New Mafia: Black, Hispanic and Italian Styles

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Organized crime is more than just a criminal way of life; it is an American way of life. It is a viable and persistent institution within American society with its own symbols, its own beliefs, its own logic and its own means of transmitting these systematically from one generation to the next. As an integral part of economic life in the United States it can be viewed as falling on a continuum which has the legitimate business world at one end and what we have come to call organized crime at the other. Viewed in this way, organized crime is a functional part of the American social system and, while successive waves of immigrants and migrants have found it an available means of economic and social mobility, it persists and transcends the involvement of any particular group and even changing definitions of legality and illegality in social behavior.

At present organized crime is in a period of transition. Italian domination has begun to give way to that of a new group: the blacks and Hispanics. During the next decade we will see the presently scattered and loosely organized pattern of their emerging control develop into a new Mafia. This black and Hispanic involvement can be examined as part of the process of ethnic succession. They, like other minorities before them, are inheriting a major instrument to social and economic mobility.

How does this new group differ from its predecessors? What is common and what is different in these groups in comparison to the Italians who preceded them? To answer these questions it is necessary to examine the networks of criminal operation in order to determine the types of relationships which bring people together, foster some kind of criminal partnership, then lead to the formation of organized criminal networks.

To research the nature of crime in America a major study using anthropological field work techniques was undertaken. All of the classifications, descriptions and anecdotes which follow are drawn from field work. Information was received either from members of networks or from those familiar with criminal networks. Although we focused on the patterns of blacks and Hispanic crime activists, previous research on Italian-American patterns was utilized for comparison.

Organization of Crime Networks

The first step in determining the pattern or patterns of organization in the networks we observed was to ask the questions: What brings and holds people together in these networks? How are relationships of mutual dependence and responsibility established among people who will engage in organized
From our analyses of the networks we found two distinct types of linkages: *causal relationships*, which serve to introduce individuals to each other and into joint criminal ventures; and *criminal relationships*, which are based on a common core of activity in crime. We identified six sets of causal relationships in our networks. All are marked by a sense of mutual trust in the personal characters of those within the relationship.

- **Childhood.** While childhood gangs are an obvious place to look for such friendships, the childhood friendship does not require a gang to establish a potentially criminal relationship. Reggie Martin and Jimmie Brown were childhood friends on 143rd Street, and later, when both were grown and successful in their individual criminal ventures, they joined together to “launder” some of their illicit profits through a joint enterprise in boutiques. The long-term relationship which grows out of childhood friendships is not, of course, restricted to crime circles and is also found in legitimate social relationships. It seems particularly potent in organized crime networks, however. In every case of childhood friendship which grew into an adult criminal partnership, the individuals involved were of the same ethnic or racial grouping and usually of approximately the same age. Obviously, this is not the result of any innate criminality in any of the ethnic groups but rather results from the fact that street society, where kids meet, is based on residential patterns which tend to follow racial and ethnic lines as well as socioeconomic ones. Reggie Martin and Jimmie Brown could just as easily have been meeting in the Grill Room of the Yale Club and discussing the formation of a joint stock venture if their childhood circumstances had been different. But youngsters growing up in the ghetto have a different set of experiences, a different set of role models and so a different pattern of life chances. One of our interviewees in Central Harlem makes just this point:

> Again I stress the point of making the right kind of friends, from the time you're a little kid, then building up the right kind of respect among your associates, and carrying yourself so that those people who have always known you can continue to depend on you, to think that you are okay. For every friend you have, you have that much more chance to get in on deals, to make it in crime. You are able to be in touch; people will give you their address, their telephone number. Otherwise you are outside looking in—you are nobody. It's a thing in New York that people just don’t take you in unless you know somebody. It’s a city thing, a poverty thing.

- **The Recruits.** A second type of linkage develops when an experienced criminal in the neighborhood sees a young boy or gang of young boys with talent and recruits them into organized criminal ventures. This is the most common mode of entry into organized crime and represents the first step in criminal apprenticeship. The War Dragons, a young gang, were recruited in this way following a successful whiskey theft. Recruitment was also the means by which Rolando Solis was brought into the lower echelons of the Cuban Connection (a drug ring) as the first step up the ladder of criminal success. Thus recruitment may involve either individuals, as in the case of Rolando, or groups, as with the War Dragons. Like all social relationships, however, this causal link between younger and older crime activists is two-sided; not only does the older criminal seek out the younger, the youngsters also seek to be recruited and to emulate their elders in crime. It is this role-modeling which gives generational continuity to organized crime and accounts, in part, for its persistence in society.

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There were numerous examples throughout the observations and interviews of both blacks and Puerto Ricans which document this apprenticeship system. The process is described by a black from Paterson, New Jersey:

> You can know who is connected and who is involved but you can’t go to them and say, ‘Hey, man, I want to be one of you!’ You can know for certain that Joe Blow is the biggest man in Paterson. He knows me and I know him but I can’t approach that man about it. If I ask him something about that directly he might cuss me out. This is the way it happens. If he has been watching me and he likes what he sees and he wants to give me a little play, he might tell me one day to go see Joe. He won’t ever turn around and com-