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Cross-Cultural Reflections of Organized Crime

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The authors discuss the phenomenon of organized crime and why it appears to be a uniquely American problem. Comparing and contrasting ten cultural and/or socio-political variables, the authors demonstrate that American organized crime is uniquely related to its historical heritage, and that the inability of British society (inclusive of the media, researchers, and police officials) to officially recognize organized crime may be a result of "perceptual impairment" as opposed to its non-existence. The authors conclude that the study of the organization of crime deserves increased emphasis among criminologists, particularly with respect to the phenomenon of organized crime.

To a large extent, literary accounts of organized crime have generally focused on this phenomenon as it relates to the United States. With the exception of Italy and to a lesser extent, France, most researchers and journalists have ignored the existence of European organized crime or have not so much as recognized its existence, (Hess, 1973; Kerner, 1978; Clarke, 1980). Clearly the paucity of either hard empirical evidence or soft inferential data permits one to speculate why this "peculiar" form of criminality has been given far more exposure in the United States than in most European countries. Perhaps, the reason for this void in international organized crime literature is related to the non-universality of the phenomenon. More appropriately, however, we would suggest that cultural distinctions are in fact the primary cause for the absence of empirical research. That is, we suspect that the failure of European societies (in general) to recognize organized crime is intrinsically related to the culture of the society and how the cultural mores shape what are relevant topics for research, investigation, and/or media exposure. Moreover, what researchers investigate or reporters "report" is to a large extent dependent upon their informational sources, and uniquely in this case, the police are the primary source for information about organized crime. Thus to understand the process through which perceptions (ultimately public policy) are nurtured and developed, one must realize that culture plays a central if not all-inclusive role.

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For the the purpose of illustration, we have chosen to compare and contrast the British and American experience. This choice, while arbitrary, was predicated upon several common yet distinct factors which permit us to demonstrate our arguments.

First, the notion of a "free press" is common to both cultures although the legal constraints differ. Secondly, the American system of policing is a direct descendant of the British system of policing, yet there are some significant differences. Lastly, the political economies of both countries are relatively similar, but once again, the distinctions which do exist have had a significant effect upon how crime and the threat thereof is perceived. Before we address these issues, however, let us briefly discuss several conceptual issues which will shape our disussion.

Organized Crime, Political Economies, and the Production of Knowledge

Understanding organized crime and its relationship to the political economy of a society and equally important, how it is treated by researchers and the mass media, provide an essential element of our ability (as a society) to comprehend this vague and often undefinable concept known as "organized crime." Much of what appears to represent inconsistencies between the United States version of organized crime vis-à-vis the European model may actually be an inability to transmit culturally-consistent images of organized crime. Inasmuch as theoretical paradigms are fundamental to the creation of perceptions, it is only appropriate that we summarily address the "more advanced" arguments and then proceed to analyze the unique features that mitigate an interculturallly-consistent perception.

Organized Crime Ideology

If we opt for traditional definitions of organized crime (of which there are too many to discuss), a fundamental theme emerges. Organized crime usually possesses the following characteristics: a definable division of labor rigidly structured which seems to restrain competition through corruption and/or physical superiority and provides goods and services unavailable through the legitimate markets. In essence, organized crime is a criminal monopoly over an illicit market. It is parasitic in nature, undermining the legitimacy of the social, economic, and political institutions in the community (Cressey, 1969).

Non-traditional explanations of organized crime differ substantially. Rather than emphasize the "structure" and parasitic nature of the criminal entity(ies), these explanations usually focus upon institutional deficiencies: lack of legitimate opportunity, cultural inconsistencies, minority group oppression and exploitation, and arbitrary legislation and enforcement. Moreover, the symbiotic vis-à-vis parasitic relationship of organized crime to the community is emphasized (Ianni, 1972). Needless to say, such explanations of organized crime lead one to conclude that institutional reform is required if we are to have any appreciable effect on organized crime.

Advancing the latter perspective further, some criminologists argue that the essence of organized crime can only be adequately expressed in relationship

to the political economy of a society. In effect, they argue that organized crime is an extension of the political economy of the society. For capitalist-democracies, proponents of the "extension theory" argue that "democratic politics" (e.g., majoritarian rule, minority rights) have created illicit markets and that "criminal" organizations (criminal only in the sense that the services or goods that are being supplied have been legally prohibited) apply supply and demand principles consistent with the economy of the society. Thus, organized crime is merely an extension of the inequality in the economic and political relationships that exist in the larger society. Hence, the elimination of organized crime will only occur when there is a significant restructuring of power relationships in the larger society (Walton, 1973).

Naturally, the definitions and explanations posited are matters of perceptual differences inasmuch as the "definers" are being asked to explain a phenomenon whose reality and character lie in the "eyes of the beholder." This is not to suggest that organized crime does not exist or is merely an aberration of someone's innovative imagination.

Rather, we are suggesting that the ambiguity of this concept makes it uniquely amenable to a wide range of definitions or explanations, all of which may bear some resemblance to reality but none of which convey an all-inclusive statement of reality. Hence, in this respect, knowledge producers (e.g., researchers, police, and reporters) play a central role in "creating" an image of organized crime, or equally important, in dismissing or diminishing its existence or influence. We need only relate the virtual paralysis that had affected American law enforcement and its tacit refusal to recognize organized crime despite compelling evidence to the contrary. It was not until the early sixties that the media and law enforcement officially recognized this phenomenon.

Clearly, the role of the police and the media in shaping our perception of crime in general is overwhelming. For what we are arguing is that few people share a virgin insight into crime — and particularly organized crime — and that our thoughts about crime are shaped by the police and the media, by what we read, hear, and see. Thus, organized crime is solely dependent upon how the police and the media have translated and transmitted this "reality." The implications and consequences of this phenomenon are, of course, far-reaching.

If as we are suggesting, organized crime is as much perceptual as real, and through the filtering of information a perception(s) of reality is born, shaped, and modified, it is important to recognize how this process occurs. In this respect, it is valuable to examine how information is generated, analyzed, and diffused throughout a society.

Processing an Image

Information is the fundamental component of knowledge; however, information in and of itself is of little utility unless it is interpreted and related to its environment. Because information on or about organized crime is often developed by the police, the perception or image which emerges tends to represent the qualities which the police believe are important. Hence, the police are

usually the parents of the child; that is, the police determine the genetic composition of the phenomenon — what it looks like and how it behaves.

The media, on the other hand, diffuse the image. Because of the unique nature of organized crime — its subtle yet pervasive influence on all communal institutions — the media is to a large extent dependent upon the police for their information about organized crime. With few exceptions, the media possess neither resources nor necessary expertise to independently investigate organized crime. Nor is there a commitment or desire to do so; the costs are far too great and the return is minimal. Thus, the media in most cases are dependent upon the police for information about organized crime.

However, in processing the information, the media, similar to the police, are interpreting data in an environment which is inherently culturally-bound and ideologically-constrained. That is, prevailing political and economic ideology combined with cultural-consistency is woven throughout the text. And when put to the task of analyzing organized crime, the bias becomes most evident. Simple-minded generalizations which are easily digestible (i.e., “good guys” versus “bad guys”) take precedence over substantive analysis, and seldom do the important nuances upon which sound public policy must be based emerge. Thus a one-dimensional view of organized crime — one that strongly suggest that organized crime represents a perversion of social values by “evil” people — appears to be the prevailing if not sole theme. Unfortunately, this perception has inhibited policy makers from promoting less utopian and more realistic policies toward the control of organized crime.

Interestingly, the pendulum in organized crime control swings from the one extreme of not recognizing that this peculiar form of criminality exists to the other extreme which suggests that organized crime can be eliminated through the adoption of more “sophisticated” and “legally-advanced tools.” In very few instances do we find substantial policy discussion that assesses the impact of a particular prosecution on an illicit market, or what effects the prosecution may have had on the criminal organization. Often symbolic prosecutions are the sole barometer of success. And while we certainly do not wish to minimize the importance of symbolism in executing public policy, we must also be cognizant of its long-term effects — public cynicism and apathy, a sense of social anomie, and resignation to the futility of the struggle. This was most apparent in several polls taken in New Jersey during the past decade which demonstrated that despite citizens’ belief that organized crime would benefit from casino gambling, they overwhelmingly favored its development in Atlantic City (*Star Ledger*, 1973).

Understandably, giving birth to an image and diffusing that image throughout society often comprises forces over which individuals have little control. Culture remains a compelling aspect in how we think and reason; and as we shall demonstrate, the phenomenon of organized crime is intrinsically related to the relative cultural mores of a society. Thus, to understand why a particular phenomenon is accepted in one society, yet rejected in another, we must examine how culture has affected our thought processes.

Cross Cultural Variables and Image Making

Kuhn has written that the institutionalization of an idea is predicated upon the acceptance of assumptions adopted by society during a particular period in history (Kuhn, 1962). If as we are suggesting, culture is fundamental to how we think about organized crime, we may be able to explain why American institutions have recently accepted the notion of organized crime whereas British society to a large extent, has not. Moreover, if the "birth" of an idea is largely dependent upon timing and cultural relativity it becomes increasingly apparent that creating and institutionalizing a belief or concept represents an extremely complex and delicate process which requires the "right" set of circumstances occurring at the "right" time. There are several distinct cultural variables that have had a significant impact upon how organized crime is perceived in Great Britain and the United States. When analyzed in a historical context, these variables have affected both the scale and, equally important, the form of organized crime.

Patronage vs. Civil Service

A unique feature of American organized crime and one which certainly addresses the symbiotic nature of organized crime is its relationship to politics. Novelists and journalists have consistently reported this strange, but not necessarily parasitic relationship between crime and politics. Within the context of the American experience, this symbiosis often permits criminal syndicates to acquire exclusive monopolies over illicit markets.

Historically, this relationship can be found in the nature of American politics—a system which in emphasizing majoritarian rule and minority rights, purposely creates a situation of constant tension. Moreover, because of the large amounts of money needed for a political campaign, coupled with the need to organize communities to ensure large voter turnouts, a system is created which at a minimum encourages flirtations with organized crime, and too often lasting, systemic relationships. Clearly the old-time "ward healer" or the political "boss" (an institution in urban politics) recognized and cultivated organized crime for both its economic and community power. The quid-pro-quo included patronage jobs, judicial favors, and political protection for unlawful activities. The history of American politics is replete with illustrative examples which vividly demonstrate the systemic relationship of organized crime to politics (Amuk, 1976).

Whereas political patronage provides the nexus between "organized crime" and politics in America, the British have opted for a system of government predicated upon civil service. The benefits of such a system are clearly evident, for there is far less patronage, fewer expensive political campaigns, and a "more professional" class of civil servants (judges, prosecutors, economists, etc.) who devote their lives to a career in government. This in effect mitigates the need for large staff turnovers when the political party changes, provides continuity and stability to government services, and minimizes the influence of "external forces" on government policies. In a nation in which trust in govern-

ment officials is relatively high, the pervasive nature of organized crime is effectively minimized though never eliminated.

Aristocracy and Privilege vs. Meritocracy and Achievements

Another factor in our understanding of organized crime is the concept of entrepreneurialship. That is, whether rigidly adhered to or rhetorically professed, there exists a belief in the U.S. that one's upward mobility is a product of initiative and innovation. The story of Horatio Alger and his meteoric rise to wealth is seen in novels, on television, and in schools. The innovative entrepreneur, if willing to make the necessary commitments (and take the necessary risks), can achieve wealth in America – the land of opportunity. Immigrants accepted this notion and it is little wonder that the “once supreme British Protestants (WASPS) were passed in per capita income earnings after World War II not only by Jews and Orientals but also by Irish, Italians, Germans and Poles . . .” (Sowell, 1978).

Conversely in Britain, the notion of privilege is supported institutionally and legally. Thus, not everyone is entitled to an opportunity to compete, for some are accepted as more worthy than others in the acquisition of wealth and power. The psychological effects of inequality predicated upon inherent right are clearly evident in the relatively low number of persons who are “permitted to pursue higher education (traditionally a means for upward mobility) and the relatively small numbers of entrepreneurs in the private sector. The inhibitions against achieving “success” (as measured in wealth and power) have seriously affected the spirit if not the means of capitalism in Great Britain. Without sounding too ethnocentric, it would appear that the lack of a national commitment to capitalistic ideals (regardless of their inherent exploitive characteristics) has retarded the growth of the private sector in Great Britain. Again, the implications are significant, for it is clear that the American version of organized crime is intrinsically related to the economic dynamics of capitalism. If we have learned nothing more from the capitalist experiment, we know that innovation and initiative even when diverted to the illegitimate sector of the economy, result in material rewards. A relatively small number of disenfranchised immigrants were soon to realize that regardless of the moral implications of engaging in a career in organized crime, it did provide a means of upward mobility. This so-called “queer ladder of social mobility” provided hope for future generations to enjoy the benefits attached to attaining the “American dream” (Bell, 1961).

Trust vs. Mistrust of Government

There was and still remains a fundamental mistrust of a large centralized government in the States. This mistrust, brought about in large part by our experience with the “mother country” resulted in a trifurcated system of government – with executive, judicial, and legislative branches. Clearly the “evils” of power concentrated in the hands of a few represented the quintessence of corruption. The notion that “big is bad” (which also carried over to our treatment

of the private sector) became a cornerstone in our concepts of "home rule" and "states rights."

Conversely, the British system of government is predicated upon what Lipset labels, "a deferential respect for the elite" (Lipset, 1966). That is, regardless of political views, there is a homogeneity of faith in the ability and capacity of government to protect and provide for the needs of the masses. This trust in government extends to the most disenfranchised minorities, who have been institutionalized to accept the benefits of a "welfare state."

When viewed in the context of organized crime, it is this mistrust of government that was and remains the genesis of organized crime in the U.S. Recognizing the failure of government to protect or provide for those who lack political and economic power, organized crime filled a void created by the absence of a strong and benevolent centralized system of government. Ostensibly then, the "welfare state" served to inhibit the growth of organized crime, for when the needy are left to protect and provide for themselves, someone (e.g., the Godfather") will seek to exploit the situation.

Homogeneity vs. Heterogeneity

A distinctive feature of British society vis-à-vis American culture is the relative homogeneity which exists. While there is (or should we say "was") a consensus of values among the British, brought about in large part by cultural homogeneity, the American experience has been one of constant need for response to "alien" values of newly-arrived immigrants, uneducated in the "ways" of American society. Recognizing the inability of any social system to accommodate a multiplicity of conflicting values in relatively short periods of time, it comes as no surprise that alienation develops and members of minority groups, conscious of their lack of social mobility, economic advancement, and political power, organized to achieve parity. Coupled with an economic system which encourages and rewards innovation and risk, the reality of organized crime is understandable (though not necessarily acceptable).

Open Press vs. Constrained Press

The role of the media in shaping public perception of crime and ultimately public policy should not be underestimated. The "muckraking" history of the American press played a very important and special part in raising the consciousness of society to the reality of organized crime. On the contrary, British journalism subject to strict libel laws and inhibited in obtaining information from government officials (as a result of the Official Secrets Act) has been somewhat reluctant to pursue stories of official corruption and organized crime. An "open press" — one which is not subject to a strict interpretation of libel laws and government constraints — is more likely to publish information which does not meet the standards of "proof beyond a reasonable doubt." It would appear that the American media, while substantially more cavalier in its attitude toward individual rights, is in a far more advantageous position to uncover and report about organized crime than is its British counterpart.

Internal Threats vs. External Threats

The British, or European, experience with external threats to national security differs significantly from the American experience. While Great Britain has been forced to defend itself against external forces, the United States (with the exception of War of Independence and Pearl Harbor) has yet to confront a foreign threat on its own soil. Moreover, the geographic relationship of Great Britain to countries of conflicting political ideologies has placed it in a position of constant threat of foreign invasion.

This experience has resulted in a cultural psychology which essentially perceives foreign subversion (particularly from Communist nations) as a "more real and more serious" threat than internal subversion. Thus, to mobilize public sentiment to recognize the debilitating effects of internal corruption on the social fabric of society requires a modification of the cultural psyche — a process which can occur either through a long-term educational process, or as in the case of America, systematic political scandals.

Violence vs. Non-Violence

Certainly a facet of American organized crime which has dominated a substantial part of the literature is the use of violence to acquire and maintain monopoly status among criminal syndicates. Clearly the use of violence by organized crime has created public awareness as to its reality. For the media has treated organized crime violence in a romantic fashion, creating a certain mystical quality which arouses public curiosity. The relative absence of violence in the British culture — a value which is generally accepted even among the criminal element — has in a very real sense, mitigated against public awareness of the reality of organized crime.

Legislating "Morality" vs. Legalizing "Sin"

The attitude of the British toward vice (e.g., narcotics, prostitution, gambling, etc.) differs substantially from that of Americans. Essentially, the British have legally acknowledged a distinction between those who solicit vice and those who exact profit from solicitors — that is, those who are in the business of extorting the solicitor. Americans, on the other hand, have created a criminal class out of those who solicit and provide services regardless of any exploitive characteristics in or about vice transactions. In fact, it appears that the British have acquired a more accurate and certainly realistic understanding of the exploitive nature of organized crime, for the legislation which focuses upon vice makes explicit distinctions between those who exact profit from the toils of others. This distinction is significant, for whereas American police officials have loosely equated vice enforcement with organized crime enforcement, the British have correctly acknowledged distinction and have properly focused their enforcement efforts. Vice enforcement in America receives greater visibility through the media and this in turn heightens the awareness of citizens to the existence of illegal markets far more so than in Great Britain. Moreover, the relative ease with which the American police can achieve large numbers of vice arrests adds to this increased sensitivity and unfortunately, creates an im-

age of a successful organized crime enforcement program. When coupled with the previously discussed cultural variables, it is obvious that the sensitivity of Americans to the reality of organized crime has been significantly enhanced through the manner in which laws have been enacted and enforced.

Proactive vs. Reactive Enforcement

If as we have suggested, an awareness to organized crime is in part dependent upon the ability of the police to uncover it, the manner in which the criminal investigation function is managed is extremely important. While the American system of policing is a direct descendant of the British system, cultural variations have shaped two distinct managerial processes.

Historically, the British police have promoted the image of being a defensive as opposed to an offensive force. As Mark points out, "a former chief constable—once acquired that the police should be confined to silent acquiescence in the criminal justice system" (Mark, 1978). This view of the police as defenders of social order and cultural consensus has permeated its management style, resulting in what persons in America would refer to as "reactive" policing. This policing mode was most evident in the manner in which the police addressed the civil strife in Great Britain during the summer of 1981. Rather than take an offensive posture to quell the disturbance, the police opted for a defensive strategy resulting in personal injury to large numbers of police officers. It was clear that police management, not only concerned with escalating the crisis, but also interested in maintaining a favorable public image, pursued a relatively more passive/reactive response than would have been the case in the United States.

While this example demonstrates a difference in the manner the police envision their role in British society, the implications of this variation are profound when we compare the criminal investigative function.

American and British criminal investigation methods were relatively similar until the sixties. Traditionally, American investigators, like their British counterparts, responded to complaints, initiating investigations after the fact. In the early sixties, American police departed radically from this tradition and established intelligence systems designed to alert police administrators to the occurrence of complaintless crime and/or permit administrators to take actions which would *prevent* crime. Interestingly this approach coincided with a period of intense civil unrest and at a time of pervasive belief that government was corrupt (a situation not substantially different from that of Britain today). Police agencies were encouraged through Federal funds, to implement preventive crime control programs, and intelligence systems proliferated American law enforcement.

Consistent with the recognition of the desirability of a proactive posture for police agencies, investigative strategies followed a similar course. "Sting operations" similar to the "Abscam" investigation began to emerge and case law sanctioning the use of such proactive methods developed. In making such changes, American policing made a radical departure from its British counterpart—a departure which may have profound effects on the nature of policing throughout

the world. In Great Britain, on the other hand, there is tremendous resistance to proactive policing, not only within British society generally, but among the police institutionally. As defenders of the social order, police officials view proactive enforcement strategies as much too radical departure for preventing crime. Thus, there has been little impetus until very recently for the British to seek out criminal transgressions other than in a response to citizen's complaints.

It should also be noted that in the United States, a symbiotic relationship between prosecutors and police has had a profound effect on the development of organized crime control programs. For instance, most organized crime units, if not managed and supervised by an attorney, are at the very least guided by the provision of legal advice critical for the successful completion of complex investigations. This has resulted in the formation of a partnership which transcends the theoretical role of the prosecutor as an independent official merely presenting evidence resulting from an investigation. In fact, what frequently results is the creation of a hybrid entity in which police and prosecutors work in real concert.

Great Britain has no comparable arrangement. Prosecutors perform only as traditional prosecutors, with no involvement in the investigative process. The implication is, of course, that the significance of organized crime in the United States is elevated by the introduction of a prosecutorial component (because of the political and professional stature which has been conferred on prosecutors). This is usually not the case in Great Britain and clearly, minimizes the significance of the phenomenon.

Labor: Revolution vs. Evolution

The remaining variable which must be incorporated into any discussion of American organized crime is the role of the labor movement. With the emergence of the industrial revolution in America, twins were born: labor and organized crime. That is, had it not been for the reserve labor forces (primarily comprised of immigrants) which were allowed entry into the States and the rather gruesome exploitation that existed during the early years, the labor movement and organized crime would have lacked the necessary incentives to organize powerless workers against powerful capitalist entrepreneurs. It was this circumstance which permitted organized labor and organized crime to emerge as a unifying force in American politics.

Notwithstanding the influence of the Communist and Socialist movements, the history of organized labor is replete with instances of violence and corruption. Resisted by both business and government (which were often the same), the labor movement relied upon violence (or the threat thereof) to exact legitimate worker reforms. At the same time, business was not morally immune from using the services of organized crime to dismantle and brutalize the labor movement. Without question, the labor movement in America did not enjoy a peaceful evolution, unlike the case in the "mother country" — Great Britain.

Inasmuch as the politically-astute British elite were quick to recognize the dangers of Communism, the emergence of organized labor in Great Britain

was a welcomed sight. Interestingly, when the acceptance of the labor movement in Great Britain is examined, it is quite apparent that the notion of détente was born long before it became the popular catch-all in international relations in the seventies.

Again, the significance of this evolutionary (British) vs. revolutionary (American) process is evident in the manner in which organized crime has become synonymous with the larger and powerful international unions. We need not reiterate the litany of scandals involving the more powerful American unions; the record is clear and convincing. This relationship and the attention which it has generated in the media has certainly heightened public sensitivities to the existence of organized crime in the American labor movement — a variable not in the least apparent in British labor movement.

Conclusion

The study of the organization of crime is relatively new and, until recently, has not been afforded the stature among criminologists that it rightfully deserves. Unfortunately, yet understandably, European scholars, journalists, and police officials have opted to ignore how crime is organized. Clearly, it is important that we understand how criminals, in the pursuit of economic gain, organize criminal markets and exploit the fragile relationships between the individual and the State. Cross-cultural analytical techniques certainly allow us to compare and contrast the unique nuances of organized crime in both Great Britain and America. Perhaps the British experience could provide Americans with some healthy insights into how to minimize the most deleterious effects of organized crime, whereas the American system of policing may afford the British police alternatives and options in addressing organized crime. Further empirical cross-cultural research is necessary if we are to expand our relatively myopic understanding of organized crime.

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