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REVIEW

Mafia Organizations: The Visible Hand of Criminal Enterprise

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The author, Maurizio Catino, has undertaken a meticulous examination of criminal organizations that dominate the illicit marketplace throughout the world. The Mafia, Cosa Nostra, Camorra, 'Ndrangheta, Triads, Yakuza, and the South American cartels are dissected and their respective nomenclatures compared and contrasted. Catino addresses their relationship to the illicit markets that they operate within and organize in order to minimize risks and maximize profits. Relying upon electronic surveillances, investigative reports, and intelligence sources, Catino takes this ethnographic data and molds it into a series of principles that govern each criminal organization. His research has profoundly advanced our understanding of criminal organizations and the illicit markets they supply. It will likely go down as the most seminal piece of research in the past thirty or more years.

Keywords: Mafia; Ndrangheta; Camorra; Yakuza; Triads; Organized Crime; illicit markets

BOOK: Mafia Organizations: The Visible Hand of Criminal Enterprise

AUTHOR: Maurizio Catino

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With the publication of *Mafia Organizations*, Maurizio Catino, a renowned sociologist and organizational theorist, has treated the reader to a cornucopia of criminal organizations that span the globe. Not only does Catino dissect and plumb the inner workings of Cosa Nostra, Camorra, and 'Ndrangheta, he also endeavors to describe how these enterprises are either similar or diverge from the Latin and South American cartels, the Japanese Yakuza and Chinese Triads, and naturally the American Cosa Nostra. Needless to say, Catino's analytical framework is both illuminating and intellectually challenging.

Boldly and unabashedly, Catino addresses what long has been the basis for the disingenuous and often poorly articulated arguments regarding the structure of mafias—or lack thereof. He deliberately and forcefully dismantles the arguments of the naysayers who have, in the words of Klaus vonLampe, 'tragically' used the late Donald Cressey 'as a "punching bag" for an entire generation of scholars who gave contour to their findings by seeking to contradict Cressey' (vonLampe 2015: 41).

'The origin of this conception—that mafia organizations are similar to multi-national firms ... can be traced to an erroneous and over-simplified understanding of Donald Cressey's work,' Catino courageously argues (12). Moreover, the belief that mafia essentially is a cultural phenomenon as opposed to a formal, secret organization, suffers from a denial of formal structures (13).

Indeed, Catino contends that kinship networks as described by any number of social scientists do not disprove the structural components that comprise mafia. Rather these social scientists tend to confuse and conflate the methods used to analyze relationships within a criminal organization (13).

Simply said, Catino scathingly underscores the obsessive compulsion to dismiss, denigrate, and disprove the findings of Cressey. As Catino points out, 'relationships within mafias are anything but loose, as

evidenced by the fact that it is (almost) impossible to get out (alive) from these organizations and what can happen if certain rules are violated ... mafias appear to be organizational hybrids: hierarchy, strong social and blood ties, and networks' (15–16). '[Organized crime researcher Annelise] Anderson is right in saying that a mafia family is not assimilable to a business, *but that does not mean, of course, that it is not an organization...*' (emphasis mine) (19).

Consistent with much of what Thomas Schelling wrote in his exploratory and earlier contribution to the often-maligned but certainly prescient 1967 *Task Force Report: Organized Crime*, 'the core business of mafia organizations is providing protection and "market governance," the monopolistic control of every relevant illegal activity,' Catino contends (20; Schelling, 1967, 1971). Territories exist, and approval to operate in a mafia's territory must receive the approval of the relevant mafia family (21).

'Homicides follow the same requirements: no one can be killed in a territory without the consent of the head of the family of that particular territory' (21–22). Clearly, Catino's research validates much of what both Cressey and Schelling found; both confronted a rather hostile and fragmented research environment. Without question, Catino had at his disposal a far richer, more reliable, and certainly larger database than Cressey and Schelling were afforded 50 years earlier.

In comparing and contrasting the American Cosa Nostra to the Hong Kong Triads, Catino argues that by limiting the number of new members, the Cosa Nostra engaged in quality control whereas the Triads 'made no attempt to control the number of members' (31). Because trust is central to the operations and longevity of a mafia organization, 'ways of dealing with the problem ... are reflected in the different ways recruitment is carried out' (31). For example, 'The 'Ndragheta constitutes a special case. Sons of men of honor ... are directly considered young men of honor from birth ... the age of entry ... can be very low ... as low as the age of fourteen, while in other mafias this is generally higher,' according to Catino (34). In the Japanese Yakuza, on the other hand, recruitment 'is found among those who have already embarked on a career of deviancy' (34). The issue of recruitment is of course a 'very serious one for mafias ... Recruiting strategies make it possible to increase the reliability of the candidate, minimizing security risks,' as both Catino and Cressey found (4; Cressey 1967).

The degree to which Catino dissects and parses the internal mechanisms that govern mafias is remarkable, to say the least. In Catino, we are witnessing a new generation of organized crime researchers who are raising the bar, advancing our knowledge to the next level. Not content to merely regurgitate the research of others, Catino has reached into the inner bowels of mafia organizations and extracted nuances that heretofore escaped the antennas of most organized crime researchers. And he introduces the findings of well-regarded journalists, or what I like to refer to as urban ethnographers, into his research findings—a technique often deplored by traditional criminologists.

In order to explain the ability of mafias to attain resilience and longevity, Catino discusses the learning practices inherent in mafias. 'Learning is mainly tacit, not codified. There is no explicit, codified, and formalized learning path, nor a master's degree in mobster administration, nor formalized training programs ... entrance selection requires that the candidate has already developed a number of skills during his previous life experience, especially in the street.... Like an artisanal apprenticeship, learning by doing and coaching are the cornerstones of mafia learning...' (51, 53).

Reputation, Catino contends, is the signature brand of all mafias. Their power and prestige are often, although not always, derived from their ability to coerce, extort, and retaliate when threatened. It is essential in order to remain relevant and maintain any sort of longevity. Reuter coined this 'the value of a bad reputation,' a phrase that resonates throughout Catino's research. 'Mafia reputation is associated with violence,' plain and simple, Catino asserts (59; Reuter 1982).

The term 'silence is golden' is one of the most problematic issues that distinguishes mafias from legitimate organizations. The less said, the better. But do not confuse silence with the lack of communication. Catino points out that 'the Sicilian Cosa Nostra ensures that the flow of information is limited to the essential ... This code ... explains why only a few words are required, or even a gesture, for men of honor to understand each other perfectly...' (28).

Catino is brilliant at dissecting these nuances. He clearly recognizes the informal language that permeates the illicit marketplace and the criminal organizations that supply these markets. Sign language has a special meaning among its members. Outsiders, particularly researchers, are often flummoxed by the lack of the spoken word. Is it no wonder that traditional criminologists are reluctant to explore criminal organizations and their attendant nomenclatures? Inevitably, the absence of credible researchers has allowed the subject matter to be populated by journalists, many of whom the lack analytical skills to understand and report on nuances that are essential to understanding the task environment.

In his effort to demonstrate some universally defining characteristics of mafias, Catino addresses the initiation rites that are the prelude to being *made* a member of a mafia organization. 'The Cosa Nostra ritual has many variations ... the Triads also share many similarities of the American and Sicilian Cosa Nostra...in the 'Ndrangheta, the initiation ritual ... includes a series of questions and answers ... Initiation ceremonies in the Russian Mafia have instead, the distinction of being, in some cases, extremely expensive ... at the end of the ritual, new members are given tattoos as a sign of their new status ... The Yakuza amputate a part of the initiand's finger' (65–70). 'The crucial function of the initiation rite is to instill a deep fear in the new member regarding the consequences of its violation, in the sense of betraying the organization's rules,' Catino opines (71).

In the final chapter, Catino provides mafias, and naturally the reader, with a blueprint as to what dilemmas exist within the various organizational structures. It is a rather unique way of brainstorming the complexities inherent in maintaining secrecy; discipline; efficiency; protection from law enforcement, frenemies, and competitors; suppression of violence; inter- and intra-family cooperation; recruitment; and investing in and maintaining kinship ties.

Catino argues that 'Mafias cannot tolerate a "boss of bosses" ... Historically, the experience of extreme hierarchal centralization seems destined to fail ... the existence of a "boss of bosses" is incompatible with an organizational order based on families...' (282–283).

Catino leaves us with the inevitable consequence of success: the accumulation of capital, which ultimately destroys the bonds of kinship and brotherhood (307–308). As mafias become more adept at making money, the shared relationships between and among its members, and 'the organizational authority loses its legitimacy ... the magical aspects disappears' (p. 308).

It is certainly doubtful that any mafia leaders or their underlings will take the time to ingest Catino's insightful analysis in order to protect themselves against outside aggression and law enforcement penetration. Similarly, it is unlikely that law enforcement leaders will invest in deciphering the analytical frameworks of mafias that Catino so meticulously eviscerates.

This unfortunately leads us back to the same old game of 'cops and robbers'—arresting extortionists, bribers, killers, and bone-crushers. Taxing these financial tycoons may be the negotiated compromise that Cressey struggled to articulate in the 1970s, for which he was unfairly chastised and humiliated (Cressey, 1970).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Frederick T. Martens is a member of The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. He was the President of IASOC. He investigated organized crime in the tri-State area of New York/New Jersey/Pennsylvania.

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