

# Partners in crime

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By bringing together two different issues such as ‘corruption’ and ‘organised crime’, this conference implies that the two are somewhat related. This implication, in its turn, alludes to, and incorporates, a specific definition of organised crime. Therefore, I would like to start by identifying a number of definitions of organised crime. On the other hand, this conference is also focused on policies, responses to both corruption and organised crime. Therefore, I will bring in some points of analysis related to the causation of these types of criminal conducts, and some notes with respect to academic research on the subject matter. As the organisers say, bridges should be built between scholars and practitioners. Hence, I would like to describe some of the difficulties that scholars encounter when researching and defining these phenomena.

If we see organised crime as a merely predatory enterprise, we may explain it through causation theories revolving around notions of strain, subculture, or relative deprivation. See, for example, Merton’s classical formulation, whereby individuals and groups who share institutionally acceptable goals (money and success), but do not possess the legitimate means to pursue them, will resort to illegitimate means as a form of deviant adaptation. In this way, they ‘innovate’, namely they re-invent the possible manners to achieve wealth and reputation. When applying this formula to Al Capone, Merton describes the notorious gangster as an example of the triumph of amorality over morally prescribed failure.

If we focus on organised crime as a provider of illicit goods and services, we may want to examine how the demand for such goods and services arises, and why they are regarded as illegal. Among the goods and services provided, trust and protection might be singled out as paramount. These, which should be supplied by the state, may under certain circumstances become the preserve of private, if unlawful, entrepreneurs. Organized crime, in this perspective, is an industry for the supply of private protection and the distribution of trust to economic actors who would otherwise be unable to interact safely. Organized crime, in brief, is regarded as a counter-power replacing the authority vacuum left by an ineffective state.

Finally, when we focus on organised crime as criminal enterprise which gains access to the legitimate economy and the official political arena, causation theories may experience serious difficulties. Eclecticism in such cases may prevail, because this type of organised crime may be explained through a combination of subculture, strain and, last but not least, differential association theory. With this we are, however, no longer within the tradition of organised crime studies, but in that of the study of white collar and corporate crime. This is the most interesting aspect, in my view, an aspect that leads me to suggest a broader sociological distinction.

But before doing this, let me relate the different definitions and causations to their respective, potential, policies and institutional responses. If relative deprivation is the cause of crime, well the response should be quite straightforward: let's reduce such type of deprivation. If subcultures are the main culprits of crime, efforts towards integration and inclusion may be fruitful. Finally, if we want to tackle those aspects that make organised crime similar or even complicit with white collar crime, we have to intervene in the official arena, namely in the economic and the political world, we are forced to address the rules and logic of the economy and the political apparatus themselves. In other words, we have to identify the dynamics that allow organised crime to be such a desirable partner for official and respectable actors.

Let me return to my broader sociological distinction. In order to identify the different interpretations of organised crime, it is useful to refer to the concept of social organisation. This concept relates to the variety of social relations which give rise to two types of networks. First, social organisation can be viewed as an *association*, a network of individuals who form some sort of culturally homogenous group. Second, social organisation can be seen as a series of *transactions*, a network of individuals involved in a common activity, whether or not they belong to the same association, in other words, whether or not they are socially and culturally homogenous. Transactions range from brief encounters to elaborate, rigid, and highly coordinated undertakings. If we view social organisation in terms of *association*, we emphasise the structure and internal cohesiveness of groups. On the contrary, if we view social organisation in terms of *transactions* we emphasise the structure and modality of joint activities.

Some scholars, but also investigators, choose the first route, thus describing the criminal groups as separate entities constituted by cohesive groups and characterised by specific cultural codes. Others opt for the second route, therefore focusing on the links the criminal group establishes with external, mainly official actors with whom the group carries out joint activities.

Those who choose the second route may highlight the capacity of organised crime to polarise markets through the use of violence, thus implying that the 'military' aspects of this type of crime are still very important. Others look specifically at the alliances and partnerships between organised crime and the official economy and the political world, and therefore suggest that organised crime combines forms of conventional criminality with a variety of white collar offences. This happens, in particular, when proceeds from illicit activities are invested in the official economy, where members of criminal groups are said to 'learn' the techniques and the rationalisations of their white collar counterparts. In this way, one could say, these groups do not corrupt markets, but they are corrupted by them. In my view, it is more appropriate to talk about a number of exchanges, and a mutual entrepreneurial promotion that the different actors engage in. In this sense, I would suggest that we are now faced with criminal networks, rather than organised crime, which involve a number of actors from the legitimate as well as the illegitimate world. These networks take advantage of the fact that in some sectors of the official economy unorthodox practices and illegal behaviour are widespread. Criminal networks imply the existence of interdependent units linked by a wide-ranging variety of ties, including kinship, ethnicity, cultural homogeneity, social proximity, or simply business partnership.

It should be noted that this is not a recent development. When sub-cultural theorists analysed organised crime in the past, they also suggested that the most successful criminal groups were those that managed to establish some form of common interest with official actors (they meant the police, particularly). Only those who did so could, in their view, really develop the scope and profits of their criminal activity. The ability to operate in both the licit and the illicit sphere allowed criminal groups to develop those multiple affiliations which could ensure success in both spheres.

As Cloward and Ohlin put it: Apprentice criminals pass from one status to another in the illegitimate opportunity system, and as they do so, develop a set of relationships with members of the legitimate world. Unless they can form these relationships, the possibility of a stable, protected criminal style of life is effectively precluded.

Let us turn to how we can acquire knowledge and understanding about corruption and organised crime. Here, the tasks of the scholars and that of the practitioners seem to coincide. What scholars call research, practitioners may call investigation or policy.

If we focus our research on illegitimate conducts, we need of course that these conducts become visible. For this to happen we have to identify victims, who have to expose and denounce those victimising them. This is not always very easy in both corruption and in the business carried out by organised crime.

With respect to organised crime, the customers who demand the goods and services delivered to them by a criminal group may be unwilling to report the nature of those goods and services, while competitors of that criminal group may fear retaliation. This is the case when one organisation is particularly powerful, its force of intimidation is outstanding, and the degree of violence or threat of violence it displays is very high. So, paradoxically, when one group is very strong, and in a sense acquires a monopoly in illegal markets, it is also when we know nothing about it, because it is somewhat invisible to us. Exposure of criminal conduct of this sort is perhaps more likely to occur in highly competitive environments and markets.

With respect to corruption and white collar crime in general, there is a characteristic problem. This is that, very often, these type of offences victimise people who may be unaware of their own victimisation. In this case, we are faced with crimes without victims, but also with crimes without criminals. This is why we talk about the invisibility of white collar crime, referring it to perpetrators as well as victims.

In political and administrative corruption, moreover, there is another dynamic that hampers research and investigation. This is that corruption occurs when something goes wrong, namely when one of the subjects involved in a corrupt exchange has reason to resent the other actors involved. In many cases that came to light in Italy and France, for example, small businessmen denounced their colleagues because their partners in a corrupt deal benefited more than they did. What is exposed in such cases, therefore, is the unequal distribution of the benefits generated by corruption, not corruption as such. In this way, what we study or prosecute (as scholars and practitioners) is a failed crime, while successful crimes evade our attention and understanding.

Ironically, I must say that the existence of criminal networks that I have described earlier, namely partnerships between clean entrepreneurs and criminal groups, is good news for both scholars and practitioners. More and more often, when studying organised crime we come across episodes of white collar crime, and vice versa. The alliances and joint ventures between the two types of offenders give us an unexpected quantity of material than helps us in the understanding of both. So, let us rejoice, and hope that this interpenetration between official and dirty business continues unabated.