

The Dual-Edged State Paradox: Fighting for Justice When the State is Unreliable

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Sociological theories of collective resistance offer insights into how communities mobilize against oppression but often overlook the complexities when the state, an entity relied upon for justice, also acts as an agent of betrayal. Based on 8 years of ethnographic research in Palermo (2016–2024), this study examines the relationship between Sicilian activists and the state, shaped by the dual forces of mafia oppression and state complicity. The present research explores how activists navigate the complexities of collective trauma rooted in state complicity, while simultaneously relying on parts of the state as indispensable allies in their fight for justice. The study introduces the “Dual-Edged State Paradox,” as a novel framework that captures this contradictory relationship. To navigate the paradox, activists adopt two key strategies: ‘fragmented trust dynamics’ and ‘layered collective resistance’. These strategies illustrate how activists continually recalibrate trust and engage in multi-layered resistance, adjusting their approach to balance public protest with collaboration based on the positioning of different state actors. This research contributes to our sociological knowledge on collective action, particularly in settings where activists grapple with both external violence of non-state actors and internal betrayal from the state apparatus.

Introduction

The concept of justice is widely acknowledged as a fundamental pillar in the maintenance of peace and social stability.¹ However, when the institutions responsible for upholding this essential principle are questioned, the quest for justice becomes a prolonged battle and leads to conflicts and negotiations between the state and society (Migdal 2001; Mitchell 2023). Navigating the paradoxes of a society, where the state assumes both oppressive and protective roles, complicates our journey toward justice, fraught with conflicting emotions and uncertain pathways (Morgan and Orloff 2017; Wedeen 2003). The Sicilian experience vividly exemplifies this dilemma, where the quest for justice by activists against the mafia intertwines with a legacy of state-inflicted injustices. These complexities expose the profound scars of a community grappling with its history of state complicity and abandonment, endeavoring to collectively heal and move forward.

In regions torn by conflict, in societies fragmented by systemic corruption, and in nations where authoritarianism silences dissent, the state often emerges as a dual agent—both as a harbinger of oppression and as a potential instrument for delivering justice. These communities are bound by a shared historical struggle, where the state’s complicity has deepened the roots of their collective trauma. This poses a universal challenge: confronting the paradox of seeking justice from the very entities that may have undermined it. The persistent motifs in these accounts emphasize an imperative for an expansive sociological exploration into the theoretical constructs of state-society dynamics, along with the strategies communities employ in their resilient pursuit of justice.

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This research project addresses a critical gap in sociological inquiry by introducing the dual-edged state paradox as a framework to examine the complex and contradictory dynamics between state actors and community members engaged in collective resistance. While previous studies have thoroughly explored how communities mobilize collective resistance (della Porta 2020; Diani 2004; Gutmann 1993; McAdam and Tarrow 2018) and how they navigate state power in conflict-ridden contexts (Aretxaga 2005; Nosheen 2019; Pineda 2021; Walker 2020), there is limited knowledge of the ways in which communities respond to a state that is both complicit in their oppression and necessary to achieving justice. The term “dual-edged” refers specifically to the state’s contradictory roles—on the one hand, certain state actors (referred to as complicit state agents) work to sustain systems of oppression, while on the other hand, other state actors (called dedicated state agents) actively push for justice and reform. The paradox lies in the fact that activists cannot simply oppose or reject the state outright because, while parts of the state are actively undermining justice, other parts are essential for achieving it. This framework moves beyond the idea that reforms are hindered by non-cooperation from some state officials. Rather, it highlights a deeper structural division within the state itself: parts of the state are not merely uncooperative but actively complicit in maintaining oppression, while other parts are crucial allies for reform. I argue that this duality is more than just a frustration with bureaucratic inefficiency; it is about the ethical and strategic dilemma of relying on a state that is both the problem and the solution. Hence, the dual-edged state paradox reflects the internal contradictions of the state that activists must navigate, which go beyond the common challenges of working within bureaucratic systems. Introducing this framework, the present study endeavors to fill the gap by probing the sociological complexities concerning how activists confront complicit state agents while forming crucial alliances with dedicated state agents to achieve justice. I argue and demonstrate that their actions result in adaptive strategies of “fragmented trust dynamics” and “layered collective resistance” which I discuss these two concepts in the presentation of data.

The introduction of fragmented trust dynamics and layered collective resistance offers fresh insights into how activists manage their relationships with state actors, showing that their strategies are far more complex than merely opposing or cooperating with the state. This study contributes to the theoretical discourse on collective action by revealing the nuanced ways in which collective resistance is organized when the state is deeply implicated in both the oppression and the pursuit of justice. Ultimately, the dual-edged state paradox framework demands both strategic adaptability and emotional resilience, making it particularly relevant for activists worldwide who face not only external oppression but also the internal contradictions of state structures. In this context, strategic adaptability refers to activists’ ability to continuously adjust their approaches to both resist and collaborate with the state based on the evolving political landscape. Emotional resilience involves sustaining morale and psychological well-being in the face of ongoing adversity, enabling activists to endure and persist despite facing both external oppression and the contradictions within state structures. This framework can be applied to diverse contexts where social movements must navigate the dual challenge of resisting state complicity while simultaneously relying on parts of the state to achieve justice.

In the sections that follow, I first discuss the relevant literature on sociological theories encompassing collective resistance, and justice-seeking activists, with a keen focus on the state’s role. Next, I articulate the methodologies underpinning data collection.

Subsequently, I explicate the complexities involved in parsing the ethnographic data, the integration of visual documentation, and the empirical insights derived from both my fieldwork and interviews. The remaining section is divided into two parts: (i) fragmented trust dynamics and (ii) layered collective resistance, where I present the ethnographic data within each section. Before concluding, I discuss these two concepts in greater depth, demonstrating how they together form the dual-edged state paradox. The conclusion highlights the key findings of the study, addressing its limitations and suggesting avenues for future research.

The Fight for Justice: Exploring State-Activist Dynamics in Collective Resistance

The state, functioning as a political entity, wields considerable influence in shaping the opportunities and constraints that chart the course of collective resistance movements (McAdam and Tarrow 2018). The complex interaction between political opportunities and constraints is a critical factor in determining the formation, progression, and ultimate achievement of collective mobilization. (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). Within the context of collective resistance, the political landscape, inclusive of state institutions and the actions of political elites, assumes a critical role in either enabling or obstructing the efforts of social movements (Giugni 1998). Political opportunities, exemplified by favorable shifts in legislation, evolving public sentiments, or changes in leadership, can establish fertile ground for the flourishing of social movements (Goldstone 2004). Conversely, constraints such as coercive governmental measures or staunch opposition from influential elites have the potential to stifle or suppress these movements (della Porta 2020). In the realm of collective resistance, the state emerges as a central actor whose position significantly molds the dynamics of social movements. The state is far from a neutral entity; rather, it exerts substantial influence, actively shaping both the opportunities and limitations encountered by collective resistance movements fighting injustices (Cayli 2012; 2013a; 2014; della Porta and Fillieule 2004; Diani 2004).

In the context of collective resistance and the function of the state, social movements and activists depend on external entities for critical resources, including financial backing, legitimacy, information, and entry into decision-making structures (Mattoni and Odilla 2021; McCarthy and Zald 2001; Tarrow, Tilly, and McAdam 2001). Activists employ a variety of mobilization strategies, including networking, advocacy, coalition-building, and negotiations with resource-rich entities, which are essential for sustaining their efforts in the face of adversity (Diani and Bison 2004). These tactics become even more significant when considering that network intersections involving individuals with weaker social ties play a crucial role in shaping identities that challenge established hierarchies and norms within marginalized communities (Poletta 1999). Additionally, emotions, interpersonal interactions, and heightened awareness serve as key driving forces for resistance, providing valuable insights into the conditions and mechanisms of resistance, further highlighting the importance of these mobilization strategies (Summers-Effler 2002).

Against the rich sociological canon exploring the interplay between the state and collective resistance, a notable gap emerges in the research landscape. While existing scholarship has adeptly dissected the influence of the state on social movements as discussed above, there remains a dearth of comprehensive analysis concerning the perplexing dynamics arising when activists rely on the state as both a resource provider and a historical source of injustice. This research gap underscores the need for a deeper exploration of the challenges and paradoxes inherent in such relationships, thereby highlighting the significance of the

present study. The state, as a repository of resources, possesses law enforcement powers and serves as the only legally justified source to organize operations against oppressive forces that violate citizens' rights. The reliance on the state for resources, while offering potential benefits in terms of resource accessibility, simultaneously introduces a power imbalance that can undermine the autonomy and decision-making capacity of citizens. This power imbalance can be further exacerbated by the historical legacy of injustices perpetrated by the state itself.

Collective trauma indicates shared experience of pain and loss that affects an entire community, not just individuals and it disrupts the social bonds and identity of the group, leaving a lasting impact on their sense of unity and collective well-being (Alexander and Breese 2016: xii). Collective traumas hold a pivotal role in fueling the momentum of collective resistance efforts. Experiences marked by injustices often serve as catalysts that propel communities to unite against oppressive forces (Alexander 2002; Cayli 2018; Mithander, Sundholm, and Holmgren 2007; Schwartz 2018). These collective traumas become central to the facilitation of collective memory, providing a platform for the voices of those who have been marginalized or silenced by catastrophic events, spanning from state formations to empire building (Argenti and Schramm 2010; Eyerman 2019; Kurnick 2019; Wise 2004). The enduring effects of oppressive forces within contemporary sociopolitical systems, such as the mafia's influence in Sicily, emphasize the need for collective remembering to confront injustice and suffering. Through this process, communities can contextualize their struggles, drawing strength from their historical antecedents to forge a path toward a future where violence, and the detrimental impacts of injustice can be fully understood and redressed.

The scholarly analysis of the mafia is not limited only to the economic, network, and social unit of analysis (Dickie 2007; Gambetta 1992; Hess 1998; Scalia 2016; Sciarone 2002), but its power is also studied within the system of political culture and historical sociology (Allum, Merlino, and Colletti 2019; Santoro 1998; Schneider and Schneider 1994; Seindal 1998). The rich literature on the influence of the mafia in everyday life informs us of the cultural repertoire of the mafia (Duggan 1989; Sabetti 2002; Santoro and Sassatelli 2001) as well as the social control of the mafia and the resistance of local people and certain factions of the state to defy the mafia (Cayli 2013b; Cayli Messina 2024; Ceruso 2015; della Chiesa 2014; Fiandaca and Lupo 2014; Jerne 2020; La Spina 2005; Lodato & Di Matteo 2018; Scaglione 2020; Tessitore 1997). In addition, studies on the mafia, its collectivity, cultural codes, and public influence attracted the attention of scholars from diverse disciplines such as sociology, criminology, anthropology, philosophy, and history, and provided us with interdisciplinary concepts that reveal the complexity of its social reality, in which the mafia endures and is transformed into new structures (Ben-Yehoyada 2018; Blok 1975; Boissevain 1966; della Chiesa 2018; Paoli 2008; Puccio-Den 2019; Rakopoulos, 2017, 2018; Schneider 2018; Schneider and Schneider 2008). Examining collective resistance against the mafia provides a sociocultural lens through which we can discern how these factors shape the perception of the state as a responsible actor while activists concurrently devise strategies to challenge the mafia and its deeply ingrained culture.

Methods and Data Collection

This study is based on my ethnographic fieldwork in Palermo, including attendance at 83 antimafia events and interviews with 56 people from Palermo year-round from March 2016 to June 2024 (see [Appendix](#)). I resided in Palermo for a total of 37 months, living in

the city at different intervals over that period of time. After earning the trust of activists particularly after the second year of my field research, they invited me to their events and granted me interviews with prominent people involved in antimafia activism in Palermo, including leading artists like Letizia Battaglia and Angelo Sicilia, as well as political figures like Leoluca Orlando, the former mayor of Palermo, and Claudio Fava, the previous President of the antimafia commission of the Sicilian parliament. During my initial attempts to establish contact with activists, I faced rejection for interviews on five separate occasions. However, after consistently attending events and strengthening my networks, even those who initially declined eventually agreed to be interviewed. This underscores both the challenges of conducting ethnographic research on the antimafia movement and the deep-seated trust issues among activists.

Each interview lasted between 32 minutes and approximately 2 hours, conducted in Italian with translations provided by myself. Additionally, I supplemented my interviews by engaging with local participants in antimafia commemorative events held in public spaces. Throughout my eight-year ethnographic research, the most well-attended memorials were for Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, two antimafia magistrates assassinated by the mafia within 2 months of each other in 1992, and Giuseppe Impastato, who defied his mafia family in Cinisi and was murdered by the mafia on May 9, 1978. Attendance at these events ranged from several dozen to several hundred individuals. Key civil society organizations in Sicily, including Addiopizzo, Libera, Agenda Rossa, NoMafia, Centro Pio La Torre, and Centro Sociale Falcone Borsellino, played pivotal roles in organizing these events and were actively involved in the activities I observed.

I used the NVivo computer software to examine the raw data derived from 56 interviews and my personal notes during my participation in antimafia events. I first started with open coding, and an array of emerging codes began to crystallize, reflecting the multi-faceted nature of the activists' struggle against the mafia. For the second round of coding, both inductive and deductive coding techniques were used. Two primary clusters of codes emerged. The primary focus of the code revolves around the concept of "unreliable state," which is connected with the historical instances of complicities and betrayals. Activists recounted past occurrences in which certain state actors failed in its obligation to confront the mafia, resulting in mistrust. The second main code centered on the "state as a required ally". This juxtaposition of reliance and distrust toward the state became the crucible in which the final theoretical concept, the "dual-edged state paradox," was forged. This concept encapsulates the complex nature of the activists' relationship with different state actors, symbolizing the core tension that defined their collective resistance against the mafia. The dual-edged state paradox is primarily elucidated by complicit state agents who obstruct antimafia endeavors and dedicated state agents who valiantly combat the mafia, even at the expense of their own lives (Table 1).

When I used pseudonyms for other interviewees, I marked their names with an asterisk in the table. For the well-known public figures, I used their real names. The following sections presented in this article serve as condensed snapshots that provide readers with a representative view of the expansive ethnographic dataset amassed during an eight-year period of fieldwork.

Table 1 The Emerging Theoretical Framework and Concepts During the Phases of Data Collection and Analyses

Phases	The following process	Outcomes
Phase I: Open coding	Initial exploration of data using NVivo	Emerging codes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State responsibility • State unreliability • Collective trauma • Collective resistance
Phase II: Second round of coding	Inductive and deductive coding	Primary code clusters <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical complications and betrayals • Unreliable state • State as required ally
Phase III: Theoretical framework	Dual-edged state paradox	Represents the complex relationship activists have with two contrasting types of state actors: complicit state agents, who undermine antimafia efforts, and dedicated state agents, who fight to uphold justice. This dynamic is captured by fragmented trust dynamics and layered collective resistance, which challenge the perception of the state as uniformly trustworthy, showing how trust is fragmented and resistance is multi-layered

Fragmented Trust Dynamics

Fragmented trust dynamics refers to the ongoing and fluid process by which activists, operating within the framework of the Dual-Edged State Paradox, constantly reassess their relationships with state actors. In this context, the state is not monolithic; it is deeply divided between complicit state agents, who undermine justice and perpetuate systems of oppression, and dedicated state agents, who actively work toward reform and justice. This internal contradiction forces activists to engage in a fragmented and cautious approach to trust, as they must selectively place their faith in certain actors while remaining wary of others. Unlike simple mistrust or frustration with bureaucratic inefficiency, Fragmented trust dynamics highlights the strategic complexity of navigating a state that is simultaneously both an oppressor and a necessary ally. Activists are compelled to continually evaluate new information, past experiences, and the political landscape to determine where trust can be placed without compromising their goals. This dynamic reflects the core of the dual-edged state paradox, where trust is never static but fragmented across a shifting terrain of reliable and unreliable state actors. In this sense, Fragmented trust dynamics becomes a key mechanism through which activists manage the ethical and strategic dilemmas posed by the state's contradictory roles, shaping their engagement with the state and their broader resistance efforts.

Despite the formal recognition of the mafia by the state, marked by the establishment of the antimafia commission in 1963, the mafia's deep-seated connections with politicians and state bureaucrats have roots dating back to the 1870s (Lupo 1993). A significant turning point occurred on February 1, 1893, when the mafia assassinated Emanuele Notarbartolo, the former mayor of Palermo as Notarbartolo had uncovered the extensive network and collaboration between politicians and the mafia during his tenure as the director of the Bank of Sicily (Mosca 1900). The mafia's enduring influence in politics has persisted with intermittent periods of exposure up to the present day (Santoro 2021). As exemplified by Notarbartolo's case, resistance against the mafia has always existed, but its mobilization intensified in recent decades, thanks to courageous individuals who channeled their anger and inspired others to follow their path (Santino 2009). Particularly, the brutal murders of the two antimafia magistrates, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, in 1992 highlighted the apparent collusion between state institutions and the mafia (Biondo and Ranucci 2010). Subsequently, a more organized civil society mobilized since 1992, bitterly understanding the fight against the mafia cannot be left to state organizations alone, and activists created initiatives such as educational programs for youth, legal support for those intimidated or threatened by the mafia, and other projects designed to generate collective change from social protests to commemoration activities that would counteract mafia power (Dino and Modica 2022; Rakopoulos 2017; Santino 2009; Schneider and Schneider 2010).

I met Claudio Fava, heading the Antimafia Commission of the Sicilian Parliament at the time of the interview. Fava is the son of Giuseppe Fava, a prominent journalist who was brutally murdered by the mafia in Catania on 5 January 1984, shortly after his participation in a national television program hosted by Enzo Biagi on Rete 4. A few weeks prior to his assassination, Giuseppe Fava named a number of mafiosi and blamed Italian politicians for their collaboration with the mafia. Claudio Fava used to work with his father until the latter's tragic murder.

He responded to my initial inquiry about the impact of his father on his life. Fava answered,

It was a great journalism lesson and a wonderful opportunity to work with my father. I had just enrolled in university. He was more than just my father. He was my teacher and boss at the same time...while everyone was silenced, my father did not remain silent...but the state abandoned him...

As Fava reflected on the past, his eyes misted over, his head dipped toward the ground, and his voice trembled. I interjected and inquired about his thoughts on the 1980s, when mafia killings were prevalent. Fava responded:

The mafia is not only a criminal organization that shoots and kills, but also a structure of political and economic thought, which has made it extremely dangerous due to its pervasiveness and presence in daily life, as well as the fact that few antibodies have been developed to combat it... Pio La Torre regional secretary of the Italian Communist Party -Partito Comunista Italiano-, PCI, Carlo Alberto dalla Chiesa (the prefect of Palermo), judge Rocco Chinnici, and Giuseppe Insalaco (the former mayor of Palermo) were all murdered by the mafia in the 1980s. And these were the most tragic years, not only because these heinous murders threw us Sicilians into disarray, but also because there were mafia allies within state institutions.

Fava's account of the past depicts the mafia as a formidable foe that cooperated with certain factions of the state and murdered not only innocent civilians but also professionals within the state institutions who threatened its authority. The trauma that these assassinations brought to the lives of Sicilians is only one aspect of this grim reality. On the other hand,

what made Sicilians less optimistic was the futile expectation that all state institutions would eradicate the mafia while facing the bitter truth about a group of state agents who were complicit in the mafia's crimes. These exposés not only unveiled the extent of corruption but also emphasized the daunting challenges that many Sicilians faced in their fight against the mafia, compelling them to confront the painful truth of the state's involvement in these injustices.

L'Ora, Palermitan daily newspaper, exposed the political-criminal nexus in the 1970s and 1980s extensively (Dovizio 2022). The national newspaper L'Unità coined the phrase "Palermo come Beirut" (Palermo like Beirut) following the assassination of antimafia magistrate Rocco Chinnici by the mafia on 29 July 1983. The comparison to a civil war reflected the ongoing mafia violence and the daily killings that created a stifling social atmosphere in Palermo. In one of my most poignant interviews, Augusta Schiera, whose son—a police officer—was killed by the mafia, recounted the enduring trauma she experienced, exacerbated by the fact that her son's killer has yet to be identified. In tears, she told me, "As a mother, I have been seeking justice for many years. They [the mafia] killed many others like Chinnici, and this is a heavy burden not just on me but on many Sicilians. Each time we commemorate my son and others, the trauma deepens, becoming part of our daily reality." This connection between personal loss and collective trauma is crucial for understanding how the mafia's violence mirrors a kind of civil war in Sicily. The systematic killings created a pervasive environment of fear, with each murder acting as both a personal tragedy and a blow to the social fabric. Schiera's words reflect her individual grief and the collective suffering of a society where justice remains elusive. The mafia's violence, much like a civil war, has torn apart families, creating wounds that are felt across generations. Through this lens, the trauma of people like Augusta Schiera becomes emblematic of the wider civil conflict within Sicilian society, where state failures compound the suffering inflicted by mafia control and has rendered trust more fragile and fragmented.

As I attended the commemoration of Peppino Impastato in Cinisi, I interviewed Leonardo. While Peppino was born into a mafia family, he courageously established the Radio Aut program in order to reveal and confront the mafia's corruption and violence. Despite this brave effort, many of Cinisi's residents would not oppose the omertà, or code of silence, which governed their everyday lives. Impastato's relentless campaign against the mafia met a devastating end when he was assassinated at 30 years old on May 9, 1978, a deed commanded by Gaetano Badalamenti himself. Leonardo told me:

Looking back over 40 years, I try to imagine how Peppino Impastato must have been when he walked these same streets. He knew the mafia would take his life...and the state would do nothing to protect him...yet he never hesitated in his fight against the mafia. Without the courage of people like him, our movement wouldn't be so large and powerful.

When I asked Alessio, another activist at the event, if he believes Peppino Impastato was abandoned by the state, he replied:

Yes, indeed, he was abandoned by the state, partly because of his socialist affiliations. Corruption has been prevalent here since the unification of Italy. The local community in Cinisi had also turned their back on him during that period. However, it's important to note that we've grown stronger in our fight against the mafia compared to 40 years ago.

In my interview with the Palermo's mayor at that time, Leoluca Orlando as well as other activists, a similar narrative emerged in referring to the past. Orlando invited me to his

office at Villa Niscemi, one of the representative Palermo Mayoral headquarters. The photographs in Orlando's office include one with the current President of Italy, Sergio Mattarella, whose brother, Piersanti Mattarella, was assassinated by the mafia in Palermo on January 6, 1980, when he was serving as the President of the Regional Government of Sicily. While I was curiously examining various objects and photographs in Orlando's office, he pointed out his photo with President Sergio Mattarella, which was located behind his chair, and stated,

You see this photo. . . He is a very good friend and of Sicilian descent. He holds the office of president. Piersanti Mattarella, his brother, was a courageous person who fought the mafia with all his strength. We could not have reached this point in the fight against the mafia without the efforts of so many dedicated Sicilians in the past.

Orlando commended the Sicilians and state officials who bravely confronted the mafia, demonstrating their dedicated commitment to resist the mafia. The memory of those who both worked for and were betrayed by the state remains vivid in the people's minds, casting a pall over their ongoing fight against the mafia and their quest for justice.

The communal support pays tribute to the victims, can be therapeutic for bereaved families, and develops a sense of community and group solidarity. One example of the power of commemoration events to offer mutual support and develop a sense of community can be seen in the annual commemoration of Claudio Domino's death, which takes place on the street where he was killed in the San Lorenzo neighborhood of Palermo on October 7, 1986. I have been attending the commemoration of Claudio Domino since 2016. The shooter, according to eyewitnesses, was a man who arrived on a motorcycle while wearing a full-face helmet, through which one could see long blonde hair that matched those of mafia hitman Giovanni Aiello, who also used to work for state intelligence (Abbate 2021). There were other mafia families on the street to support the parents of Claudio Domino. Claudio Domino's mother, Graziella Accetta, became emotional and trembled as she addressed those gathered to commemorate her son:

I and my family have been waiting for justice for more than 30 years to find out who murdered my son when he was 11 years old. . .but today I have many children, and I thank you for coming here. . .I know there are courageous people in state institutions who have been killed by the mafia but the state abandoned and forgot us, and as a mother, I am still waiting for justice from the state.

These words encapsulate the dual role of the state from the perspective of a grieving mother who has been waiting for over 30 years to discover why her 11-year-old son, Claudio Domino, was killed. From one perspective, she emphasizes the state's accountability for the continuation of tragic occurrences and injustices, while also lamenting the tragic demise of valiant personnel affiliated with state institutions who have fallen prey to the mafia. In addition, these words also highlight a sense of abandonment and neglect by the state, as the mother expresses her enduring wait for justice and the feeling that the state has forgotten them. Yet Graziella Accetta fiercely defends the valiant efforts of antimafia magistrates like Nino Di Matteo, whose steadfast works are sometimes met with criticism from the media and peers. This conflicting perspective embodies the convoluted relationship between activists and various state actors—a fragile balance between placing trust in certain state agents while simultaneously feeling disillusioned by other's actions.

As Graziella delivered her statement, her voice weighed down by years of unresolved grief, a group of high school students stood nearby. Among them, two young girls quietly

wept, their tears not only a reflection of the personal impact of Graziella's words but also an embodiment of the collective burden borne by their generation. In this moment, the square where we stood encapsulated the manifestation of collective trauma, where the grief of past violence continues to shape the emotional landscape of the present. Although these students were distanced from the direct experiences of the mafia's earlier brutality, Graziella's testimony revealed the enduring reverberations of such trauma, transcending generations. This moment demonstrated how historical trauma, embedded in the experiences of survivors and their communities, remains interwoven with contemporary Sicilian society. This a constant reminder of the pervasive impact of mafia violence on collective memory. Figure 1 captures a pivotal moment of collective trauma, visually representing the shared silence and emotional weight experienced by the community during the commemoration of Claudio Domino.

Stefania, who attended the commemoration of Paolo Borsellino, underscored the fragmented trust dynamics that activists experience, where complicit state agents contribute to the erosion of trust in state institutions. Reflecting on the personal loss her family endured, Stefania remarked:

You know. . .my dad's best friend was killed by the mafia for not paying pizzo (extortion money). Even after so much time has passed, their brutality stays unchecked and lots of cases go unsolved. This is horrible! The state holds responsibility too for our pain.

Through the historical and contemporary cases of Emanuele Notarbartolo, Giovanni Falcone, Paolo Borsellino, and personal accounts like those of Claudio Fava and Graziella Accetta, we see how fragmented trust dynamics operates in practice. These cases illustrate



Figure 1 Leoluca Orlando, the mayor of Palermo, stands between Claudio Domino's parents, Graziella Accello and Ninni Domino in front of the memorial marking the spot where Claudio was murdered by the mafia on October 7, 1986. *Source:* Author, 7 October 2019.

that trust is never static but continually fragmented and reassessed based on the shifting roles of state actors. Activists are forced into a dual engagement—relying on dedicated state agents for justice, while simultaneously guarding against the influence of complicit agents who undermine their efforts. Fragmented trust dynamics provides theoretical lens for examining how activists contend with the inherent contradictions of the dual-edged state paradox. This concept sheds light on the strategic and adaptive processes through which activists engage with a state that is divided between complicit agents, who perpetuate systems of oppression, and dedicated agents, who work toward reform and justice. Unlike traditional conceptions of mistrust that are rooted in bureaucratic inefficiency or corruption, Fragmented trust dynamics encapsulates the ongoing, deliberate recalibration of trust necessitated by the paradoxical role of the state. Activists are not merely navigating dysfunction; they are strategically managing an environment where the very institution they oppose is also indispensable to their cause.

The primary contribution of fragmented trust dynamics is its ability to conceptualize how the dual-edged state paradox impacts activists' strategic calculations. It moves beyond typical analyses of state-society relations by revealing the profound ethical and emotional toll that the paradox imposes on activists, who must balance hope for reform with the reality of systemic betrayal. By exposing the fragmented nature of trust within divided state structures, this concept advances clarifies the complex mechanisms through which activists adapt to and resist the dual roles of the state in their struggle for justice.

Layered Collective Resistance

Layered Collective Resistance refers to the multi-faceted strategies activists employ to confront both the complicit and dedicated agents within the state under the framework of the dual-edged state paradox. Unlike a uniform approach to resistance, this concept captures how activists operate across various layers of engagement—ranging from confrontational, grassroots actions aimed at undermining complicit agents, to cooperative, institutional efforts that work alongside dedicated agents. The existence of this paradox forces activists to adopt a layered approach to resistance, recognizing that the state is not a monolithic entity but is instead composed of contradictory forces that simultaneously sustain and combat oppression.

Layered collective resistance thus encapsulates the strategic adaptability required in contexts where activists must both resist and collaborate with the state. This layered approach can include public demonstrations, commemorative acts, legal advocacy, and educational initiatives, each tailored to the role the state plays in a given moment. For example, while activists may confront complicit state actors through public protests or direct action, they may simultaneously work with reformist state actors in legal or policy-making arenas to achieve broader social change. The essence of layered collective resistance lies in this flexibility: it enables activists to adjust their resistance tactics depending on the nature of state engagement, navigating the state's dual role as both a repressive and reformative force. In doing so, this concept provides a more nuanced understanding of how collective action is organized and sustained within the contradictory realities posed by the dual-edged state paradox.

The Centro Internazionale di Fotografia (International Centre of Photography), located in Palermo's Ziza cultural sites, was involved in a variety of antimafia activities. I went to there to conduct an interview with Letizia Battaglia in 2018 and 2021, the Centre's director. Letizia Battaglia, a renowned Palermitan photographer who dedicated many years of her life to working at the L'Ora newspaper, passed away on April 12, 2022. She gained fame for

her exceptional photographic documentation of the aftermath of numerous mafia killings in the city during the tumultuous 1970s and 1980s. In my interview with her, she stated that culture is based on values and crucial in every aspect, from developing collective resistance to the eradication of poverty, and she added,

I remember the 1970s and 80s when it was almost impossible to challenge the mafia by local people but also leading figures and intellectuals of Sicily... (sighing)... Now everything has changed; there is resistance and many cultural and social activities going on... but when I look at those photographs that I took after many assassinations of the mafia on the streets of Palermo, I say that the mafia is less visible now but still very powerful... and the state must do more to prevent poverty; the most effective way is the prevention of recruitment for the mafia. If the state prevents poverty, there may be more hope, and we can forget the state's past injustices, corruption, and collusion with the mafia.

Letizia Battaglia underlines the state's historical failings, marked by injustices, corruption, and collusion with the mafia, all of which have contributed to the enduring power of the mafia. These past transgressions by the state are viewed as a key reason why, in earlier decades, challenging the mafia was an almost insurmountable task for both local residents in Sicily. This historical context underscores the state's role in perpetuating the mafia's influence and fostering an environment in which it could thrive. Recognizing the state's capacity to prevent poverty becomes a pivotal factor in diminishing the mafia's power and influence. Hence, this dual perspective portrays the state as both a contributor to past injustices due to mafia prevalence and a potential remedy through poverty prevention, a vital component in reducing the mafia's grip on communities. Letizia Battaglia's remarks on the mafia's less visible power choosing less blood on the streets confirm my interview with Chiara who try to help businesses that were targeted by the mafia to pay *pizzo*, extortion money. She said:

The pressure to comply with the mafia's demands is intense, but there is a deep-rooted historical influence as well. If the businesses of one family paid the *pizzo*, it was expected that subsequent generations would follow suit considering that the state was powerless in the past to protect them; hence, we offer our assistance to help these businessowners and families to cope with this difficult situation. We also cooperate with the police and justice system, they are not left to face these intimidations alone.

Chiara's remarks reflect the historical influence and powerlessness of the state in the face of mafia extortion. The expectation that businesses would continue paying the "pizzo" (protection money) generation after generation arose from a grim reality where the state failed to provide adequate protection. This historical complicity or inability to safeguard businesses and families created a culture of compliance out of fear, and the mafia exploited this vulnerability and hindered collective resistance. However, in contrast to the past, there is a recognition of the need for change and cooperation with state institutions. Acknowledging the state's historical negligence, Chiara also underscores a notable shift in the approach to tackling mafia intimidation. Her mention of providing support to businesses and families grappling with these issues, alongside cooperation with the police and justice system, reflects a resolute determination to collectively confront the mafia. In response, activists have developed multiple layers of collective resistance, adapting their strategies based on the specific challenges and dynamics of their relationship with the state. Despite the ongoing prevalence of extortion payments to the mafia in Sicily, this dynamic presents a complex and challenging enigma. It highlights the enduring historical legacy of complicity of certain state actors or ineffectiveness in protection, while simultaneously emphasizing the contemporary commitment to collaborating with state institutions to resist the mafia's demands.

In terms of the role of schools in the fight against the mafia, Centro Pio La Torre's activities play a crucial role. The Centre was named after Pio La Torre, a leader of the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI) who was assassinated by the mafia on 30 April 1982 after campaigning for a law that would allow the courts to seize the assets of mafia members and members of a mafia conspiracy (see Figure 2).

The inclusion of L'Ora's front page from 30 April 1982, following the assassination of Pio La Torre, marks a significant moment in Sicilian history when the mafia's violence directly confronted political resistance. This historical artifact captures the immediate public reaction to La Torre's murder and becomes a powerful visual representation of the broader collective trauma inflicted by the mafia. The presence of blood and La Torre's lifeless body on the newspaper's front page underscores the grim reality of mafia violence for Sicilians, transforming abstract fears into tangible, visible terror. For those reading the newspaper, this visceral imagery reinforced the omnipresence of mafia power, while simultaneously amplifying the sense of betrayal by state forces that failed to protect one of its most committed



Figure 2 L'Ora, the headline of the daily newspaper regarding the assassination of Pio La Torre by the Corleonesi mafia on 30 April 1982. *Source:* Author.

antimafia leaders. This visual documentation transcends mere reporting, acting as a collective reminder of both the cost of resistance and the deep wounds left in the community's psyche.

Together with the magistrate Cesare Terranova, who was also murdered by the mafia on September 25, 1979, La Torre authored a report detailing the political-criminal connection between the Christian Democratic Party (DC) and the mafia. The two antimafia magistrates, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, followed in the footsteps of Cesare Terranova.² Since then, thousands of mafia assets have been confiscated as a result of the law introduced by La Torre (Cayli 2011). The focus of the Center's activities is on education and the organization of extracurricular activities related to the mafia in order to encourage the next generation to adopt appropriate behaviors and strengthen a culture of lawfulness.

I met with the Director of the Centre, Vito Lo Monaco, at the association's headquarters in Palermo, which is also a mafia-owned confiscated asset. Lo Monaco explained that the law introduced by Pio La Torre at the time was revolutionary as he directly targeted the wealth of the mafia. The law change frustrated the mafia because it posed a direct threat to its central power and territorial control. Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa, the prefect of Palermo, was appointed as a prefect of Palermo the day after the La Torre was killed, was also assassinated by the mafia on 3 September 1982. The bill purposed by La Torre was approved by the House of Deputies, the Chamber, and the Senate on September 11, 1982, and it was published in the official Gazette on September 13, 1982.

Lo Monaco added:

It is essential to inform and educate oneself. Consider, for instance, our Constitution, which encourages the implementation of legality-centered policies for the development of a democratic culture. All of these things are not taught in school, that is, they are not taught the values of being a good and responsible citizen, so our focus has been on reinforcing the tenets of a culture of legality through our projects. . .hoping to change minds who can also change the political spectrum as the politicians are responsible for our tragedy.

The interview with Vito Lo Monaco sheds light on the paradoxical relationship between the state's responsibility in perpetuating mafia power and its role as a necessary partner in the fight against the mafia. The tragic history of mafia-related assassinations, including that of Pio La Torre, demonstrates the state's failure to adequately protect those who have courageously stood up against the mafia's influence. The mafia's reach into politics, as revealed by La Torre and others, raises questions about the complicity of state institutions in enabling the mafia's growth. This painful history of betrayal and violence highlights the state's dual role – as both a collaborator in the past and a potential ally in the present struggle against the mafia.

Within the context of layered collective resistance, this statement exemplifies how activists navigate the state's dual role by engaging in multi-tiered resistance strategies. While holding the state accountable for its past complicity, activists like those at Centro Pio La Torre recognize that certain dedicated state agents are crucial partners in the fight against the mafia. This illustrates the layered approach in which activists resist the oppressive elements of the state (such as its historical failures) while simultaneously collaborating with reformist agents who support justice. Their ability to balance confrontation with cooperation—depending on the state actors involved—demonstrates the core flexibility of layered collective resistance in navigating the contradictions of the dual-edged State paradox.

Legal changes, such as the legislation introduced by Pio La Torre, have been instrumental in undermining the mafia's power by targeting its assets. Educational initiatives,

conducted in collaboration with schools, aim to instill a culture of lawfulness and responsible citizenship. This complex relationship highlights the significance of recognizing the state not as a monolithic entity but rather as an institution comprised of divergent actors. Within these state structures, distinctions emerge between those who collaborate with criminal elements, thereby failing their duty to citizens, and those who actively engage in combating the mafia, often at great personal risk.

The Falcone-Borsellino Museum was dedicated to the memory of Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, the two antimafia magistrates, by converting their offices in the Tribunale di Palermo into a museum. Giovanni Pappacuri, the museum's director, was Rocco Chinnici and Giovanni Falcone's driver when they were anti-mafia magistrates. I visited the two rooms where Falcone and Borsellino keep numerous personal and professional items (see Figure 3). These two rooms are linked by a corridor that also contains significant photographs of the two magistrates. Pappacuri interacted with each museum visitor and inquired as to their reason for visiting. Each visitor emphasized the significance of the two magistrates' sacrifice and the values that they defended. Pappacuri became very sentimental while sharing his memories and, with his voice trembling and his eyes fixed on Falcone's table and typewriter, he said,

Doctor Falcone attended my wedding. Never will I forget that day. He was a unique person, very unique...and an excellent judge... Doctors Falcone and Borsellino were criticized by even some of their colleagues and they knew they would be targeted by the mafia, but they never stopped working on their cases against mafiosi.

This image, Figure 3, provides insight into Borsellino's personal life, contrasting his daily routines with his monumental fight against the mafia. The presence of tourists in the museum reflects the enduring public reverence for his legacy. The table and typewriter—



Figure 3 The personal table, typewriter, and photos of Paolo Borsellino. *Source:* Author.

ordinary objects of daily work—become symbolic of Borsellino’s dedication and courage in the face of great risk. For Sicilians and visitors alike, these artifacts not only preserve personal history but also embody the relentless pursuit of justice. This intertwining of personal memory with public commemoration highlights how figures like Borsellino continue to inspire resistance within a community scarred by mafia violence.

Participation in the 26th commemoration of magistrate Paolo Borsellino and five police officers assassinated by a car bomb organized by the mafia on 19 July 1992 attests to the large number of activists and locals who came together to send a message that they will continue to fight the mafia with the same dedication and principles as Paolo Borsellino (see Figure 4). Stefania, whom I know from previous events, a young participant of the event, was livid, and tears streamed down her face, and she said:

If we Sicilians live Paolo Borsellino’s principles in our daily lives—not just remembering them—we can create real change in Palermo and Sicily. She articulated fiercely, sighed and continued: The people here today are important, but we need more individuals with Borsellino’s dedication to protect our rights and futures.

This image, Figure 4, captures a significant moment of public memory and collective action, as a diverse group of participants—ranging from local citizens to activists—gather under the symbolic banners and flags. This commemoration functions not only as a memorial for Borsellino’s sacrifice but also as a ritual of collective resistance, reinforcing the community’s ongoing struggle against the deep-seated influence of the mafia. The scene reflects how historical memory is intertwined with present-day activism, revealing the community’s determination to uphold justice in the face of persistent threats.

By engaging in public commemoration, activists reaffirm their commitment to confronting both complicit state agents, who have allowed mafia influence to persist, and dedicated state agents, who work to dismantle that power. The layered nature of this resistance



Figure 4 The commemoration of the antimafia magistrate Paolo Borsellino. *Source:* Author, July 19, 2022.

allows activists to work simultaneously on multiple fronts: confronting state complicity through public calls for justice, leveraging legal reforms and memory preservation, while fostering community solidarity and resilience. In this way, layered collective resistance becomes a powerful tool for sustaining activism against entrenched oppression, using public memory as a way to bridge symbolic action with ongoing practical efforts to challenge both the mafia and the state structures that have historically allowed its power to thrive. Thus, this case demonstrates the flexibility and adaptability of layered collective resistance, as it integrates symbolic, legal, and community-based strategies to challenge both external mafia oppression and internal state failures, keeping the movement alive and dynamic despite the enduring challenges posed by the dual-edged state paradox.

Amidst the solemn remembrance, placards boldly voiced the citizens' frustration and disillusionment with the state's complicity in the commemoration of antimafia judge Paolo Borsellino on July 19, 2023. "Oggi siamo qui perché lo Stato è assente" (We are here today because the State is absent) and "Bastò stato-mafia" (Enough mafia-state) were among the messages that conveyed a strong sentiment during the commemoration, which was attended by many young people. These phrases reflect the collective anger and disappointment of many, who see the state as having failed in its duty to protect its citizens from the mafia.

Layered collective resistance can facilitate institutional change, especially in environments where the state is significantly polarized between complicit and dedicated state agents. This concept emphasizes the strategic adaptability of activists, who engage in multi-dimensional forms of resistance—ranging from public demonstrations and commemorations to legal reforms and grassroots mobilization. By operating across these different layers, activists can pressure institutions to reform from both within and outside the system. Through symbolic actions, such as commemorations of figures like Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, activists preserve memory and create moral pressure on state institutions to align themselves with justice and reform. At the same time, by working with dedicated state agents, activists can engage in legal and institutional reforms that target the structural foundations of oppression, such as laws that weaken mafia power or initiatives that strengthen rule of law and accountability. The layered nature of this resistance—combining confrontational strategies against complicit actors with cooperative efforts alongside reformist agents—enables activists to exploit internal divisions within the state. This flexibility can create cracks in the institutional status quo, allowing for incremental but significant changes. By continuously applying pressure through legal, symbolic, and grassroots efforts, layered collective resistance can contribute to long-term institutional transformations, making it an effective approach to navigating the complexities of the dual-edged state paradox. As a result, layered collective resistance is not only about resisting oppressive institutions but also about strategically engaging with them in ways that can reshape them over time, aligning state functions more closely with justice and accountability.

How Fragmented Trust Dynamics and Layered Collective Resistance Shape the Fight for Justice

The dual-edged state paradox elucidates the complex and contradictory interplay between activists and the state, wherein the state acts as both a hindrance to justice and an essential partner in its attainment. This paradox arises because the state is not a unified entity but is divided between complicit state agents who undermine justice through corruption and dedicated state agents who actively work toward justice. Under this paradox, activists face

the dual challenge of navigating relationships with state actors who both oppress and support them. To manage this, activists develop key strategies through: (1) fragmented trust dynamics; and (2) layered collective resistance. In the fragmented trust dynamics, activists are forced to continually reassess their trust in state actors, forming temporary and fluid alliances with dedicated state agents while avoiding or resisting complicit state agents. Trust in the state is constantly fragmented, requiring activists to navigate shifting perceptions of reliability and loyalty within the state apparatus. In addition, the dual-edged paradox leads to layered collective resistance through which activists respond to the duality of the state by organizing their resistance efforts in multiple layers. When dealing with complicit state agents, activists adopt more confrontational, disruptive tactics. In contrast, when engaging with dedicated state agents, they use cooperative and constructive approaches, adapting their resistance to match the role of the state in each context. Together, these two dynamics—fragmented trust dynamics and layered collective resistance—capture the essence of the dual-edged state paradox where activists must simultaneously resist and collaborate with the state. The paradox is not merely about frustration with bureaucracy or unreliable cooperation, but about the profound tension of relying on a state that is both a source of oppression and an indispensable ally (see Table 2).

The dual-edged state paradox provides a conceptual framework that can be fruitfully applied across diverse global contexts. The concept illuminates the complex relationship between states and their citizenry in contexts beyond Sicily. This facilitates a thorough analysis of the ways in which the interplay between cooperation, agency, and trust changes in light of both contemporary challenges and historical legacies that hold the state accountable. The dual-edged state paradox provides a flexible analytical instrument for examining the dynamics between the state and society. This enables scholars from various fields, including sociology, political science, history, and criminology, to investigate the profound impact that these interactions can have on sociopolitical environments worldwide. Specifically, the dual-edged state paradox finds application in a multitude of practical scenarios in which the state agents' simultaneous roles as both a contributor to social malice and a potential vehicle for their resolution. This theoretical concept accentuates the critical role of past injustices as catalysts for collective mobilization, thereby influencing and redefining the role of multiple actors with the state.

Unlike conventional models of trust or distrust, which assume a binary relationship between activists and the state, fragmented trust dynamics demonstrates how trust is fragmented and situational, shaped by historical betrayal, present alliances, and future uncertainties. This concept introduces new knowledge by explaining how activists strategically navigate these shifting relationships, making decisions about which state actors to trust and when to withhold trust altogether. This fragmented approach to trust reveals the deeper complexities of activism within divided state structures, where activists are forced into an ethical balancing act between cooperation and resistance.

Layered collective resistance offers a multi-dimensional perspective for understanding how activists organize their resistance efforts across different layers of engagement. Traditional models of resistance often focus on direct confrontations with power, but layered collective resistance highlights how activists combine symbolic, grassroots, and legal strategies depending on their interactions with complicit or dedicated agents of the state. This new theoretical concept introduces new theoretical insights by explaining how activists can simultaneously resist oppressive state forces while collaborating with reformist elements

Table 2 The Attributes of Fragmented Trust Dynamics and Layered Collective Resistance

Attribute	Fragmented trust dynamics	Layered collective resistance
Description	Activists engage with state agents based on shifting perceptions of trustworthiness, constantly adjusting their trust between complicit and dedicated state agents	Activists organize collective resistance in multiple layers, adapting their strategies based on the type of state agent (complicit versus dedicated)
Trust allocation	Trust is fluid, constantly reassessed based on new information about state agents' behavior, with interactions involving both complicit and dedicated agents	Activists vary their resistance approaches, being more confrontational against complicit agents and more cooperative with dedicated agents
Engagement with state	Engagement is flexible, with activists forming temporary alliances with dedicated agents and avoiding complicit agents based on developments	Resistance is adaptive, shifting between non-violent, cooperative actions with dedicated agents and disruptive, aggressive actions against complicit agents
Strategy	Activists maintain a flexible approach to trust, constantly reevaluating their relationships with state agents to adjust their engagement	Resistance is multi-layered, allowing activists to mobilize at different levels (grassroots, institutional) depending on the role of state agents
Emotional impact	Constant re-evaluation of trust can cause emotional fatigue, as activists must remain wary of betrayal from complicit agents while cautiously trusting dedicated agents	Activists manage emotional resilience by channeling frustration against complicit agents through disruptive action while building solidarity through cooperative resistance with dedicated agents

within the same institutions. It also expands our understanding of the scope of collective action, showing how activists must operate on multiple fronts—such as commemorative practices, public mobilization, and legal reforms—to sustain their movements and adapt to the complexities of state structures.

Conclusion

This study reveals that activists navigating the dual-edged state paradox must continuously adapt their strategies through fragmented trust dynamics and layered collective resistance, offering a deeper understanding of how collective action is shaped by both internal state contradictions and external threats, thereby advancing new theoretical insights into the complexity and adaptability of social movements in political systems where the state is overwhelmingly perceived as an unreliable institution. The dual-edged state paradox not only

illuminates the complex dynamics of the relationship between the state and society, but also contributes to our understanding of sociological theory concerning the complexities of collective resistance against non-state actors, such as the mafia.

The two concepts introduced in this study, —fragmented trust dynamics and layered collective resistance— offer a more comprehensive framework for understanding the dual-edged state paradox and its influence on activist strategies. Fragmented trust dynamics and layered collective resistance move beyond the mere identification of state complicity, providing deeper insights into how activists navigate and adapt to the state's internal contradictions. These concepts illuminate the ongoing, adaptive nature of activism in complex political environments, where resistance is shaped by both the state's internal divisions and external threats, such as the mafia. By introducing the dual-edged state paradox, this research advances the broader discourse on collective action and resistance, offering novel perspectives on how activists engage with the state in strategically flexible and contextually responsive ways. Methodologically, this study has sought to advance the analysis of social movements by demonstrating how activism adapts across multiple dimensions—trust, resistance, and collaboration—while emphasizing the importance of longitudinal ethnographic work in capturing the evolving nature of state-society relationships.

The novel concepts introduced in this research—fragmented trust dynamics, layered collective resistance, and the dual-edged state paradox—offer a more nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding activist strategies in politically ambivalent environments. By unveiling how contradictions within state structures shape social movements, these concepts enrich theoretical frameworks for understanding collective action. This study advances our knowledge by illustrating the sophisticated ways activists maneuver within and against unreliable state institutions, paving the way for further exploration of how state complicity, collective trauma, and adaptive resistance strategies intersect in diverse political landscapes. Over the course of a protracted struggle led by committed activists, Italy has fashioned one of the most sophisticated antimafia legal measures. This evolutionary trajectory demonstrates the dynamic adaptability inherent to state entities, enabling them to assume a central role in confronting the entrenched power of the mafia thanks to the resistance of Sicilians and dedicated state agents. Nonetheless, the erosion of trust between the citizens and the state presents formidable challenges to the realization of more effective collaboration between activists and governmental institutions. While dedicated state agents have exhibited a capacity for reform, the persistent perception of the state as an unreliable actor continues due to the existence of complicit state agents. The erosion of trust undermines the potential for a robust collective resistance. Activists find themselves in a precarious position, relying on the very institutions that have historically failed them, thus hampering their efforts to fully mobilize against their oppressors.

While fragmented trust dynamics and layered collective resistance provide valuable insights into how activists navigate the dual-edged state paradox, there are limitations to these two concepts and the paradox framework that should be considered. First, these two concepts are primarily focused on contexts where the state is divided between complicit and dedicated agents, which may not fully apply to situations where state institutions are either wholly repressive or entirely cooperative. Additionally, fragmented trust dynamics captures trust as a fluid, fragmented process, but it does not fully address how deeply ingrained mistrust or historical trauma might permanently undermine collaboration with state agents. Similarly, layered collective resistance emphasizes the adaptability of activists, but it may

underplay the emotional and resource constraints that limit the capacity for sustained multi-layered resistance over time. Future research could explore how these concepts function in different political contexts, such as authoritarian regimes or more democratic states with a stronger culture of lawfulness. Longitudinal studies could further examine how trust is rebuilt (or not) after prolonged conflict and whether layered collective resistance is feasible in movements with fewer resources or fragmented leadership. These inquiries could deepen the theoretical scope of the dual-edged state paradox and expand its applicability across diverse political systems.

The perpetual predicament of reconciling the quest for justice with the existence of an unreliable state extends well beyond national boundaries. This dilemma highlights the complex relationship between the state's unreliability, the potential strengthening of oppressive forces, and the profound complexity of this issue on a global scale. In such situations, when the state proves to be unreliable, it not only hampers the efforts to establish justice but also inadvertently empowers oppressive elements within society and state institutions. This empowerment can manifest in various forms, such as the unchecked influence of criminal organizations, the perpetuation of corruption, or the persistence of inequality. The state's unreliability, attributable to the presence of complicit state agents, creates an environment where oppressive forces can flourish, intensifying the obstacles encountered by those advocating for justice.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author confirms that there is no conflict of interest to disclose.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ENDNOTES

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²Both magistrates presided over the world's largest mafia trial, Maxiprocesso (Maxitrial), which lasted in Palermo from 10 February 1986 (the first day of the Corte d'Assise) to 30 January 1992 (the end of the appeals process) and indicted 475 mafiosi.

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APPENDIX

Information regarding 56 antimafia activists that I interviewed. I appended an asterisk (*) to each pseudonym if the interviewee wished to remain anonymous or accepted my suggestion that they remain anonymous.

Name	Profession (at the time of the interview)	Age range	Gender	Affiliation with an antimafia organization
Giovanni*	Student	20–25	Male	Agenda Rossa
Alba*	Student	20–25	Female	Libera
Andrea*	Student	20–25	Male	No official affiliation
Sara*	Student	25–30	Female	No official affiliation
Leonardo*	Student	25–30	Male	No official affiliation
Giovanni*	Unemployed	25–30	Male	City Angels
Luca*	Unemployed	25–30	Male	No official affiliation
Francesca*	Student	25–30	Female	Addiopizzo
Valeria*	Student	20–25	Female	No official affiliation
Vincenzo*	Student	20–25	Male	Libera
Enzo*	Student	25–30	Male	La Fondazione Giovanni Falcone
Stefano*	Artist	25–30	Male	No official affiliation
Manuela*	Teacher	30–35	Female	No official affiliation

Appendix
(continued)

Name	Profession (at the time of the interview)	Age range	Gender	Affiliation with an antimafia organization
Sophia*	Researcher	30–35	Female	Libera
Vittoria*	Doctor	30–35	Female	No official affiliation
Alessio*	Nurse	30–35	Male	No official affiliation
Maurizio*	Businessperson	30–35	Male	Agenda Rossa
Veronica*	Researcher	35–40	Female	No official affiliation
Roberto*	Tour guide	35–40	Male	No official affiliation
Fiorella*	Teacher	35–40	Female	No official affiliation
Sandra*	Teacher	35–40	Male	No official affiliation
Daniele Marannone	Director, Addiopizzo	35–40	Male	Addiopizzo
Federica*	Businesswoman	40–45	Female	No official affiliation
Chiara*	Journalist	40–45	Female	No official affiliation
Alessandro*	Lawyer	40–45	Female	No official affiliation
Valentina*	Housewife	40–45	Female	No official affiliation
Francesco*	Unemployed	40–45	Male	No official affiliation
Francesco Citarda	Representative of the Libera Terra	40–45	Male	Libera
Stefania Ludicina	Entrepreneur	45–50	Female	No official affiliation
Alessio Cicalone	Social worker	45–50	Male	No official affiliation
Antonella*	Nurse	45–50	Female	No official affiliation
Isabella*	Doctor	45–50	Female	No official affiliation
Marinella*	Unemployed	50–55	Female	Libera
Antonio Vassallo	Freelancer	55–60	Male	No Mafia project in Capaci
Pif (Pierfrancesco Diliberto)	Film director/actor/writer	50–55	Male	One of the founders of NoMa project
Antonia Messina	Vet	50–55	Female	No official affiliation
Giuseppe Castronovo	Owner of the bookstore, Tantestorie Libreria	50–55	Male	No official affiliation
Rosanna Mellilli	Teacher; Director of Communication, Agenda Rossa	50–55	Female	Agenda Rossa
Angelo Sicilia	Artist	50–55	Male	No official affiliation

Appendix
(continued)

Name	Profession (at the time of the interview)	Age range	Gender	Affiliation with an antimafia organization
Claudio Fava	Head of the Antimafia Commission	50–60	Male	No official affiliation
Carla*	Vet	55–60	Female	No official affiliation
Sofia*	Teacher	55–60	Female	No official affiliation
Roberto Greco	Editor, author, public speaker	60–65	Male	No official affiliation
Giovanni Papparcuri	Director of the Museum of Falcone and Borsellino	65–70	Male	No official affiliation
Graziella Accetta	Retired businesswoman	65–70	Female	No official affiliation
Vito Lucio Lo Monaco	Director of the Centre of Pio La Torre	75–80	Male	Centre Pio La Torre
Leoluca Orlando	Mayor of the city of Palermo	75–80	Male	No official affiliation
Augusta Schiera	Activist (deceased on 28 February 2019)	80–85	Female	No official affiliation
Umberto Santino	Writer/Researcher/ Director of Centro Siciliano G. Impastato	80–85	Male	Founder of Centro Siciliano, Giuseppe Impastato and NoMafia Memorial
Vincenzo Agostino	Activist	80–85	Male	No official affiliation
Letizia Battaglia	Photographer (deceased on 13 April 2022)	85–90	Female	No official affiliation
Leoluca	Retired (Journalist)	85–90	Male	No official affiliation
Sabrina	Retired (Administrator)	85–90	Female	No official affiliation
Carol	Retired (Housewife)	85–90	Female	No official affiliation
Fabio	Retired (Doctor)	85–90	Male	No official affiliation
Emma	Writer	85–90	Female	No official affiliation