The First Family: Terror, Extortion, Revenge, Murder, and the Birth of the American Mafia.
By Mike Dash.
New York: Random House, 2009.
375 pages.

The Black Hand: Terror by Letter in Chicago.
By Robert M. Lombardo.
Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010.
239 pages.

History of the Mafia.
By Salvatore Lupo.
New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.
328 pages.

In *The Black Hand: Terror by Letter in Chicago*, Robert M. Lombardo, sociologist, professor of criminal justice, and former deputy police chief for Cook County, Illinois, recounts in fine and fascinating detail the dynamics of extortion in Chicago's immigrant Italian community, covering especially the "hottest" years, 1907–12. Proceeding case by case, the author describes the practice of writing anonymous letters over the written or figurative signature of a "black hand" or other menacing symbols. Sent through the post, at times from distant places so as to avoid detection, and often in sequences of two or three, the letters tended to flow from "criminals" toward fellow Italians who were "making it," such as small-scale merchants, landlords, and professionals. The amounts requested, ranging for the most part from $500 to $5,000, were subject to negotiation through intermediaries—presumed "friends" whose names were suggested in the letters. Individual cases richly illustrate the ambiguity of this kind of crime, in which overlapping relationships of kinship, friendship, and patronage thoroughly blur the boundary between perpetrator and victim. They also suggest why the "White Hand Society," established by Italian immigrant professionals in Chicago and other cities in response to "Black Hand" extortion, had little staying power, dissolving and reconstituting itself several times in the years before World War I. Fortunately, the White Hand Society produced a treasure trove of analyses, correspondence, and opinion that Lombardo exploits to good effect, alongside archived police reports and newspaper stories.

The book also argues, forcefully, that "Black Hand crimes were not related to the emergence of the Sicilian Mafia but were the product of America's disorganized urban areas" (10). Supporting this claim, Lombardo analyzes "the social construction of deviance," showing how a racist, anti-immigrant press galvanized nativist public opinion and, oblivious to the poverty, isolation, and ineffective policing of immigrant communities, produced a myth of a Black Hand Society imported by Southern Italian criminal aliens, carriers of the notoriously secretive and conspiratorial Mafia and Camorra. Evidence presented against this myth includes the nonexistence of any such society in Italy, and the equally high crime rates of other ethnic groups that migrated to American cities in the early twentieth century and endured similar hardships.

From this reader's perspective, two realities question the analysis. First, as the author himself indicates, when compared with other Chicagoans, the preponderance by far of both victims and perpetrators of extortion by letter were Italian and, unmentioned in his necessarily cursory review of public disorder in Sicily at the time (which is based only on English language sources), extortionate letters were part and parcel of the tremendous wave of banditry (and kidnapping) that accompanied Sicily's transition from feudal to capitalist property relations and subjugation to the new Italian state in the late 1800s. Indeed, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in towns of the Sicilian interior, it was not uncommon for bandits to send anonymous letters of extortion to wealthy landowners, demanding money against the threat of physical harm. Known as *lettere di scrocco*, these were remarkably similar in form and content—and in their indirection and reliance on intermediaries—to the wave of threatening letters described by Lombardo. The similarity makes one imagine that a handful of migrants among the nearly 4 million who came from southern Italy to the United States in the same period carried with them this particular strategy of extortion, which was not typical of Irish, Jewish, and other urban American gangs.

It remains a question, however, whether the *lettere di scrocco* extortions in Sicily and the *mano nero* letters in Chicago properly belong to the phenomenon of Mafia. In both places, it seems, the extortion project is best understood as having a complex relation to the emergence of Mafia-style organized crime. How often were the confederate mediators named in the letters *mafiosi*? In both Sicily and America, the mediator often approached the target as a "friend" who could help reduce the burden of the exaction and protect the victim from the threat of future predations. Indeed, what appeared to be a simple extortion of money might well have led the victim to accept the more general protection of his or her new friend. Precisely in late-nineteenth, early-twentieth century Sicily, protection from the crisis of banditry was morphing into protection rackets, some protagonists of which belonged to an evolving translocal, and even trans-Atlantic fraternity known as the Mafia. One need not assimilate Black Hand extortion to Mafia in order to appreciate that bandit-type assaults on accumulated wealth and the entrepreneurial offer of protection from bandits were co-developing in both the United States and Sicily.

Lombardo's brief discussion of the origins of the Sicilian Mafia could certainly have benefited from a reading of Salvatore Lupo's *History of the Mafia*, which has only just now been translated—as well as his most recent *Quando la mafia trovò l'America* (*When the Mafia Discovered America*). Lupo, professor of contemporary history at the University of Palermo, is the preeminent scholar of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Sicilian Mafia whose research is widely respected for its theoretical analysis thoroughly grounded in original archival sources as well as the growing literature in the field. Those who are already familiar with that literature will appreciate the major contribution his work makes to it. Readers who are not familiar with the main actors and events may have difficulty absorbing some of the detailed material—always more challenging in translation—but newcomers to the field will nonetheless treasure his brilliant introduction as well as the paragraphs found throughout the work that summarize the main conclusions.

Unfortunately, as Lombardo's analysis of the social construction of deviance suggests, the term *mafia* becomes an all-purpose descriptor for everything from solo

street criminals, or Black Hand letter writers, to the group of gung ho traders who corrupted the Enron Corporation. But "if everything is Mafia, then nothing is Mafia" (3), and Lupo would rather give the concept a solid historical anchorage in space and time, viewing the organization as a specific social institution, populated by identifiable (if not always identified) people, with ends, practices, and places that change in response to changing circumstances and opportunities. Understanding the concept is confounded by the fact that from its beginning, "in the primordial broth of post-Risorgimento Sicily" (early 1860s), the term has been put to widely different political uses, including the xenophobic denigration of all southern Italians by elites in northern Italy and the United States, as well as the mischaracterization of the Mafia as an honorable tradition by "Sicilianists."

In his introduction, by way of describing the origins and trajectory of the Sicilian Mafia, Lupo effectively dismantles the proposition that the organization is residual, left over from a traditional and agrarian quasi-feudal social order. This model fails on several grounds: First, even from its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century, the Mafia exerted its presence in the urban core of Palermo and in the surrounding orchard districts, as well as in the latifundist interior. In the city it dominated export as well as domestic commerce. Furthermore, the notion that the Mafia was and is an archaic vestige of the old order does not jibe with its remarkable continuity, its ability to accommodate to, and even to shape, modernizing transformations in both the rural and the urban sectors, as "age-old locations and age-old power bases find . . . new opportunities for profit" (9), including participation on both sides of the Atlantic in such contemporary modern traffics as contraband narcotics, counterfeit and stolen securities, and "laundering dirty money." All of this despite the fact that *mafiosi*, in producing their own cultural codes, practices, and ideologies, have appropriated the image of an honorable feudal past, creating a charter myth of noble origin, along with rites of initiation, behavioral etiquettes, and rules of silence before civil authority.

Critical of those who would conflate the Mafia's cultural production with Sicilian culture more generally, Lupo also helps us navigate the difficult conceptual terrain that lies between alternative organizational maps. One model—favored by many journalists, police spokesmen, and political leaders—imagines a highly centralized corporate form that unites far flung *mafiosi* and their local groups, or *cosche*, in a single worldwide conspiracy under the direction of an executive body—an octopus with one head and many tentacles. By this token, American and Italian Mafias are both agencies of a single criminal conspiracy. This model is problematic because it will not adequately explain the ample evidence of autonomous actions among Mafia groups in different localities and the existence of serious, often violent, factional conflict between and within these groups.

Another equally extreme model of organization was that favored by some social scientists during the 1970s (regretfully I must count myself among them) who argued that each local group was not only independent but was also similar to other Mafia *cosche* only because they responded to similar historical conditions. Each also blended almost seamlessly into its surrounding "atmosphere." Proponents of this approach tended to deny what Sicilian judge Giovanni Falcone later referred to as the "unicity" of the Mafia. Based on the results of his exhaustive investigations, amplified by the elaborate and revealing testimony of Mafia *pentiti* who eventually cooperated with the police, by the mid-1980s Falcone and his colleagues were promulgating a third

model whose outlines are as follows. Mafia "families" and even single *mafiosi* are often quite autonomous in their entrepreneurial engagements. Yet in spite of this, and notwithstanding the constant tension among its constituent parts, the Mafia is a single organization uniting so-called men of honor in separate, even distant localities by their shared consciousness of membership, behavioral etiquettes, rules of association and rites of initiation, frequent intermarriage among their families, and patterns of collaboration under the admittedly intermittent leadership of some sort of governing "commission" or council.

This model, in which coherence rests more on social and cultural integration than on any executive function, is very close to what Lupo elaborates for the past. Imagine, he suggests, a fraternal organization similar to Freemasonry, with "chapters" in Italy and in many American locales, whose members share a strong sense of identity and commensality. Actually, the analogy is not simply hypothetical, as Lupo presents much of the recent historical evidence for a role of the secret fraternal Freemason order in the early formation of Mafia *cosche* and in the elaboration of their rituals. He further notes the continuity of relations between some Mafia *capi* and elements of contemporary Masonic lodges, the Italian Propaganda Due (P2) Lodge being the most notorious example. Admission to membership in such an exclusive organization as the Mafia or Freemasonry gives the individual and his family, regardless of their social class, some degree of respectability and privileged opportunity in a rapidly transforming political economy. Leaders of both profited from their ability to share strategic information and political or economic contacts.

A further contribution of Lupo's work lies in his ability to search out and map transformations over time in the social space between the Mafia and other institutions in its environments, including key transactions with political and commercial entities, as well as other organized crime formations in Italy and abroad. Those transactions must be understood in terms of the Mafia's dual functions as both "power syndicate" and "enterprise syndicate." The power syndicate represents the local Mafia group, or *cosca*, in its capacity to command a variety of activities in a given territory. The enterprise syndicate stands for the capacity of singular *mafiosi* to organize specific activities across the territorial boundaries that separate one group from others, sometimes over great distances, as, for example, in the case of contraband smuggling of grain in postwar Sicily, traffic in contraband cigarettes from the United States into postwar Italy, and international traffic in narcotic drugs in many modes from the early twentieth century to the present. In either of its territorial or its enterprise functions, links between *mafiosi* and government are critical and, as Lupo documents, they have been so since the 1870s.

In the 1960s when I was engaged in field research in a small town in interior Sicily, a friend recited the following dialect saying to me:

> *Cu venne a Sammuca e unnè rubatu,*
> *o Don Bito è fuori, o enne malatu.*
> "If you come to Sambuca and you are not robbed,
> either Don Vito is away, or he is ill."

The "Don Bito" referred to was Vito Cascio Ferro, a notorious *capomafioso* of nearby Burgio, Corleone, and Bisaquino, who married in *Sammuca*. But we learn from Lupo's history that Don Vito was no rural huckleberry whose sphere of influence was limited

to the countryside along the border of Palermo and Agrigento provinces. His various affairs—including the assassination in Palermo of the New York police lieutenant Joseph Petrosino in 1909—took him not only to several Sicilian cities and Rome but also to New York. The case of Cascio Ferro is emblematic of another important contribution that Lupo anticipates in this book, but really develops in the next (*Quando la mafia trovò l'America*), which documents the extent to which important *mafiosi* of the early 1900s move between Italy and the United States, building "families" in both places that were interdependent and interwoven.

A case in point is found in Mike Dash's *The First Family: Terror, Extortion, Revenge, Murder, and the Birth of the American Mafia*, a fascinating history of the Morello/Lupo Mafia "family" of New York, which originated with the migration of Giuseppe "Clutch Hand" Morello and his close relatives from Corleone to America in 1894. In addition to Morello, the cast of trans-Atlantic characters in this account are all well-known to American mafiologists: in particular Morello's brother-in-law, Ignazio Lupo; the above-noted Don Vito Cascio Ferro; Giuseppe Fortuna, who participated in the clamorous murder of Sicilian banker Emanuele Notarbartolo in 1893; Nick Gentile, peripatetic *mafioso* who migrated from Siculiana, Sicily, lived and "worked" in several U.S. cities before retiring to Sicily, and wrote an autobiography *Vita di capomafia*, in 1963; Giuseppe Bonanno, who also published an autobiography; and the protagonists of New York's Prohibition era "wars": Joe Profaci, Giuseppe "Joe" Masseria, Salvatore Maranzano, the Maggadinos of Buffalo, Ciro Terranova, the artichoke king, and Charles Lucky Luciano.

A journalist and compelling historical writer, Dash describes and documents both criminal events and the often ineffectual or contradictory, and sometimes heroic, police investigations that these events provoked. His attention to William Flynn, Treasury official in charge of pursuing counterfeiting rings, is especially riveting, thanks to his having analyzed Flynn's own writing and reflections. The documents in question reveal the Morello family to have elevated itself above simple theft and extortion, activities in which they also engaged, in order to set up presses, first in East Harlem, then on an abandoned farm in upstate New York, for printing counterfeit American and Canadian dollars. A specialized printer was hired from Italy; at certain moments of intense surveillance, plates were actually shipped to the homeland, the printed bills then being re-shipped to America in crates of produce controlled by Ignazio Lupo. Confirming Salvatore Lupo's argument for organic connections between the Sicilian and American Mafias, Morello dispersed his fake money through a network of Corleonesi immigrants in several American cities (among them, Kansas City, Louisiana, and Seattle), concentrating on those who could place the bills into circulation in saloons, poolhalls, gambling dens, and other places of underground entertainment. As Dash notes, the rural town of Corleone, in the heart of latifundist Sicily, was already a center of counterfeiting activity before the twentieth century. No wonder many members of Morello's family—considered by Dash to be the first American Mafia family—took great pains to maintain social relations (including animosities) on both sides of the Atlantic.

Dash, unlike Lombardo, follows his protagonists into the Prohibition era (Lombardo's prohibition chapter focuses on Black Hand extortion during that period, but not on the bootlegging "wars" as such). Here we gain an appreciation, shared by Lupo, of what the Eighteenth Amendment did for organized crime in America.

"Working" relationships emerged between bootleggers of every ethnicity, just as conflicts within and between groups intensified, calling for ever more lethal weapons, ever larger arsenals and armored cars, ever more sophisticated strategies to launder money, bribe police, corrupt politicians, and take down competitors. In this context, the American Mafia outstripped its Sicilian counterpart in capital accumulation and attempts at central coordination and control in order to contain the violence—that is, until the Sicilian Mafia became the global mediator of heroin trafficking in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Taken together, these books suggest new ways of thinking about organized crime and Italian migrant communities in the United States. It is not just that the American version was a simple transplant from Sicily; as Lombardo emphasizes, each developed in a specific historical context and adapted in its own way to very different social contexts. Thus, for example, the Sicilian Mafia played an organic role in the development of mass political power on a national scale in Italy (an aspect that Lupo explores but is not discussed here), while the American Mafia was considerably more involved in labor racketeering and gained special power from supplying the population's thirst for alcoholic beverages during the Prohibition years. Yet, as part of the same world system, with members who easily traveled back and forth, transporting resources and evading arrest, each organization provided support and manpower to the other at critical moments in its history.

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The Value of Worthless Lives: Writing Italian American Immigrant Autobiographies.
By Ilaria Serra.
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244 pages.

Ilaria Serra's book sets out to contradict Giuseppe Prezzolini's observation, as stated in his 1963 book *I trapiantati*, that "immigrants left tears and sweat, but no memories" (quoted as epigraph on page 1). To support the argument that Italian migrants to the United States and their descendants did, indeed, write and preserve a large number of memoirs, Serra "hunted down and discovered dozens of forgotten texts that had been buried in archives and in the drawers of private houses" (2). Hence, as the title of the book claims, Serra's aim is to rescue and give value to the lives of Italian migrants whose stories of what she calls "quiet individualism" would otherwise be forgotten or interpreted as "worthless."

The book is divided in two main parts, with the second part containing further divisions to account for the different aspects of the works discussed. In the first part, given that the life stories included in Serra's book are defined as autobiographical works, Serra carefully situates these works within the field of autobiography and, in