

## DIGGING OUT A HISTORY OF ORGANISED CRIME

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What are the security issues defining the twenty-first century? Despite the attention paid to terrorism, I would contend that it is organised and transnational crime, both in its own right and also as a facilitator for so many other problems, from millenarian violence to environmental degradation. After all, where do today's bombers tend to get their explosives and false IDs? From criminals? And who make massive profits from circumventing laws on the safe, clean disposal of toxic wastes? Criminals again. My own professional trajectory has tracked the evolution of security studies, from pre-1991 concerns about armed conflict between two opposed blocs through to a modern era of networked, transnational non-state actors.

As such, I find myself bisected between two separate, but complementary areas of interdisciplinary study. On the one hand, I explore the contemporary challenges, in particular those posed by Russian and other post-Soviet criminal networks, which in turn connect and work with a range of other 'dark networks', from Sicilian mafiosi to Afghan warlords. On the other, I stick to my first love, history, and work on the place of organised crime within societies, both for its intrinsic merits and also the insights it provides into wider questions of state-building, law and legitimacy.

After all, it is a common and tempting conceit that organised crime is an essentially modern phenomenon. Certainly, it has developed at a dramatic pace since the beginning of the twentieth century, such that it now operates across the world, dominates an underworld turnover estimated (very crudely) at one trillion dollars annually and is second only to Islamic terrorism in most Western states' nightmares. Yet while many of the basic textbooks seem to think that organised crime began with the migrations of the Irish and Italians to the United States in the nineteenth century – especially daring works may present the pirates of the Spanish Main as primordial Mafiosi – in practice it appears that organised crime in some form and to some degree has been around as long as organised societies.

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The accounts we have of organised, hierarchical, long-term criminal conspiracies dating back into antiquity are often hard to evaluate, decoratively embroidered, and reflect the assumptions and prejudices of the chroniclers. However, it is clear that there is nonetheless a core of truth to many of them. For example, while it is highly unlikely that the fifteenth century French gang known as the Coquillards really had their own elected 'king,' as was claimed at the time, they did have a secret dialect, subsequently popularised by the poet François Villon. Pre-modern society is full of examples of organised crime, or at least its primordial ancestors. While many gangs were opportunistic and transient, they could still demonstrate a degree of organisation, discipline, even esprit de corps. In 1276, two armed men were apprehended by John de Lascelles, steward of Robin Hood's mythological haunt, Sherwood Forest. They were locked up in the village of Bledworth (now Blidworth), next day to be taken to the sheriff in Nottingham for justice. However, that night 20 more members of the same gang stormed the house in which their associates were being held, fought off the steward's men and disappeared back into the forest.

Look further back in history: in ancient Greece, olive growers whose groves had been cultivated over generations were prey to protection racketeers. Ancient Rome supported a thriving and complex underworld, from smugglers and counterfeiters to pirates and confidence tricksters. Indeed, patchy archaeological evidence suggests that even the Aztecs of Central America suffered from organised rings of cocoa bean counterfeiters, for the bean was more often used as currency than ingredient. In Europe, with the fall of Rome 'organised crime' was largely displaced by the simpler and cruder predations of bandits and would-be local lords, with a few exceptions such as the Coquillards, specific to a particular time and place. Organised crime only began to revive in more sophisticated forms in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and then in Italy and Holland, the two nations at the time were precisely in the forefront of the reinvention of the state and the primitive beginnings of the modern economy. Since then, organised crime has evolved, taking a variety of incarnations, from the piracy of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Spanish Main to the gangs of horse thieves who plied their trade in nineteenth century Russia. The actual criminals may not have been especially sophisticated, but the structures and economies in which they operated were – after all, pirates needed intelligence on which ships were worth attacking and the routes they would take, while the horse thieves had to be able to sell their horses on into other regions to avoid detection.

To this end, I am working on a book, tentatively titled *Criminal World*, which tracks the evolution of organised crime across time and space to explore the relationship between 'upperworld' of legitimate state and society and its underworld. It is not just that organised crime arises inside societies, but that there is a direct correlation between how organised a society is, and in what way it is organised, and the shape and power of its organised crime. In this respect, organised crime tells us much about the societies in which it operates precisely because it is in many ways its shadow, its shape defined by the contours of the milieu which produced it.

The study of organised crime is a truly interdisciplinary field, fusing history, criminology, anthropology, sociology and a host of other disciplines, from social psychology to economics. For a piece I am currently writing on the antecedents of Russian organised crime, for example, I am also teasing out the evidence to be found within the literature of the time. To this end, I am delighted to be associated with SOLON and its commitment to combining the study of law, crime and history in a dynamic and cross-disciplinary way. Criminals break the rules and cross borders all the time; so too must those who study them.