Organised Crime and Corrupting the Political System

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There are increasing levels of concern in many countries about the threat posed by organised crime to established political structures and processes. This analysis considers some of the issues associated with the political influence of organised crime.

ORGANISED CRIME AND CORRUPTION

An immediate difficulty when analysing this subject area is that of definition.¹ There are very real problems in trying to define corruption and no universally accepted definition. Some definitions centre on abuse of public office, but most involve some conception of the public interest and the element of private gain for money, power or prestige. Definitional models of corruption usually include varying degrees of co-optation, or capture, of public agencies and officials. Beare lists four categories of corruption which illustrate its paradoxical characteristics:

- bribes/kick-backs: payments are demanded or expected in return for being allowed to do legitimate business;
- (2) election/campaign corruption: payments to gain or maintain political influence;
- (3) protection: payments to permit illegitimate business; and
- (4) systemic top-down corruption: a nation's wealth is systematically siphoned off by ruling élites.²

When discussing corruption and/or organised crime, it is worth pondering how applicable these four categories are for both legitimate business and organised crime within various countries and cultures. There has been a tendency in some Western democracies to assume an ethnocentric universal template for what constitutes corruption and what should be done about it. Usually this is accompanied by stinging criticism of jurisdictions viewed as particularly corrupt and an often quite deafening silence on how corrupt one's own back yard might be. This ambivalence and ambiguity on corruption is valuable to organised crime groups, and can be exploited to further their own commercial activities within the host economy.

What *is* generally true about organised crime and corruption is that corruption is very often necessary in order to facilitate the smooth interaction of the legitimate and illegitimate operations of organised crime. The level and intensity of corruption required will fluctuate. Often, as organised crime groups and/or individuals become more sophisticated and powerful, the violence component of their operational equation will become increasingly replaced by the corruption variable. This increasing wealth and power of organised crime groups/ individuals is almost inevitably accompanied by increasing social legitimacy, which in turn facilitates the capacity for further corruption.

The most organically advanced forms of organised crime are those that have become the most sophisticated agents of corruption, which in turn has allowed them to become highly integrated into legitimate society and often camouflaged from being perceived as a social or criminal problem. This neutralisation of opposition that corruption can assist is why it is a master card for organised crime. Interestingly, it is also part of a broader societal behavioural continuum, because similar processes are employed by powerful nations, corporations and individuals in the course of conventional business in all types of states, whether capitalist, communist or other totalitarian regimes. Particular examples of these processes being part of normal business are the arms industry and major infrastructure projects overseas. It is not uncommon for a whole range of inducements to be offered by major contractors in their efforts to bid successfully for large military hardware defence contracts, or to win the tenders for major projects, such as the construction of airports and power systems.

In an increasingly globalised economy, economic actors will continue to make rational decisions on *how to do business* in different countries and cultures. Organised crime and corruption have been, and will continue to be, very real factors in a host of rational business decision-making processes, in a wide range of increasingly interlinked scenarios.

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Organised crime can deliver some selective benefits to a state, community or individuals.³ However, in general the influence of organised crime is a repressive one. Indeed, a collective suspension of belief, widespread application of techniques of neutralisation,⁴ and a sustained distortion of reality are required if people are consistently to deny this truism. Nevertheless, complex relationships and forces can combine to achieve such a mind-set, whether on an individual or collective basis, to create situations where organised crime and its perpetrators may be viewed in more positive terms.

THE POLITICAL ROLE OF ORGANISED CRIME

The level of political power that organised crime can wield is often crucial to the success of its activities. The political strength of organised crime may be augmented by the fact that there is often a symbiosis between many legal and illegal enterprises. Much organised criminal activity is meeting consumer demand for goods and services, which may or may not be illegal. The political skill of some organised crime groups, such as the Mafia in Sicily, has been to combine their public and private role, so that the needs of the collective interest merge with those of the organised crime group itself. This is most clearly demonstrated by organised criminal networks performing social welfare activities for the poor; for example, the Mafia in Sicily, paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland and the drugs cartels in Colombia.

Three of the most widely acknowledged manifestations of the political power of organised crime are:

- (1) protection;
- (2) repression; and
- (3) mediation.

Organised crime may operate as a proxy for the state by performing policing and other criminal justice roles. Italy is an example of those trends where the political and economic development of the country has accentuated the visibility and relevance of organised crime, especially in those regions such as Sicily (once a part of the Spanish Empire) and Calabria that are further away from the centre. The Mafia has acted as the linkage between the needs of the central state and the problems of regulating a peripheral territory.⁵ However, Italy is certainly not the only example of state/organised crime linkages. There is a long history of state/ organised crime collaboration, and the keys to deconstructing this relationship across time and cultures are:

- (1) prevailing social structures;
- (2) contemporary political economy; and
- (3) classifications and understandings of criminality.

If these three templates are adopted then patterns between the involvement of various nation states and different organised crime activities can be seen through history. An example of these processes at work is piracy. Chambliss describes how from 1500 to 1800, the colonial powers of Europe were in constant dispute over new territories, trade and other imperial colonisation issues. Continuing all-out war was not a feasible option, so in order to attack the enormous wealth that Portugal and Spain were drawing from the Americas, England, France and Holland engaged in state-sponsored piracy. As capitalism developed into the world's dominant economic system, countries were fearful of one or two nations dominating world trade and colonisation. In this context piracy '. . . helped to equalize the balance and reduce the tendency toward the monopolization of capital accumulation'.⁶

In all the countries involved, piracy was an act punishable by death. However, pirates were sponsored by various countries, given safe harbour in home or colonial ports, and furnished with letters of marque from the sponsoring state. These letters of marque acted as an opportunistic legal fiction, providing a hollow legitimacy to coercive action. Similarly, the concept of terra nullis was utilised by England to self-legitimate its occupation and exploitation of the colonies of Australia. The letters of marque gave specified individuals a licence to plunder, but with specific limitations attached. These limitations were largely ineffectual in practice and tended to be ignored by all. England, France and Holland allowed such flagrant transgressions, precisely because of the damage the pirates wrought upon Portugal and Spain, and the subsequent wealth that they brought to sponsor states. The most successful pirate of all, Sir Francis Drake, is reported to have returned to England from one voyage of piratical mayhem against Spanish shipping '. . . with enough gold and silver to support the

government and all its expenses for a period of seven vears'.⁷

In more recent times, a range of governments have cooperated with organised crime groups in smuggling various commodities which these same governments have prohibited; for example, drugs trafficking in South-East Asia by US government agencies under successive administrations. During the 1960s and the 1970s, the involvement of Air America (the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA] airline in Vietnam) in drugs smuggling from Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam is well documented. These activities generated revenue for the CIA and achieved political goals by gaining support within the local populations in the drugs-cultivation areas of those countries.

An example of state-organised crime cooperation from the 1980s is the *Irangate* scandal, which involved among others Colonel Oliver North, senior CIA personnel, Defence Secretary Caspar Weinberger and other members of the Reagan administration. Senate inquiries into the affair revealed importation of illegal drugs by the CIA and the US military, and the illegal sale of arms to Iran. The purpose of these covert and *illegal* schemes was to fund the actions of Contra guerrillas in Nicaragua against the popular and democratically elected Sandinista government.

The *Irangate* scandal again displays a national government in concert with organised crime groups in its efforts to meet competing policy goals. In this case it is foreign policy priorities clashing with domestic health and law enforcement priorities. Drugs are banned at home in the war against drugs, but the profits generated by these illegal drugs are necessary to achieve specific foreign policy aims, especially the fight against communism. State officials are mired in a condition of *anomie*, resorting to illegitimate pathways to achieve legitimate goals, and organised crime individuals and groups facilitate this contradictory impasse.⁸

Organised crime groups will often collaborate actively with the agencies of the central and local state, both in advanced and less developed countries, and in both urban and rural settings. Potter and Gaines, following their research on rural organised networks in eastern Kentucky, summarised these collaborative relationships thus:

'Many social contradictions are resolved by, and many "legitimate" social functions are in fact sustained by, organized crime groups. Organized criminals and public officials form a close, symbiotic bond, that usually places the latter in the center of the illicit enterprise. Public officials are not just the minions of organized crime; they are part of its fabric, albeit the part found in society's legitimate and respected institutions.'⁹

This conclusion is not that surprising if one reminds oneself that the goals of many criminals (especially organised criminals) may match those of the majority of the population. It is the means that are different. Indeed, there can be much ambiguity and blurring of boundaries between licit and illegal business activity. This is not surprising within the entrepreneurial culture of capitalism, which prizes innovation and competitive advantage. For example, in the economic and social history of the US, this ambiguity and blurring of boundaries was exploited by various aggressive entrepreneurs in the 19th century, often referred to as 'The Robber Barons'. Some of the more rapacious exponents of graft and monopolistic commercial practice, such as John Astor, Cornelius Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller and J. P. Morgan, are now icons of American business culture and history.¹⁰

Other countries have had, and indeed still do have, their own robber barons. In a similar manner, corrupt allocation of government contracts has been an enduringly popular activity for organised crime groups in the US and elsewhere. Historically, the local political machines in many US cities functioned to serve not only legitimate but also illegitimate business. However, the corrupt local politician often performed the social welfare role that was not widely available until post-1945 and was usually widely popular. It was a feudalistic approach to patronage distribution, which was often a lifeline to immigrant populations.

Politics in the US is traditionally more personalised than in many other advanced economies. Notions of political clientalism are well established, and so individuals have been able to deliver large numbers of votes to those who are prepared to pay for them. There are many well-documented examples in American federal, state and municipal politics of *fixers* guaranteeing blocks of votes to politicians and receiving patronage in return. However, the phenomenon of machine politics is by no means exclusively American — there are many other examples from other cultures and time periods, including:

- the origins of the triads in their political opposition to the Manchu emperors, and later their work for Chiang Kai Shek in the 1920s; and
- Corsican organised crime groups which began as nationalist political groups against the French occupation.

Similarly, the US is certainly not alone in having a dubious tradition of bribery impacting upon political elections. Such practices are still common in many countries and were widely prevalent in Victorian Britain, when it is estimated that over f_{3m} was spent on bribery in the 1880 general election (equivalent to over £100m in 1990s' terms). Rotten boroughs and gross gerrymandering of electoral rolls had been common up till then, but the 1880 general election was such an egregious excess of dubious political practices that it prompted the passing in 1883 of the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act. That statute, together with the Prevention of Corruption Act 1916,¹¹ has helped ensure the maintenance of certain standards of probity in UK political life since that time.

Returning to the US,¹² traditionally one of the principal occupational roles of many senior organised crime figures has been to act as a broker between those lower-order criminals who carried out organised crime activities, and the police and politicians who were supposed to stop them, but who could be tempted to forego such a role. Chicago during the Prohibition era of the 1920s is perhaps the most notorious example. Organised crime could not have functioned during Prohibition without the support of whole agencies. Such a corruption process can be intensely local, or can at times be regional and national in its scope. Whatever the scale of this corruption process, 'The ability to corrupt government, in particular, law enforcement agencies, is arguably as important for organized crime as the ability to intimidate.'13

The Prohibition era is a window on these processes in action. Remarkably (or not so remarkably, depending on one's viewpoint), the Prohibition Bureau was part of the Treasury Department, which was:

"... headed by Andrew Mellon, a man who had millions invested in the liquor trade before Prohibition and was not interested in enforcing the new law. Neither were most local police agencies, and very little money was allocated to accomplish the most sweeping criminal law ever enacted in the United States....During Prohibition...a general tolerance of the bootlegger and a disrespect for the federal law were translated into a widespread contempt for the processes and duties of democracy. This was exemplified by the lawlessness that reigned in Chicago.¹⁴

Prohibition unleashed competitive violence into existing local political corruption arrangements, propelled organised crime gangs into large-scale business practices, increased the syndication of organised criminal activity and educated organised criminals in using legal institutions to service their illegal enterprises. In short, it served as business model for the modern international drugs trade. The greatest danger posed by the drugs trade in the 21st century is that, like the US bootleggers of the Prohibition era, the economic power of those individuals/ groups associated with drugs trafficking will be utilised to gain political influence and facilitate corruption (possibly through political campaign contributions). These strategies can allow organised crime to harvest what are perhaps the most desirable fruits of corrupting the political system - political, social and economic legitimacy.

Whether organised crime is ultimately successful in its efforts to gain legitimacy is often decided by the scale of its economic power. In order to achieve economic success, organised crime has adopted many of the principles and practices of legitimate business, and extended them into its own theatres of operations. A significant proportion of the structures and processes of organised crime, such as flexible labour arrangements, internationalised and overlapping business partnerships, use of offshore finance centres, and diversified investment portfolios, do reflect conventional contemporary business models and practices. Similarly, just as major legitimate corporations will seek monopoly situations with their intrinsic rewards (especially reducing costs and risk), so will organised crime groups seek to control their markets. However, the very nature of markets in some illegal goods and services will stimulate competition; for example, the relatively low finance capital start-up costs regarding extortion and prostitution.

Nevertheless, the increasing sophistication of organised crime, and in particular its increasing internationalisation, is typified by drugs trafficking. Large-scale importation of illegal narcotics is a complex and expensive business which requires extensive planning, manufacturing and distribution networks. The parallels between organised crime and conventional commerce in an age of latemodernity are if anything increasing; for example, the drugs and armaments industries. The variables that promote organised crime are not hermetic influences and may be interdependent with the legitimate business sector. Corruptible political authority needs to be financed, and this may be achieved by the profits drawn from illegal goods and services. However, the required finances may also be derived from independent legitimate businesses, which may be controlled by associate companies or individuals. Similarly, organised crime can be just as stratified as 'legitimate' society, sharing many of its prejudices. For example, dominant groups in the licit and illicit sectors of many advanced economies have tended to be drawn from dominant minorities, usually Caucasians, and there are many 'family-dominated' businesses. The growing parallels and deepening ambiguity surrounding the licit and illicit sectors of the economy pose enormous problems for law enforcement efforts against organised crime, and it is this issue which is now the focus of analysis.

THE POLITICAL ELEMENT IN LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSES TO ORGANISED CRIME

Just as academics face problems of definition regarding organised crime, so too does law enforcement. The problems of the latter are obviously more pressing, because this fogginess in defining organised crime obstructs the formulation of policy development and the construction of effective anti-organised crime legislation. Just as there are significant problems of definition, there are also distinct difficulties in actually identifying the activities of organised crime, especially in the financial sector. Another very significant practical imperative which affects the law enforcement response to organised crime is the fact that much organised crime actually provides services, or meets market needs. This in many ways is the greatest pragmatic difficulty that faces law enforcement, because it is attempting the almost impossible task of bucking the market. The US experience with the prohibition of alcohol in the 1920s and contemporary law enforcement problems with drugs markets (which are flexible, irregular and largely open) are clear examples of this phenomenon.

As discussed earlier, organised crime is not confined to illegal goods and services, and there can often be a symbiosis between the activities of organised crime and many conventional enterprises. When this symbiotic relationship exists, business, public and indeed sometimes government support for law enforcement efforts against organised crime can be extremely muted. Ultimately, all law enforcement efforts against organised crime are dependent on *political will*, and the crucial importance of national difference *must* be considered in any evaluation of the effectiveness of law enforcement responses to organised crime.

Local circumstances and how they affect social norms within a jurisdiction must be taken into account in attempts to analyse law enforcement efforts against organised crime. These sets of local circumstances can be surburban, urban, national, regional or multinational in character. Corruption and organised crime can be normal, or at least partially legitimised, activities in many countries (for example, Japan and the entrenched social, economic and political influence of the yakuza). In such countries it is particularly important for law enforcement to be aware of the effects of cultural traditions in the distribution of privilege and how these may be linked to organised crime. For example, most public corruption cases are intrinsically easy to investigate, but are complicated by political factors surrounding their investigation.

As described above, the state's involvement in organised crime, or the state as organised crime, is not a new or inconsequential phenomenon. Stateorganised crime has an institutional character, which can be seen at work in the role of the CIA and Air America in facilitating drugs transportation during the Vietnam War; the apartheid regime of modern South Africa; the government-sponsored death squads that have been prevalent in some contemporary African and Latin American countries; and the state-sponsored piracy (eg through letters of marque) that was such an important feature of the foreign policy of the great colonial powers between the 16th and 19th centuries.

Given the diverse range of social, economic, political and cultural considerations that can have an impact, it is not surprising that different countries have varying levels of commitment to fighting organised crime. The US has been in the vanguard, as evidenced by the number of specialist statutes targeted at organised crime groups, their activities and their profits. Significant among these have been the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act 1968; the Organized Crime Control Act 1970 [OCCA]; the Bank Secrecy Act 1970 [BSA]; the Comprehensive Crime Control Act 1984; the Money Laundering Control Act 1986; and the Continuing Criminal Enterprise Act 1987 [CCEA]. OCCA introduced several new law enforcement facilities including:

- (i) *witness immunity schemes* to compel witnesses in organised crime cases to testify;
- (ii) the Witness Protection Program [WPP], which has seen thousands of strategic witnesses and their family members entering the programme;
- (iii) special sentencing provisions for organised criminals (usually long sentences);
- (iv) special investigative grand juries under Title I of OCCA, special grand juries are to be called at least every 18 months in federal judicial districts of one million or more population; and
- (v) most importantly of all, the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization [RICO] provisions under Title IX of OCCA. The RICO provisions allow for lengthy gaol sentences of up to 20 years; heavy fines; punitive civil damages (private citizens can sue for triple damages); and dissolution of business enterprises if racketeering or corrupt organisational practices are proven. The RICO provisions are widely acknowledged as perhaps the most potent law enforcement weapon against organised crime in any jurisdiction.

These innovations have undoubtedly assisted law enforcement against organised crime. However, it is important to consider the cyclical relationship between corruption and reform, with regard to both law enforcement efforts against crime and organised crime itself. Just as the latter can offer illegitimate pathways for social mobility, so can 'corruption/organised crime-busting' serve as a political step-ladder in the US and elsewhere. For example, Thomas Dewey became New York District Attorney and Governor of the State of New York on a 'corruption-busting' ticket in the 1940s.¹⁵ In the 1990s, Rudolph Guiliani has fuelled his rise to New York District Attorney and then Mayor of New York as a 'crime-buster', and he is steadily building his national political profile, primarily on his image as a politician who is tough on crime and corruption.

Similarly, in Italy, Antonio di Pietro has powered a spectacular rise to prominence as a fierce prosecutor against organised crime. Also, the current Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Bill Skate, was elected on an anti-corruption manifesto. However, he has personally been strongly implicated in continuing corruption scandals.

Political momentum is crucial to law enforcement efforts against organised crime, and once momentum is achieved astonishing progress can be made. Italy in the 1990s is a clear example of this phenomenon, as evidenced by the ongoing 'Clean Hands' judicial inquiries in Milan which began in 1992, and which have had substantial political impact. So far, over 3,200 people have been implicated, including three former Prime Ministers, many former Cabinet ministers and members of parliament, magistrates, approximately 100 law enforcement officials and many senior executives of major corporations. Close links between organised crime, national and local government, and conventional business have been revealed. Most Italian corporations were discovered to have maintained substantial slush funds (some as high as US\$1bn) to pay corrupt politicians and organised crime figures.

Political momentum is of course a fluctuating force and it can be marshalled by organised crime to its advantage. For example, in Russia criminal capital is emerging as the dominant economic force, especially in the banking sector. This harsh reality, taken in conjunction with the near-emasculation of the security/military infrastructure, presents mountainous obstacles to those charged with combating organised crime. In Russia, organised crime and its capacity for corruption represents a potentially mortal threat to the democratisation of its institutions and structures. For decades, Italy was also an example of organised crime infiltrating various levels of government. Some judicial investigations into organised crime were undermined by the Italian Justice Ministry diverting resources/priorities away from specific inquiries and specific regional justice departments which were considered particularly proactive in their efforts against organised crime.

The problem of corruption may not simply be one that is found in governments and those holding public office; it is also a very real issue for law enforcement agencies themselves. Most law enforcement agents are not well paid and the attractions of monetary reward from organised crime can be overwhelming. The business sense for organised crime in

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bribing law enforcement agents is blindingly obvious, given the vast profits of much organised crime activity.

Unsurprisingly, the problem of poorly resourced and/or corrupt law enforcement agencies varies between countries. Russia is an example of a law enforcement system in crisis. During the anticorruption purges of the 1980s, 500,000 personnel were dismissed from the Ministry of the Interior and they have not been adequately replaced. Current personnel are underpaid, under-resourced, low in morale and present as obvious bribery targets. For example, in 1995 the then Interior Minister, Anatoli Kulikov, was dismayed that his own agents were asked for bribes at 22 of the 24 police checkpoints that they encountered when driving a truckload of vodka across southern Russia.

There is a plethora of different types of constraints which affect law enforcement efforts against organised crime, at different levels, in different ways between different countries, and at different times. For example, in the US there are significant constitutional constraints which protect the individual from the government, such as the Fifth Amendment, and which can be utilised by organised crime to deflect investigation. There are jurisdictional constraints at both the international and national level (especially within a federal structure). The problem of corruption can emasculate law enforcement responses to organised crime. There can be a multitude of agencies involved in efforts against organised crime. Sometimes effective cooperation can be difficult to achieve, which can lead to confusion and even inter-agency conflict.

There is growing evidence that organised crime is moving heavily into white-collar crime and, in particular, targeting the financial sector. For example, various organised crime groups have infiltrated Wall Street broking firms and engaged in sophisticated market manipulation techniques (sometimes facilitated by their traditional capacity to apply violence in the face of non-cooperation). The ambiguity and international character of much financial trading present significant obstacles to law enforcement which seeks to combat the influence of organised crime in this sector.

Overarching all these problems for law enforcement against organised crime is the emergence of cyberspace as the new frontier for organised crime, an area where its activities are increasing rapidly. All the resource issues and constraints confronting law enforcement efforts in traditional areas are increased exponentially when transferred to the cyberspace sphere. For example, cyberspace produces ever greater levels of *disintermediation*, which multiply the investigation and evidentiary obstacles facing law enforcement agencies.

These law enforcement in cyberspace dilemmas are especially pronounced with regard to financial crime, because under conditions of late modernity the greater proportion of world finance is intrinsically *electrons in flight*. How can under-resourced, underskilled and often internally marginalised policing agencies be expected to counteract effectively the cyberspace operations of organised crime? There will need to be significant changes in how law enforcement against organised crime is resourced and managed if organised crime's ability to corrupt political systems is to be curbed.

The trends discussed in this paper pose significant challenges to law enforcement agencies as they seek to counter the political influence and capacity for corruption of organised crime. Some of the interesting questions raised by these issues are:

- How do collaborative relationships between politicians and criminals develop? Possible reasons include blackmail; debts; kinship; and mutual economic interest.
- (2) What sustains these relationships?
- (3) What changes these relationships? Possibilities include broader socio-political change or globalisation.
- (4) What are the vulnerable points in these relationships? Are there structural faults or weak individuals?
- (5) What can governments/private sector/civil society do to affect these relationships? Possible innovations include more effective actuarial processes in the commercial sector and more openness in government.

These are some of the questions that must be addressed if the capacity of organised crime to corrupt the political system is to be reduced. Corruption seems to be an endemic feature of most forms of social organisation and has been described by a Roman Empire scholar as '... the most infallible symptom of democratic liberty'.¹⁶ As is well known, the Roman Empire disintegrated into chaos and the Dark Ages became established. If organised crime is successful in achieving legitimacy and power in social, political and economic domains by corrupting political systems, then a New Dark Age of the 21st century may emerge.

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