

Vittorio Mete

Felia Allum, Francesca Longo, Daniela Irrera and Panos A. Kostakos (edited by), "Defining and Defying Organized Crime. Discourse, Perceptions and Reality". London-New York: Routledge, 2010, XIV-231 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/72709)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2012

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

#### Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book reviews

**Felia Allum, Francesca Longo, Daniela Irrera and Panos A. Kostakos (edited by), *Defining and Defying Organized Crime. Discourse, Perceptions and Reality*. London-New York: Routledge, 2010, XIV-231 pp.**

10.2383/72709

Social sciences have to face many and various obstacles in the study of organized crime. The following four obstacles can be considered the most important ones.

The first concerns the hidden nature of the phenomena to be investigated. Paradoxically, the stronger and the more ingrained the presence of organized crime is in a specific area, the more it is invisible, capable of hiding its secrets and offering protection to the members of the criminal groups from the law enforcement actions taken by the Government.

The second obstacle, which is partly due to the hidden nature of organized crime, is represented by the asymmetry between scientific knowledge and common sense knowledge. The knowledge produced by social sciences is limited since – besides the difficulties in finding funding for the investigation of the phenomenon – the techniques of social research that can be applied to the study of organized crime are mainly based on the consultation of judicial documents and interviews with key informants. This limited scientific knowledge is, however, matched with a wide and animated public debate on organized crime led by different social actors. Politicians, journalists, magistrates, law enforcement professionals, social movement activists, victims of organized crime and their relatives are those who shape the public discourse on organized crime. Very often this debate follows stereotypes that lack any empirical basis, it tends to dramatize the news and it makes sweeping generalizations from single cases.

The third obstacle to overcome in order to get a satisfactory definition of organized crime concerns the specific characteristics that the phenomenon has in each area. Criminal groups are, indeed, shaped by the environment in which they grow: by the economic fabric of the area, by the counter measures taken by the Government and by the culture of the communities in which these organizations operate. Very often, the analyses on organized crime tend to highlight its specificities rather than looking for common elements that would make the discourse on organized crime more general.

Finally, the wide variety of crimes included under the definition of organized crime (from drug and arms smuggling and international human trafficking to extortion racketeering and political corruption, etc.) makes it more difficult to develop a common definition of the phenomenon.

The volume edited by Felia Allum, Francesca Longo, Daniela Irrera, and Panos A. Kostakos tackles, although in an indirect way, all these four obstacles to the study of the phenomena connected with organized crime. The book gathers most of the papers presented at the ECPR's fourth general conference held in Pisa in September 2007. It consists of 12 chapters, whose authors come from different disciplines, mainly connected with political and social sciences and, in particular, with international relations. Since it is not a collective volume reporting the outcomes of common research activities, the

chapters cover topics which are sometimes very different from each other. They range, for example, from the analysis of the institutional discourse of the European Union on organized crime to the recent organizational evolutions of the Yakuza and its social perception in the Japanese culture, from the realistic and non-impressionistic analysis of the human trafficking in Northern Ireland to the impact of the Bulgarian democratic transition at the turn of the 1990s on the development of organized crime in the country, to Mafia infiltration of local administrations in Southern Italy.

The common thread of the book, which offers the chance to read in a coherent way these heterogeneous approaches, research objectives and references to different territories, is represented by the simultaneous use of three different levels of analysis: the political discourse, the social perceptions and the reality of organized crime. The chapters address the topics adopting a constructivist approach, highlighting the dialectic between the “subjective” and “objective” reality, focusing on the social representations of organized crime framed by institutional discourses.

On a sociological level, in particular from the point of view of sociology of policy and sociology of culture, some analyses contained in the volume are more interesting than others which, although significant, are more related to the field of study of international relations.

The value of these contributions consist in deconstructing the image of exceptionality (or even of “uniqueness”), which is, as stated before, one of the obstacles to the empirical study of organized crime phenomena. The book provides many suggestions to compare similar phenomena occurring in different and far areas and social contexts.

The first chapter of the volume engages, appropriately, with the problem of the definition (of the definitions) of the phenomenon, that is to say, with what the expression “organized crime” refers to in social sciences and in the language of political institutions. As it often happens with the concepts of social sciences, also that of organized crime is, indeed, controversial and not uniquely defined. In fact, as Francesca Longo states in her contribution, there are more than hundred definitions for it. The usual illustration of divergences among experts on the definition of the phenomenon is followed by a proposal of “conceptual cleansing” aimed at clarifying the meaning of the adjective “transnational,” which is linked to the term “organized crime.” The proposal is based on the distinction of two aspects of the same phenomenon, which are often mixed up: the organizational nature of criminal groups and their *modus operandi*. According to Longo, – whose point of view is easy to agree with – a better understanding of the phenomenon can be achieved by keeping separated the “who” and the “how” of organized crime. There can be, indeed, local criminal organizations that are occasionally involved in international trafficking, but this does not mean that they are actually transnational. Thus, it would be more appropriate to reserve the label of Transnational Organized Crime for those “networks created by different organized crime groups which establish links, contacts, and relationships. These networks have national-based organized groups as nodes and they can vary in terms of intensity, duration, tasks and complexity” [p. 27].

An original key to the reading, sociologically based on the analysis of transnational organized crime, is the one offered by Amandine Scherrer in her contribution. The author focuses on the role played by the “experts” in the construction of the prevailing image of organized crime and, consequently, on the identification of the most suitable

instruments for combating it. Today, the fight against organized crime is mainly based on special techniques of investigation, justice and police cooperation and on an extensive use of surveillance. This is due to the choices taken by a small elite of international experts who work in law enforcement institutions (first of all, law enforcement professionals and magistrates). According to the author, the widespread agreement on the definition of the phenomenon and on the law enforcement actions would be connected with the common social and professional background of the experts. The international community of experts has the possibility to create its identity and keep its boundaries closed thanks to the frequent formal and informal meetings of its members. Like all professional communities, although it is aimed at defeating a common enemy and towards the progress of society, also the community of experts on organized crime is riven by divisions and conflicts. As the author effectively states: “following a sociological perspective, the field of security professionals is certainly not a quiet arena, and competitions, rivalries and backlashes are numerous” [p. 60].

A very interesting case of interaction between the institutional definition of a criminal phenomenon and the transformation in the perception and judgment of the same phenomenon from the members of a political community is represented by the events that have involved the Japanese Yakuza over the past 20 years. As Sayaka Fukumi carefully describes in her paper, the Yakuza is a very old social phenomenon, which has been so widely accepted in the Japanese society, despite its criminal nature, that its members could publicly display their membership. A radical change in the public perception of the criminal phenomenon took place in 1991, with the introduction of the Organized Crime Countermeasures Law after some cruel fights between the Yakuza groups. As it often happens in the field of policies against criminality, this measure was introduced after a serious act of violence that caught the collective imagination of the Japanese society. In this case, the exceptional event was the murder, in 1990, of three men who did not belong to Yakuza and who were killed by mistake. The 1991 law was followed by some amendments in 2004 and 2008 that were introduced as a reaction to the murder of other innocent citizens, such as the Mayor of Nagasaki, who had stood out against the involvement of Yakuza businesses in the construction of major public works. On the whole, these legal interventions declared the illegality of the Yakuza and allowed to prosecute the leaders of the most powerful criminal organizations. Therefore, in 1991 the Yakuza started to collapse with a progressive loss of social acceptance and at the same time it was affected by the countermeasures of the Government. The aforementioned events show many similarities with what happened, more or less in the same period, to the Italian Mafia and in particular to the Sicilian Cosa Nostra. The Mafia massacres at the beginning of the 1990s had, indeed, similar consequences: a strong reaction from the Government, with the introduction of harsher anti-Mafia laws, and an increase, among Italian citizens, in hostility towards Mafia.

The chapter of Jana Arsovska and Panos A. Kostakos focuses on the theme of the social acceptance enjoyed by groups of organized crime too. The two authors refer, in particular, to the groups operating in the Balkans and they highlight the difference between the description of criminal phenomena in the documents of the European Union and the common perception of these phenomena in the Balkans. While the European Security Strategy defines organized crime as one of the five key threats to the EU, the

Balkan population, as well as part of the ruling class, considers organized crime as an opportunity. Some crimes, indeed, represent a source of income for many citizens. It is the case, for example, of drug smuggling, coming from the Middle East and heading to Western Europe, or of illegal emigration, which produces remittances from the emigrants. According to the surveys mentioned by the two authors, at the top of the list of concerns of the Balkan population there is not organized crime, but economic growth and social welfare. The benefits of organized crime allow, indeed, to alleviate the economic difficulties and to make the lifestyle of the Balkan population more similar to the one of the citizens of Western European countries. According to the authors, understanding this significant difference in the perception and evaluation of the phenomenon at a local level and in the EU institutions should suggest more caution in defining the anti-organized crime policies set in Brussels.

The chapter of Marina Tzvetkova deals with a crucial topic, which is often overlooked, of studies on organized crime. It engages with the role of political and governmental elites in the creation and consolidation of criminal groups. Of course, it is not a simple topic to deal with, both for the empirical difficulties of such study and for the taboo around it. The context of the two authors' study is Bulgaria during the transition phase from the communist regime to democracy and to the market economy which developed at the beginning of the 1990s. The research is based on a significant amount of semi-structured interviews with key informants, some of whom were even belonging to organized crime. Summing up, it is possible to state that the criminal groups were used during the communist regime by the ruling elites in order to re-establish their power in the new democratic regime. The criminal groups entered into an exchange relationship with the elites of the time, allowing illegal activities that had been carried out by members of State elites already before 1989. In exchange, as it typically happens for this kind of relations, criminal organizations received political protection and public resources. The development and strengthening of the organized crime groups in Bulgaria is also to be ascribed to the deep reform of the Home Office and of the law enforcement professionals in conjunction with the transition to a democratic regime. The following lay-offs had two main consequences, both very harmful: on the one side, law enforcement against organized crime weakened and, on the other side, many officers joined the ranks of organized crime, bringing their strategic and precious know-how to the "enemy." With time, these Mafia-type groups strengthened so much that during the discussion for the entrance of Bulgaria into the EU, the Bulgarian Home Office Minister of the time met the leaders of these criminal groups in order to negotiate a peace that would put an end to a long series of murders of businessmen and criminals that was deluging the country with blood and putting it in a bad light to the EU institutions.

The chapter written by Felia Allum also deals with the connection between criminals and politicians. In this case, the specific context is Italy, in particular its Southern regions. The author presents a picture of Mafia infiltration of local administrations starting from 1991, when a law was introduced, allowing the dissolution of Municipal Councils suspected of being influenced by Mafia groups. Allum's study is based on a series of interviews with key informants and on the consultation of official documents which are at the basis of the dissolutions (the ministerial reports attached to the decree of dissolution). The law introduced in 1991 was an answer to the (perceived) emergency caused by a

bitter feud. Currently, it allows to quickly reveal possible connections between local administrations and Mafia, but it does not provide a long-term solution to Mafia meddling in local politics. From this point of view, the author is right when she maintains that “the new legislation has in real terms had very little impact. Councils may be dissolved for Mafia infiltration but this does not mean that the Mafia has been destroyed or eliminated – indeed far from it” [p. 171]. She is certainly right, but it should be added that it is excessively demanding to believe that a law on its own can have a major influence on the social and political approval that Mafia members have in “their” territory and which is at the base of their “political success.” This means that the law is effective as long as people do not pretend what it cannot guarantee on its own. The conclusions drawn by the author, after carefully reviewing the reports attached to the dissolution decrees of many local administrations, are that today, unlike before the 1990s, “there is a union between criminals and local politicians whereby it becomes very difficult to disentangle the different positions and roles. The political and criminal agenda are the same. Rather than a nexus, there is fusion, an overlap in which the political and the criminal agenda become one, a union, a crossover” [p. 178]. This position is as clear as worrying but it would need to be better articulated. It is indeed certainly true that, in some cases, the role of politicians and Mafia members converge in the same person, but this is not currently the most common scenario.

Overall, the volume has the merit of investigating the problems on the definition of organized crime, highlighting the processes of social construction (in particular within institutions) that concern this phenomenon. Furthermore, the book gives international access to analyses empirically based on phenomena that are generally not well known in different national and linguistic contexts.

*Vittorio Mete*  
Università di Catanzaro