**Article 5**

# Private Symbols as Vehicles for a Public Voice: "Women of the Fast" Reject the Mafia

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**Abstract**

The 1992 murders of Falcone and Borsellino marked a turning point in the fight against the Mafia in Italy. People throughout Italy, and especially in Sicily, felt that the Mafia had gone too far and that they could no longer be silent in front of its oppression. This essay analyzes the rhetorical strategies used by the Women of the Fast, a group of women who staged a month-long non-violent demonstration to bring attention to the relationship between the State and the Mafia. Specifically, it looks at how women were empowered to speak against the Mafia by using private symbols as vehicles for a public voice. By occupying a public square and using food, bed sheets, and their own bodies as symbols of protest, they changed the meaning of this public place. As such they gave a distinctly feminine touch to their rhetoric, stripping away the traditionally masculine understanding of public protest. Their protest received national and international media attention, adding a feminine voice to the fight against the Mafia.

**Keywords***:* women, Mafia, public sphere, nonviolent resistance, transformative rhetoric, social movement, hunger strike

In the late 1980s the Italian government intensified its fight against the Mafia. At the forefront of this fight were judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino who, making use of declarations by former *Mafiosi* turned state's evidence, gained in-depth knowledge into the Mafia organization and uncovered many connections between the Mafia and Italian government officials. On May 23, 1992 Judge Giovanni Falcone, his wife, Judge Francesca Morvillo, and their body guards, Vito Schifani, Rocco Dicirillo, and Antonio Montinaro, were killed by the Mafia. Less than two months later, on July 19, 1992, a bomb exploded in via D' Amelio in Palermo killing Judge Paolo Borsellino, and his bodyguards, Emanuela Loi, Agostino Catalano, Vincenzo Li Muli, Walter Cosina, and Claudio Traina. Falcone and Borsellino, together with their bodyguards, became national heroes in death: martyrs whose dedication to justice had cost them their lives.

The murders of Falcone and Borsellino marked a turning point in the fight against the Mafia in Italy. People throughout Italy, and especially in Sicily, felt that the Mafia had gone too far and that they could no longer be silent in front of its oppression. Palermo, the capital of Sicily, was shaken as it had never been before by the realization that its century-old association with the Mafia was becoming intolerable now that Cosa Nostra had begun to resort to terrorist tactics of outrageous proportions in direct defiance to the State. Even more so, people were shocked by the inability of the Italian government to prevent such attacks and the incompetence of many government officials to confront the problem of the Mafia. Falcone and Borsellino were supposed to be among the best protected of government officials: they always traveled surrounded by bodyguards, rode in bullet-proof cars, and their itineraries were secret. As Italians mourned their dead heroes, they were reminded of Falcone's own words as he was trying to explain why so many Italian government officials had been killed by the Mafia: "One generally dies because one is alone or because one has entered a game that is too big. One often dies because one does not have the necessary alliances, because one lacks support. In Sicily the Mafia hits the

servants of the State that the State is unable to protect"[1] (Falcone & Padovani, 1992, p. 171).

Rage was the common feeling experienced by the many mourners who attended the funerals. Among the participants were a dozen women who wanted to do something to show their disgust over the murders of these innocent people and the government's inability to protect them. Together they decided to stage a demonstration in Piazza Castelnuovo, a square in the center of Palermo. Three days later, on July 22, 1992, they met in the square, set up a tent, brought tables and chairs, and sat under a big banner that read: "We are hungry for justice. We fast against the Mafia." They called themselves *"le donne del digiuno"* [the Women of the Fast], and began fasting, by taking turns of one to three days, and forming a permanent presence in the square for an entire month. They demonstrated their rage against the Mafia and against the government and requested that five of the government officials responsible for the fight against the Mafia resign and admit their incompetence. Soon, the women were joined by others, and at times numbered over two hundred. Four government officials resigned, and one was transferred, in effect honoring their request. More importantly, however, the Women of the Fast forced people in Palermo to take notice of them, to think about the Mafia, and to stop their daily routines in recognition of the problem of the Mafia. Their actions received media coverage in Italy and around the world.

This essay analyzes the rhetorical strategies used by the Women of the Fast. Specifically, it looks at how women regained the right to speak against the Mafia by using private symbols as vehicles for a public voice. By occupying a public square, and using food, bed sheets, and their own bodies as symbols of protest, they changed the meaning of this public place. As such they gave a distinctly feminine touch to their rhetoric, stripping away the traditionally masculine understanding of public protest. Their use of non-traditional rhetorical strategies is representative of other women's groups such as the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo

in Argentina, and many other women's groups around the world who have also relied on traditionally feminine symbols to create a new form of protest.

This study is significant on two levels. First, it presents ways in which women and other marginalized groups in society can gain a public voice and speak to issues that have traditionally been relegated to authority figures such as political experts and law enforcement agents. Second, it is important from a theoretical standpoint as it shows how the translation of private symbols into public ones can lead to a new interpretation of social reality and provide novel rhetorical forms that can be used to bring new solutions to problems in the public realm.

After a brief explanation of the role played by the Mafia in shaping Sicilian society, the essay analyzes the rhetoric of the Women of the Fast by focusing primarily on their ability to transcend the personal by making public traditionally private symbols such as food and the body. The analysis begins with the coming together of the group and with the women's understanding of fasting as a form of political protest. It then focuses on the actual experience of protest during the month spent in the square, and on how the women's presence changed the traditional symbols of the public square, opening a forum to express their public voice against the Mafia.

**The Mafia in Sicily**

The Mafia has existed in Sicily for over one hundred years, during which time it has played a very important role in shaping the values, beliefs and the entire way of life of most Sicilians. Although the Mafia has always been a criminal organization concerned with gaining economic and social power in illegitimate ways, its relationship with Sicily has often been advantageous for both parties. Because of the nature of its domain, the Mafia has always been in direct opposition to the State. Historically, Sicilians felt alienated from the rest of Italy, often relegated to the status of secondary citizens, and have learned not to trust the Italian government and not to expect its help (Fabj, 1998). Furthermore, traditionally the State has not maintained a very strong presence in Sicily, and

the Mafia has taken advantage of this absence by becoming the State wherever the State was absent. In Sicily the Mafia brought much violence but it also took care of petty crime, offered protection, created jobs in many industries, and encouraged social mobility (Gambetta, 1992). This is not to say that its aim is not corrupt and its means unethical. However, one cannot underestimate the emotional, social, and economic link that exists between Sicilians and the Mafia even if this link is clearly one between oppressor and oppressed. As some of the Women of the Fast explained, the Mafia "is a community of which one can feel a part, and has a closer and more tangible dimension than the State" (Accardi et al., 1994, p. 71).

Throughout its history, Mafia players have always been "brigands, always connected to power or at least to that part of power which counts" (Marchese, 1986, p. 8). Without connections and support from what appear to be legitimate sources of power (i.e., government officials, police chiefs, etc.,) the Mafia could not have survived this long (Arlacchi, 1992/1993, p. 5). The complicity, or at the very least, the impotency of the State creates an atmosphere of helplessness among ordinary people and a feeling that the State is truly absent as a force which can change people's lives, especially in Sicily where the Mafia is strongest. Thus, it is easy to understand why ordinary people give in to the demands of the Mafia, and let themselves be subjected to extortion. Buscetta explains that, "In the Sicilian towns it is the Mafia that has the power, not the State. Even today they turn to Riina, [a powerful Mafia boss who is in jail awaiting trial] they tremble in front of Riina, but they turn to him" (Commissione Parlamentare Antimafia, 1993, p. 22). Fear becomes the driving force that leads to acceptance of the Mafia, and to people's unwillingness to collaborate with the authorities to fight the Mafia. A woman interviewed by a journalist regarding the Mafia summarized this feeling well. Without irony, she said: "See, I told you these things to make you understand, because I like you. But why do you think I have not spoken before? Because I have three cats, a cute penthouse, a father, a mother, two brothers, three beautiful nephews, and all are combustible" (Salemi, 1993, p. 12).

Lack of trust in the authorities and fear are the undertones to the cultural practice known as "*omertà*" [connivance]. To live by the "law of connivance" means to give tacit approval to the illegal activities of the Mafia. Connivance, thus, equals loyalty to the Mafia. It is manifested in the total acceptance of the power of the Mafia, granting complete sovereignty to the "family" which controls a given territory (Chinnici & Santino, 1989). Adherence to this practice extends beyond the members of the Mafia to include almost all people of different social classes. Thus, people are taught to "mind their own business," to accept the inevitability of a society ruled by the Mafia, and to avoid any action that might interfere with the Mafia's illegal activities. As a result, Mafia culture is tolerated in Sicilian society (Fabj, 1998; Siebert, 1994). The cost for whomever chooses to disobey this order is very high: rejection by one's family and friends, economic calamity, and often death.

Although public demonstrations against the Mafia are not uncommon, they are usually associated with candidates running for political office, and traditionally candidates of left wing parties. However, especially lately, such demonstrations have been criticized as "mere rhetoric," or as politically correct speeches with few direct results. Even more important, the declarations of former *Mafiosi* have uncovered connections between the Mafia and politicians who vocally opposed the organization in public (Arlacchi, 1993, p. 5). Leonardo Messina, a former *Mafioso* turned State's evidence, declared: "All politicians say they are against the Mafia. One needs to see in reality what they do, the agreements they have. We do not worry very much: it is a facade. Consider this, a politician one evening came to my house for dinner and the next day he was at an anti-Mafia rally" (Mafia e Potere, 1993, p. 72). Thus, political rallies have lost much of their meaning, and Sicilians have become skeptical of politicians who speak against the Mafia.

This is the context needed to understand the Women of the Fast and their protest. In a society where individual citizens are afraid to speak against the Mafia and have lost faith in the ability of the State to protect them against this

organization, a small group of women decided to make public their indignation for the crimes committed by Cosa Nostra. In a place where traditional rhetorical methods had failed, because few people trusted words that denounced the Mafia, they chose to speak with their bodies rather than with their words, to show their commitment to the anti-Mafia cause. To be heard, they had to enter a realm that had to that day been predominantly male (there are few women politicians in Sicily who speak against the Mafia), they had to adopt new and innovative rhetorical forms that would overcome the cynicism of many Sicilians, and they had to engage other Sicilians who would certainly hesitate to participate for fear of becoming vulnerable to the Mafia by disclosing their views. They accomplished all this by transcending private symbols, and created a distinctively feminine form of protest in their fight against the Mafia.

**The Women of the Fast: A redefinition of symbols**

An atmosphere of despair reigned when eleven women gathered at the *Unione Donne Italiane* (UDI) [Union of Italian Women], a women's center in Palermo, after attending the funerals of Borsellino's bodyguards on July 21, 1992, yet none of them was ready to return home to isolation and inaction. The women did not necessarily share political views, and some were non-partisan all together, but they were united in their grief and in their dismay over the recent murders. Then, Claudia, one of the women, said, "We have to do something that we have never done in our political history: a hunger strike in a public square, until the people responsible for the homicides are relieved of their jobs" (Mortillaro, 1992, p. 1). The proposal received mixed reactions. Some worried about embarking in such a different form of protest from what they were used to, others thought of their family commitments, while a few were uncertain of the significance and effectiveness of this course of action.

One of the appeals of fasting was the novelty of this form of protest for the women involved. They chose a form of protest that would unite them and erase their differences: "It is time to leave behind our political or group affiliations. Let us do something together, as individuals, as women, as citizens" (Morgantini,

1992, p. 2). A protest based on symbolic acts, on the physical participation of each individual, purposely without words that might divide, seemed the most appropriate strategy. Suddenly the women agreed to try this new form of protest. They chose a square, Piazza Castelnuovo, in the center of Palermo, applied for a permit, found a tent, and a camper. They decided to take turns fasting, never endangering their health or their lives, but rather maintaining a permanent presence in the heart of the city. The next day, July 22, 1992, they occupied the square and began their protest. They set up a large banner which read: "We Are Hungry for Justice: We Fast Against the Mafia."

By choosing to fast, they chose to take the private act of nourishment and make it public, changing themselves from private citizens to public figures. At the same time, by choosing to fast in a public square and especially by maintaining a permanent presence in the square for an entire month, they changed the very meaning of the square, from a public space to a space permeated with private symbols made public. The following analysis shows the dual nature of the choice of fasting in a public square, a choice that changed the participants of the fast, and changed the nature of the public space in which the fast took place.

**Fasting as rhetorical choice**

In the following days, and throughout the month-long demonstration, the Women of the Fast, who were joined by many others and at times numbered over two hundred, reflected on the meaning of their fast. Many of them stressed the difference between their form of fasting, which involved taking turns of one to three days, and more traditional hunger strikes: "In our fast there was no aspect of threat. There did not exist the equation: if you do not do what I want I will fast and die. We did not ask anything of anybody. We only demanded a general cleansing so that not only among authorities but everywhere everyone would accept the responsibility of his or her own actions" (Lanza, 1994, p. 61). The choice to take turns in fasting allowed them to maintain a longer presence in the square (their protest did not have to end once their bodies became too weak

from malnutrition and died), but it also clearly defined this fast as their own, as different, and gave it a unique meaning.

Many women spoke of the uniquely feminine meaning of their fast. Angela Lanza (1994), one of the Women of the Fast, explained, "We wanted to feel transparent and clean against the dirty work and the cruel actions of the Mafia; we were determined to reject any role of subjugation, and therefore of complicity" (pp. 60-61). Since food and nourishment are the responsibility of women in Sicily, and women are often connected to others and to their community through the preparation and sharing of food, the Women of the Fast believed that by rejecting food they could symbolically reject the connection with their community. In somewhat strong language Angela (Lanza, 1994) states:

> I wanted to have nothing to do with these people, with these Sicilians! I cut myself off from others through lack of nourishment which is a basic and primordial need, because I wanted to have nothing to do with people of the Mafia. I felt that the body needed to be transparent, I had to keep it away from this filthy situation. We have chosen to act through a symbol that is congenial to us: food is nourishment and it is part of the daily lives of women because we nurse, we grow food, we prepare it, we cook, we are in tune with nourishment. . . . And since food also turns into shit, I do not want to add to the shit that is in this city. Thus, it is as though we had said: we do not want to take on the role of mother or of woman in a world that we do not agree with. We no longer want to be accomplices and we subtract ourselves from this shitty situation. I want transparency: this desire has given me a great energy and great joy. Many of us have felt this way. For me it has been an affirmation not a negation. (p. 61)

To reject the Mafia and all that is corruption, to be clean, to separate from this culture: these were the themes echoed by many of the Women of the Fast.

While the eleven original women had quickly agreed on the meaning of the fast, others who joined them sometimes struggled with its significance. Simona, for example, wondered: "What are we doing? We want to fight the Mafia with a fast made by women? But what do we do to the Mafia by fasting? Are we throwing whipped cream against an atomic bomb?" Eventually she decided that what she was doing was indeed worthwhile, that her presence in the square could make a difference: "To be here myself, to give my name, my time, to lose three days of my life and put them in this square; to be part of this large collective penance of not eating, in remembrance of those who are no more, and who cannot eat or walk or see; to transform my body which is mine and over which I have total dominion, in an instrument of protest, not violent and silent, but louder than any scream" (Lanza, 1994, p. 25). For many of the women fasting also signified the "identification with the terrible pain of those bodies, ripped apart by the massacre of Via D'Amelio" (Lanza, 1994, pp. 60-61). This sacrifice of not eating, of stopping the daily routine, and standing together with other women in defiance of the Mafia and in solidarity with the victims of the recent events empowered women who were tired of feeling helpless in a city dominated by the Mafia.

Gianpiera had different misgivings about fasting. She was not concerned about the effect of the fast against the Mafia as much as unsure of the choice to fast because "Fasting evoked ideas of purification, of self-punishment. Then I understood and agreed that it is a form of protest that involves one's entire being, as a person, and it is precisely this focus on the value of our own subjectivity that has worked, not only for us, but as a message for the entire city [of Palermo] and for those who live here" (as cited in Bertuglia, 1993). Her words are echoed in the explanation given by the Women of the Fast to a reporter from the *Boston Globe* who inquired about the significance of their protest: "Fasting is a form of protest that does not pertain to the history of the women's movement in Italy, but it involves our body. It is a sign of cleanliness, of transparency so as not to waist any energy. It is a symbol diametrically opposed to violence . . . . It is a metaphor for our hunger for justice and truth. Through this symbolic order—

visible in the very heart of a city like Palermo where symbols are still very important—we feel more certain of our actions" (Lanza, 1994, p. 46).

Although the Women of the Fast chose a hunger strike as their primary form of protest, they did not limit their demonstration to their fast, but employed many other rhetorical strategies to make themselves more visible in Palermo. First and foremost, they fasted in a public square, and their presence, their banners, their speeches all added to the anti-Mafia message. The following section analyzes the women's rhetorical strategies as seen in Piazza Castelnuovo, the square they occupied for their protest.

**The square: Private symbols shape a public space**

While one can argue that a city square is simply a city square, it is important to note the symbolic meaning of public spaces and the tension that exist therein. As Madanipour explains, one can only understand public spaces by looking at the dialectical relationship between the context and the people or actors who inhabit it (albeit temporarily). Places that might appear timeless actually change as people interact with them. Similarly, people can be changed by their interaction with such places. Thus, it is crucial to see how “the dialectic relationship affects and changes both actors and the multiple contexts of the actions” (Madanipour, 2003, p. 3). To better understand the impact of the Women of the Fast occupying a city square one must look at the symbolism associated with city squares in Sicily and at how the women’s presence challenged those symbols changing both the context and themselves as active participants in the struggle against the Mafia. In doing so, they questioned the power structure and transformed “the inherent power imbalance toward a more inclusive outcome” (Madanipour, 2007, p. 251).

Squares are very important sites in Sicilian cities, especially when they are in central locations. They almost always include a "bar" or cafe with outdoor chairs and are meeting places for old men who sit playing cards and discussing politics or sports. They are places of reunions, where people meet in the evenings.

Squares are also places of transition. People come and go at will, and often do so hurriedly, creating a sense of constant motion. At times they might be turned into little market places where food or clothes are sold. Sometimes, they are used for music concerts or for dramatic plays reminiscent of the Commedia Dell'Arte in the Renaissance. Still other times, public demonstrations and political speeches are held there. In a square, many things compete for one's attention—buildings, people, cars—and thus one can forget one's life for a while. While public places, squares provide anonymity: one can feel inconspicuous, disguised, and almost lost among people.

The image of the square fits well with the Sicilian mentality of minding one's own business. In many ways squares enable people to live by the law of connivance [*omertà*]. The transitory nature of squares is symbolic of people's desire to avoid responsibility by just "walking by" events. The square as marketplace represents the everyday acceptance of a society controlled by the Mafia (as the products sold at the market are controlled by the Mafia), and the extent to which people depend upon those products for their survival. The anonymity provided by the square allows people to live as cowards without being noticed, to hide among others instead of personally participating in the fight against the Mafia: the complexity of the square makes it easy to look the other way, too busy to get involved, and able to claim ignorance.

As Foucault explained, there are public places “that seem to be pure and simple openings, but that generally hide curious exclusions. Everyone can enter … but in fact that is only an illusion: we think we enter where we are, by the very fact that we enter, excluded” (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p. 26). This tends to be the case for women in Sicilian cities. Although women are certainly present in squares, in general this is the dominion of men. Men sit in groups in squares (while women work at home), men sell their products at the market (and women buy them), and it is mostly men who stage political demonstrations. The masculine dominion of the square is reminiscent of traditional Sicilian values, adhered to and encouraged by the Mafia, in which men are in control of public

life and women's function is to be mothers and wives, caretakers of the home and family. Thus, a public space as apparently open as a square is, in Weisman's (1994) words, "but a reflection of a comprehensive system of institutionalized sexism" (p. 63). Further, the male domination of such public spaces requires added efforts on the part of women who choose to step outside of the traditional private spaces to which they are relegated and enter spaces more conducive to public deliberation.

Piazza Castelnuovo is a very large square at the center of Palermo, always full of people and surrounded by trafficked streets. In the square there are palm trees that provide much needed shade in the unbearably hot Sicilian Summer days, and a little stage used for music concerts. The Women of the Fast set up camp with a tent, a camper, and a few small tables with chairs to collect signatures of people who support the fight against the Mafia as well as suggestions of possible courses of action to intensify the fight. The large banners with slogans like "We are Hungry for Justice: We Fast Against the Mafia" and "Between Killing and Dying There Is a Third Choice: Living" made it impossible for anyone passing by not to notice their presence. Together they challenged the traditional symbols of the square and redefined this public space to stage successful political demonstration.

**Permanence vs. transition**

Almost everything the Women of the Fast did was in direct opposition to the common symbolism of the square, and therefore stripped away any parallel between "their" square and the Mafia. First of all, the Women's permanent presence in Piazza Castelnuovo defied the transient nature of life in public squares. While everybody else came and went, the Women of the Fast remained in the square for an entire month. They began their demonstration with a press release stating their goals:

> We begin this afternoon, with the occupation of Piazza Castelnuovo, a hunger strike, as citizens of Palermo beyond

any membership to political parties or associations, which will continue until Prefect Jovine, Head of Police Parisi, Attorney General Giammanco, High Commissioner to the Fight Against the Mafia Finocchiaro, and Minister of Internal Affairs Mancino will resign.

We know that this is only the beginning: but the confrontation with this dramatic situation, the need for acceptance of responsibility by the system of power that has governed us for over 45 years, and the confrontation with the rituals that follow every homicide while waiting for the next victim, require strong and significant measures. We demand that at least those who occupy institutional roles finally accept responsibility.

It is the only action we feel we can take.

We want to continue living in this city.

We encourage the solidarity of whoever wants to be with us in Piazza Castelnuovo beginning this afternoon**.**

Palermo, July 23, 1992 (unpublished pamphlet).

By asking for the resignation of top government officials, the Women of the Fast hoped to make the government accountable for its failure to protect the Judges and their escorts, and for the slow progress against the Mafia.

The women with their tent, tables and chairs remained in the square from July 23rd until August 23rd. For an entire month they collected signatures against the Mafia, and asked people for suggestions on how to fight its oppression. During this time they collected over 3000 signatures and suggestions in answer to the question "What can be done against the Mafia?" (Salemi, 1993, pp. 173-174). People came forth, defying the law of connivance, to give their opinion and add

their names and addresses to the list of people against the Mafia. They chose to take responsibility, even if in a small way, for ending the violent Mafia culture, and put themselves on the line by disclosing their anti-Mafia feelings.

**Place of remembrance vs. marketplace**

The action of fasting was in direct opposition to images of the square as a marketplace. Here, in Piazza Castelnuovo, women refused to consume the products sold by men, not because they opposed men but because much of the agriculture and food industry in Sicily is controlled by the Mafia. As shown earlier, by rejecting food, they rejected the role of women as passive consumers of "dirty" food, and as supporters of a corrupt economy. The market is also representative of everyday life, a place where women go routinely and which allows them, through its products, to perform many traditionally feminine tasks like providing meals and clothes for their families. By rejecting the market, the Women of the Fast affirmed that life could not go on as usual in light of the recent killings. They thus transformed the square into a place of remembrance, an ode to their martyrs, and a stronghold against the Mafia. All routine had to be stopped, all signs of normality avoided, so as to underline the severity of the present situation in Sicily.

**Visibility vs. anonymity**

The presence of the Women of the Fast in Piazza Castelnuovo was in direct opposition to the notion that one can become invisible in a square, anonymous among people. The Women of the Fast made their presence known by occupying the square and filling it with signs and painted sheets that announced their presence. Angela Lanza (1994) explains that one of the main purposes of the fast was to gain visibility: “Our actions make us visible in our opposition, with our occupation of the square. We are looking for a word that makes us ‘be,’ which makes it impossible to erase us. A word that is not separate from our body and thus is whole” (p. 36). The translation of private symbols into public ones allowed the Women of the Fast to “speak” without words, to involve their body

and mind (in the fast) their private lives and their public selves (in the sheets and signs they posted around the square).

To make their presence more evident, some women tied clothes lines between palm trees and hung painted bed sheets on them. Various local artists painted the sheets, some with just pictures, others with slogans. One portrayed a picture of Borsellino and Falcone and stated: “They have closed your eyes, and you have opened those of the people of Palermo”. The sheets gave color to the square, and voice to the women. They took on a symbolic significance both in the square and outside of it, where people hung sheets from their windows as a sign of protest against the Mafia and its killings. Franco, one of the artists, explained that in their daily use bed sheets serve as coverings, concealing people, while here their symbolism has been reversed: The sheet, “no longer covers but reveals, it is not white therefore it is not silent; it speaks, it even screams. The fight against the Mafia is expressed with passion, among a plurality of interpretations from which emerged the horror of violence, the pain, the disgust, the hope; all in tumultuous floods of color” (Alajmo, 1993, p. 106).

At one point, the Women of the Fast began to cover the statues in the square with newspaper to protest against the inability of newspapers to take a definite stance against the Mafia. The media reinforces this atmosphere of uncertainty by reporting the many arrests of *Mafiosi*, as well as their subsequent releases, and creating a sense of helplessness in which the Mafia continues to thrive. As a result, Sicilians continue to tolerate the Mafia, to subscribe to "*omertà*" [silence], and to accept the present condition as inevitable. By bandaging the mouths of statues the Women of the Fast symbolized the silence imposed upon Sicilians by the press, which creates a sense of tolerance of the existing Mafia system instead of encouraging dissent.

**Feminine vs. masculine sominion**

Through their occupation of the square, the Women of the Fast transformed the traditionally male public square into a distinctly feminine place. By simply

maintaining a strong presence in the square, they inverted the usual ratio of men to women, but most importantly they stopped being spectators (as women traditionally are in the markets and at political rallies), and they became the orchestrators of events. Men were never excluded from fasting, but barring a few exceptions, they did not volunteer, and although men were welcomed they only played a marginal role in this demonstration. Bice explained: "The attitude of the men that came to the square deserves reflection. They showed respect and admiration, besides their initial and sporadic ironic comments. They seemed disoriented when confronted with such a new and different strategy" (as cited in Lanza, 1994, p. 45). She described how men suggested the use of more traditional rhetorical strategies including the use of loudspeakers for speeches and of leaflets, and the Women had to resist some attempts by men to identify the protest with specific political views, especially in the early days of the demonstration (as cited in Lanza, 1994, p. 45).

The organizational structure of the group was also distinctly feminine, and did not resemble the traditional political demonstrations against the Mafia. There was no hierarchy in this group. Simona recalled: "There [was] no leader, no secretary, no friends-first-and-then-others. Among women the sense of egalitarianism, of interchangeabilty (I started, "you finish," "take my place for a moment," "she will continue"), of circularity almost to the point of anonymity, is constantly in the background" (as cited in Lanza, 1994, p. 24). The Women of the Fast, whether or not they were the ones fasting at the time, sat together, discussed ways to fight the Mafia, and gave each other the much needed emotional support to overcome this difficult moment in history.

The women found comfort in each other's presence and used their own bodies to make a statement against the Mafia. They did not try to persuade others to join them by giving speeches, but simply showed their commitment by occupying a space that was not traditionally theirs. They chose a form of protest that drew upon their experience in the private realm, where collaboration and connection to other women helped them find a voice and the strength to overcome life's

obstacles. Although there was no immediate danger in the square, they knew that their peaceful protest would gain the attention of the Mafia and might put them and their families in danger. Yet, they persevered and showed the people of Palermo that they were committed to this cause with their entire being.

**Conclusion**

On August 23, 1992, one month after they first occupied Piazza Castelnuovo, the Women of the Fast decided to leave the square and end their protest. They held a public performance on their last night in the square during which they reaffirmed their commitment to the fight against the Mafia through readings, poems, speeches and dances. They promised to meet again twice a month in the square for the following year on the 19th and 23rd of each month, the dates of the two massacres. While it was hard for many of the women to choose to leave the square that had become their home and center of support, they agreed that they had accomplished a great deal in the month-long occupation, and that to stay would mean to risk becoming a "label" a dead symbol that people no longer noticed but took for granted.

Angela Lanza (1994) reflected on the experience of the fast by saying: "We fasted because we could not do otherwise, because if we had not done it we would have been erased. Only like this, by being visible, we were able to be at peace with our conscience. Vigilance, in a moment of danger, has united the group, in spite of the differences that the many women brought with them to the square, both in our political affiliations and in the lack of affiliations" (p. 62). In the process women were changed and learned the meaning of working together for a common cause in a public square which transformed them into symbols of the anti-Mafia sentiment that existed in Palermo. Giampiera (cited in Bertuglia, 1993), one of the Women of the Fast, described this personal transformation as follows:

> I believe that for some strange reason driven by refusal or sensitivity, we alone at first and then with others, have given

> meaning to an existing exigency: the need to redefine the individual and social space in our lives as citizens: individually, because by not delegating my responsibility and accepting old rituals or giving into rhetoric, I am here; and socially because I was not alone, and the strength that has come to us by not being alone is incredible and was unimaginable.

By working together in a public space the Women of the Fast did not allow people to forget what the Mafia had done to Judges Falcone and Borsellino and their escorts. Most of all they kept the conscience of a city alive during the month of August, a time in which Italians tend to forget about work and responsibility and hide in the sanctuary of the beaches.

By changing the meaning of a public square through the use of personal symbols, the Women of the Fast were able to gain the attention of the people of Palermo, and encouraged a free and open discussion of the Mafia. Luisa, one of the Women of the Fast, believed that the success of the protest resided precisely in this, in the ability to bring to the forefront the issue of violence by the Mafia and to open the way for a public discussion of ways to combat it. Luisa (as cited in Lanza, 1994) explains: "We think that deep down we have achieved a great deal. We are keeping a piece of civil society alive in Palermo. We have not allowed people to go home alone and helpless after the last massacre. There is pride in the women who initiated this protest. We feel the need to change this city, to "liberate" the territory, to face the problem of violence and also of joblessness, to change the role of women of and in the Mafia" (pp. 30-31).

In the end, the Women of the Fast achieved their stated goals: four government officials resigned, and one was transferred. But their true victory came in their ability to bring visibility to the problem of the Mafia and to engage the people of Palermo in an open forum to discuss civic responsibility. By translating private symbols into public ones, and transforming masculine space into feminine space, they created a new interpretation of social reality. They showed the people of Palermo that it was possible to engage in rhetorical practices that went

beyond traditional political demonstrations. In essence, they proved that their commitment to this cause was genuine and not limited to dedicating a few hours shouting slogans or giving speeches for political gain. It was their obvious commitment, and their welcoming tactics reminiscent of the private realm, that encouraged so many people to add their signatures and their suggestions to the fight against the Mafia.

## Note

[1] All translations from the Italian are the author's.

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