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# The Social Embeddedness of Organized Crime

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## Abstract and Keywords

Between organized crime and the legitimate societal context, there are usually all sorts of "interfaces," and the relationships between legality and illegality are by no means necessarily antagonistic or aimed at avoiding one another. Instead of operating in a social vacuum, organized crime has a habit of interacting with its social environment. This contribution aims to develop the perspective of the social embeddedness of organized crime. It focuses on the embeddedness of organized crime with regard to gender relations, ethnic minorities, and occupations. We also show here that the relations between the environment and organized crime are constantly changing.

Keywords: social embeddedness, immigrant groups, cocaine trafficking, local hero, relational embeddedness, partners in crime

### I. Introduction

Organized crime groups are often portrayed as entities that derive their strength from strong internal cohesion and an ability to conceal their illegal activities from the outside world. Criminal organizations such as the Italian and Russian mafias, the Japanese Yakuza, and the Chinese Triads are often conceived of as secret societies, with their own sacred rituals (Paoli 2008), secret codes of communication (Gambetta 2009), and verbal agreements about leadership, finances, and social control (Siegel 2005). These representations of organized crime groups strongly resemble the secret societies studied and analyzed by Georg Simmel, who focused on the internal dynamics and interrelationships within these societies.

At the same time, organized crime is a thoroughly social phenomenon. Between organized crime and the legitimate societal context, there are usually all sorts of "interfaces," and the relationships between legality and illegality are by no means necessarily antagonistic or aimed at avoiding one another. Instead of operating in a social vacuum, organized crime has a habit of interacting with its social environment. This contribution aims to develop the perspective of the social embeddedness of organized crime. We will first discuss the concept of "social embeddedness" in general terms and then apply this perspective to the areas of gender, occupation, and ethnic minorities.

### (p. 322) II. Social Embeddedness of Organized Crime

The concept of embeddedness originated in the field of economics. It was first used many years ago by Polanyi (1944), who argued that economic behavior cannot be explained without taking into account the social and cultural framework within which this behavior is situated. Three decades later, this idea was again taken up by Granovetter (1973, 1985). Since then, there has been growing attention in the social sciences to the role of social context and social relations in the economic sphere. Explanations for economic behavior are not only sought in

"physical capital" but also in terms of "social capital" (Bourdieu 1985). The insights of economic sociology can also help us better understand organized crime (Coles 2001).

Let us start with the concrete example of a network of Dutch cocaine traffickers.[1] These traffickers imported cocaine from Colombia in containers by hiding the drugs inside frozen fruit juice. Over a period of many months, dozens of kilos of cocaine were smuggled into the Netherlands. The idea was hatched in a bar where the Dutch owner of a thriving patisserie business ("the baker") got to talking to several other visitors, who listened with great interest to his stories about his legal trade contacts with Colombia. The baker happened to be a regular importer of frozen fruit juices. After several friendly meetings, the baker and his new "friends" (who already had drug trafficking experience) decided to cooperate in importing cocaine by using the baker's trade routes as well as his Columbian contacts.

This use of an existing trade channel is an illustration of almost literal embeddedness. The trafficking of cocaine was embedded in a legitimate structure and can therefore be called "structural" embeddedness. Structural embeddedness should be distinguished from "relational" embeddedness (Granovetter 1992). Relational embeddedness refers to the concrete social relations and contacts between individuals in a certain context or network. In our case, the conversations between the baker and his future partners in crime started out as ordinary small talk in a bar. Structural embeddedness relates to the institutional aspects of the network: the bar, the trade route, and the bakery.

Social embeddedness means that existing relations and structures are not only the breeding ground for criminal activities, but also determine the form these activities can take. Without the presence of the bar as a social meeting place, the baker would never have come into contact with criminals, and without these contacts with his bar friends, he would never have become a financier of cocaine trafficking.

The structural side of social embeddedness can be analyzed on different levels. The example of the baker illustrates embeddedness on a micro level, with a criminal operation revolving around a specific trade contact and a local bar. However, embeddedness can also be analyzed at the meso/macro level. Criminal activities can be structurally embedded in places (airports, seaports), branches of industry (transport, prostitution, catering), occupations, social communities (neighborhoods, ethnic groups), prevailing gender relations, and public administration.

(p. 323) For example, in nations lacking an effective political structure, so-called failed states, organized crime is bound to be embedded in society in ways that differ from countries where the power of the state is effective and experienced as legitimate. In failed states, the members of criminal groups will take advantage of the absence of formal state power by focusing on duties neglected by the state, such as offering protection (Gambetta 1988). In modern Western states with an adequate infrastructure (a high level of services, a functioning road system, a high education level), organized crime will seek to take advantage of the opportunities offered by this infrastructure. The port of Rotterdam, for example, the largest European seaport, lends itself to smuggling activities. It is also the reason why organized criminality in the Netherlands (a trading nation par excellence) has all the characteristics of "transit criminality". Crime proceeds are generated not from extortion or territorial control, but from the trade in illegal goods.[2]

The relational side of social embeddedness refers to the fact that criminal cooperation does not exist in a social vacuum. Criminal activities cannot be separated from the social relations between the participants and the institutional environments in which their interactions take place. These relationships usually involve more aspects than just committing crimes. "Partners in crime" are first and foremost partners who are bound by relatively strong social ties. Criminal cooperation is usually embedded in existing friendly, familial, or work-related relationships. Collaborating in illicit operations relies heavily on mutual trust. For example, drug smugglers who get "ripped off" are not in a position to ask for police protection and neither are wealthy criminals able to initiate civil action when someone runs off with their money (Reuter 1983; Paoli 2002, p. 64; Zaitch 2005). Everything comes down to trust because there is little to no protection from opportunistic behavior. This is why criminal cooperatives are often characterized by strong internal relationships. Criminals prefer working with family members or friends in order to ensure the smooth running of their operations.

Relational embeddedness also implies the existence of social ties between criminals and persons who do not participate in criminal cooperatives but belong to the same ethnic group, neighborhood, occupation, etc. Social

embeddedness of, for instance, a Nigerian criminal gang in a Nigerian community in Amsterdam means that there is an exchange of contacts: the gang members are related to local residents, with whom they maintain all sorts of friendly and economic relations. This relational embeddedness has two faces (Potillo 1998). On the one hand, the criminals can benefit from the resources of the community or local neighborhood. Local residents may act as receivers of stolen goods or contribute to the concealment of criminal activities. This is where we see the strength of social ties: strong relations can contribute to the continued existence of criminal groups (Van de Bunt and Kleemans 2007). On the other hand, strong ties can also have a limiting effect. The fully socially embedded perpetrator is the "local hero," a "respected" criminal with mostly strong ties to his own social environment. Such a person, who is by definition limited in the further expansion of his criminal activities, exemplifies the opposite of what Granovetter (1973) describes as the strength of weak ties: individuals with mostly superficial contacts may find it easier to discover new business opportunities, including criminal activities. Our baker, for (p. 324) instance, just happened to come into contact with people from a totally different background who put new ideas into his head: the frozen fruit juice for his bakery could also be used for cocaine smuggling. The case of the baker demonstrates an example of the strength of weak social ties.

### III. Women in Organized Crime

This section focuses on the embeddedness of organized crime with regard to gender relations. Similar to kinship, friendship, and ethnicity, gender relationships can create a fertile ground for organized crime activities, ranging from the marginal involvement of women in specific activities to women occupying leading positions in international drug rings or human trafficking networks. Gender relationships reveal themselves to be valuable channels through which criminal networks can be expanded and new opportunities in illicit markets can be created.

## A. Historical Sources on Gender Networks in Criminal Activities

The subject of women and crime has always fascinated criminologists (Adler 1975; Chesney-Lind 1986, 1997; Daly 1994; Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2004), but in the past 20 years, the role of women in organized crime has come particularly to the fore. The publication in 2007 of *Women and the Mafia. Female Roles in Organized Crime Structures*, edited by Giovanni Fiandaca, provided an impressive collection of essays on the history of women in the Mafia as well as comparative contributions from Latin America, Europe, and the United States. Similar to previous attempts to describe the role of women in criminal organizations (Siebert 1996; Longrigg 1998), the criminological and anthropological literature on the subject is largely based on media reports, fragments of biographies (usually of the male partners of female criminals), police files, and court proceedings.

The prevalent explanations for the involvement of women in organized crime are founded on analyses of family/gender role divisions and/or the specific structure of particular crime organizations, such as the Colombian or Mexican cartels (Campbell 2009; Carey and Cisneros 2011). Another frequently used argument in the literature explains the supposedly growing involvement of women in crime by pointing to the emancipation of women both in society in general as well as within criminal groups (Siebert 1996). Explanations such as these leave many questions unanswered, such as whether the involvement of women in organized crime activities can also be linked to their ethnic origin. For instance, why is it that Nigerian female criminals appear to be more daring and more actively involved in criminal networks than their European counterparts?

(p. 325) A brief search of the historical sources reveals that the supposedly passive attitude of women involved in criminal organizations does not reflect the historical truth. All over Europe and the United States we can find examples of female criminal leaders in various periods of history. Sheyndl Bljuvshtein, nicknamed Sonka Zolotaya Rutchka (Sonka, the golden hand), was one of the most admired female criminals in Russian history, despite her extremely violent actions in major Russian cities in the nineteenth century (Siegel 2005; Gilinsky 2007). Agata Galiffi, also known as "the mafia flower" or "the lady boss of all bosses," was a legendary crime boss in 1930s Argentina, who stood at the head of a criminal organization operating in Rosario, Buenos Aires, and Tucuman (Goris 1999; Rossi 2007, p. 153). We can also find examples of female criminal leaders in the Jewish underworld of New York's Lower East Side in the 1930s (Block 1977). After World War II, Yoshika Matsuda, who led the large Kanto Matsuda-gumi gang in Tokyo, and Nami Odagiri, the godmother of the Ryugaki gang in Osaka, were prominent figures in the Japanese underworld (Otomo 2007, p. 210). Their relationships with male criminals, varying from marriage and blood ties to purely business relations, provided these women with access to criminal opportunities

and catapulted them to the top of criminal organizations.

### B. From Recruiters to "Madams"

Despite past and present examples of women reaching the top of criminal organizations, the majority of women involved in criminal activities either occupy marginal roles or act as partners in crime with their male companions or relatives. Generally speaking, there are three categories of women involved in organized crime: "supporters," "partners in crime," and "madams." Women can be classified as *supporters* when they are subordinate to the leader of a criminal group and either under threat or "voluntarily" participate in criminal activities, for instance as drug couriers or recruiters of potential victims of women trafficking. Female offenders can be called *partners in crime* when they have a relationship with a man and cooperate with him, in principle on the basis of equality, by performing certain tasks and activities. The category "partners in crime" consists of women who voluntarily take part in the criminal activities of their partners (spouses, boyfriends, or business partners). The role of female partners can vary from a fifty-fifty division of work and profit to a managing role with the male partners occupying themselves solely with the task of providing protection through violence and intimidation. The relationships between the partners can vary from intimate to symbolic or "businesslike" (Siegel and De Blank 2010). The *madams* of the last category are female offenders who are themselves in charge of coordinating criminal activities.

In some parts of the world, women in criminal groups remain in marginal positions (Sicily, Eastern Europe), while in other regions they actively participate in criminal activities and sometimes climb to the top of criminal organizations (Latin America, West Africa). Their positions and involvement in criminal enterprises mirror the gender (p. 326) relationships in the broader society where women occupy a wide range of functions and roles (from housewife to top executive or politician).

The relational embeddedness of organized crime in society is also manifested in the intermediary role women sometimes play by building connections to the legitimate world on behalf of their criminal spouses. The mistresses and wives of crime bosses are often actresses, models or popular singers who are constantly invited to appear at functions, parties, television shows, and charitable events. A well-known example of the "glamorous wife" is that of Ceca, the wife of the late Serbian crime boss Željko Ražnatović, alias Arkan. In this context, the role of women in organized crime shows the embeddedness of gender relationships in the broader society and demonstrates the embeddedness argument with regard to gender: organized crime is not exclusively a man's world.

### C. Taking Over Men's Positions

When the husbands are in prison, their spouses sometimes take over the role of criminal entrepreneur, and in this position they are not averse to using threats of physical violence. This kind of behavior is well documented in the literature on the wives of Italian Mafiosi. As a result of the intensified fight against the mafia and of the use of *pentiti*,[3] many mafia members have been imprisoned, and their wives and daughters had no choice but to look after their affairs.[4] Here we see family businesses in which everyone fulfils their own task. In the case of Italy, enhanced law enforcement actions against the Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta in the late 1990s to early 2000s led to the rapid emergence of women in the criminal arena. A great many male members of these criminal organizations were arrested and convicted to long prison sentences (Paoli 2008). As a result, the sisters, wives, and mothers of these imprisoned Mafiosi emerged to take over their activities. Some of these women have become major criminal figures and leaders of criminal clans.[5] Nevertheless, by and large, the Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta are still male organizations, even though women are increasingly participating in running illegal businesses. In this respect, the gender relations in organized crime replicate the dominant gender relations in broader society.

### D. Embeddedness in the Sex Industry

In contrast to the women in the Italian mafia who take on the duties of their imprisoned husbands and sons, Nigerian and Ghanaian female traffickers take the initiative themselves: they set up contacts, plan operations, and use every opportunity to make money. Here we find another example of the embeddedness of organized crime in gender relationships. Since the mid-1980s, African women have managed to obtain leading roles in criminal organizations engaged in large-scale human trafficking and they have left their male competitors behind. The

phenomenon of female women traffickers can (p. 327) be explained by socioeconomic developments in the position of women in their native countries on the one hand, and by the opportunities for making money in Europe on the other hand. Economic necessity forced women from various parts of Africa to go and look for opportunities in Europe. They came to Europe in the 1980s as seasonal laborers looking for work in the tomato fields in Italy or as prostitutes with previous experience in their own countries. These women discovered that there was a great demand for African girls. Working as prostitutes themselves, they started recruiting other girls and were able to convince male sponsors to invest in the extremely lucrative sex industry (Monzini 2005, p. 117; Siegel 2007). By using their social ties and the existing structures (the local sex industry, trade channels from Nigeria to Western Europe), some of these prostitutes were able to settle as "madams" in Europe. These women forge relationships with local actors in the sex industry such as pimps, brothel owners, other Nigerian madams, local drivers, and bodyguards. They take advantage of the existing sex industry facilities to guarantee their women protection, a place to work, and a regular supply of clients.

Today, Nigerian female criminals have become associated with women trafficking. They are in charge of fully fledged criminal organizations: they give orders to subordinates, coordinate the trafficking, control the prostitutes, and manage the finances. The networks they lead can vary from small groups with only a few members to sizable, internationally operating organizations (Monzini 2005; Siegel 2009).

Organized crime was and still is dominated by men, the same as it is in the outside world. Every now and then, remarkable women will make it to the top. They will always be remembered because they are exceptional. As a rule, however, women play a subservient role, even when they replace their partners when they are in prison. The above-mentioned examples of the Sicilian mafia and the 'Ndrangheta reflect the traditional gender relations in Italian society. But there are also women who are successful in seizing opportunities in new markets. Thanks to their knowledge, skills, and experience acquired in previous occupations, they are able to develop into "madams."

**IV. Occupational Embeddedness**

In this section we focus on occupations, work relations, and work settings that can serve as a breeding ground for organized crime activities. There are various ways in which organized crime is embedded in occupations, as each occupation provides different opportunities to commit and conceal criminal activities.

## A. Occupations as Opportunity Structures

In some cases, the link between organized crime and occupations is easily explained: certain occupations provide their practitioners with ideal opportunities to engage in (p. 328) organized crime, as demonstrated by the example of the baker (section 2) who discovered that his licit activities provided a golden opportunity to smuggle drugs. Benson, Madensen, and Eck explain how certain occupations provide opportunity structures to commit crimes (2009, p. 108 ff). They distinguish between three aspects of the opportunity structure: nodes, paths, and edges. *Nodes* refer to the social contacts established during the course of a career. In addition to their position in a work-related social network, the practitioners of certain occupations have also gained valuable knowledge on how to follow established procedures and where to find the right people to achieve certain goals (*paths*). In the exercise of his profession, an actor may also run into so-called *edges*, the gray areas that offer opportunities to commit crimes. This usually involves activities insufficiently supervised by others.

By offering a combination of nodes, paths, and edges, some occupations provide excellent opportunities for organized crime activities, particularly in relation to the provision of illegal goods and services. For instance, knowledge of international shipping routes, international road transport, import and export routines, and the social contacts established on these routes are as useful to criminal entrepreneurs as they are to legitimate businessmen. Some of these businessmen may be inclined to use the opportunity structure to make a complete transition from legal to illegal business dealings. Others may use the opportunities to double their income by continuing to perform legal activities while also using the legal trade channels as a cover-up for illegal activities. In this gray area, part-time criminals can smuggle relatively small amounts of drugs in containers full of legitimate commodities.

Occupations involving mobility, transport, or logistics can be a fertile breeding ground for transnational smuggling activities. These occupations not only provide opportunities for smuggling but also for the concealment of illegal activities. For instance, someone with legitimate reasons to travel frequently rarely evokes suspicion. This is not

just about the occupations per se but rather about their intersections with legitimate activities such as the transport of goods, the transhipment of goods in ports and airports, the crossing of European Union borders, and so on. Seaports, customs offices, and transport firms are places where we may expect to find such "structural" embeddedness of organized crime.

### B. Embeddedness as a Strategy

In the Western world, there are basically two types of organized crime (Paoli 2002). In the United States and Italy, there are criminal groups who try to bring specific sectors or territories under their dominion through corruption or threats of violence or by infiltrating local elites. They offer "regulation" or "protection" in exchange for money, but what they are really engaged in is extortion. The second type of organized crime is aimed at the provision of illegal goods and services; these perpetrators derive their position and income from catering to existing societal needs. Both these forms of organized crime are embedded in different types of occupations. In the previous subsection, we (p. 329) discussed the embeddedness of organized crime groups engaged in the provision of illegal goods and services, more specifically in smuggling activities.

In the literature on the "Italian American" type of organized crime, we find completely different forms of embeddedness, namely in government institutions (customs, police), societal institutions (politics, trade unions), and branches of industry such as the construction industry, the clothing industry, the waste disposal industry, etc. (Massari 2003). Time and again, embeddedness is employed as a strategy to weaken these institutions from within. In the absence of effective social control, criminal organizations are often able to insert their own regulatory mechanisms. In these cases organized crime manipulated its social environment to fit the needs of organized crime. Embeddedness has, as it were, become a means to establish dominion over businesses or government agencies. This strategy is accomplished by influencing ("buying") auditors, lorry drivers, internal security personnel, property developers, aldermen, etc. By colluding with or corrupting these functionaries criminal organizations are able to manage the social environment. An example of this is the role of organized crime in the awarding of public tenders. In some parts of Southern Italy no government contract is awarded without mafia groups having a say in the matter and taking a percentage of the money as a "fee" (Savona 2010). These groups play a decisive role in the cartel agreements between companies (Gambetta and Reuter 1995; Paoli 2003). They are so deeply embedded in the business world that they can claim this role. Without such a far-reaching embeddedness it would be impossible for criminal groups to play this role. In other parts of Western Europe organized crime is not embedded in its social environment to such a far-reaching extent. Cartels do exist in Western Europe, for instance in the construction industry in the Netherlands, as was revealed in 2002 by the findings of a parliamentary inquiry in the Netherlands. Thousands of construction firms were shown to be involved in illegal price and market fixing, but it was concluded that organized crime did not play any role in the arrangement and enforcement of the cartel's agreements (Van de Bunt 2008b). As mentioned above, social embeddedness determines the form of criminality. But what comes first: the embeddedness determining the form or the form of criminality determining the embeddedness? One thing is certain: organized crime in most West European countries appears to be primarily focused on illegal trade and this requires a different kind of embeddedness than that of criminal groups deriving their profits from extortion and dominion.

## V. Ethnic Embeddedness

A final example of social embeddedness can be found in cases in which ethnic minorities (whether first-generation immigrants or their second- or third-generation descendents) are involved in organized crime. The link between organized crime and ethnic minorities has been extensively researched and theorized (Ianni and Reuss-Ianni 1972; Ruggiero 1996; Bovenkerk 2001; Paoli and Reuter 2008). Research on the links between (p. 330) ethnic minorities or immigrant groups and organized crime include a vast range of studies.[6] These studies, together with other contributions on specific activities and characteristics[7] explore and discuss how ethnic minorities or immigrant groups use violence, secrecy, trust, kinship, ethnicity, cultural codes, reputations, or economic and political resources when they engage in organized crime activities.

Despite the variety of methodologies followed and arguments put forward on the above-mentioned issues, all authors show, sometimes implicitly, that criminal activities of these ethnic minorities do not take place in a social vacuum or in a parallel, underground, secretive, or "external" reality. On the contrary, researchers offer plenty of

evidence that the (illegal) activities and transactions of these groups are socially embedded in various ways. In fact, the notion of social embeddedness has been, particularly in the field of economic sociology, extensively researched, theorized, and applied to immigrant groups and "ethnic enclaves" to understand the nature of informal markets and the different ways in which immigrants are incorporated or assimilated into local arrangements (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Portes 1995; Waldinger 1995).

When we analyze the ways in which ethnic minorities involved in organized crime embed their activities in broader social arrangements, we find that they maintain, establish, cultivate, or negotiate material and symbolic ties (1) with their own (national, ethnic, language) communities (both locally and overseas), (2) with local, mainstream "native" actors or groups, and (3) with other immigrant groups (locally and abroad).

### A. Social Embeddedness in Communities

Part of the strength of ethnic minorities in organized crime activities lies in the fact that they are able to mobilize internal resources and relations, both material and symbolic, that grant them a comparative advantage to successfully conduct their (illegal) transactions.

The use of kinship, family, and locality ties, more than ethnicity per se, has consistently been found across all ethnic minorities and immigrant groups, providing a fertile ground for "bounded solidarity," enforceable trust, cooperation, loyalty, and secrecy needed to protect and enforce illegal operations.[8] This form of social embeddedness can take several forms across groups, from an "instrumental," pragmatic use of blood and artificial kinship by, for instance, Colombians (Zaitch 2002) to stronger "ethnic" lines based on tribal affiliation, as in the case of Nigerians (Carling 2006; Oboh 2011), or relying on large extended families, as in the case of Albanians or Kurds (Bovenkerk and Yesilgöz 2007; Arsovska 2009).

Many ethnic minorities successfully involved in illegal transactions are able to hide, disguise, or mix them within a wider range of illegal or informal but mainly legal activities and businesses of the group. Commercial or political diasporas, particularly transnational ethnic enclaves or trading, middlemen minorities, have played a central role in hosting cross-border (illegal) production, smuggling and distribution of (illegal) goods and services, as it has been for example the case of Cubans in Florida (Saenz Rovner (p. 331) 2008), Jews in Antwerp (Siegel 2008), Nigerians in China (Oboh 2011), or Chinese in American Chinatowns (Chin 2000). The symbiotic and parasitical use of own "ethnic" businesses is widespread and includes in many countries the use of restaurants, bars, discotheques, telephone and internet businesses, informal money transfer offices (underground banking), travel agencies, export-import companies, etc.

This is also true for large old and new immigrant groups mainly consisting of migratory blue-collar workers who do not form commercial diasporas and do not develop own ethnic entrepreneurship, but instead are incorporated in the formal and informal economy as industrial or service workers. In these cases, usually involving both first and second generation immigrants, a large number of visible immigrants (mostly experiencing social deprivation) host/embed illegal transactions conducted by a rather small group, often around local, street-level, visible illegal markets. This kind of social embeddedness includes cases such as cocaine trafficking and smuggling by Mexicans in California (Campbell 2009), heroin trafficking by Turks in the Netherlands (Bovenkerk and Yesilgöz 2007), advanced fees scams by Nigerians in Britain (Carling 2006), street drug retail by North Africans in France (Lalam 2004), or extortion by Italians and Irish in Chicago during the days of Prohibition (Bovenkerk 2001).

Another important source of social embeddedness of illegal transactions by ethnic minorities belongs to the realm of geopolitics. Cases of this kind involve at least two types of (overlapping) immigrant groups. First, we have immigrants who come from production or transit areas from where illegal goods (drugs, etc.), services (prostitution), or people (human smuggling and trafficking) originate. Their comparative advantage lies in their privileged access to key actors, commodities, and resources, including corruption. We can think here of Colombians (cocaine production), Albanians and Turks (Balkan Route), Mexicans and Antilleans (cocaine transit), or Nigerians (prostitution, fraud, cocaine transit). A second group of immigrants whose involvement in crime can be explained by geopolitical factors come from border areas, peripheral regions, often economically depressed and a site of lawlessness, rebelliousness, war, banditry, and piracy (Bovenkerk 2001, p. 116). These regions usually show strong autonomy from central political powers, they are in the hands of outlaw (but locally legitimate) power brokers or are located in fragile or failed states. Classic examples cover very different regions of the world

including Sicily, Corsica, Malta, the Rif Mountains in Morocco, the South-East Asian Golden Triangle, the Yunnan province (China), Ireland, Galicia (Spain), the Kashmir region (India and Pakistan), Kurdistan (Turkey and Iraq), Sierra Leone, Chechnya, Somalia, El Salvador, the Balkans, or Baluchistan (Pakistan).[9] In some cases, ethnic minorities originating from these areas enjoy political protection from own local leaders (warlords, dictators, local Mafiosi, corrupt politicians, secret services, etc.) and their illegal activities serve their political interests and purposes. Some examples involve Sicilian or Corsican Mafiosi, Lao heroin traffickers, Moroccan hashish entrepreneurs, or Balkan arms traders. In other cases, migrant groups are precisely engaged in political conflicts—or war—against the central government or neighboring countries, and they can use the illegal profits to further support their cause, as in the case of Irish, Chechnyan, Kurdish, or Kashmiri migrants (Bovenkerk 2001; Bovenkerk (p. 332) et al. 2003). In still other cases, migrants involved in crime originate in lawless regions or fragile states, as it is the case of many Salvadorian gangs (*maras*) operating in the United States and Central America, or Somali human smugglers active in Europe.

### B. Social Embeddedness in Other (Foreign) Groups or Networks

Immigrants engaged in cross border crime not only rely on their own ethnic, national or language group to facilitate illegal business, but they also establish "weaker" but very fruitful ties (Granovetter 1973) with other illegal entrepreneurs either from abroad or belonging to other minorities. First, all reviewed research indicates that organized crime is strongly interethnic and intraethnic and that part of the competitive advantage of some groups lies in their network of international contacts and their capacity to mobilize them.[10] This is, for example, the case of Nigerian entrepreneurs, with contacts (and mobility) stretching from China and Britain to South Africa and Brazil (Oboh 2011). The same can be argued about Dutch illegal entrepreneurs: neither large in numbers nor with high profiles (no violent reputation), they have been (historically) able to reach and trade with all sorts of commercial diasporas and posts all over the world (Fijnaut et al. 1998).

It has also been argued by many authors that "brokerage" is an essential feature of organized crime. Blok (1974) describes how Sicilian Mafiosi were in fact successful "power brokers" between different social groups, while others have emphasized the key role played by some individuals and minority groups (even entire ethnic enclaves) as intermediates or "trade brokers" in illegal transactions (Bovenkerk 1995; Zaitch 2002; Morselli 2005). La Bella Bettien, for example, was a Dutch female broker who managed in the late 1980s to function as intermediary between Colombian and Italian drug entrepreneurs based in the Netherlands (Bovenkerk 1995). Cases of "ethnic" brokerage involve some immigrant groups living in transit countries, such as Nigerians in Brazil, Colombians in the Dutch Antilles, or Russians in Poland.

Next to engaging with other local or foreign groups as business partners or brokers, ethnic minorities involved in organized crime also heavily rely on them as (international) service providers, facilitators, and customers. Among goods and services provided/sold by legal and illegal foreign entrepreneurs we can mention arms, waste disposal, chemical precursors, contract killers, investment opportunities, or illegal workers (Ruggiero 2000; Passas 2003). Examples include Colombians in the Netherlands contracting professional killers from Yugoslavia (Zaitch 2002), Chinese in Europe smuggling immigrants from all over Asia, Russians in South Spain providing business opportunities to British or Dutch criminals, etc. Other cases can also be found when examining international women trafficking and smuggling networks: Albanian traffickers moving Moldavian or Romanian women to Italy or the Netherlands, Turkish criminals exploiting Bulgarian women in Rotterdam, Nigerian "madams" smuggling women from Ghana or Liberia to Europe, etc. (Carling 2006; Siegel 2007; Becucci 2008; Arsovska 2009).

### (p. 333) C. Social Embeddedness in Local Actors, Structures, and Arrangements

A third form of social embeddedness takes place when ethnic minorities involved in organized crime establish parasitic and symbiotic relations (Passas 2003) with local actors and structures (both legal and illegal) from mainstream society. In fact, it can be argued that "ethnic" organized crime has better chances to succeed in contexts where it is able to use local economic infrastructure, receive social acceptance, enjoy some kind of political protection, profit from local technological resources (mainly communication), and/or culturally adapt to the demands of the local context.

The strong links with mainstream economic activity and actors are well documented by all existing research on organized crime and include the use of local import businesses, hotels, restaurants, bars, airports, seaports,

transport companies, or financial businesses. Zaitch (2002) found not only Dutch Colombian "mixed couples" in the cocaine business in the Netherlands but also many other "Colombian ties" with the port of Rotterdam or Schiphol airport. As Bovenkerk (2001, p. 119) explains, organized crime minorities flourish around "the ports with well-known underworld traditions such as Marseilles, Hamburg, Odessa, Alexandria, Shanghai, Sydney and New York." Local markets and businesses that use or depend on migrant labor (construction industry, job contractor companies, prostitution, intensive agriculture) or are cash intensive (gambling industry, hotels, catering business) have traditionally been linked in one way or the other with "ethnic" organized crime.

Reviewing the conditions under which transplanted "mafias" can succeed, Federico Varese argues that "the response of the local population (both criminal and law-abiding) to the newly arrived mafia is key to the success, or otherwise, of transplantation" (Varese 2006, p. 419). He analyzes how the local demand for protection works in the cases of the 'Ndrangheta in Verona and the Russian Solntsevo crime group in Budapest.

In many countries, another important dimension in the social embeddedness of ethnic organized crime is the political one: to what extent are these organizations able to enjoy protection (or at least indifference) from local state actors, including politicians, policemen, judges, prosecutors, customs officers, control authorities, etc. While criminal groups might be looking for protection, impunity, security, intelligence, information, money, or assistance, state actors (both politicians and law enforcement agents) are usually interested in money for personal or political purposes, services, favors, information, intelligence, violence, or votes (Godson 2003, p. 9). Social embeddedness in political structures can take the form of passive or active corruption, collaboration, collusion, co-optation, or funding (Passas 2003). The so-called political-criminal nexus (Godson 2003) seems to work differently in various contexts, but in general we can argue that political embeddedness is stronger or even only available for native, powerful mainstream organized crime. However, in many countries particular ethnic minorities may constitute an electoral force due to demographics or economic power, and enjoy political protection for their illegal businesses and activities. Historical cases (p. 334) include Italians in New York, Indian immigrants in Suriname, or Lebanese immigrants in Argentina.

Another way in which immigrant groups involved in organized crime establish a strong link with their environment is through the use and development of particular technological resources. The range of information and communication technologies daily used to conduct illegal transactions includes mobile phones, email, faxes, the Internet (websites and blogging), and social networks. Despite all kinds of measures, illegal entrepreneurs seem to use phones and the Internet in a rather open way, and it is not surprising that law enforcement tries to follow and catch criminals by intercepting their communications. They also leave traces when they use computers for buying commodities, advertising and distributing forbidden goods and services, or engaging in banking operations. Ethnic minorities might use some specific forms of communication (prepaid phones, the Internet, telephone booths, certain websites or social forums for migrants, underground banking systems, etc.).

A final form of embeddedness is found in the realm of the symbolic and the cultural performances of immigrant groups. Far from being culturally or ethnically fixed, immigrant or minority groups are constantly changing and negotiating cultural meanings and practices around crime. Much like trustful individuals who become suspicious in new places, previously peaceful entrepreneurs may feel the need to resort to violence in unfamiliar social contexts (Zaitch 2002, p. 262). Organized crime, if it is to be successful, has to mutate, readapt, and reshape not only at a material level but also in cultural terms. A good example is provided by Zaitch in his study on Colombian drug entrepreneurs in the Netherlands: a newly arrived trafficker who used to carry (and use) a gun in Colombia, continues to carry a knife in the Netherlands. He is immediately told by his own Colombian partners that in the Netherlands you do not carry weapons on the street (Zaitch 2002, p. 270). We can see this as a case of successful "assimilation" of foreign crime into local practices.

To sum up, from the research and literature discussed here on ethnic minorities and organized crime, two central arguments emerge. First, we claim that the way in which ethnic minorities engage (or fail to engage) in organized crime activities is to a large extent shaped by the nature of their social embeddedness, consisting of social ties (relational embeddedness) with local and overseas groups and arrangements such as own communities, native groups and infrastructure, foreign entrepreneurs, etc. (structural embeddedness). This means that their degree of success in any given organized crime related activity or illegal market largely reflects (and depends on) the way in which these groups are able to establish links with their local and global environments, at economic, political, cultural, and technological levels.

Second, it can also be argued that ethnic minorities involved in organized crime activities constantly change and (re)adapt their ways of "conducting business," as their social ties with others (persons, groups, markets, both local and global) also change, develop, and greatly vary according to local contexts. Far from reflecting fixed cultural codes or "accumulated" forms of social capital, illegal transactions at the local level by ethnic minorities are deeply embedded in diverse and changing environments.

### (p. 335) VI. Conclusion

Social embeddedness refers to the intertwinement of organized crime with the social environments at micro as well as macro levels. These environments provide fertile grounds for crime groups. Old and new environments offer opportunities to commit and conceal crimes. Crime will take on the shape of its social environment. For instance, the gender relations existing in society reflect the ways in which women are represented in crime groups. The social environment determines the form and nature of organized crime and vice versa: organized crime can determine the shape of its environment: criminal ethnic groups can undermine and contaminate the position of ethnic communities; mafia groups are able to control and corrupt their entire social environment. The many examples mentioned above also point to the fact that the relations between the environment and organized crime are constantly changing. By expanding existing networks or by switching to other networks through the use of social ties, criminal groups are able to access new markets and discover new opportunities for criminal activities.

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## Notes:

(1) . The example is based on a real case from a research project on organized crime that involved the analysis of 120 police files of large-scale investigations into organized crime (Van de Bunt and Kleemans 2007).

(2) . The social embeddedness of many organized crime activities is well documented (see Albini 1971; Ianni and Reuss-Ianni 1972; Chambliss 1978; Finckenauer and Waring; Kleemans and Van de Bunt 1999; Van de Bunt and Kleemans 2007; Varese 2001; Zhang and Chin 2002; Morselli 2005; and Natarajan 2006).

(3) . This term is used for Italian Mafiosi who cooperate with the authorities.

(4) . Letizia Paoli, Ernesto Savona, and Anton Blok called attention to this phenomenon in their presentations at the CIROC seminar about the Italian Mafia on 20 December 2006 in Amsterdam.

(5) . "Donna Gemma" or "Pupetta," Assunta Maresca, Erminia Giuliano of the Camorra (Allum, 2007) and Rita DiGiovine of the 'Ndrangheta (Ingrasci, 2007) have become well-known female crime bosses.

(6) . On Chinese in the United States (Chin 1999; Zhang and Chin 2002; McIllwain 2004); Albanians in Europe (Arsovska 2009); foreign ethnic minorities in Italy (Becucci 2008); South-Italians in North Italy (Paoli 2003; Varese 2006); Turks and Kurds in Europe (Bovenkerk and Yesilgöz 2007); Russians in the Netherlands (Siegel 2005) and in the United States (Finckenauer and Waring 1998); Colombians in the Netherlands (Zaitch 2002) and in New York (Cajas 2004); African Americans in the United States (Ianni 1974; Griffin 2003); Nigerians in Europe (Carling 2006; Siegel 2007; Oboh 2011), just to name a few.

(7) . On activities: Van de Port (2001), Paoli and Reuter (2008), and Van de Bunt (2008*a*). On characteristics: Kleemans and Van de Bunt (1999), Von Lampe and Johansen (2004), Bovenkerk et al. (2003), and Zaitch (2005).

(8) . See Blok (1974), Bovenkerk (2001), Zaitch (2002), Kleemans (2007), and Bovenkerk and Yesilgöz (2007).

(9) . For the relation between organized violence, illegal entrepreneurship, peripheral autonomous regions, and failed states, see Blok (1974), Bovenkerk (2001), and Koonings and Kruijt (2004).

(10) . See Kleemans and Van de Bunt (1999), Zaitch (2002), Paoli (2002), Dorn et al. (2005), Kleemans (2007), Paoli and Reuter (2008), and Van de Bunt (2008*a*).

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