

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The question that forms the background to this monograph is, “what is the nature of organised crime?” This is a rather familiar subject and one that has been responsible for an extensive amount of academic discussion spanning well over 70 years, originating in the USA but now increasingly of global concern.

Traditionally those interested in the subject have been somewhat obsessed with a definitional debate—people have contested what the defining characteristics of organised crime are and how they can be encapsulated in a useable definition. While much of this writing has been somewhat tedious, the exercise is clearly very important. Indeed, given the supposed increase and spread of organised crime one could suggest that the definitional debate is correspondingly becoming of increasing concern. Thus, a necessary consideration is discussing what various people and institutions think ‘organised crime’ is. In doing so, it is hoped that an historical overview of the subject can be provided, including an introduction to some of the most influential texts.

However, the key aim here is not to provide the definitive definition of organised crime. Rather, the most important aspect of this monograph is the argument that organised crime has become a muddled analytical concept in mainstream discourse due to a combination of poor empirical research and popular misconceptions about notorious crime groups such as the American Mafia. In agreement with others I suggest that the concept of organised crime should be replaced with that of ‘illicit enterprise’. This recommendation is more than simply one of semantics, for it involves changing the analytical focus away from criminal groups and towards specific commodity and service economies. This change in the underlying unit of analysis may overcome some of the major shortcomings of both law enforcement and research in this field.

The monograph comprises three main sections. The first deals with the basic question: How can crime be organised? In answer, four models are constructed based on competing visions of criminal groups, especially La Cosa Nostra. These models, when combined, form a comprehensive framework for understanding how crime can be co-ordinated and why it is co-ordinated in the way that it is. This section ends by contemplating how these models may be developed for future research and how they may be used to develop policy.

The second section provides a history of the evolution of a mainstream definition for organised crime. It starts from the 1930s in the USA and ends with its present status as a familiar worldwide concern. The section ends with a summary of how organised crime has been defined in Southern Africa.

The third section consists of a critical discussion of the major assumptions of the mainstream conceptualisation of organised crime. In doing so the parameters of a mainstream paradigm on organised crime are introduced and critiqued.

The final section presents an alternative perspective, designed to overcome the problems associated with the mainstream paradigm. In particular, I suggest that the notion of *illicit enterprise* should replace the two concepts of organised crime and white-collar crime, and that within the broad subject of illicit enterprise it may make sense to focus on *illegal economies* as individual systems rather than focussing on specific crime groups. The monograph ends with a list of principles that should form the basis of an alternative perspective.

Although this monograph is essentially theoretical, it has been written bearing in mind that the publisher, the Institute for Security Studies, is working on matters relating to organised crime in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. Thus, where possible, I have tried to bring in experiences and case studies from Southern Africa. Unfortunately, the lack of published material on this topic in the region means that a Southern African focus will by default seem largely a South African focus.