonrisa*'s actors. In all cases, customers are presented with a final bill that can vary according to the quality and quantity of the singers hired, the number of guests invited to the ceremony, and also their socioeconomic position. *Neomelodica* performances are sold by *la Sonrisa* together with other different services such as catering, photoshoots, limousines and so on. As shown in the quotes above, the resort can provide its customers with a large and easily accessible portfolio of artists to be hired for their ceremonies. *La Sonrisa* exploits *neomelodica* within an informal network through which it can come to dominate the local music market, and to impose products and prices to the purchasers. This strategy to operate in the lucrative business of private ceremonies is exemplary of the *neomelodica* alternative political economy in which formal actors dominate informal professional networks and make profits under the table. In other words, *neomelodica* represents a site of relational and economic capital accumulation that is alternative to the official business of the ceremony venue. Furthermore, differently from those artists who dominate the professional hierarchy, dominant actors such as *la Sonrisa* do not need to control the structures and means of music production. Rather, they base their power on the control of the different practices of the established market of private ceremonies.

## Where is the Camorra?

If, from the case presented above, we have seen how the action of a dominant actor like *la Sonrisa* in the alternative *neomelodica* economy includes formal and informal activities, the role of organised crime and the illicit activities of the Camorra seem not to emerge. This said, it would be a mistake to maintain that *neomelodica*'s alleged criminal connections are only a matter of journalistic speculation or that they only involve small, nonprofessional singers. The purpose of this article is not to underestimate or even neglect the connections between Camorra and *neomelodica*, but rather to contest the reductive understanding of these connections as overemphasised in the public debate. The alleged cultural connection between music and organised crime, although it is an interesting discourse to deconstruct, is not central in this context. Here, the objective is to give a contribution to the understanding of *neomelodica* as a field of capital accumulation and to describe its business as affected by dynamics of appropriation and concentration of the means of production. As such, it represents a potentially attractive business for organised crime affiliates who can use specific strategies of affirmation of power including not only formal and informal but also illicit practices. In particular, this section will briefly focus on the use of intimidation and direct violence within the professional network, and on the economico-managerial strategies that have emerged from the fieldwork as being representative of the implications of Camorra with the

*neomelodica* industry.

The use of violence and intimidation are not rare in the scene, but mostly concern a kind of activities other than the ceremonies. In late 2012, for example, a group of Camorra affiliates was arrested for pushing the organisers of a public concert to hire some singers they controlled. The venue's owner was also forced to buy a number of concert tickets in advance as a form of protection money. The incident was reported in the press as a common practice in *neomelodica*<sup>[17]</sup>. According to the actors interviewed, however, *neomelodica* performances are not usual contexts for direct use of violence. The ceremonies, in particular, are considered as a peaceful setting in which economic and relational forms of capital have an impact greater than anything else. Most of the episodes of violence that occur in these contexts concern questions of competition and conflicts in specific situations. Interesting in this regard is the experience of Pino, a singer who tried unsuccessfully to make a career in the *neomelodica* scene and mostly worked as an ambulant seller of pirate CDs:

I came to know people in the business because I tried to become a singer when I was young. I had my fans, but I couldn't find a sponsor...nobody wanted to bet on me. So I started my real business, selling the music I made at home and the copies of other artists' albums. After a while, I was arrested and spent some time in prison. This made me tough and I gained some respect, and I started to work as a bodyguard for a quite well-known singer when I was released. [...] Sometimes you need to deal with some inconvenience, like when somebody doesn't want to pay the cachet and stuff like that. [...] You know the parties, people drink and take other things...there can be somebody to slap up, but it's only once in a while.<sup>[18]</sup>

Although having a marginal role in the music business, Pino has direct knowledge of the forms of abuse of power characterising the action of Camorra affiliates in the field. Much of his unfortunate musical career and other forms of participation to *neomelodica*, indeed, are linked to the so-called Sarno family, a Camorra clan that ruled between the 1980s and the late 2000s in Ponticelli, a suburb in the eastern periphery of Naples (e.g.: Barbagallo, 2011). In particular, Pino indicated Carmine Sarno, brother of the clan's leaders Ciro and Giuseppe, as his principal contact. Carmine Sarno owned *La Bella Napoli*, a music agency controlling a large portfolio of singers<sup>[19]</sup>, organising their performances and providing a series of services such as contacts with radio, private television stations, recording studios, publicity, technical and logistic support. Pino was directly contacted by Carmine who hired him not only as a bodyguard, but also as a driver or for any other kind of immediate support to the artists and the performances such as bringing instruments and setting the stage, depending on the situation.

The agency was not indicated by Pino as directly engaging in illicit activities or resorting to violence and intimidation, and Carmine himself demonstrated not to be involved in the Camorra affairs when the investigation directed by Public prosecutor Vincenzo D'Onofrio dismantled the Sarno clan and its extensive interests in 2012. However, when Sarno brothers were arrested and decided to become state witnesses, Carmine was pushed to close down the agency and to leave his interests

in the *neomelodica* industry to the other Camorra clans that were emerging in the Ponticelli district<sup>[20]</sup>. This circumstance was particularly inconvenient for Pino who lost most of his job opportunities in the circuit. The man saw the Sarno clan's nosedive as the main reason for the end of *La Bella Napoli*. Nevertheless, Pino underplayed the erosion of the local hegemony that the family itself could guarantee to the agency. Rather, he specifically highlighted the loss of potential customers following multiple arrests as the most relevant factor in the decline of his *neomelodica* opportunities:

It's not a matter of losing control of the territory, as the journals have said. I mean it was a music business, not a drug dealing system. After the trials we had lost most of our regular customers. [...] It's very simple my friend: if you arrest thirty *camorristi* over here it means that you eliminate half of the richest people in the district. Then, who is gonna to pay thousands of euros for the music at a baptism?<sup>[21]</sup>

*Neomelodica* singers and *camorristi* interact with each other to capitalise on their reciprocal symbolic power and local prestige. In the same way that it is remarkable for a singer to be working in renowned venues such as *la Sorrisa* or produced and promoted by the most influential managers, being invited to sing to a Camorra affiliate's ceremony can be considered as a sign of prestige and success in the circuit. The proximity of *La Bella Napoli* to a Camorra clan and the experience of Pino can reveal how *camorristi* employ the music in order to flaunt their wealth and social reputation:

A few years ago, we went to a wedding in Boscotrecase, on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius. There were something like twenty singers queuing, with tens of musicians waiting to play. They made us wait in another hall of the restaurant where we could eat and drink as much as we wanted. It was the wedding of Salvatore Sarno, son of Peppe [Giuseppe], the big boss of the family. If the police had raided the restaurant, the whole clan would have been busted! [...] Being there meant being very important in the music scene, since only the best singers were invited. [...] At 2 A.M. we've been asked to leave, to go home without performing because the bride wasn't feeling well after such a long day. Everyone got paid.<sup>[22]</sup>

From this quote we can understand how *camorristi* use the singers as luxury goods, as status symbols to denote their exclusive socioeconomic positions. In the case of *neomelodica*, the forms of affirmation of power enacted by Camorra affiliates seem to be directly linked to their great economic capacity.

The strategies of affirmation of power enacted by Camorra affiliates within the field of *neomelodica* can also take a negative form. Not only can they demonstrate their influence by hiring the best and most expensive artists, they can also refuse to pay. This is confirmed by both Raffaele and Nello:

When you go to a Camorra wedding, you know that you could not be paid. I mean it never happened to me, I always got my pay, but they have been known not to pay your cachet. Rather,

they give you a gift, let's say.<sup>[23]</sup>

The reason why most singers accept this condition, however, is once again related to the dominance of criminal elites in terms of economic and relational capital rather than to the direct use of intimidation and violence. According to Raffaele:

I am a professional, and I can refuse to go and play if I'm not sure to get paid. On the other hand, it is better not to say no to these people. Not really because they are dangerous...I mean I could come up with an excuse and refuse to go. But it's not convenient since they are the richest and most known around. [...] They will hire you for other ceremonies and make of you the expensive present they give when they participate to other people's weddings. They can represent a significant part of your earnings in one year.<sup>[24]</sup>

The contacts between the Camorra and *neomelodica* are not limited to sporadic episodes of intimidation and to forms of symbolic affirmation of power in the local community. Affiliates also participate to a series of formal and informal activities in the field. The specific literature tends to conflate the totality of these activities with the direct activities of Camorra clans that enter the music market for moneylaundering purposes. According to this view, the Camorra would be a form of local power that offers opportunities for a rapid and successful career by way of large investments and strong territorial influence, while exploiting the circulation of money in the field for cleaning up the profits of other illicit activities such as racket and drug trafficking. The successful articulation of these dynamics would be based on a combination of economic constraints and sociocultural attitudes that push the singers to maintain exchange relations with criminal groups<sup>[25]</sup>. The problem with this view, however, is that neither the set of formal and informal activities through which the Camorra participates to *neomelodica*, nor their concrete articulation in the industry, are specified.

Informants identified the role of the Camorra in the *neomelodica* industry as a mainly economic participation of affiliates to a series of formal activities in the phases of music production and commodification. On the contrary, informal activities of *neomelodica* such as the ceremonies cannot be part of the strategies through which the clans clean up their capitals. Weddings and other ceremonies, indeed, are completely informal activities:

How can you believe that the Camorra would use the weddings or the piracy to clean up dirty money? Every single euro we make is tax-free, it does not make any sense. [...] You need a clean business for that purpose. I told you: check out the money invested by the studios, the producers, the radio owners or the restaurateurs! It is impossible for them to work only in the *neomelodica* music, they must have other activities for justifying their earning, and they must also have contacts with the official business.<sup>29</sup>

In describing the interests of the Camorra, informants contrasted the official description of *neomelodica* as an improvised and largely unprofessionalised context. On the contrary, they remarked that the Camorra has a strong influence over a series of professional practices and

actors integrated in the formal music business. Music production, for example, is indicated as a field where organised crime actors can invest and transform important capitals. In this regard, the experience of Raffaele as a professional producer is particularly meaningful:

When we are making an album, we normally have a shortlist of reliable musicians to work with. We know they're good and quick [and] we know their cachet in advance so we can give our customers an estimated price for the work to be done. Making an album is an expensive thing, in spite of what many people think, that you only need a mic and a computer. The instruments cost thousands of euros, and the musician too. You need professionals, and professionals are expensive. Sometimes you can see a *neomelodica* album recorded by very known Italian musicians, people who work with Eros Ramazzotti or Gigi D'Alessio. Same with the lyrics and the arrangements : sometimes there are very wellknown authors behind a singer. I guess they have to declare everything, so I don't even imagine how much a single production of that kind can cost.<sup>[26]</sup>

While Raffaele's affirmations are consistent with some of the analyses of several popular contemporary *neomelodica* albums<sup>[27]</sup>, they open a different perspective on the relationship between the *neomelodica* scene and the national music industry. The former and the latter emerge as to be occasionally but structurally connected in fact, as the national music industry's way of production seems to be, in some instances, absorbed by the *neomelodica* scene.

While dominant *neomelodica* actors such as Raffaele seem to have the possibility to choose whether exploiting the business opportunities offered by *camorristi* for their own profit or not, being in close relationship with the Camorra milieu is much more important for Nello. As seen above, for example, Raffaele said he was free to refuse an invitation to a Camorra ceremony. In the case of Nello, on the other hand, the conditions of the working opportunities offered by affiliates cannot be negotiated. The reason for that, however, concerns only limitedly the use of violence and intimidation. For Nello, the power of *camorristi* is located in their capacity to control the structural/relational and the economic means of production. Talking of the cultural stereotypes circulating about *neomelodica* in the Italian public debate, the singer said:

Hundreds of newspapers articles point the blame at the singers singing of life stories, the fans, the people selling and buying fake CDs. Nobody tries to look at the real business, where the big money is. They call us criminals, they say we are all *camorristi*, given that they don't look at us as a normal music scene. I mean, the journalists who talk about *neomelodica* and become experts after listening to a couple of songs. I have never seen one of them asking a simple question: where do the money to make those albums that cost tens of thousands of euros come from? Where do the money to build up and run the huge restaurants hosting hundreds of weddings per season come from? All that is in the hands of respected entrepreneurs who will never be disturbed.<sup>[28]</sup>

## Conclusion

The data collected and analysed in this paper indicates how an ethnographic approach, although conducted on a limited number of subjects and situations, can help acquire a more complex knowledge about *neomelodica* as a specific business sector. Rather than being a consequence of the sociocultural conventions that, as the cliché would have it, characterise the Neapolitan underclass, the political economy of this musical scene reflects the way in which different dominant actors, including Camorra affiliates, can produce considerable profits operating within series of formal and informal activities. On the one hand, the circumstances presented here show the interaction of formal entrepreneurs and established businesses, and can help to problematise the paradigm that sees this music as completely embedded into a mafiarun entertainment industry. On the other hand, they shed light on a system of production that is highly structured, including a network made of dominant and subordinated actors. Beyond the limits of reductive understandings of its political economy, *neomelodica* emerges as a field characterised by vertical hierarchies of professionals occupying privileged positions according to their capacity to create, produce and distribute music. Individuals and enterprises can become dominant actors in the business by developing and dominating networks, organising and managing performances, and investing capitals. These actors can operate and make a profit within a series of invisible activities that the concealed position of the *neomelodica* business makes available.

Artists and entertainment entrepreneurs produce hundreds of albums and manage thousands of shows every year. Among them, the most influential ones keep legitimate and formal positions in the entertainment industry whilst, at the same time, successfully operate within an informal field of symbolic and material interests concealed behind a wall of ethico-aesthetic judgements and structural underestimations. The conditions for establishing informal networks of mutual interest between entrepreneurs, and for facilitating their activities, exist independently of whether the Camorra enters the field or not. Lucrative relationships and activities can be put in place without the participation of Camorra clans. Due to the unofficial dimension of the whole business, however, these relationships and activities can represent an area of easy and profitable domination for affiliates, although their power seems to be mostly related to their capability to control structural relations and economic investments.

On the margins of the mainstream culture industry, *neomelodica* has become an extremely versatile and lively business sector. Its alternative political economy, if we consider its logic of production, is not characterised by dynamics other than those of the official music industry. Indeed, if on the one hand it is marginalised, on the other its participants declare that some of the activities performed by dominant actors are integrated in the mainstream. This said, *neomelodica* follows market mechanisms that are completely different from those of the mainstream music industry. As a consequence, this music scene is not affected by any of the possible problems and crisis affecting the official music market. It has taken great advantage of the latest changes following the social media explosion and the development of audio and video sharing websites where moral and structural obstacles seem to have a lesser impact. We leave for future research precise characterisation of this question and believe that the specific study of its dynamics can help understand the way formal, informal and criminal entrepreneurship operate in the entertainment

industry.

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[1] For a precise scientific account of criminalising depictions of Southern Italian music repertoires, including but not limited to *neomelodica*, see Goffredo Plastino (2014a).

[2] The expression 'quartieri-stato' has been invented and popularised by sociologist Isaia Sales and writer Marcello Ravveduto (2006: 265) who gained a reputation in the local and national debate as experts on the cultural expressions of camorra in the mid 2000s as also highlighted in Perna (2014: 202).

[3] The early signs of a music industry in Naples date back to the 16th century (Del Prete, 2008). For a specific focus on the dynamics and structure of the city's music industry in the mid 1800s see Careri and Dionisi (2015). For a complete account on the history of the *canzone napoletana* see Scialò (1995).

[4] A particularly pivotal moment is between the 1970s and 1980s with the so-called *Naples Power* movement including remarkable musical experiences mixing dialectal lyrics with Southern Italian folk revival and African-American styles such as blues, funk and jazz (Plastino, 2014b).

[5] See for example: Castaldo, G., Canta il Regno delle Due Sicilie, *La Repubblica*, 28 January 1998.

[6] See: Lucarelli, O. and Sannino, C., Napoli, Amato Contro i Neomelodici « Celebrano i Camorristi come Eroi », *La Repubblica*, 14 December 2006.

[7] Nello Liberti was constantly and unanimously identified as a *neomelodico* in both national and local reports. See for example: C. Sannino, Il pentimento del neomelodico “Non ricanterei ‘O capoclan”, *La Repubblica*, 10 February 2012.

[8] Informants are anonymised by way of pseudonyms.

[9] Interview collected in Giugliano, Naples, on 28 July 2012.

[10] *Ivi.*

[11] *Ivi.*

[12] Interview collected in Naples on 21 June 2015.

[13] *Ivi.*<sup>14</sup> *Ivi.*

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] Int. 21 June 2015.<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

[16] Depending on the season, Raffaele said he gave from 30 to 60 concerts to *la Sorrisa* every year (approx. 20 to 40 percent of his live activity). For Nello, the resort is even more central as it covers half of his yearly activity (from 30 to 35 concerts averagely). The author, furthermore, participated in 38 concerts in the venue.<sup>19</sup> Int. 28 July 2012.

[17] R. Sardo, Imponevano cantanti neomelodici. L'ultima estorsione dei casalesi, *La Repubblica*, 2 December 2012.

[18] Interview collected in Naples on 10 August 2015.

[19] Also Nello has been part of *La Bella Napoli's* portfolio.

[20] See: I. De Arcangelis, Il fratello del boss si saffida alla giustizia, *La Repubblica*, 28 February 2012.

[21] Int. 10 August 2015.

[22] *Ivi.*

[23] Int. 21 June 2015.

[24] Int. 28 July 2012.

[25] Besides the production of albums and other working opportunities, this exchange would include also clothes, vehicles, drugs and other material goods. This interpretation is shared by those authors who criticise the ethico-aesthetic characteristics the music and its milieu (e.g.: Ravveduto, 2007), but also by those who focus on *neomelodica* as an entertainment industry (e.g.: Caiafa, 2013).<sup>29</sup> Int. 21 June 2015.

[26] Int. 28 July 2012.

[27] A brief overview on the involvement of renowned musicians in neomelodica productions is provided in Mazzola (2015).

[28] Int. 21 June 2015.