Organized Crime

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Abstract

Today, organized crime is an inevitable element of many people’s everyday realities. The goal of this paper is to review the fundamentals of organized and its theoretical and political explanations. The paper attempts to define organized crime and bring together its most crucial features. The role of politics in organized crime is discussed. The paper includes a brief description of the crime theories most relevant to organized crime. Recommendations for future researchers are provided.

*Keywords:* organized crime, control, subculture, politics, political vacuum, enforcement.
Organized Crime

Organized crime has become an essential element of many people’s everyday realities. According to FBI (n.d.), organized crime affects every corner of the globe; unfortunately, even the most sophisticated policies and enforcement decisions have been too weak and misbalanced to stop the proliferation of the organized crime theme. The developed world remains extremely vulnerable to the risks of organized crime. Political problems create a vacuum that favors the emergence and expansion of organized crime groups. Graft, the use of public funds, and dishonesty in government continue to persist (Naim, 2012). Changes in global politics and economy make organized crime groups even more powerful. The lack of social control and the existence of certain subcultures help explain why organized crime has become so common. Therefore, future researchers should focus on the analysis of the complex relationship between politics, social change, and organized crime to move the organized crime problem from a purely legal to the political and socioeconomic realm.

Defining Organized Crime

Defining organized crime has never been easy. Despite the rapid advancement of criminology and law enforcement, a single universal definition of organized crime is still lacking. The absence of such definition can be attributed to the overall complexity of the organized crime phenomenon. Still, several attempts have been made to define and describe organized crime. In 1969, the Federal Bureau of Investigation proposed the first comprehensive definition of organized crime, describing it as an act committed by a person who occupies an established position in a hierarchical system designed specifically to commit crimes (Abadinsky, 2009). Later in 1970, the U.S. Department of Justice proposed a different vision of organized crime, defining it as a set of illegal activities committed by members of criminal syndicates and their associate members throughout the U.S. (Abadinsky, 2009). Needless to say, this definition is no longer relevant, as organized crime has become a
transnational phenomenon. It is wrong to limit the scope of organized crime to the U.S. This is why it would be more appropriate to say that organized crime is a type of illegal activity committed by a group of individuals that has a formalized structure, and whose basic intent is to obtain money (Abadinsky, 2009). In organized crime, illegal activities are initiated and committed by a group of people, and these people keep associated with one another for the purpose of crime. In this sense, a group of people should be interpreted and understood as “a structured cohort of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences established […] in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit” (Abadinsky, 2009, p.3).

The complexity of the organized crime phenomenon is in that, in order to be viewed as organized, the act of crime must meet a number of criteria. These criteria also distinguish organized crime from other forms of illegal activity. The first and, probably, most important feature is that organized crime has no political goals (Abadinsky, 2009). Above everything, organized crime is designed to facilitate the acquisition and procurement of material benefits. Politics can and does play a role in organized crime, but only to the extent that facilitates material enrichment of the organized group members. At the same time, organized crime is always hierarchical (Abadinsky, 2009). In other words, organized criminal groups rely on the vertical power principles and always have at least three power ranks (Abadinsky, 2009). The authority in such groups depends on the position, and it does not matter who occupies this position at any given moment of time (Abadinsky, 2009).

Other unique features of organized crime include exclusive (limited) membership and the presence of a unique crime subculture (Abadinsky, 2009). Becoming a member of an organized crime group is not easy, and only a limited number of participants is allowed to engage in organized crime activities. Each group operates within a unique subculture, and its members are bound to follow the informal norms, traditions, and rules of behavior set by this
particular group. Organized crime groups perpetuate themselves and are willing to use violence to achieve their enrichment goals (Abadinsky, 2009). They are monopolistic, governed by a well-developed set of regulations and rules (Abadinsky, 2009). Here, one should not confuse organized crime with terrorism. Despite certain commonalities, terrorism and organized crime are two different types of illegal activity. Terrorism is political and public, whereas organized crime is materialistic and secret (Abadinsky, 2009). Researchers and law enforcement professionals should be particularly cautious while defining the meaning and scope of organized crime.

Organized Crime and Politics

That organized crime is inherently apolitical does not mean that politics has nothing to do with it. On the contrary, politics can become a major barrier or the most effective facilitator of organized crime activities. Skaperdas (2001) provides a perfect answer to the question of politics and its relation to organized crime: organized crime emerges because of the political power vacuum and the lack, shortage, or complete absence of political enforcement. The sources of such power gaps vary considerably across countries and states, but in all its forms, organized crime looks like a logical product of numerous political inconsistencies.

Geographic distance, prohibition decisions and activities, major political changes, and social and ethnic difficulties in politics favor the creation and expansion of organized crime (Skaperdas, 2001). The issue of geography is particularly relevant to large countries like the United States, Canada, and the former Soviet Union. These states fail to acquire and retain the absolute monopolistic control over their entire territories, due to their size. Deserts and mountains, jungles and remote villages create a breeding ground for organized crime (Skaperdas, 2001). At times, the lack of political enforcement results in the creation of small
independent armies that turn into a chief source of power and control within certain territories and states.

This lack of control over large territories is further coupled with the broad prohibition activities. By prohibiting certain goods and activities, the people of power create a favorable environment for criminal manipulations and illegal activities (Skaperdas, 2001). It does not really matter whether the state prohibits alcohol, drugs, or salt and tobacco – exclusive government monopolies look very inviting for smuggling and similar crime activities (Skaperdas, 2001). The situation is particularly difficult in authoritarian states, where prohibition often becomes the most prevalent form of political decision making. In many authoritarian states, organized crime is a by-product of the poor political oversight, the absence of civil society and the system of checks and balances (Williams & Godson, 2002). In these states, corruption and organized crime expands citizens’ opportunities to realize their individual and collective goals.

Prohibition decisions are often made during the times of major political shifts, which also facilitate and contribute to organized crime. Wars, revolutions, and other political changes create an atmosphere of insecurity and uncertainty, and organized crime seems the only way to make this political atmosphere more certain (Skaperdas, 2001). In its extreme forms, organized crime turns into the basic type of financial activity among state officials and government agencies (Naim, 2012). In these situations, criminals do not have to capture the state through bribery, because the state itself comes to control all criminal activities and crime networks (Naim, 2012). Organized crime turns into the source of financial benefits and an effective mechanism of control for the criminalized government elites (Naim, 2012). Organized crime becomes a relevant support to the political activities and campaigns advanced by criminalized government officials.
Theories Explaining Organized Crime

Numerous theories have been proposed to explain the essence and causes of organized crime, but only few of them shed some light on the etiology of organized criminal activities. Cesare Lombrose was one of the first trying to explain the nature of organized crime and attributing its high prevalence to the lack of stigmatization of organized criminals in society (Shanty & Mishra, 2008). In some societies, being a member of an organized criminal group is prestigious and desirable. In other communities and groups, organized crime can be associated with the values of the machismo culture. The relationship between stigmatization, labeling, and organized crime is complex, but it can help to explain why organized crime groups have become so popular and common.

Social control theories also have the potential to explain the causes and nature of organized crime. Social control theories suggest that society, family, and community bonds can keep individuals from committing a crime (Mallory, 2011). However, based on the social control premise, members of organized crime groups display strong bonds with their communities and even share their values and wealth promotion dreams. The main reason why they engage in illicit activities is because they cannot balance the lack of legitimate enrichment capabilities and their strong desire for large wealth (Shanty & Mishra, 2008). In this context, it is not social control but social disorganization that favors organized crime activities. Social disorganization turns violence and organized crime into a system in its own right, and both legitimate and illegitimate communities successfully co-exist. In the meantime, organized groups keep developing and improving their criminal subculture. Actually, it is subcultural theories that help explain organized crime. Based on the theoretical contributions of Merton and Sutherland, organized crime exemplifies a unique subculture that helps its members obtain the opportunities (mostly, financial) they would not have possessed otherwise (Shanty & Mishra, 2008). In their communications with other communities and the
rest of society, organized groups learn to rationalize their criminal behaviors, turning organized crime into a norm.

**Conclusion**

Organized crime lacks a single, universal definition, but it is always hierarchical, formalized, well-regulated, and apolitical. The lack of any political orientation distinguishes organized crime from terrorism and other illicit activities. Still, politics plays a huge role in facilitating organized crime, through the shortage or absence of political enforcement and control and considerable social, economic, and policy shifts that favor the rapid expansion of organized crime activities. Numerous theories help explain the etiology of organized crime, from the lack of social organization and poor control to the importance of the criminal subculture that opens new venues for the group members’ financial enrichment. Future researchers should focus on the analysis of social norms and the reasons behind the normalization of organized crime. Special attention needs to be paid to the transformation of politics into organized crime.
References


