



STUDIES OF ORGANIZED CRIME

Carlo Morselli



Inside Criminal Networks

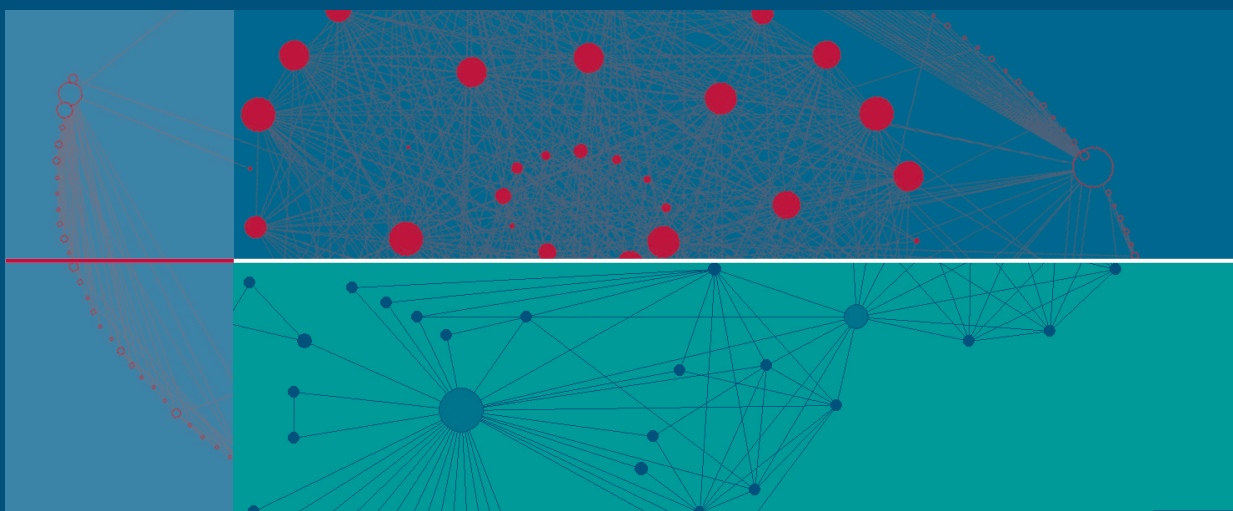


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Carlo Morselli

Inside Criminal Networks

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Chapter 1

The Criminal Network Perspective

The scope, forms, and contents of criminal organizational systems vary across an extended continuum. They range from simple co-offending decisions to seize an available and attractive criminal opportunity to sophisticated designs to monopolize a given market or geographical territory. They may be based on the incentives offered by a one-time partnership to execute a criminal venture or framed within a bureaucratic-like infrastructure that demands and enforces exclusivity on the actions and productivity of members. Within the range of criminal organizational systems, interactions between coparticipants can be based on family or friendship ties, background affinities, resource sharing, individual expertise, group loyalty, or governance by a dominant figure.

Which criminal phenomena remain problematic across such a continuum is difficult to tell. The lesser organizational forms may appear as trivial single events, but when aggregated they emerge as a formidable problem—note that the majority of crimes involve more than one person. The other extreme presents an immediate and serious threat—that of a vast criminal organization that governs the actions of its members who prey off society and disrupt the value systems that maintain collective order. Many would say that the latter is primarily the stuff of myth and public sensation seeking. I tend to agree, but as students of crime we are nevertheless forced to confront (or reflect on) such a possibility, regardless of how unlikely it may appear.

What is lacking in the study of criminal organizational systems is a concept that offers enough flexibility to incorporate such a wide variety. The sociology of crime has gone through its share of concepts that denote the social agglomeration of offenders from different angles. Often, the features uniting a concept were considerably influenced by the prevailing doctrine of the time. In search of the lumpen proletariat or immersed in the class-conflict framework, contemporary and historical studies of the mid-to-late nineteenth century were marked by the dangerous underclasses (Mayhew 1861/1968; Booth 1902), the anti-society (Chesney 1970), or social banditry (Hobsbawm

1969, 1959). Early Chicago school research was concerned with the disorganized neighborhoods of the urban core and introduced us to the intergenerational transmission of criminal values and traditions (Shaw and McKay 1942). Extending from this position, Sutherland (1947) proposed the concept of differential social organization, which distanced us from the pathological assumption underlying the idea of a disorganized subsection of society and invoked the concept that, in certain contexts, groups organize around criminal values and activities just as other groups would converge around noncriminal activities. The latter half of the twentieth century saw Sutherland's students extend his ideas on criminal values and organization toward achievement-based subcultural theories (Cohen 1955; Cloward and Ohlin 1960) and the apparent rise of the bureaucratic-like criminal syndicate or confederation (Cressey 1969). Mainstream criminology did not follow growing claims that offenders were organized or could organize into normative subcultures or systems of governance that paralleled those of official states. Instead, the mainstream experienced a shift back toward the individual. However, in the demise of selective incapacitation attempts to target habitual and serious offenders and in the rise of routine activity theory, researchers in the 1970s and 1980s were increasingly concerned with the spatial convergence of offenders, leading to the rise of environmental criminology (Brantingham and Brantingham 1984, 1981) and the revelation of crime hot spots (Sherman, Gartin, and Buerger 1989). A close and more recent relative of this is Felson's (2003) convergence setting—the place where potential offenders go to meet, solicit, or recruit established or other potential offenders. During this same period, the escalation of the war on illicit drugs led to economic-based approaches emphasizing the criminal market perspective (Reuter and Kleiman 1986). Aside from these theories and perspectives that have been put forward to understand criminal organizational systems, specific offending groups have been referred to with a multitude of terms, as diverse as gangs (Thrasher 1927), action-sets (Boissevain 1974; Walsh 1977; Baker and Faulkner 1993), combinations (Block and Chambliss 1981), crews (Adler 1985/1993), firms (Reuter 1983; Hobbs 2001), and criminal/illegal enterprises (Smith 1980; Haller 1990).

Most recently, and in light of past and current evidence that we are living in a small world (Milgram 1967), a network society (Castells 1996), a connected age (Watts 2003), or a network-driven information economy (Benkler 2006), we have seen the rise of the social network concept as the principal organizational structure for noncriminal and criminal social relationships. The present book fits within the growing set of research endeavors that have turned to the network perspective for studying criminological issues. It is a follow-up to a previous book, *Contacts, Opportunities, and Criminal Enterprise* (Morselli 2005).