

Organized Crime: A Very Short Introduction, by Georgios A. Antonopoulos & Georgios Papanicolaou, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, 132 pp., (paperback), ISBN 978-0-19-879554-4

By Alex Chung

It is a difficult task to condense a topic worthy of serious academic debate into a palm-sized book, it is a mammoth task to do so for organised crime. In their book, Antonopoulos & Papanicolaou managed to do just this - in a reader-friendly way, too.

Organised crime, by all its names, organisational forms, activities, structures, sizes, and so on, is a highly contested notion. The disagreements are particularly pronounced within academia. Meanwhile, the general public tend to subscribe to one type of popular perception or another as to the 'reality' of organised crime, thanks partially to the insatiable appetite for a constant feed of imageries and stories through mass media and the entertainment industry.

As with most books on organised crime authored by academics, the thorny issues of definition and conceptual clarity of organised crime do not escape the authors' attention. Chapter 1 is devoted entirely to this. Unlike migrant smuggling or human trafficking, for which definitions formulated by the United Nations are aptly cited in Chapter 3, the book does not look to an institutional explanation of organised crime – except to note that definitions derived from such international organisations 'have taken very broad approaches, essentially relying on the 'minimum common denominator' characteristics of organised crime.' (p. 2)

While the authors acknowledge that they do not intend to 'offer definitive answers' as to what organised crime is (p. 2), they do provide what they regard as three key ingredients of organised crime: criminal collectivity, either organised in a structured way or as a network of associations; criminal business aimed at generating profit through the economics of illicit market supply and demand; and, extra-legal governance that involve the aspiration to monopolise a part of the underworld, often achieved through violence-related means.

Without resorting to defining organised crime, the authors instead frame the discussions around the structures and businesses of organised crime, and why it matters to the international order of security and the field of criminal justice more generally. Rather than providing 'an inventory of organized crime by country or region' (p.9), which has notably been attempted by various books on organised crime, the authors' approach is one of linking major criminal organisations to their geographical and cultural contexts, as well as taking stock of the policy response to organised crime and its practical implications. As a 'Short Introduction', this is certainly a profitable way of organising and presenting a phenomenon as varied and complex as organised crime, so that the reader can gain a deeper understanding of its emergence within different contexts and the reasons behind its diverse representations.

The examples in Chapter 2 of criminal organisations taken from around the world cover a set of what the academic community invariably consider to be the most widely acknowledged organised crime entities in existence. The references cited in these sections and in Further Readings reflect the diligent effort to selectively include authoritative publications by prominent scholars in the field.

By and large, the criminal activities described in Chapter 3 is, again, representative of the breadth of the most salient forms of organised crime by scholarly consensus – and contains about as much depth in revealing its workings as appropriate in such a short space. The inclusion of corporate crime as a business of organised crime is not unwarranted given that in the organised crime literature, there is not dispute over whether overlap exists between the two. However, the demarcation between some forms of corporate crime and organised crime could be made clearer through examples. This is perhaps where it would be useful to revisit the extra-legal governance dimension of organised crime to inject analytical rigour to the explanation. That is to say, for some corporate crimes, if the qualifiers for the use of violence or intimidation to enforce the transaction and for *criminal* organisation membership and covertness are absent, where does one draw the line between *crime that is organised* and committed by corporates for profit and *organised crime* that capitalises on and exploits legitimate businesses? Indeed, there is no shortage of past examples from Italy’s construction businesses or garbage disposal operations that had been infiltrated by mobsters (Birrell 2016; McKenna 2016). Underworld figures prefer these territorial-based businesses as they can hardly run away from tactics of intimidation and violence. Thus, the inclusion of corporate crime under the organised crime umbrella could have used further theoretical refinement to avoid being a curious case that leaves the obfuscation unaddressed.

The book could have also benefitted from an extended coverage of how organised crime fares in the area of cyber. As a rapidly evolving and expanding field with global annual revenues of \$1.5 trillion (McGuire 2018), cybercrimes that involve the components of – according to the organised crime criteria set out in the book – criminal collectivity and criminal business would not be hard to find. In fact, recent examples of large scale, profit-oriented cyberattacks such as phishing and ransomware device-lockouts perpetrated by cybercriminal collectives are plentiful. In other cases, drugs and identity are for sale, while contract killing and malware ‘as a service’ are for hire on the dark web - a hidden area of the Internet much less visible than otherwise publicly accessible online domains.

Moreover, studies in recent years by Jonathn Lusthaus (2013, 2014) and Federico Varese (2017, with Lusthaus as lead author) into the offline and local dimensions of cybercrime is in stark contrast to the argument that the inflated criminal presence behind online crimes is simply a misperception. His empirical research into this obscure area shows that there is ample collaborative effort amongst cybercriminals and with local criminal organisations and corrupted officials. All would be interesting to examine and cast a different light on the cyber realm of organised crime, an area that is currently topping the law enforcement agenda of governments (including the traction cyber-laundering is gaining as a tool for laundering proceeds of organised crime).

Nevertheless, this book succinctly contextualised the relationship between organised crime, politics, and policymaking in Chapter 4. It does so by tracing the historical role politics has played in the US since the 1950s when organised crime became a topical issue. It details the two-way process of the general attitude toward organised crime as a result of the way various forms of organised crime manifests in reality through sensational occurrences and hyperbolic reporting; this is also true of the policing responses and legal measures that shaped and redefined what organised crime came to be in the public eye. By charting the influence of United States (US) Government policy on international policy and law enforcement communities, the book shows the far-reaching consequences of US policy decisions on the Western world – or the exportation of the ‘US model’ of response to organised crime.

The explicit link drawn between organised crime as a form of crime that is subject temporally to political constructs in the public discourse helps to place organised crime within the wider context of criminology and criminal justice studies. Drug policies such as the ‘war on drugs’ and the ‘tough on crime’ stance of governments are used as examples. This is a readily overlooked element in the mainstream literature. For instance, there is hardly any mention of organised crime, let alone the link between organised crime and criminology or criminal justice, in either the Criminology volume or the Criminal Justice volume (the latter contains one reference to organised crime; the former, none) of the same Oxford University Press series, ‘A Very Short Introduction’ (2018; 2015) In light of this, the book deserves praise for underscoring the historical and international dimensions of the fight against organised crime as part and parcel of the ‘culture of control’ paradigm pertinent to the fields of criminology and criminal justice.

In reconciling the diversity of organised crime - citing the examples of businesses and structures illustrated throughout the book - with its social, media, and political constructs as well as the regional and cultural conditions out of which they arise, the authors offer a sobering evaluation of the authorities’ attempt to create a uniform response to the organised crime problem in a non-contextualised manner. The book makes a compelling case in the final chapter that to tackle the organised crime problem, any effort to reform the system as if it exists in a vacuum is misguided at best, such as the rhetoric of going to ‘war’ with organised crime.

This book is highly recommended to anyone who wishes to not only gain a concise and credible overview of what organised crime has been, is, and does, but also to understand the theoretical and practical issues relating to the various contexts and dimensions of organised crime.

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