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La Cosa Nostra: The Criminal Empire

Hannelore Gude Hohensinner

Organized crime will emerge as the distinct contribution of the twentieth century to lawlessness. Conspiracies of a mainly business character, employing even hired assassins to gain their ends, are common to the political and economic history of every nation. Environment, social system, and method of government have merely changed these conspiracies from age to age and people to people. Superficially, in that they were conspiracies, they resemble modern organized crime, but in reality they simply were sporadic forms of organized larceny attesting how ancient and universal greed is as a vice.

Organized crime unfortunately cannot be seen as a present-day form of standard larceny. It is the institutionalization of a highly subversive philosophy of business merged with an archaic pattern of authority – the perverted remains of feudalistic social order (what used to be a feudum nowadays is called a racket) with the sole objection of conquering invisible territory within modern urban ecosystems to establish shadow-land – the empire of crime.

For decades the phenomenon of organized lawlessness in the USA has been blamed on immigrants from Southern Italy. But Southern Italians did not invent the criminal scheme nor have they established it in the United States as some kind of perfidious heritage from the land they left behind. Organized crime is not the result of a fault in a nation's character. The organized underworld is the end product of many forces: some bad and some good, including acts and attitudes that may be proclaimed with pride. Indeed, the very strength of organized crime arises from the fact that it is a complex counterpoint to a complex civilization – a distorted image of modern urban society.

“Organized crime” is a rather recent term, identifying bizarre phenomena of organized illegal subculture in metropolitan areas dating back to the year 1906, when a New York Times editorial focused on the necessity “to fight

organized crime among low-class Italians.”¹ As low-class immigrants they were stigmatized indeed – notably Mezzogiornians who could neither expect sympathy from ordinary native citizens nor respect in the eye of justice. New York District Attorney Arthur Train in 1912 pronounced what was the general attitude in law enforcement circles:

There are a million and a half of Italians in the United States, of whom nearly six hundred thousand reside in New York City – more than in Rome itself. The north Italians are molto simpatici to the American character, and many of their national traits are singularly like our own, for they are honest, thrifty, industrious, law-abiding, and good-natured. The Italians from the extreme south of the peninsula have fewer of these qualities, and are apt to be ignorant, lazy, destitute, and superstitious. A considerable percentage, especially of those from the cities, are criminal. Even for a long time after landing in America, the Calabrians and Sicilians often exhibit a lack of enlightenment more characteristic of the Middle Ages than of the twentieth century.

At home they have lived in a tumble-down stone hut about fifteen feet square, half open to the sky, in one corner the entire family sleeping in a promiscuous pile on a bed of leaves, in another a domestic zoo consisting of half a dozen hens, a cock, a goat, and a donkey. They neither read, think, nor exchange ideas. The sight of a uniform means to them either a tax-gatherer, a compulsory enlistment in the army, or an arrest, and at its appearance the man will run and the wife and children turn into stone. They are stubborn and distrustful. They are the same as they were a thousand or more years gone by.”²

Even obsessive “give-me-your-huddled-masses” liberals started to reflect on their position in view of the immigration reports of the years 1907 to 1912, when Italians came by the hundreds of thousands and xenophobia spread. “Italy has sent its people to us a good deal faster than they could be well taken care of – taken care of, that is, for their own good and for ours.”³

Lacking practically every virtue for urban life, “the black-haired, brown eyed, red tempered Italians”⁴ flooded the city. The mostly rural newcomers’ sudden passion for urbanity was prompted by pauperism. When the notoriously overcrowded vessels from Southern Italy dumped their human freight at Ellis Island, the majority were simply too poor to move further from the immigration island than to one of the various ethnic ghettos in the brand new Moloch called Greater New York.

¹ New York Times, December 21, 1906.

² Train, Arthur. *Courts, Criminals and the Camorra*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912, p. 214.

³ New York Times, November 29, 1912.

⁴ New York Times, August 15, 1909.

And there they already were, waiting for them: *uomini d'honore* with prestigious handlebar mustaches dressed in black sharp suits and bankrolls the size of a man's fist in their pockets, whose ruthless reputations had followed them across the ocean and demanded the ancient rites of respect. Rejected by native-born Americans as undesirable *illiterati*, and finding many of their basic values turning to quicksand, the disillusioned new arrivals gave their obedience to these *uomini d'honore* because they represented vague coherence in a dissembling new world that was not consistent at all. The old scheme they so desperately tried to leave behind in the hostile new surrounding became a vital factor of social interaction. The next step in what turned out to be a fatal chain reaction was that career criminals rose to become authorities in the ghettos – apparently with the blessings of municipal and state authorities who neglected legalities.

As a life of lawlessness is not for the stupid, highly effective criminals, all with excessive lifestyles, obviously achieved without elbow-grease, quickly became idols for the uprooted ghetto breed:

“At the age of twelve my ambition was to be a gangster. To be a wiseguy. To me being a wiseguy was better than being president of the United States. It meant power among people who had no power. It meant perks in a working-class neighborhood that had no privileges. To be a wiseguy was to own the world. I dreamed about being a wiseguy the way other kids dreamed about being firemen or policemen.”⁵

Perceiving society from this angle, potential enlistees did not see the underworld through distinctions between good and evil. Habit plus ignorance multiplied by poverty created their own perspectives in the Italian ghettos: joining the mob just meant a job – the only job that promised the accomplishment of otherwise unimaginable life fantasies for eighth-grade school dropouts.

“I began to realize that taking a straight job would make me nothin' but a crumb, workin' and slavin' for a few bucks, like all the other crumbs. I made up my mind that if I hadda wind up a crumb, I'd rather be dead.”⁶

The odds to wind up a crumb for the offsprings of poverty-stricken Southern-Italian emigrants stranded in cold water flats on New York's Lower East

⁵ Pileggi, Nicholas. *Wiseguy, Life in a Mafia Family*, New York: Pocket Books, 1985, p. 13.

⁶ Gosch, Martin /Richard Hammer. *The Last Testament of Lucky Luciano*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975, p. 19.

Side at the turn of the century were indeed overwhelming. Watching the family's dreams for a better life slowly going down the drain eventually launched a retardation in social development in a youngster called Salvatore Lucania, a bright and streetsmart fellow in his early teens, that made him the creator of a rational nationwide criminal operation called *La Cosa Nostra*, which law enforcement later referred to as the Criminal Empire. When the frustrated teenager Salvatore summed up his poor perspectives and manifested his willingness to fight the odds, the *raison d'être* for a big-scale illegal scenario was already set.

Two of the center-stage characters in New York's numerous Little Italys in the first decade of the 20th century were the Palermian Ignazio Lupo, a fugitive murderer, and Guisepe Morello, who gave Corleone a bad name. Around 1900 Lupo the muscle and Morello the brain drew their gifts together in megalopolis. With the reputation of criminal nobility they soon had cornered various aspects of Italian life in the two Manhattan ghettos, either by forceful persuasion or by persuasive force. Morello's brother Ciro was so enthusiastic about greens that the label "Artichoke King" became second nature to him.

Our smart young friend Salvatore and his three cronies, his fellow countryman Frank Costello, and two acquaintances from the same dirty sidewalks, the Jewish partners Meyer Lansky and Benjamin Siegel began to inhale the habits of the "Moustache Petes" – the old world Dons – by running errands for them.

At the eve of Prohibition this tutelage came to a sudden stop. The "Young Turks," as the second mob generation was called, had absorbed enough to do without their tutors. Years of criminal indoctrination had made them familiar to the fact that body-bag stuff was part of the business. They were willing to use their knowledge to cut short any possible demographic problems and to cash in exclusively on the blessings of Prohibition.

But besides a steady cash flow towards mobland, Prohibition also stood for something else – something much more threatening than illegal dollars: the complexity of the bootleg racket tore down ethnic barriers. From now on cross-ethnic alliances were not bound to personal preferences but part of pragmatic business decisions.

And within a few years of intensive know-how transfer, the long isolated Italians were ready to move into the rackets that the socially rising Irish had abandoned. Italians filled in the gap in what can be referred to as the ethnic succession.

Short before repeal Italians were the dominant force in gangland, after having eliminated the leftovers of the Irish underworld and the majority of the Jewish outfits. In expectation of smaller profits after Congress purged the 18th Amendment, the body bag also was temporary home to Italian wise-guys, this time to clear the problem of an overcrowded underworld job market.

But corpses brought heat, and heat was bad for business. His Prohibition contacts to politicians like the Governor of Louisiana, Huey Long, or to semi-legal business men the likes of Joe Kennedy or Moses Annenberg had convinced Salvatore Lucania (or Charles "Lucky" Luciano as he called himself after he had mysteriously survived having been taken for a ride) of the benefits of negotiating.

At a mob conclave in Chicago in 1931 he established twenty-four Crime Families, and to reduce tension on the illegal markets divided the U.S. into an equal number of criminal domains, each allocated to one Family. When Meyer Lansky advised him that this new scheme had to have a name ("nobody would walk into a salesroom and buy the car over there, the one without a name"⁷), *La Cosa Nostra* (LCN) was born: a criminal interstate enterprise with a perfidious philosophy and a ruthless code of conduct to live by: "You can lie, steal, cheat, even kill, and it's all legitimate."⁸

The Bosses of the nine most powerful Families formed the ruling body of LCN, the Commission, with Luciano as the chairman of the board. Conflicts had to be arbitrated before the Commission; the new law in gangland from now on was: words before lead. Soon the mob was in everything that would make a buck, criminal and legitimate alike.

After Prohibition the second heyday period for underworld entrepreneurs was the decade from 1940 to 1950. These years saw criminals not only protected by obscure politicians but as partners of the government. The mob-controlled waterfront union ILA (International Longshoremen Association) was spying for the Naval Intelligence (ONI), union officials who took orders from gangland were used as strongholds against communist infiltration and Luciano personally gave word to the Sicilian Dons to support the Allied Landing. A Luciano pal and fugitive murderer from New York, Vito Genovese, was officially named go-between by the U.S. Military Government in

⁷ Gosch, Martin and Richard Hammer. *The Last Testament of Lucky Luciano*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975, p. 87.

⁸ Senate Hearing, Special Hearing to Investigate Organized Crime: 25 Years After Valachi, U.S.G.P.O., Washington 1989, p. 772.

Italy to supervise all food logistics to feed the starving native population. Mob business was running on high profits.

The good times were abruptly curtailed when the Democrats were in search of a popular platform for the 1952 elections. The rights on the communist threat were monopolized by the Republicans, so the Democrats began to stir into mob affairs. Senator Estes Kefauver, the self-anointed mob-buster came up with the number of seventy businesses with criminal infiltration. There was heavy hysteria, but zero consequences when it ebbed.

The first real blow to LCN was caused by an individual by the name of Joe Valachi. A low-ranking member of the Genovese Family, he had received the kiss of death from his boss – for ratting. But Joe felt innocent. His struggle to stay alive made him kill the wrong assassin. In a frenzy over the fact that he was sentenced to death without being heard by a kangaroo court (the gangland's version of the penal system), he became talkative. The Government was all ears. He disclosed the existence of what he called a second government. His testimony before a Senate Committee, divulging the best kept secrets of LCN, dropping names and digging up long buried corpses, made the last political “there-is-no-such-thing-as-organized-crime” optimist crumble under the weight of evidence. And still the mob got away, due to excellent contacts. (Yes, J. Edgar Hoover was blackmailed, but rumors about him wearing a black lace dress were heavily denied.)

But time was running out. Politicians who would or could not stick to their protection after the mob's heavy business expansion into drug trafficking, most recently as a result of the Valachi debacle, feeling concerned about the current bosses' qualifications to run their outfits, changed tracks and let loose a bunch of skilled law experts to fight the pest.

But the ratification of new laws like the Title III provision from 1968 (eavesdropping and electronic surveillance) and the RICO Act from 1970 (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization Act) was only one factor in the decline of the mob. The halt in immigration from Southern Italy as of the early 1950s dried up the supply of qualified new talent, especially brains, and for the third and fourth generation the mob no longer was an equal-opportunity employer. The leftover muscles inherited a highly sophisticated criminal scheme – and could not handle it. Blessed with nothing more than guts, members of LCN Families were ousted in many of their semi-legal fronts, like the crackdown of the concrete club in New York City that for decades had forced contractors to pay mob kickbacks.

As of the early 1980s the only way for organized criminals of Italian descent was down. They had to leave the fancy business quarters and were heading back into the streets. Whereas Frank Costello in the mid 1950s gave his profession as broker, residing on Central Park West, John Gotti, the big-shot of the 1980s gave his legal facade as salesman for plumbing devices and his residence as Ozone Park, Brooklyn. Only in his attitude he reinvented himself as a reminiscence of the golden rum-runner days of the Roaring Twenties – right out of central casting. So the word goes that while he is in Marion Prison, he is still waiting for someone to call cut.

These guys have a mindset that is completely foreign to anything we would consider normal. Our mindset is completely foreign to anything they would consider normal, because we get up every morning and we go to work and we put in our forty hours a week and some overtime and we make our payments and all of that. They look at us as complete victims, trapped in a terrible existence. Their whole thing is, you don't get up early, you drive a big car, you don't have to answer to anybody who's punching a clock or riding you for a performance, but that you're out there hustling all the time.

I bet that John Gotti is sitting in the subbasement of Marion Prison right now in solitary confinement. If we went to him and said, "Listen, you went to jail before you were fifty, for the rest of your life. Was it worth it to live as a wiseguy and be the boss for seven years in the largest crime family?" I am dead positive that he would say, "It was worth every minute of it."⁹

What are the 21st-century perspectives for archaic underworld formations of Italian style? Globalization of criminal schemes, the end of ethnic control due to the break-up of the ghetto-system, assimilation by society and the advanced techniques of law enforcement in the United States made *La Cosa Nostra* look like merchandise nearing its expiration date. What remains will very likely be inherited by the South-East Asians, now the number-one immigrant group into the U.S., in the course of ethnic succession.

Today successful international crime groups station members only from mid-level downwards to operate in rich industrialized nations with tight security systems, while the management level directs all activities from safe retreats - countries with fragile legal systems where money still can buy all sorts of benefits including exemption from the law.

The bid for eradication of the mob since long has given way to a more pragmatic look at that problem: the mob could not exist except that it benefits straight society – the underworld has established itself as our secret ser-

⁹ Zion, Sidney. *Loyalty and Betrayal - the Story of the American Mob*. San Francisco: Collins Publishers San Francisco, 1995, p. 143.

vant. Excerpt from the questioning of the former LCN member Vincent Cafaro by Senator Roth, Special Hearing to Investigate Organized Crime, Washington, 1988:

Senator Roth: "If you were a law enforcement official, what would you do or what do you think could be done to try to end their (wiseguys) influence?"

Mr. Cafaro: "Cannot end it. You can try to curb it. I do not think you are going to end it. But what you can do is, try to curb it."¹⁰

This hearing concluded that "Law enforcement can only deal with one side of the organized crime equation. Unlike street crime and other more conventional offences, organized crime is a business which depends, as do all businesses, on customer acceptance and patronage."

Activities such as illegal gambling, narcotics trafficking, loan sharking and fencing transactions, prostitution, pornography etc. all depend upon willing purchasers or customers for the goods and services which organized crime sells.

It must be understood and emphasized that whatever program is designed by law enforcement it can only deal with the "supply" side of the equation, the "demand" side is, in the final analysis, dependent on the actions and reactions of the American public."¹¹

¹⁰ Senate Hearing, *Organized Crime: 25 Years After Valachi*, p. 246.

¹¹ Senate Hearing, *Organized Crime: 25 Years After Valachi*, p. 998.

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