Understanding the new geographies of organised crime: empirical studies into the spatialities of organised criminal phenomena

Ella Cockbain[1], Patricio Estévez-Soto[2] and Felia Allum[3]

[1]UCL Department of Security and Crime Science. ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6293-0268
[2]UCL Department of Security and Crime Science. ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7513-6904
[3]University of Bath, Politics, Languages and International Studies. ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0769-1700

Abstract

Organised crime – and the people, processes and structures involved – do not exist in a geographical vacuum. They have an inherent spatiality: shaped by and shaping the places they occupy in physical, virtual and hybrid spaces. Although the 'social embeddedness' of organised crime is relatively well-recognised, its spatiality – or 'spatial embeddedness' – has been neglected. This article contextualises and introduces our special issue on the new geographies of organised crime. We put forward a central argument that geographical lenses can advance and enrich understanding of organised crime, briefly review relevant literature and explain some of the foundational concepts in geographical thinking. We discuss the rationale for this special issue and highlight its papers' main contributions. Since the geographies of the illicit are full of complexities, heterogeneities and subjectivities, we do not propose any singular approach, but rather see a plurality of possibilities for better incorporating geography into organised crime scholarship. Accordingly, the papers are theoretically and methodologically diverse, as well as covering varied topics and locations.

Keywords: illicit economies, geospatial, scale, space, place, territory, Global North, Global South, mafia

Introduction

Organised crime groups often seek profit and power across both illegal and legal economies. To succeed, they need to make the most of the spaces and places they occupy. These spaces have physical and, increasingly, virtual and hybrid dimensions. Organised crime is both socially and spatially embedded and produced, and can have deep local roots and a wide, dynamic reach across space-time. Yet, spatiality is rarely taken into account when seeking to explore and explain organised criminal phenomena. The geographies of organised crime have attracted surprisingly little focused or explicit research attention. This neglect is particularly striking when we consider that both 'geography' and 'organised crime' are expansive, diffuse concepts, which overlap in numerous and varied ways.

This introduction to our special issue *'Understanding the new geographies of organised crime'* contextualises this edited collection of articles and reflects upon the importance of including an analysis of the relationships between geography and organised crime. We do not seek to invent new terms or concepts to describe social-criminal groups and their activities in a geographical context. Instead, we explain and illustrate the importance of spatiality and seek to demonstrate what various geographical lenses can add to studies of organised crimes and organised criminal groups in their many different forms. We believe that geographical lenses are invaluable in better understanding and responding to organised crime, not least because they provide different ways of thinking about and analysing organised crime's historical, material and social-spatial contexts. We certainly aren't suggesting all scholars of organised crime must become geographers (or vice versa) but see clear and under-tapped scope for greater cross-pollination of ideas, collaborations and partnerships, and more generally exploring synergies between these domains.

Our two central concerns in this special issue – organised crime and geography – are mutually constitutive: our environments can shape organised criminal phenomena, and they too can shape our environments. The papers herein show how organised criminal phenomena of various types are produced differently in different spaces and places, unevenly distributed across space-time, and build and control territory in different ways. The diversity of the articles in this collection underscores that there are numerous fruitful ways of conceptualising and analysing the geographies of organised crime.

We framed the collection around 'new geographies', while also recognising that the idea of a 'new geography' is fluid and open to different interpretations. Overall, the collection covers both emergent crime issues and recent iterations of more established phenomena for which the environment is constantly in flux. Having focused empirical studies into the spatiality of various organised crime-related issues is itself novel, especially for the most under-studied of topics and contexts herein. There is also a new geography in the virtual geographies of the internet and darknet where different actors and markets have appeared. In our call for abstracts, we were also particularly keen to hear about novel data sources, innovative uses of more traditional datasets, applications of methods not commonly used in this domain, novel theoretical approaches and under-researched organised crime phenomena.

Organised crime and its geographical dimension

'Organised crime' itself is a slippery and elusive concept and 'notoriously resistant to definition' (Naylor, 2003, p. 82). Questions of how organised crime (and associated terms) is understood, measured, experienced and best addressed are long contested (*e.g.*, Armao, 2004; Finckenauer, 2005; Hagan, 2006; Paoli, 2002; Von Lampe, 2015). We could spend an entire editorial debating the definitional boundaries of 'organised crime' but decided instead

to leave this question open, subject to individual contributors' interpretation. We recognise, however, that organised crime is a sensationalised and politicised topic, laden with assumptions, associations and expectations. Moreover, the imaginaries of 'organised crime' can diverge greatly from documented empirical realities.

Over the past forty years or so, organised crime has been a rapidly expanding research domain and it attracts considerable state interest – but research quality can be variable and commentators have called for more diversity and innovation in datasets, methods, and perspectives (Windle & Silke, 2019). There are well-documented practical, ethical and other difficulties accessing data and participants for research into organised crime (*e.g.* Von Lampe, 2015; Windle & Silke, 2019). Barriers include the fact that datasets that exist as standard for volume crimes are rarely available for organised crime issues, large-scale primary data collection on organised crime is especially challenging and expensive, and university ethics committees can be risk-averse in signing off on much needed ethnographic studies. Such methodological challenges and tangible risks to researchers can be particularly acute in the Global South (Pereda, 2022).

Organised crime research also suffers from uneven geographies of knowledge-production, with scholarship dominated by institutions in wealthy, Global North countries and tending to focus on the role of non-state actors (Hosford et al, 2021; Pereda, 2022). Yet, there is a growing literature showing the limits to theories from the Global North in explaining organised crime (or indeed crime more broadly) in the Global South (Carrington et al., 2019; Pereda, 2022). Moreover, countries in the Global South are at the sharp end of many of the worst ravages of organised crime, particularly when corrupt state actors' criminality is also given due attention (see, e.g., Kupatadze, 2023; Pereda, 2022). The legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism extend all too sharply into the present too (Carrington et al., 2019), reflected for example in the contours of drug cultivation and supply networks[1], the extractive geographies of travelling child sex offending, or the geopolitics of externalised border controls and the securitisation of migration more generally. The geographies of organised crime, like so many other social phenomena, are also increasingly hybrid in nature: leaving footprints across both physical and virtual landscapes (*e.g.*, Di Nicola, 2022). In calling for greater attention to the spatiality of organised crime, we therefore also recognise the need to examine these digital geographies as well and how they intersect with physical ones (see, e.g., Kjellgren, this volume; Lambrechts, this volume).

The study of organised crime has long been dominated by a certain type of gaze: a privileged, male, white gaze, which has obscured and overlooked other aspects such as women's role in organised crime groups (Arsovska & Allum, 2014). We have tried to counteract that hegemony through a more diverse set of contributors, although also recognise there is still

[1] These post-colonial legacies also manifest in outsourcing networks and the commodity flows of regular goods and indeed labourers between colonised and coloniser countries, not just the geographies of illicit economies.

more to be done here. We would also urge researchers interested in the geographies of organised crime in all their messiness to beware what feminist geographer Donna Haraway (1988, p. 581) famously called the 'God trick' of supposedly neutral, omniscient, detached knowledge-production.

For all that 'organised crime' is a social construct rather than a natural 'fact', it encompasses a diverse set of phenomena that have indubitable material realities that impact on individuals, communities and societies at large. This special issue is primarily concerned with the spatial production and distribution of organised crime activity, actors and territory. What we do not have so much here is research that focuses on scrutinising and critiquing the geographical imaginaries of organised crime phenomena or the political geography of anti-organised crime interventions, such as who gets to determine 'success' and at what cost it comes? These are also important questions on which we hope to see more scholarship in future.

A decade ago, Hall (2013) noted the divergence between the considerable geographical scholarship on volume crime and limited interest in organised crime (see also Russo & Strazzari, 2019). Pointing to the lack of a substantive research focus on organised crime in any of geography's subdisciplines, Hall summed up the state of geographical scholarship as follows,

> 'So, in sum, we have an extensive, if uneven, interest among geographers in the illicit generally and a diverse but patchy interest in organized criminality specifically.' (Hall, 2013, p. 368).

Although interest from geographers in organised crime has continued to grow since then, it remains under-developed, fragmented and unevenly distributed across geographical subdisciplines and organised crime topics alike (*e.g.*, Hall et al., 2021; Smith, 2018). A recent review highlights the growing – albeit still fractured and comparatively marginal – contributions from geographers and/or mainstream geography journals to the study of organised crime (Hall & Yarwood, 2024). Such scholarship encompasses empirical studies into a wide range of transnational organised criminal phenomena, including money laundering (*e.g.*, Warf, 2002), drug production and trafficking (*e.g.*, Ballvé, 2012; Boyce et al., 2015; Dávila et al., 2021), cybercrime (Hall et al., 2021), human trafficking (*e.g.,* Blazek et al., 2019; Cockbain et al., 2022; Yea, 2016), illicit trade in tobacco (Holden, 2017), maritime piracy (Hastings, 2009), and wildlife poaching (Schmitz & Gonçalves, 2019). Hall and Yarwood (2024, p. 441) stress that although there is evidence of shared interests and directions of development, such research is rarely explicitly positioned as part of a broader corpus on the 'geography of crime'. They also highlight considerable variance between contributions in terms of their 'sub-disciplinary origins, methods, sources of data, scales of analysis and their relative orientations to economic, urban, ecological and political realms' (ibid). This is an exciting, developing field, but one yet to reach any real critical mass.

Looked at from the other side – i.e. the extent to which crime-focused disciplines have engaged with organised crime through geographical lenses – we see a rather different picture. Within mainstream criminology, researchers have typically focused on two main geographical dimensions: questions of territory and territoriality (see, *e.g.*, Clark et al., 2021; Walton & Dinnen, 2020) and the tensions between the transnational and local dimensions of organised crime (see, *e.g.*, Russo & Strazzari, 2019). They have paid far less attention to other aspects of geographical thinking, leading to many missed opportunities for cross-pollination of ideas and approaches. Environmental criminology and crime science are unusual, however, for being centrally concerned with the immediate environment in which crime occurs (Bruinsma & Johnson, 2018; Cockbain & Laycock, 2017). It is no surprise then to find more geographically-inclined scholarship here, given these sub-fields' embrace of spatial perspectives and GIS (geographic information systems) methods.

Indeed, crime mapping (using GIS) has been described as geography's first prominent contribution to the analysis of crime (Hall & Yarwood, 2024). Traditionally, environmental criminology and crime science focused overwhelmingly on so-called volume crimes (high frequency, relatively low impact) (Bullock et al., 2012; Cockbain & Laycock, 2017) but their application to organised crimes has been expanding rapidly. Taking GIS-based studies as an example, these disciplines have now seen it applied to serious and organised as diverse as wildlife poaching (*e.g.*, Lemieux et al., 2014), illicit drug markets and trafficking (*e.g.*, (Barnum et al., 2017)), child sexual abuse (*e.g.*, Chopin & Caneppele, 2019; Gönültaş & Sahin, 2018), maritime piracy (*e.g.*, Marchione et al, 2014) and human trafficking (*e.g.*, Cockbain et al., 2022; de Vries, 2022).

As this section has demonstrated, research certainly exists that bridges the geography/organised crime divide and it is not our intention to downplay the growing pockets of exciting and innovative scholarship out there. Further dialogue and cross-pollination across the disciplines of geography and criminology/crime science/criminal justice would be welcome, however. When we were planning this special issue, we could find only two previous special issues devoted specifically to the geographies of organised crime (Russo & Strazzari, 2019; Sergi & Storti, 2021). One dealt primarily with questions of territoriality (Sergi & Storti, 2021) – arguably the most mainstreamed of the intersections between geography and organised crime[2]. The other focused on organised crime on islands (Russo & Strazzari, 2019). Notably, both skewed overwhelmingly qualitative, paying little attention to quantitative or mixed-methods innovations.

[2] We suspect that the comparatively greater interest in territoriality reflects the broader skew in focus towards mafias and street gangs, both of which can have obvious and pronounced territories.

Thinking geographically: the lexicon of space, place, scale and territory

The key concepts at the theoretical core of geography[3] include space, place, scale and territory. These terms are not stable and have gone through various iterations towards the understandings embraced by most critical geographers. Over the past few decades, other disciplines have gone through their own 'spatial turn', borrowing from geography's lexicon concepts to inform their own disciplinary work to make sense of the world. As multidisciplinary academics putting some of these concepts to work in our own fields of study, we think it is important to introduce our readers how we are thinking with these slippery, and contested concepts.

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Despite, or perhaps because of, being 'the fundamental stuff of geography' (Thrift, 2009, p. 85), the meaning of **space** is surprisingly difficult to articulate succinctly. It is an abstract concept, dynamic, time bound and socially produced. Pre-eminent geographer David Harvey has tended to define space through a tripartite conceptualisation of absolute space, relative space, and relational space[4], arguing that space can be any or all of these depending on the context. Rather than asking 'what is space?', he reorients focus towards a rather different question: "how is it that different human practices create and make use of different conceptualizations of space?'' (Harvey, 1979, p. 13). He goes on to explain,

> 'The property relationship, for example, creates absolute spaces within which monopoly control can operate. The movement of people, goods, services, and information takes place in a relative space because it takes money, time, energy, and the like to overcome the friction of distance. Parcels of land also capture benefits because they contain relationships with other parcels . . . in the form of rent relational space comes into its own as an important aspect of human social practice' (Harvey, 1979, p. 13, cited in Harvey, 2006, p. 275)

Thinking through the ways in which space is 'folded into' our social relations – or how space is made and unmade in our everyday (Lefebvre, 1991) – the idea of space is transformed theoretically from a static to a dynamic, shifting and exciting concept. This point is also made by Doreen Massey, one of the foremost geographical thinkers on space. She called for formulating space in terms of its relationality and multiplicity, but above all, as a power-laden process:

> 'Space concerns our relations with each other and in fact social space, I would say, is a product of our relations with each other, our connections with each other… [and] all those relations are going to be filled with power. So, what we have is a geography

[3] While recognising these central, shared interests, it is also worth noting that there is not a singular 'geography': it is a diffuse domain, with different epistemologies, theories, methods and interests (Nayak & Jeffrey, 2013)

[4] For a longer discussion on these three terms, see Harvey's Space as a Keyword (2006).

> which in a sense is the geography of power. The distribution of those relations mirrors the power relations within the society we have.' (Massey, 2023, p. 4)

Just as absolute, relative, and relational space produce the spaces of our everyday lives, so too they define **place**. A classic formulation of place emphasises three main meanings: 'a point on the earth's surface; the locus of individual and group identity; and the scale of everyday life' (Castree, 2009, p. 153). Massey, through her work on globalisation (1991), re-envisioned place as a 'constellation of social, economic, and cultural relations stretched across space' (Lave et al., 2018, p. 131). Specifically, she had

> 'a notion of globalization inseparable from deep commitments to place…a variously more intimate, positional, and political sense of place, imbued always with the recognition of difference. Place was a site of encounter, of engagements with and across difference, globalization being experienced, as a far-from-universal condition, "in here" just as much as "out there"' (Peck et al., 2018, p. 14)

Castree thought of place in a similar way. As processes of globalisation and the proliferation of digital technologies increase and intensify interconnectivities and interdependencies between spatially distributed locations, such processes have been said to stretch 'social relationships across space such that the boundaries between the 'inside' of a place and the 'outside' are rendered porous (Castree, 2009, p. 161). The 'power geometry' inherent in space and place means different social groups and people are positioned very differently to respond to 'these flows and interconnections' (Massey, 1993, p. 61).

Massey's (1991) 'global sense of place' is one scale to think through power dynamics inherent in space and place. The production of **scale** is a process deeply embedded in these same processes. While scholars in criminology or public health often think of scale in terms of micro, meso, and macro scales, geography places emphasis on its *production*[5]. In his classic formulation on the production and politics of scale, Neil Smith (1992, p. 66) examined the scales at which social activity was produced and contained: 'body, home, community, urban, region, nation, global'. Scale can be understood more specifically as

> 'a produced societal metric that differentiates space; it is not space per se. Yet "geographical scale" is not simply a "hierarchically ordered system" placed over preexisting space…Rather the production of scale is integral to the production of space, all the way down. Scaled social processes pupate specific productions of space while the production of space generates distinct structures of geographical scale.' (Marston & Smith, 2001, pp. 615-616)

[5] Geographers tend to use the language of micro/meso/macro only in methodological or operational terms, when talking in terms of the scale or resolution of data collection and analysis (which can run hierarchically from individual-level data upwards) (Marston et al., 2009). Discussions of production of scale should also not be confused with the distinct and very specific concept of map scale (or cartographic scale): a tangible measure, conveying the ratio between a distance a map and the same distance on earth.

According to Moore (2008), preoccupation with scale in geographical scholarship has both helped increase appreciation that politics are fundamentally spatial and generated an extensive, varied and often contradictory literature on scale, its definition, basic properties and politics. 'Possibly the only point about which geographers are in agreement', he writes, 'is that scale is not a fixed or given category, rather it is socially constructed, fluid and contingent' (Moore, 2008, p. 204). These characteristics are reflected in how the production or construction of scale is defined in the Dictionary of Human Geography:

> 'In this view, spatial scales do not…rest as fixed platforms for social activity and processes that connect up or down to other hierarchical levels, but are instead *outcomes* of those activities and processes, to which they in turn contribute through a spatially uneven and temporally unfolding dynamic.' (Marston et al., 2009, p. 665)

This uneven dynamic is acutely visible in processes playing out across land and **territory**. In geography, the long dominant understanding of territory was that of the spatial organisation of nation states, until Sack (1986) 'extended the understanding of human territoriality as a strategy available to individuals and organisations in general' (Agnew, 2009, p. 746). This broader conceptualisation is clearly particularly fruitful in researching how organised crime groups produce and control space for their own gains (see, *e.g.*, Ballvé, 2012, 2013). Territory 'can be understood as a political technology: it comprises techniques for measuring land and controlling terrain' (Elden, 2010, p. 811). Here, territory is a 'unit of contiguous space that is used, organized and managed by a social group, individual person or institution to restrict and control access to people and places' (Agnew, 2009, p. 746).

Here, we've tried to unpack and explain what we meant by thinking geographically – hopefully, in a way that is accessible and helps other readers on the journey to more engagement with the spatialities of organised crime. In doing so, we benefitted greatly from conversations with special issue contributor Lauren Pearson, herself a geographer. We want to end this section with Lauren's words of advice:

> 'As geographically inclined criminological scholarship on organised crime takes steps into the lexicon of geography, it's useful and important to hold onto these terms as historical, these concepts as dynamic and shifting, and these processes as always part of a power dynamic.' (Pearson, 2024[6])

[6] Personal correspondence from Lauren Pearson, October 2024.

A call for greater recognition of the spatiality, or 'spatial embeddedness', of organised crime

Over two decades ago, Kleemans and van de Bunt (1999, p. 19) introduced the influential concept of the 'social embeddedness of organised crime' with the argument that,

> 'Organized crime does not operate within a social vacuum; it interacts, however, with its social environment. Consequently, social relations are crucial for understanding the phenomenon of organized crime.'

While the social embeddedness of organised crime has been widely embraced by criminologists, with a few notable exceptions they have tended to pay far less attention to its 'spatial embeddedness'. Yet, we see spatiality as an equally important dimension to how organised crime is produced, experienced and distributed. The two concepts are not discrete, of course, given that social relations themselves have a spatiality, and spatial relations are socially produced too – as we have shown in the previous section. Nevertheless, recognising how crime (including organised crime) is 'spatially embedded and contingent' is important (Hall & Yarwood, 2024), not least in providing a strong counterbalance to sweeping, overly simplistic 'hyperglobalised' accounts of criminal phenomena and their regulation. Building therefore on Kleemans and van der Bunt's classic formulation of social embeddedness, we emphasise that organised crime does not operate in a spatial vacuum either; it is similarly produced in people's everyday lives: in the physical, virtual and hybrid spaces they occupy. It is influenced in myriad ways by the same constraints and opportunities that space imposes on all human activity. The importance of geography to crime at large is neatly illustrated below:

> 'Crime is spatial. It occurs in and between localities, affects the ways that we behave in places and is masked or revealed by space…Beyond revealing aspects of the spatialities of crime and adding to our understanding of particular crime issues, geographical analysis of crime also, with varying degrees of implicit and explicitness, addresses a wider set of questions about the relationship between place, society and crime.' (Hall & Yarwood, 2024, p. 437)

Following this line of emphasis on spatiality, we argue that incorporating geographical ideas and practices more consciously and explicitly can open up new ways of thinking about how various organised crime actors, markets and networks are spatially produced, constrained and distributed, and how they in turn shape the spaces around them. We hope to encourage organised crime researchers to explore geographical thought and theory and consider introducing or extending geographical dimensions to their scholarship. As Edward Said (1993, p. 6) memorably argued,

> ‘just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.’

‘Questions of space and spatiality’, wrote Agnew (1994, p. 55), ‘have taken hold in the various social science fields… [but] are usually implicit or taken for granted rather than openly advertised or contemplated’. We would argue that researchers who are not geographers by training can find in geographical approaches considerable and largely under-used potential to shape their ways of thinking and doing organised crime scholarship. For example, thinking about how social space is produced could advance understanding of why and how organised crime groups arise, persist or perish in some places and not others, or how space enables (and constrains) criminal cooperation and activities. There are also important spatial dimensions to the geopolitics of anti-organised crime measures, with obvious exemplars including the havoc wreaked by the ‘war on drugs’ internationally and border hardening, internalisation and externalisation ostensibly in the name of combatting people smuggling and trafficking. There are also geographical angles to examining representations of organised crime and organised criminals in media, politics and popular culture alike. Territory has clearly already been a comparatively fruitful inroad to inquiry into organised crime (see, *e.g.*, Sergi & Storti, 2021) but still merits further attention, particularly beyond the contexts that have most occupied criminologists thus far (*e.g.*, Italian mafias). For example, how do more disorganised, informal criminal groups occupy, produce and shape their territory? How do states invoke, control and extend their territories in the context of illicit flows, through their rhetoric, representations and tangible counter-measures?

Questions of scale are important too. The decisions we make about what scale at which to analyse organised criminal phenomena can have considerable ramifications, masking some important aspects and revealing others. The impact of scalar choices is perhaps most obvious when mapping organised criminal activities quantitatively: here scaling up or down can fundamentally alter the contours of the problem observed (as demonstrated in Cockbain et al., 2022). But it is also crucial to how we understand organised criminal phenomena through other approaches and methods: clearly we can learn very different things when analysing the production, or representation, of organised crime and its counter-measures at, for example, national or global scale versus that of the individual or community. Multi-scalar approaches that recognise and address the interconnectivities and contingencies between different scales are also important, especially if approaching organised-crime-related issues from a complex systems or network perspective (*e.g.*, Hall et al., 2021; Walton & Dinnen, 2020).

We expect that for some readers, ‘doing geography’ might evoke notions of sticking pins in maps to chart crime locations – or using the digitised equivalent of increasingly

sophisticated GIS software to model and interrogate spatial distributions of organised crime. Following a principle known as spatial heterogeneity, it is by now well documented that crime in general is not evenly distributed in space-time. There is also now evidence that at least some organised criminal activity is similarly spatially concentrated (*e.g.*, Estévez-Soto et al., 2021). Crime mapping – a mainstay of environmental criminology (see, *e.g.*, (Andresen, 2018; Chainey & Ratcliffe, 2013) – is certainly part of the puzzle in bringing geography into the study of organised crime (as is reflected in some studies in this volume).

But that type of quantitative spatial analytics is far from the whole picture, as we hope our discussions so far have illustrated. Indeed, geography had the heyday of its 'quantitative revolution' in the 1950s and 1960s (Ferreira & Vale, 2022; Nayak & Jeffrey, 2013) and then in the 1970s the discipline took a social turn, led by David Harvey (1973). With that came a rejection of positivism, embrace of a much more explicitly political-economic direction for the discipline and growth in interest in more humanistic and qualitative approaches to geography. Since then, both qualitative and quantitative approaches have been vital parts of geographic inquiry. As elsewhere, in geography the value and opportunities of mixed methods-approaches are also increasingly recognised (see, *e.g.*, Elwood, 2010; Finney, 2021; Yeager & Steiger, 2013).

Making sense of the new geographies of organised crime in this special issue

Our focus with this special issue was broad. We hoped to advance thinking about how diverse geographical perspectives can enrich the study of organised crime, ideally stimulating more such research in future. We sought to bring together a varied set of researchers across different disciplinary backgrounds, epistemological and theoretical orientations, methodological skills and preferences, thematic interests and regional foci. While many of the authors would otherwise have been working in pockets of geographically-inclined work, we wanted to bring their efforts together, embracing and showcasing a plurality of views and approaches.

The red thread running throughout is about cutting-edge *empirical* research that pays close attention to new and neglected geographies of organised crimes, namely different aspects of the spatiality of organised criminal phenomena. When putting out our call for abstracts and sifting through the over 60 submissions received, we knew we were interested in different spaces and places, scales, territories, routes, flows, borders, spatial concentrations, and spatial meaning-making. We were also particularly keen to encourage and support early career researchers and researchers from outside the Global North. We were lucky to have funding via a grant from the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) that enabled us to bring contributors together in London in Summer 2023. There, we shared drafts, critiqued one another's work, teased out synergies and worked together to strengthen our thinking and writing.

We are delighted that the studies in this collection span research into different criminal groups (*e.g.*, mafias, triads, prison groups), crime types (*e.g.*, environmental crime, human trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, drug trafficking, money laundering), locations (online and offline, rural and urban, places spanning four continents), scales and responses to state interventions. Beyond our central aim to encourage more attention to the complex and varied geographies of organised crime, we are not pushing a particular perspective, idea or method. Instead, we embrace the multiplicities, ambiguities and messiness of the central themes of both geography and organised crime.

In our view, there is not a 'right' approach here and a search for consensus or an overarching grand theory would be futile. Different approaches each offer valuable insights, together enabling a range of perspectives on organised crime. Thus, we treat this special issue primarily as a catalyst. By showcasing a diverse array of perspectives and methodologies, we hope to stimulate greater interest in the geographies of organised crime among crime-focused disciplines, geographers, and other social scientists alike.

An overview of the papers in this special issue

In this section, we briefly introduce each of the papers in this special issue, its focus, approach and key contributions.

Although mafias are a major focus of the organised crime literature, there has been surprisingly little theorisation and empirical study of mafia geographies. Lauren Pearson (this volume) innovates theoretically and empirically in her ethnographic analysis of the production of mafia space. She focuses on how the Cosa Nostra intentionally sets wildfires in Sicily, taking as a departure point Lefebvre's ideas on the production of space. She argues that mafia groups reproduce socially and spatially through fire-setting, changing their relationships with the land and operationalising the landscape in new ways for territorial control and accumulation.

As climate change escalates, more attention is being paid to how natural hazards and disasters affect various human activity. Yet, the impacts of natural disasters on organised crime more specifically are poorly understood. Adan Silverio-Murillo, Enrique García-Tejeda and colleagues (this issue) push the boundaries by examining the impacts of recent earthquakes in Mexico on organised crime-related activities. Their results show an increase in kidnapping, driven by local criminal organisations (without equivalent modifications for national criminal organisations). The results suggest these earthquakes increased both violent and altruistic activity, again only for local organisations.

Since the so-called 'migration crisis' of 2015, there has been heavy political focus on the 'Central Mediterranean Route' to Europe. Yet, the journeys of people travelling irregularly on this route have been little studied. Alexandre Bish, Hervé Borrion and colleagues (this

volume) disentangle the geographical intricacies of 71 people's journeys through Libya to Malta by sea. Pushing the boundaries of how script analysis, they use rich qualitative data from interviews to inform systematic, geospatially-situated scripts of smuggler-facilitated journeys. They find that on average journeys were long and circuitous, routes were diverse and geographically complex, and the extreme harms of detention and forced labour were worryingly common.

The dominant approach to researching the much-hyped 'nexus' between technology and human trafficking has been analysing the contents of individual online escort adverts, often involving dubious inferences. In a stark break with this tradition, Richard Kjellgren (this volume) uses open source data to construct and analyse 15,016 spatio-temporal *networks* of escort adverts. His study innovates methodologically, demonstrating new ways of examining intersections between online and offline geographies. He finds a 'continuum of complexity', argues for greater attention to the structural and geographical characteristics of networks, and cautions about the limits of inferring exploitation from online footprints.

As organised crime groups adapt to the transformative possibilities of online spaces, there is growing interest in how gangs make use of social media. To date, however, there has been little to no such research on the African continent, despite it being a major growth market for social media. Derica Lambrechts (this volume) uses digital observations to scope the online geographies of gang-related social media content in Cape Town, South Africa. Focusing on TikTok, she explores how gangs, community activists and vigilantes produce virtual space. Her results show many intersections of the online and offline and reveal a polarisation of digital territories.

Transit spaces are a vital component of trade routes criss-crossing the globe. In analyses of illicit trade, however, they are routinely either overlooked or implicitly reduced to passive spaces through which illicit goods flow without trace. Emilia Ziosi (forthcoming) challenges these assumptions through a novel case study of Honduras: an increasingly important transit hub for US-bound cocaine shipments. Using court documents and expert interviews, she argues that the transnational cocaine trade is embedded in and enabled by local politics and society, physical and social infrastructure. She also proposes that territoriality has important 'itinerant dimension', as organised criminal actors seek to control and protect the *mobilities* of drug flows.

Despite movement being so central to human trafficking, its geographies have been greatly under-researched – particularly from a quantitative perspective. Additionally, there is a tendency to amalgamate a huge range of disparate issues, obscuring distinctions in context, drivers and distributions. Drawing on environmental criminology, Ella Cockbain, Matthew Ashby and colleagues (this volume) explore geospatial and demographic concentrations in trafficking and extreme exploitation (aka 'modern slavery') identified in the UK. They analyse individual-level data for 26,503 people officially designated as suspected or confirmed victims, finding both much variation overall and clearly pronounced spatial and demographic concentrations of harm. Their results indicate the importance of both systemic

drivers and immediate opportunity structures and emphasise the need for finely disaggregated, context-sensitive analysis and intervention.

Although geographical mobility and infiltration into the licit economy are core topics in the study of organised crime, the two issues are rarely examined in tandem. Michele Riccardi and Mario Maggioni (this volume) advance understanding of the geography of mafia economies through their analysis of geographical and social determinants of investment patterns of Italian mafias. Using spatial regression analysis, they examine data from 1,700 confiscated firms to assess how geographical context relates to investment behaviours within Italy. In their geography of mafia economy, they find marked regional differences on a range of variables (e.g. level of mafia infiltration) between investments in construction and hospitality.

The Mexican government has long pursued the so-called 'kingpin' strategy of targeting group leaders to counter organised crime. Despite growing evidence that doing so has exacerbated and spatially displaced violent crimes, effects on other crimes are less well-understood. Patricio Estévez-Soto and Reynaldo Lecona Esteban (this volume) innovate thematically and methodologically by assessing the strategy's impact on extortion and kidnapping, using a novel matching method for cross-sectional time-series data. Their results underline the importance of considering both spatial and temporal effects: they find a significant increase in extortions within six months of intervention, but no temporal effects for kidnapping and no spatial displacement effects for either crime.

Organised crime in rural and urban contexts tend to be studied in separation, and there are very few comparative analyses across the rural-urban divide. Taking China as a case study and using material from 861 court judgements, Shuai Wei and Fan Pan (this volume) innovate in comparing organised crime group activity across rural and urban settings. Central to their analysis is a focus on territory. Alongside some similarities (e.g. in exploitation of gambling markets), they find clear distinctions between urban and rural organised crime groups, including in terms of differences in markets, exploitation of natural resources, and means of concealment and exerting power.

Prisons feature prominently in popular culture depictions of organised crime, yet academic research into organised crime has tended to overlook prison settings. Kate Gooch and James Treadwell (this volume) innovate in analysing prisons as an important space for organised criminal activity, examining adaptations to the particularities of prisons' political economies and institutional contexts. They draw on a vast qualitative dataset from across male prisons in England and Wales, obtained through protracted and multi-sited ethnography. They argue that organised crime is better understood as 'transported' (not 'transplanted') both into and out of prison settings, expanding the reach of criminal networks, drawing on both prison- and community-based links, and influencing prisoner society.

Although there is growing research on Chinese organised crime, it tends to focus on specific crime types in which groups are engaged. Questions of territoriality have been largely

neglected. Drawing on interviews with a combination of current and former triad members, T Wing Lo and Sharon Kwok (this volume) analyse triad territoriality in Hong Kong. They consider what territory means to triads and how they establish, maintain and defend it. They show that different triad societies exert territorial control over different geographical spaces and business sectors. Underlining the importance of territory, they emphasise that it is not only illicit business that is territorially-enabled and -situated, but ways of maintaining social networks, exchanging information, and gathering opportunities and intelligence.

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Author biographies:

Ella Cockbain is an Associate Professor in Security and Crime Science at UCL and a visiting Research Fellow at Leiden University. She leads the UCL Research Group on Human Trafficking, Smuggling and Exploitation.

Patricio Estévez-Soto is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the UCL Department of Security and Crime Science, where he previously was an Assistant Professor in Organised Crime. He recently took an appointment as a financial crime data scientist in the private sector.

Felia Allum is Professor of Comparative Organised Crime and Corruption at the University of Bath. Her research interests relate to West European Politics, organised crime, Italian mafias (the Neapolitan Camorra), gender and political corruption.

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