

The study of organised crime: An assessment of the State of affairs

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This article is concerned with the study of organised crime as a distinct field of research. What does it mean to “study organised crime”? For some, this question is an easy one to answer as it appears to imply the obvious: the study of “organised crime” is about studying organised crime. For others, the answer may be equally straightforward, but in the opposite direction: studying organised crime is about chasing ghosts, because there is no such thing as “organised crime” in the sense of a coherent phenomenon. For the majority however, the question is a difficult one, although not impossible to answer, this is because the answer is linked to the tricky and controversial question of definition: what is “organised crime”? Indeed, at first glance it seems logical to say that studying organised crime first of all requires clarity concerning the object of study (see e.g. Finckenauer 2005). However, I would argue that this is not true for a subject such as “organised crime” which is first and foremost a construct, a “notion vulgaire” in the Durkheimian sense (Durkheim 1973, 22–23), reflecting social reality as much as the emotions, prejudices and ideologies of those involved in the construction

process. From a sociological perspective, such constructs cannot be accepted at face value. Rather, it is the duty of the social scientist to define and categorise the underlying phenomena and, through empirical observation, to explore the intricate links that exist that would justify placing all these diverse phenomena in one theoretical context. Accordingly, research on organised crime, at least in my understanding, does not have the notion of a coherent object of study as its starting point. On the contrary, the very purpose of the study of organised crime is to determine whether or not such a coherent phenomenon indeed exists. A definition of "organised crime", therefore, is a possible outcome rather than a precondition for the study of organised crime (Kelly 1986).

What needs to be done first is to try to bring the multifaceted imagery associated with the term "organised crime" into a preliminary form of order: What are people referring to when they talk about organised crime? Which persons, what events, which situations, places and so forth?

The second step is to examine the corresponding empirical manifestations to separate myth from reality and to develop an understanding of the dynamics and mechanisms at play.

At the end of a long research process, we may be able to determine the aspects of the social universe which can meaningfully be subsumed under this one concept of "organised crime", and which aspects call for different concepts.

In order for such a research program to unfold, researchers have to establish some common grounds on a terminological and conceptual level. However, little has been accomplished in this direction. Where "organised crime" is not just used as a non-committal label, a certain degree of coordination and reciprocity of research has only been achieved by either taking mafia imagery

as a common point of reference or by narrowing the focus to particular aspects. These aspects are then examined within fairly rigid conceptual frameworks, such as illegal markets or networks of co-offenders.

Despite the lack of a common understanding of its object of study, the study of organised crime has emerged as a field of research in its own right over the past 30 to 40 years. While American scholars dominated the scene in the 1960s and through the 1980s, Europe can stake a claim in recently becoming the centre of organised crime research. Based on a systematic, although certainly not exhaustive review of the academic literature, I am attempting here to identify some key trends regarding the institutionalisation of organised crime research as well as key research topics and methodology. While I have tried to include literature from Latin America, Africa, Asia and Australia, the focus is primarily on the situation in North America and Europe.¹

The study of organised crime as an academic discipline

An academic discipline is constituted through a self-referential system comprising elements such as specialised journals, professional associations, university courses, and text-books. By this measure, the study of organised crime has emerged as at least a separate

¹ For a version of this paper focussing exclusively on the situation in Europe, and with a special emphasis on the funding of organised crime research, see K. von Lampe, Organised crime research in Europe: development and stagnation, in: P.C. van Duyne et al. (eds.), *European crime-markets at cross-roads: Extended and extending criminal Europe*, Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers, forthcoming.

sub-discipline within the broad field of criminology and the social sciences. There are three journals with an exclusive or major focus on organised crime: *Trends in Organized Crime*, the journal which is affiliated with the International Association for the Study of Organized Crime (IASOC); *Crime, Law and Social Change*, which has the longest tradition and highest prestige among the three journals; and *Global Crime* which was previously published under the name *Transnational Organized Crime*. The editorial boards of these journals have partially overlapping membership, indicating the density of the overall network of scholars interested in organised crime. Two professional associations provide additional structure to the field: IASOC and the Standing Group Organized Crime of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR). The *eNewsletter Organized Crime* issued by the Standing Group is also an important publication platform aside from the three journals. Finally, there are regular meeting places for organised crime scholars, either at larger conferences such as those of the American and European societies of criminology, or at thematically focused conferences and workshops such as the Cross-border Crime Colloquia held annually at changing locations throughout Central and Eastern Europe.²

Courses on organised crime have been regularly taught in criminology and criminal justice programs in the United States for decades, with universities in other parts of the world, especially Europe, now following suit. A number of textbooks are available, of which the ones by Howard Abadinsky (Abadinsky 2007) and Jay Albanese (Albanese 2007) have the longest tradition, with first

² See the conference volumes produced as a result of the Cross-border Crime Colloquia under the co-editorship of Petrus C. van Duyne et al.

editions dating back to the 1980s. However, the first organised crime texts appeared as early as the mid-1970s, most notably Frederic Homer's underrated "Guns and Garlic" (Homer 1974; see also Pace & Style 1975). The recent publication of European textbooks, or textbook-like introductory volumes, on organised crime is an indicator of the increased importance of organised crime as a subject in European criminology curricula (Ignjatovic 1998; Johansen 1996; Wright 2006).

While scholars interested in organised crime are scattered all across the globe, certain centres of research activity have been established. Some of these research centres are institutionally independent, such as the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD) in Sofia, Bulgaria; and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) with the "Organised Crime & Money Laundering programme" of its Cape Town office in South Africa. Others are integrated into government structures, such as WODC in the Netherlands, the Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) in Sweden and the Institute of Criminology and Social Prevention (IKSP) in the Czech Republic. Some centres are affiliated with universities, such as the Centre for Information and Research on Organised Crime (CIROC) in the Netherlands; Transcrime in Italy; Ghent University's Institute for International Research on Criminal Policy (IRCP); the Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center (TraCCC) at George Mason University in Virginia³ with a branch office in Tbilisi (the capital of the former Soviet republic of Georgia); and the Nathanson Centre on Transnational Human Rights, Crime and Security (formerly: Nathanson Centre for the Study of Organized

³ TraCCC moved from American University, Washington D.C., to George Mason University in 2007.

Crime and Corruption) at York University, Toronto. (Despite the recently expanded thematic focus, the latter has declared the intention of maintaining an interest in the study of organised crime.)

Some universities have become centres of organised crime research, not by virtue of formal structures but because of continuous research by scholars, including PhD-students, who have specialised in organised crime studies. In North America, these include, to cite a few examples, the University of Montreal, Canada; Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey; San Diego State University, California; and John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. In Europe, Cardiff University in Wales; Tilburg University in the Netherlands and the University of Leuven in Belgium are among the academic institutions with a strong profile in organised crime research. Finally, several supranational research and documentation centres, which include the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) in Lisbon; the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in Vienna; and the Geneva-based International Organization for Migration (IOM), have made significant contributions to the study of organised crime in specific areas: drug trafficking, human trafficking and human smuggling to name but a few.

The three grand themes of the study of organised crime

There are three grand themes addressed in the academic literature under the broad heading of "organised crime": the meta level of the discourse on organised crime, the level of empirical manifestations of organised crime, and the level of counter measures.

Meta level: Construction of "organised crime" as a social problem

Quite a lot has been written about the construction of "organised crime" as a social problem.

The concept of "organised crime", this much seems clear, is an American invention, which has been exported to other parts of the world via the dual channels of Hollywood films and international law enforcement co-operation. The imported concept has then been superimposed onto heterogeneous crime landscapes and gone through various modifications and reinterpretations across time and space.

A number of authors have examined how the concepts of "organised crime" and "transnational organised crime" gained prominence first in the United States and later throughout the world (see e.g. Albanese 1988; Edwards & Gill 2002; Kelly 1978; von Lampe 1999; 2001; Luczak 2004; Massari 2003; Moore 1974; Smith 1975; 1991; Woodiwiss 1990; 2003). Two recurring themes can be found in this literature. There is, on the one hand, the issue of myth and reality and the apparent discrepancy between the certainty with which the concept is used in public discourse and the weak underlying knowledge base. On the other hand, there is the political dimension, the instrumentalization of the image of the threat of "organised crime" in order to legitimise new law enforcement measures and the associated infringement of civil liberties. It has been argued that the concept of "organised crime" was uncritically adopted outside the United States,⁴ that it serves political and institutional interests and reproduces historical threat

⁴ It should be noted that similar problems had already arisen within the United States owing to the contrast between the situation in the New York area and those parts of the country without a presence of Cosa Nostra families (see von Lampe, 2001: 107).

imagery rather than contributing to a better understanding of the social reality of crime. While this argumentation has some merits, one cannot ignore the fact that research in this area is fragmented and, with very few exceptions, no methodologically rigid and systematic studies on the process of constructing "organised crime" as a social problem have been conducted. Most of the literature is essayistic rather than analytical. It draws on small sets of sources, centred on particular events such as highly publicised parliamentary inquiries, and there is a tendency towards hedging conspiracy theories when it comes to explaining the political career of the concept of "organised crime". A widespread, at least implicit, allegation is that the concept of "organised crime" is a purposeful fabrication by law enforcement lobbyists who have sought to justify the expansion of police powers. However, in order to reach such a conclusion with any level of confidence, one must look behind the scenes, which would include the analysis of internal documents and interviews with key actors. Indeed, in all likelihood, such research would probably unearth more complex and complicated mechanisms in the construction of "organised crime" than are suggested by what can be termed the "law enforcement conspiracy theory". Accordingly, it seems safe to say that future researchers will encounter sufficient opportunities to significantly broaden, deepen, and revise current wisdom.

Empirical manifestations of organised crime

There is a slowly but steadily growing body of empirical literature on organised crime world-wide. Yet, it seems that the majority of contemporary work in the field has originated in Europe, with the Netherlands the most productive country. In order to obtain a better understanding of the course the study of organised crime is

taking, it is helpful to sort the literature by central research topics or basic dimensions. In fact, when describing the object of the study of organised crime, one should address a number of different empirical phenomena that are examined in a rather loose conceptual context. These phenomena include "organised criminals" as a distinct category of offenders; the activities they are involved in; the associational patterns through which they are connected; and the power structures that subordinate these individuals and collectives to common or particular interests. Additionally, one must consider the relations between these individuals: structures and activities on the one hand, and the legal spheres of society on the other. These main facets of the indistinct overall picture are not equally addressed in the literature (see von Lampe 2006b; von Lampe et al. 2006).

Individual Offenders

Individual "organised" offenders are very rarely the focus of attention. This is in stark contrast to other fields of criminology, including the study of terrorism, where medical and psychological approaches enjoy some popularity. It is also in notable contrast to the gangster and mafioso stereotypes which dominate the public image of "organised crime". Other than Italian literature on the psyche of mafiosi (see ref. in Di Maria & Lo Verso 2007), Frank Bovenkerk's examination of the personality of mafia bosses, drawing on gangster biographies (Bovenkerk 2000), appears to be the only work specifically concerned with the psychological aspect of organised crime. A biographical approach is also adopted by Claudio Besozzi in his more general analysis of illicit entrepreneurs (Besozzi 2001). In a methodologically rigid study, Morselli and Tremblay (Morselli & Tremblay 2004) examined the relationship

between levels of self-control (measured using Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik and Arneklev's twenty three item self-control scale) and the structure of criminal networks. They questioned 156 prison inmates, previously involved in money-oriented crimes, about their core (egocentric) criminal networks and found that, for illegal activities requiring ongoing social organisation, low self-control has a disruptive impact on criminal earnings by diminishing the abilities of offenders to fully exploit the opportunities rooted in their non-redundant criminal networks.

Others have addressed psychological aspects in broader discussions of illegal markets and criminal collectives (Canter & Alison 2000; van Duyne 2000). In the future, the emphasis on associational structures can be expected to become less prominent and the study of organised crime is predicted to move closer to mainstream criminology by incorporating the human factor in the analysis of criminal structures (von Lampe 2006b). This assumption is based on the concept that approaches aiming at explaining "organised crime" by the structure of criminal organisations, such as networks or organisations in the narrow sense of the word, tend to underestimate the importance of individual skills and characteristics in the creation and shaping of associational structures, and collective activities for that matter. To paraphrase a popular motto (Coles 2001), it may not be who you *are* but who you *know* that counts in "organised crime", although who you know may depend upon who you are and what social skills you have to a considerable extent.

Two other aspects that define stereotypes of "organised criminals" without being purely individualistic traits, have received some attention in the academic literature on organised crime: ethnicity and gender.

In public perception and in law enforcement statistics, organised crime tends to be associated with members of particular ethnic groups, although the specific links may vary across types of crime, illegal market level, geographical region and time. From the evidence available it seems that, in many instances, ethnic homogeneity among offenders (where it does exist) is not linked to ethnicity. Rather, it seems to be a reflection of underlying factors such as family ties or differential opportunity structures linked to geography; or the prevalence of certain ethnic groups may be a result of xenophobic discrimination (Bovenkerk 1998; O'Kane 1992; Paoli & Reuter 2008).

Gender has been discussed in the context of organised crime primarily in two ways, first with respect to the apparent predominance of men within criminal networks, and second with respect to the victimisation of women through organised criminal activity, namely human trafficking for sexual exploitation. In recent years, there has been a tendency to question formerly held views, which are to an extent parallel to perceived empirical changes in the relation between men and women, notably in the realm of traditional mafia associations (see e.g. Allum 2007; Siebert 2007). It is argued that, contrary to imagery of male domination, there is a significant incidence of women who occupy leading roles in criminal networks, including areas of crime where female victimisation is a characteristic (Calder 1995; Denton & O'Malley 1999; Graziosi 2001; Kleemans & Van de Bunt 1999; O'Kane 1992; Surtees 2008).

In the realms of both ethnicity and gender, it seems that there is considerable scope for future research. One such manifestation involves combining the findings of empirical studies on crime with insights from related disciplines, such as anthropology and gender studies.

Criminal Activities

“Organised crime” is associated with a wide range of criminal activities. Accordingly, specific types of crime or illegal markets may provide the frame of reference for scientific exploration, rather than studies focusing on “criminal groups” or geographical areas. This holds particularly true when “traditional organised crime” is not an issue, as is the case in the majority of countries other than the U.S., Italy, China and Japan,

Drug trafficking has traditionally received the greatest amount of attention in research on organised crime (see e.g. Van de Bunt, Kunst & Siegel 2002; Desroches 2005; Dorn, Otte & White 1999; Gruppo Abele 2003; Gruter & van de Mheen 2005; Pearson & Hobbs 2001; Zaitch 2002). Recently, however, the black market in cigarettes has emerged as a favourite object of study (Antonopoulos 2006; 2007; Beare 2003; Coker 2003; Dantinne 2001; van Dijck 2007; van Duyne 2003b; Hornsby & Hobbs 2007; Hozic 2004; Janssens et al. 2008; von Lampe 2002; 2003b; 2005b; 2006a; 2007; Markina 2007). Examples of other areas of crime explored by empirical research include human trafficking (Antonopoulos & Winterdyk 2005; Obradovic 2004; Spencer et al. 2006), illegal gambling (Liddick 1998; Reuter 1983), trafficking in stolen motor vehicles (Gerber & Killias 2003; Tremblay et al. 2001; Sieber & Bögel 1993), alcohol smuggling (Johansen 2005), illegal waste disposal (Gruppo Abele et al. 2003; Massari & Monzini 2004), maritime piracy (Eklöf 2005; Warren 2003), credit card fraud (Levi 2003), fencing (Sund et al. 2006; Weschke & Heine-Heiß 1990), black labour (van Duyne & Houtzager 2005; Carlström & Hedström 2007), and money laundering (van Duyne 2003a; Passas 1999; Suendorf 2001).

Patterns of Criminal Association

The question “How organised is organised crime?” appears to guide most researchers in the field, whether explicitly or implicitly. Donald Cressey’s (Cressey 1969) interpretation of the American Mafia as synonymous with organised crime and similar in structure to a government and a large corporation (see e.g. Albin 1971; Smith 1975; Anderson 1979; Reuter 1983; Potter 1994), and the ensuing dispute has not been exclusively confined to the research community in the United States. Distancing from Cressey’s “bureaucratic model” is a central component in the overall line of reasoning of quite a number of non-American authors also. Indeed, something of a consensus has developed which holds that the predominant structural pattern of criminal cooperation is characterised by webs of personal relations that are flexibly used by offenders to commit crimes. According to many empirical studies, cooperation typically occurs either on a contractual basis, that is in the form of supplier-consumer or ephemeral employer-employee relations, or on a partnership basis – in pairs or small groups with little overall horizontal or vertical integration (Adler 1985; Bruinsma & Bernasco 2004; Desroches 2005; Van Duyne 2003b; Johansen 2005; Junninen 2006; Gruppo Abele 2003; Klemans & Van de Bunt 1999; von Lampe 2003b; Paoli 2003a; Pearson & Hobbs 2001; Reuter & Haaga 1989; Ruggiero & Khan 2007; Zaitch 2002).

Two challenges emerge in this situation. The first of which is to develop a sufficiently concise terminology in order to adequately capture the variation and fluidity of patterns of criminal association. The paucity of concepts, which is mirrored in the frequent use of ambiguous phrases like “loosely structured” or “network like” translates into a lack of analytical clarity. The second challenge lies

in the application of network analytical tools. What would seem to be an obvious choice in instances where there is no form of structural integration of offenders, that is, to examine offender relations in terms of networks, has considerable limitations, of which the problem of missing and incomplete data may be the most difficult one to resolve. Missing data influence network analysis more than traditional statistical analyses (Chattoe & Hamill 2005; Knoke & Kuklinski 1982; Robins, Koskinen and Pattison 2008). At the same time, data are particularly likely to be missing in the case of criminal networks where researchers seldom have prior knowledge about all the relevant individuals. Furthermore, even if all individuals are known, researchers may then be unable to obtain the requisite information on all of them (Sparrow 1991). Proceeding with the analysis "in terms of what is known" (McAndrew 2000: 62) may make sense for some network measures, but not for all (Robins, Koskinen and Pattison 2008).

Criminal network analysis is also limited by the lack of depth of the available information. Often, data do not consistently go beyond merely stating that some form of contact exists between a given pair of actors. This level of information is only sufficient for certain research questions, such as the one addressed by a Swedish study which, based on co-offending data, explored the reach of criminal contacts of a set of drug traffickers. The study revealed that the 127 individuals convicted in connection with serious drug offences in Stockholm county, in 2003, had been in contact (either directly or indirectly) with at least 7,000 other individuals suspected of criminal involvement (Korsell et al. 2005). The authors took this to be evidence for the existence of a widespread criminal milieu. In other studies, network analysis has proven valuable in sorting through data sets involving large numbers of actors, especially in

the initial phase of data analysis (see e.g. Finckenauer & Waring 1998; Giannakopoulos 2001; Natarajan 2000; 2006). Network analysis is also useful for addressing specific research questions such as criminal risk management (Morselli, Giguère & Petit 2007) and the relevance of actors from legitimate spheres for criminal operations (Morselli & Giguere 2006). Otherwise, the greatest value of the network concept seems to be that it forces researchers to adopt a bottom-up approach in the description and analysis of offender structures that is independent of popular imagery and constructs (Klerks 2003; von Lampe 2003a). Henner Hess' classical study of the Sicilian Mafia (Hess 1970), in which he breaks down the world of Cosa Nostra into different types of dyadic ties, is a good example of such a down-to-earth research strategy. However, there is a danger of falling to the other extreme by failing to acknowledge durable, vertically and horizontally differentiated offender structures when they are indeed present. To avoid this pitfall, the examination of vertical integration and differentiation need to be incorporated in criminal network analysis (Natarajan 2000).

Overarching Power Structures

Above the micro-level of entrepreneurial offenders and offender collectives, overarching structures can be found which claim control over a given territory, such as a town or region, or an illegal market or illegal-market level, furthering particular or common interests. Alan Block has coined the term "power syndicate", as opposed to "enterprise syndicate", to denote this kind of criminal structure (Block 1983: 13). Phenomena falling into this category have mostly been identified and studied in Southern Italy (Gambetta 1993; Hess 1970; Paoli 2003b), Russia (Varese 2001), Japan (Hill 2003) and the United States (Anderson 1979; Haller 1991; Reuter 1983). An

interesting question that has been raised recently pertains to the extent to which these territorially based groups have the capacity to migrate and reproduce their position of power, this may also extend to the legal economy, in areas or even countries outside their traditional sphere of influence (Varese 2004; 2006).

Illegal-Legal Nexus

The individuals, structures, and activities associated with “organised crime” do not exist in a social vacuum. Instead, they are connected with their surroundings in various ways.

One aspect is the “social embeddedness of organized crime” (Kleemans & van de Bunt 1999) in certain social strata, milieux, or ethnic communities. Anomie theory has proved an obvious choice in order to explain this connection with regard to migrant communities (Bovenkerk 1998), whereas concepts and theories derived from social and cultural anthropology have been applied to indigenous “organised crime” phenomena such as the Sicilian Mafia (Cottino 1999; Hessinger 2002). However, not all “organised crime” is necessarily (sub-)culturally rooted. Research on cigarette smuggling and on a wide range of other areas of crime in different countries suggests that, to a considerable extent, offenders involved in illegal market activities do not have a wider criminal background and apparently start their criminal careers fairly late in life (Desroches 2005; van Dijk 2007; van Duyne 2003b; Janssens et al. 2008; Kleemans & van de Poot 2008; von Lampe 2005b).

Many discussions about the links between the illegal and legal spheres of society are framed in the concept of corruption. An associated image depicts “organised criminals” neutralizing law enforcement by bribing and intimidating police officials, prosecutors and judges. Another image is that of “organised

criminals” in alliance with political and business elites. Relatively little empirical research has been conducted in these areas and the bulk of the literature refers to conditions in the United States, Southern Italy and Eastern Europe; few studies specifically address the dimension of “organised crime” (see e.g. Center for the Study of Democracy 2004; Galli 1994; Gardiner 1970; Maljevic et al. 2006; Newell 2006; Paoli 2003b; Potter 1994; Potter & Gaines 1995; Varese 2001).

Similar to the infiltration of government there is a concern about the infiltration of the legal economy by “organised crime”. This may take the form of legal businesses falling under the control of criminal groups, legal businesses and criminals establishing collusive links, or the formation of criminal networks within the legal business sector (Albanese 1995; Dorn et al. 2007; Paoli 1995; Ruggiero 2000). Finally, in an extension of the regulation of illegal markets, criminal groups may provide quasi-governmental functions such as debt collection, conflict resolution and protection from competition for legal businesses (Gambetta 1993; Reuter 1985; Varese 2001; Volkov 2000).

Dutch criminologist Jan van Dijk recently assumed an interesting approach to the study of “power syndicates” and criminal influence on legal business. He combined various types of data to create what he terms a “Composite Organized Crime Index (COCI)” (van Dijk 2007: 42). A central component of this index is a survey by the World Economic Forum (WEF) delivered to business executives in over one hundred countries. One item in the questionnaire reads as follows:

Organized crime (e.g. mafia-oriented racketeering, extortion) in your country (1=imposes significant

costs on businesses, 7=does not impose significant costs on business).

(World Economic Forum, 2005, 565)

Van Dijk put the average rankings of countries on the WEF surveys of 1997 to 2003 alongside assessments by a consultancy firm, the Merchant International Group, of the prevalence of different types of organised crime (drugs, arms, people trafficking), and national rates of unsolved murders. Van Dijk found that all of these measures varied fairly consistently cross-nationally. By this measure, Oceania and Western and central Europe had the lowest scores of 33 and 35, respectively, indicating low levels of "organised crime", while Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Transcaucasia, and the Caribbean ranked the highest with a score of 70 (van Dijk 2007: 42). The values are not further broken down in van Dijk's paper, although it is interesting to note that, from the WEF data alone, using the 2005 survey figures, the situation is more heterogeneous. That is to say that "organised crime" in the Netherlands appears to have a strong influence on legal business in the perception of the management elite; a stronger one than in countries like Estonia, Uruguay, or Ghana (World Economic Forum 2005: 565). Future research will reveal how robust the insights gained from survey data are, but the combination of various data sources appears to be well worth further exploration.

Organised crime in the context of a geographical area

An approach that touches on most, if not all, of these aspects within one overall framework is the examination of "organised crime" in the context of a particular geographical area. Studies range from neighbourhoods (Standing 2006), towns (Chambliss 1978; Potter

1994), and counties (Potter & Gaines 1995) to entire countries (Galeotti 1998). However, it seems that, the broader the area under study, the more difficult it is to produce a comprehensive analysis with sufficient detail due to the complexities that have to be taken into account.

Organised crime in history

The difficulties in attaining a comprehensive picture increase when historical events and conditions are examined. A number of historical studies of organised crime have been produced in recent years, focusing on the situation in particular places (Block 1983; Dickson-Gilmore & Woodiwiss 2008; Egmond 1993; McIlwain 2004), on particular crimes (Eklöf 2005; Johansen 1994), or on particular criminal groupings (Catanzaro 1992; Hartmann & von Lampe 2008; Lupo 2002; McIlwain 2001). As Jeff McIlwain, perhaps the most outspoken advocate of an historical approach to the study of organised crime, has argued, history adds perspective, it shows that what is perceived as new may not be so new after all, it may also serve to retrospectively test hypotheses (McIlwain 2004: 189). On the other hand, organised crime research is notoriously characterised by difficulties in accessing data. The passing of time aggravates, rather than minimises these difficulties; at least when the period under investigation is so far back that no witnesses are left to tell their story. This inevitably limits the number of suitable objects of historical study.

Countermeasures

The third major thematic area defining the study of organised crime, apart from the meta-level of the construction of "organised crime" and the empirical level of "organised crime" phenomena, concerns

countermeasures adopted against “organised crime”. Generally, countermeasures have been adopted in the form of modified and newly introduced material and procedural criminal law (Goredema 2001; Goredema & Botha 2004; Paoli & Fijnaut 2006),⁵ in part driven by international agreements and conventions (Albrecht & Fijnaut 2002; McClean 2007), institutional changes in law enforcement and the criminal justice system (Pütter 1998; Segell 2007), and administrative law (Huisman & Nelen 2007; Köbber 2002). These measures, and especially their legal ramifications, have been described in great detail. However, relatively little research has been conducted on their implementation and efficacy with regard to reducing and preventing “organised crime” (Maltz 1990). The major weakness appears to be the lack of a clear understanding of the nature, extent, and developmental trends of “organised crime” as a valid measuring stick. In the majority of cases, the literature relies on *prima facie* plausibility, and on politically and media induced imagery regarding the reality of “organised crime”; alternatively it applies criteria that have nothing to do with the crime situation as such, but with bureaucratic effectiveness or civil rights issues (see e.g. Kinzig 2004; Vettori 2006a).

Some efforts have been made by scholars to tackle the deficiencies in the existing knowledgebase on “organised crime”, which are becoming apparent not only in the evaluation of countermeasures, but more generally in the areas of criminal policy and intelligence-led policing. One such undertaking has been to make better use of existing statistical data, especially in a cross-national perspective, on particular areas of crime, such as human trafficking (Di Nicola &

⁵ An interesting collection of national overviews of anti-organised crime measures is contained in the volume “Organized Crime in Europe”, edited by C. Fijnaut and L. Paoli (Dordrecht: Springer, 2004).

Cauduro 2007), or on organised crime in general (Vettori 2006b). Another undertaking aims at utilizing a broader range of data for the purpose of proactive assessments of “organised crime” in the form of risk analysis, scenario building and model construction (Black et al. 2000; Vander Beken & Defruytier 2004; Vander Beken et al. 2004; Verfaillie & Vander Beken 2008; Williams & Godson 2002).

An alternative direction has been proposed by the EU-funded “Assessing Organised Crime” project. Without developing a comprehensive conceptual and theoretical framework, the project has outlined a mechanism, the New European Common Approach (NECA); this advocates not only more effective use of existing law enforcement data for strategic crime analysis, but also the future integration of strategic crime analysis and scientific research. The idea behind NECA is that the existence of a sufficient knowledge base for valid and meaningful assessments of “organised crime” cannot simply be pretended. Instead, it needs to be systematically built bottom-up in both the medium and long run (Assessing Organised Crime Research Consortium 2007; van Duyne 2007; von Lampe 2005c).

Empirical research and theory building

The study of “organised crime” is not fundamentally different from any other area of social science research in that it is confronted by problems in finding good data, and meaningfully describing, systematizing and explaining the social phenomena that have been observed.

Collecting data on "organised crime"

All means of data collection common in sociological research can, and have been, utilised in the study of "organised crime": observations, interviews and text analysis. Participant observations have been rare and not always without risk. Two of the earliest Mafia studies, Anton Blok's exploration of the Mafia in a Sicilian Village (Blok 1974) and Francis Ianni's exploration of the social life of a New York Mafia family (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni 1972), fall within this category; as does Patty Adler's similarly classic study of upper level drug dealers in California (Adler 1985). An example where the risks of participant observations have materialized is provided by a yet unpublished PhD-project in Poland, which has become the subject of a book by the German investigative journalist, Jürgen Roth (Roth 2005). Aneta M. took a job in a bar that served as a meeting place for the Polish underworld with the purpose of writing a doctoral thesis on organised crime. Roth alleges that owing of pressure exerted by criminal circles, Aneta M. was unable to obtain her doctoral degree from the University of Szczecin, Poland, where she had been based while conducting her research. A daring approach was also adopted in a study of smuggling and corruption in Georgia, where researchers posed as smugglers for the purpose of participant observation and covert interviewing (Kukhianidze, Kupatadze & Gotsiridze 2004).

In the American research tradition, direct interaction with offenders as a method of data collection has always played an important role alongside interviews with law enforcement officials and other experts (see e.g. Thrasher 1927; Albin 1971; Potter 1994). In Europe, for a long time, interview-based studies in the area of organised crime meant studies drawing primarily or exclusively on expert accounts, in most cases that of police investigators (Kerner

1973; Mack & Kerner 1975; Rebscher & Vahlenkamp 1988; Sieber & Bögel 1993). In recent years, however, a general trend towards offender interviews either as a prominent source amongst others (see e.g. Johansen 2004; Ruggiero & South 1995), or as the primary data source has emerged, at least in North America and Europe. A few studies, especially those with the largest sample sizes, involve incarcerated offenders or individuals, namely informants, otherwise under the control of the criminal justice system (see e.g. Decker & Townsend Chapman 2008; Desroches 2005; Dorn, Oette & White 1998; Kinzig 2004; Matrix Knowledge Group 2007; Pearson & Hobbs 2001; Reuter & Haaga 1989). Some studies have used both incarcerated and non-incarcerated offenders (see e.g. Junninen 2006; Ruggiero & Khan 2006; Zaitch 2002), while others exclusively rely on non-incarcerated offenders (see e.g. Antonopoulos 2006; Hobbs 2001; Hornsby & Hobbs 2007; see also the special issue "Interviewing 'Organized Criminals'" of the journal *Trends in Organized Crime*, 11(1), 2008). These latter studies contradict the commonly held notion that "organised criminals" are unapproachable for research purposes.

Text analysis is most frequently used in the study of organised crime in connection with official and media reports (see e.g. von Lampe 2006a), but it is also employed when criminal files and investigative files comprise the primary basis of data (see e.g. Anderson 1979; van Duyne 1996; 2003b; Herz 2005; Hess 1970; Kinzig 2004; von Lampe 2005b; 2007; Reuter 1983; Suendorf 2001). With the increasing computerization of police work, it can be expected that the study of organised crime will routinely involve the analysis of electronically stored data (see e.g. van Duyne 2003a; Korsell et al. 2005).

Systematization

No attempt is made here to comment in detail on the different ways researchers have been systematizing their areas of study.⁶ What can be said, although with some caution, is that the most valuable categories and classifications have been proposed and elaborated by North-American authors, which may reflect the chronology of research efforts. Valuable classifications include the dichotomies of predatory and market-based crime (Naylor 2003), of "power syndicates" and "enterprise syndicates" (Block 1983), of economic and non-economic criminal structures (Haller 1992), and the distinction between purely market-based criminal relations, criminal networks ties, and transactional links within criminal organizations (enterprises) (Smith 1994).

Explanation

In a similar vein, it is beyond the scope of this paper to review the various theoretical propositions found in the organised crime literature in depth. Moreover, it seems that the most influential theoretical propositions, however fragmented they may be, originate in North America. When one thinks of global approaches to explaining "organised crime", one is immediately reminded of Robert K. Merton's anomie theory which is closely linked to the American experience of immigrant criminal groups (Merton 1957; see also Bell 1953; Cloward & Ohlin 1960). More focused theoretical propositions aim at explaining the emergence (Felson 2006; Smith 1994) and the structure of illegal enterprises (Reuter 1983; Smith 1994; Southerland & Potter 1993). These theoretical

⁶ For a more in-depth analysis of some of the international organised-crime literature, see von Lampe et. al. (2006).

approaches have been reflected in the international research literature fairly extensively. Some propositions, in particular those of Peter Reuter, have been confirmed, although predominantly on a rhetorical level rather than in the form of rigorous testing. This is particularly problematic because Reuter developed his hypotheses in investigations of crime phenomena – illegal gambling and loan sharking – in manifestations that seem to be quite specific to the situation in the United States and New York City in particular (Reuter 1983).

There is probably only one theoretical approach originating outside of North America that has assumed any general significance: Diego Gambetta's notion of mafia-like associations thriving as industries of protection in low-trust social environments (Gambetta 1993). In much the same way that this proposition has been tested in different social contexts (Hill 2003; Varese 2001), all the facets of the subject area of "organised crime" need to be explored in different historical and socio-geographical settings in order to be able to develop and test hypotheses and theories through comparison.

Concluding remarks

Within the limits of this article, I am only able to give a rough and inevitably sketchy outline of the state of organised crime research. From a global perspective, it appears that a shift in weight has taken place over the past 20 years, from North America to Europe. This shift is in terms of both the number and diversity of empirical research projects, and also in the reality of organised crime. Following the fall of the Iron Curtain myriad, new, although not necessarily novel, manifestations of criminal structures and illegal markets have emerged in ever-changing patterns. These have been

the subject of numerous, mostly descriptive studies. However, the opportunities for comparative research and theory building have not yet been systematically exploited.

There are three fundamental challenges defining the future of organised crime research. The first one is to ensure continuity of research in order to go beyond merely reproducing, and responding to, the clichés that appear in the media and in political debates at irregular intervals. Continuity means, first of all, an ongoing research process which contributes to a cumulative body of knowledge. It also means that a network of researchers can develop to combine resources and connect different countries and different areas of specialization within the field of “organised crime” and different academic disciplines. Continuity of research also means that relations of trust can develop between researchers and law enforcement practitioners. This is particularly important because trust is often the precondition in order for data to become available for scientific analysis in this security-sensitive area of study.

Indeed, access to data is the second major challenge in the study of organised crime. While researchers have been both innovative and persistent in their efforts to obtain information from offenders, law enforcement sources, victims and experts, these successes cannot be taken for granted. Training of young researchers, further development of methodologies and an increasing receptivity to the needs of research on the part of law enforcement agencies and politics seem to be key for more and better organised crime research in the future.

The third major challenge is to maintain or win independence from outside influences. In many countries of the world, organised crime researchers find themselves in direct conflict with powerful interest groups in political and business spheres. Even in countries

where criminal structures are apparently less pervasive and powerful, independent research is hampered or rendered impossible by biases towards particular topics. Accordingly research questions and outcomes are typically built into funding schemes and there is differential access to data that favours embedded, uncritical researchers (see e.g. Weitzer 2007: 460). Research taking place within these confines cannot be expected to yield meaningful results.

To the extent that an environment conducive to critical empirical research and theory building does exist, the onus to move ahead is on the community of organised crime researchers. As I have argued elsewhere (von Lampe 2002), research projects need to be designed in such a manner that they are reciprocally meaningful in order to be able to contribute to a cumulative body of knowledge about phenomena that are variously subsumed under the pre-scientific umbrella concept of organised crime. In order to attain such compatibility, two requirements must be met. Firstly, middle-range concepts well below the lofty level of “organised crime” need to be defined and agreed upon; secondly, the phenomena defined by these middle-range concepts need to be investigated: within one context and in as many social and historical settings as possible. In the end, the concept of “organised crime” may well evaporate; nevertheless, the study of “organised crime” would have proved itself to be an endeavor which addresses some substantial concerns, ones that cannot simply be argued away solely because they are articulated using an often abused buzzword.

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Unipub 2009