

Organized Crime Families

Dick Hobbs looks at flexibility and continuity where organized crime is the family business.

From Margaret Thatcher to Norman Dennis and most popular staging posts in between and beyond, the family constitutes a powerful rhetorical tool in discourses regarding social order. Further, the family unit is often located as flawed in the post-mortems of notorious violent criminals careers, and while white collar felons seldom find the relationship between themselves and mater and pater examined with the same fervour as that afforded to their proletarian cell mates (“They only sent me to Eton, then it was downhill all the way: Oxford, Household Cavalry and finally guv, House of Lords and a seat on the board of a multinational corporation. I never stood a chance”), an examination of how the family unit can actually enable and enhance serious criminal activity is a way of bursting one of the many polite bourgeois assumptions that floats aimlessly above the collective milieu of criminological endeavour.

‘Organized crime’, despite the global conspiracy theories of a growing number of political scientists

racecourses or Soho’s vice market.

Contemporary empirically based theories of organized crime stress interlocking networks of relationality, and kinship is the most fundamental form of relationality, which in organized crime should be regarded as a trust variable, a means of assuring loyalty by appealing to something other than self-interest. As Lupsha shrewdly notes, “If a group all speaks the same language, has the same village roots, possesses the same myth and culture norms, then it can function as a unit with greater trust and understanding” (1986).

In an environment where relationships can be transitory and loyalty has a market price, family relationships and the trust nurtured within them carry a high premium. The importance of trust becomes particularly relevant in relation to violence, for the continued relevance of violence in contemporary crime markets demands commitment and discourages neutrality amongst family members and their associates, “Where violence is paramount,

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fearing redundancy in the post cold war era, is enacted within the cultures of the urban working class, and localized organized crime, often in the form of ‘family firms’, has long been central to the economies and cultures of traditional working class communities (Samuel, 1981). These communities have undergone massive changes as a result of deindustrialization, and the territorial base upon which organized crime was so dependant has drastically changed. However, recent research (Hobbs, 2001) clearly indicates that like working class culture itself, organized crime has evolved rather than expired, and flourishes in post industrial nooks and crannies that are inconvenient or inaccessible to the gaze of flâneurs, reformers, or nostalgic gangster groupies.

However, contemporary family firms can no longer rely upon traditional working class neighbourhoods, and the local labour markets upon which they were once dependant. Traditional organized crime was usually based upon the extortion of both legal and illegal local businesses, the families involved were neighbourhood based, and flexed their muscles regularly against dominant families from adjacent ‘manors’. In exceptional cases forays beyond their circumscribed territory were conducted in pursuit of larger prizes, for instance gaining a monopoly over extortion at

interpersonal ties must necessarily be strong, intense and effectively connoted” (Catanzaro, 1994).

The scope of activities engaged in by contemporary organized crime groups is far greater than that of their one dimensional predecessors, and the family firm’s ability to prosper unrestrained by territorial imperatives shows that the same forces of deindustrialisation and fragmentation that have ravaged traditional communities have created new notions of locality and identity, and fresh markets to plunder. In every major urban conurbation, the family firm can be observed as a constantly evolving social system whose potency is derived from a sense of proximity and continued identification with locales which retain a deep and enduring sense of place and sources of cultural commitment constituting, “real interdependencies between people who formed the community” (Blok, 1974).

Traditional criminal firms are based upon family ties and neighbourhood dispositions, and are products of a material world rooted in the political economy. Gaining an allegiance to such a firm can be as beneficial to a fledgling gangster or drug dealer as a place on the board of a multinational company can be to the career of the apocryphal fraudster mentioned above. Indeed über villain ‘Mad’ Frankie Fraser bemoaned his parents respectability for retarding his criminal career.



The illegitimate economic sphere is constituted by interlocking networks of small flexible firms, and while criminal careers are no longer restricted to the dark smoky alcoves of an urban 'underworld', the family firm is a crucial and effective vehicle that enables individuals and groups to move between the inter-reliant spheres of the local and the global (Hobbs, 1998). Further, kinship is as relevant to understanding contemporary British organized crime as it was in the days of the Krays and the Richardsons. Any reader with access to a local publican, taxi driver, or even a police officer, will quite easily glean the names of the dominant local families. They are long established institutions of urban Britain whose survival is due to their ability to operate not only in the old neighbourhood, but also across regional, national, and international boundaries.

The family firm has found its place in this new market place by proving itself to be exceptionally flexible, operating from the suburbs, from a regenerated inner city, from foreign parts, or perhaps a prison cell. Yet retaining links with the family seat in the old ruins of Britain's industrial past is crucial, even if the old neighbourhood has been devastated. Blood ties remain as important in British organized crime as they are amongst the British aristocracy, and rather than pontificate upon such intangible panic riddled, and potentially racist notions such as 'transnational organized crime', we might glean more from considering the permutations of old established brands (Hobbs 2001), who continue to

form the cultural and economic bedrock of British organized crime, and bring a real meaning to the term 'family values'.

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