

Essay on perceptions of organized crime

[Law](#), [Security](#)



Abstract

Organized crime is not strictly an Italian, Sicilian or Italian-American phenomenon. It appears to be a multi-cultural institution whose genesis was the need for a protective and mutual assistance society. Such groups have changed from a self-contained, horizontal model to a vertical, hierarchical model, less involved with protection and mutual assistance and more involved with spanning the gamut of enterprise from the clearly criminal to the purely legitimate, often admixing the two. This hierarchical model has similarities to both a military and corporate model.

Whenever I heard the term “organized crime”, I would envision well-tailored, well-coiffed, beefy-appearing gentlemen in fedoras leaning upon some forlorn small business owner. I pictured Italian neighborhoods in New York City and Chicago where the food was great but the life expectancy short. I imagined the thrill of fear on receiving a “pay or die” black-hand note. I counted money and lots of it. I wondered who would be the next victim of the dreaded vendetta. I pictured the lavish dinners and wedding receptions of the “Godfather” movies and “Goodfellas” and figured that the Italians had a lock on organized crime.

I soon learned, however, that organized crime is not and probably never has been a strictly Italian, Sicilian, Italian-American or Sicilian-American affair. The drug cartels in Colombia, Bolivia, Mexico and other Latin American countries are not Italian. The Irish gangs of the United States, such as the Dead Rabbits of the mid-nineteenth century (Asbury, 1927) and the more recent Westies in New York City (English, 1991) and the Winter Hill Gang in

Boston (Weeks & Karas, 2007) are (or were) not Italian, although they worked with the Italian families in New York, Boston and Providence. The recent influx of foreign gangs into New York City's Coney Island and other areas of the city are of Russian, Albanian and other Eastern European extraction. The gangs of the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, New York, the forerunners of Murder, Inc., were largely Jewish (Cohen, 1998). The gangs of the Harlem section of Manhattan, New York in the 1930's were largely African-American. The Hells Angels and other " biker" gangs do not even have a homogeneous ethnic affiliation. Clearly, there was more to organized crime than La Cosa Nostra.

I wondered what the motivation was for this activity. After all, while it might seem simple to fathom the motivation for a random crime by an individual – theft might be motivated by need or simple greed, a homicide by jealousy or revenge – what would cause these criminals of diverse origins to band together into a hierarchical organization? What, if anything, do these seemingly unrelated groups have in common?

Italian/Sicilian organized crime, whether termed La Cosa Nostra (Our Thing) or Mafia (possibly from the Arabic for " refuge" or an acronym for " Morte Alla Francia, Anella Italia" [Death to France, Italy cries]) (Lewis, 1964) in reference to the organization of Sicilian origin or groups such as 'Ndrangheta (honored man) from Calabria on the Italian mainland (the Honoured Society in Australia) (Paoli, 2003) or the Camorra of Naples, is the most well known and best studied. However, it appears that it may have characteristics in common with many other organized crime groups, which may help define organized crime as a whole.

The Italian Mafia appears to have its roots centuries ago among the peasantry of feudal Sicily. Constantly oppressed by the wealthy land owners, who often were not even Sicilian (due to the continued invasion and occupation of Sicily by many foreign nations, such as Spain, France and Ottomans, among others), these peasants banded together into mutual assistance and protection societies. Not only peasants were involved. Local professionals such as physicians, judges and the clergy lent a hand. Key to the success and continued existence of these groups was a strict code of honor, involving, among other elements, secrecy (often couched in ritual), a code of silence (omerta), solidarity with and loyalty to the group as a family (at times even more so than to one's biological family) and refusal to involve the official government or police in its affairs. This code was strictly enforced, with group sanctioned violence and murder against violators (Lewis, 1964).

The Irish groups in the United States often had their origins as political clubs, often involved with protection against the established majority of English descent (Asbury, 1927). The Jewish gangs in New York provided a haven from the non-Jewish majority (Cohen, 1998). The same may be said of all the other groups who found themselves in the position of an insular minority. As time passed, the "ideals" of these groups became corrupted. No longer was the group solely a means of protection against the outsiders, but it began to prey upon the weaker elements of its own people. This is typified by an offshoot of this group among immigrant Italians in New York City in the early twentieth century, the so-called "Black Hand" (La Mano Nero), which was involved in extorting local shopkeepers and business powers into paying for "protection" from its own violence. The groups which had been

horizontally organized, each being relatively autonomous, started to become hierarchical, with a pseudo-military structure to the extent that members spoke of “ soldiers”, regimes (regiments) and capos. Board meetings were held as if they were legitimate corporations. The same code of honor applied, but with violence now being directed towards rivals and business competitors. Promotion by assassination became accepted. A corollary of this hierarchical structure was insulation (“ buffering”) of the upper echelons by numerous levels of the hierarchy existing between them and the low ranking foot soldiers who actually committed illegal acts (Lewis, 1964; Paoli, 2003).

The business of the group was no longer protection against outsiders but all manner of illegitimate enterprise: gambling, bootlegging, loan sharking, prostitution, extortion, drug trafficking and contract murder. Added to this mix was involvement in legitimate enterprise, including free-standing concerns operated as any legitimate business, the “ fronts”, seemingly legitimate businesses operated primarily as an ostensible source of legitimate income and for money laundering purposes and those legitimate businesses infiltrated by the group, such as labor unions, sanitation and construction. The former aversion to involvement with the formal government ironically has turned into a “ partnership” forged by bribery and corruption.

Recent reversals of fortune mainly center on a weakening of two of the pillars of the organized crime code: secrecy and silence (Paoli, 2003). Still, as one generation of criminals is deactivated, by death, old age or incarceration, another stands ready to take its place.

Organized crime, then, is a hierarchical organization founded upon a code of honor that relies heavily upon secrecy and silence that has diversified itself so as to become involved in a continuum of business activities from the clearly illicit to the mundanely legitimate, freely admixing the two along the way. This model is by no means unique to any one ethnicity.

References

Asbury, H. (1927). *The Gangs of New York*.

Cohen, R. (1998). *Tough Jews*. New York, NY. Random House.

English, T. J. (1991). *The Westies: Inside New York's Irish Mob*. New York, NY. St. Martin's Press.

Lewis, N. (1964). *The Honoured Society – The Mafia Conspiracy Observed*. New York, NY. Putnam.

Paoli, L. (2003). *Mafia Brotherhoods: Organized Crime, Italian Style*. New York, NY. Oxford University Press.

Weeks, K & Karas, P. (2007). *Brutal: My Life inside Whitey Bulger's Irish Mob*. New York, NY. Regan Books.