Ethnographies of Organized Crime

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter discusses how the ethnographic method has been used to study organized crime (OC). The first part defines OC, the mafia, and ethnography. The second section reviews early field studies, and the third focuses on the seminal contribution by W.F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society* (1943/1993). Whyte has set the model for subsequent ethnographies of OC and the mafia as involving (1) extensive periods in the field, (2) a project that is independent of authorities, (3) developing an intimate knowledge of the place or an organization, (4) the observation of interactions, and (5) a concern for the validity and the reliability of the data collected, including the impact of the ethnographer's position on the information gathered. The fourth section offers a selective review of subsequent ethnographies of OC which are compared and contrasted with *Street Corner Society*. The final section discusses risk, the use of official data, the issue of anonymity, "rapid ethnographies," and the limitations of fieldwork.

Keywords: organized crime, mafia, Street Corner Society, communities, organizations, networks

THIS chapter discusses how academics have conducted fieldwork on organized crime (OC). The first section provides definitions of OC, the mafia, and ethnography. The second section focuses in particular on *Street Corner Society* (SCS) by W. F. Whyte ([1943] 1993) and highlights how SCS has established the modern canon of ethnographic work on organized crime, while the third section offers a selective review of subsequent studies compared and contrasted with SCS. In the final section of this chapter, I discuss the limitations of the ethnographic method in studying organized crime.

The key points of this chapter are as follows:

- Definitions of OC either focus on the organizational structure or the activities of the groups.
- There are important distinctions to be made between "organized crime" and "mafia."

- *Street Corner Society* by W. F. Whyte ([1943] 1993) has set the model for subsequent ethnographies of OC and the mafia as involving (1) extensive periods in the field, (2) a project that is independent of authorities, (3) developing an intimate knowledge of the place or an organization, (4) the observation of interactions, (5) a concern for the validity and the reliability of the data collected, including the impact of the ethnographer's position on the information gathered.
- Early field studies of organized crime have argued that crime is a product of social forces, not moral failings.
- Ethnographic research on organized crime and mafia can be risky, especially for field studies of the internal organization of groups.
- Ethnographies are best equipped to capture how the activities of OC have an impact on a community, rather than the inner workings of the crime organization.
- Variations on ethnographic approaches, such as "rapid ethnography," present new opportunities to study organized crime and mafia.

(p. 341) What Are Organized Crime and the Mafia?

The United Nations offers a typical definition of organized crime:

> A group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time, acting in concert with the aim of committing at least one crime punishable by at least four years' incarceration in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit. (UN 2004: art. 2)

The British National Crime Agency has a similar, broad definition: "Organized crime can be defined as serious crime planned, coordinated and conducted by people working together on a continuing basis. Their motivation is often, but not always, financial gain" (cit. in Campana and Varese, 2018: 1381). Along the same line of reasoning, the US Organized Crime Control Act of 1970 defines organized crime as "[t]he unlawful activities of […] a highly organized, disciplined association." Such definitions—and many others—emphasize the organizational aspect of OC—the planning, the coordination among lawbreakers, and the longevity of the group. Organized crime is crime that is organized, often spanning several countries. As documented in Varese (2010), definitions that emphasize the structure have evolved over the twentieth century. Until the 1960s, OC was defined as a highly structured entity, but from the 1970s onward, the organization of OC has been considered to be more flexible, "networked," and less hierarchical.

An alternative way to think about OC is to focus on *activities*. A view that was popular in the 1960s suggested that organized crime groups are illicit enterprises producing goods and services, such as gambling, loansharking, narcotics, and sexual services (Task Force Report 1967: 1; Smith 1975, 1978). Once a product exists, it needs someone to bring it to the market. Activities traditionally associated with organized crime, such as human trafficking, human smuggling, drug trafficking, trafficking in animal parts, and stolen data

can all be thought of as forms of *trading* which can occur in physical or virtual marketplaces, such as the dark web. Although some groups are involved primarily in *production* or *trading*, others *govern*. Governance-type OC groups attempt to regulate and control the production and distribution of a given commodity or service unlawfully. In essence, these types of OC groups perform a function that is normally reserved to the state in legal markets. In order to govern, they need to invest in a special set of resources, which are not necessarily available to illegal producers and traders, such as violence (Campana and Varese 2013; Gambetta 1993; Schelling 1971).[1]

A further distinction should be made within governance-type organized crime groups. These entities can take many forms. Some might limit themselves to governing the production and sale of a *particular commodity* like drugs or sexual service, while others aspire to protect *any* transaction, not just those related to, say, drugs, in a given domain. The latter definition would include traditional *mafias*. In other words, mafias (p. 342) attempt to govern any transaction in a given territory or, to use the influential definition by Gambetta (1993), they exercise a monopoly over protection. This way of thinking about organized crime and the mafia takes as its starting point the *activities* of the groups rather than their structure. The latter becomes a by-product of the former. In turn, the activities take place in communities which suffer from the presence of OC. For instance, asking for protection money involves an entrepreneur operating in the community and a Mafioso belonging to the organization.

Several influential works on organized crime and the mafia are based on lengthy ethnographic fieldwork undertaken by academics, some focusing primarily on the organization, while others focusing primarily on the activities of OC and their effects on the communities where OC and the mafia operate (Adler 1993; Blok 1974; Fleisher 1998; Hamill 2010; Ianni 1972; Schneider and Schneider 1976; Stark 1981; Varese 2001; Whyte 1943; Wong 2019).[2] Ethnography is a method of data collection that occurs in a natural setting and is not dependent on official sources. Involving extensive field observation, it is “research conducted by situating oneself in a social setting to observe and analyze individual interaction in order to understand some complex social process, event, activity, or outcome” (Vaughan 2011: 690). Ethnography can in principle be conducted in an organization or a community where OC operates. Yet two specific dilemmas arise for ethnographers. If the characterization of the object of study is vague and generic, as in the definitions cited at the beginning of this chapter, ethnographers could end up studying any type of co-offending. If one takes OC and the mafia to refer to highly secretive organizations (as it would seem more sensible), one might find it hard to be able to penetrate such organizations safely and in a way that results can be reported in academic books and articles. On the other hand, ethnographers can focus on OC activities and their impact on communities. That step would allow scholars to conduct in-depth fieldwork in communities where OC and the mafia nest, and report on the social and economic consequences of these criminal organizations for the people at large, while recognizing that information gathered on the structure of the groups will be limited and hard to come by.

Early Examples of Ethnographies of Organized Crime

Accounts of organized crime and the mafia based on field trips and interviews with lawbreakers have been published since at least the mid-nineteenth century. In the case of Italy, the *Report on the Conditions of Sicily in the Nineteenth Century* by Leopoldo Franchetti ([1877] 2010) stands out. The author, an Italian aristocrat concerned about the situation in the South of Italy in the recently unified Kingdom, traveled to Sicily with two friends in 1876. His trip lasted some four months—from January to May—and led to the publication of his report in 1877. Franchetti talked to people who employed mafiosi to settle disputes and punish peasants. For the first time, Franchetti highlighted how that particular form of organized crime was part and parcel of the broader society. His work (p. 343) contains theoretical arguments still relevant today, and it has the merit to show that crime is the product of social forces rather than an individual moral failure. Rather than trying to penetrate the mafia, Franchetti outlined the social conditions that led to its emergence, and the effects it had on local politics and life. Yet this and other early studies (such as Mayhew 1980) are protoethnographies, lacking a systematic method of data collection.

The Chicago School, which grew out of the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago and was led by Robert Park and Ernest Burgess in the period 1917–1942 (Deegan 1988), produced a remarkable body of works on crime and deviance, including OC, such as *The Unadjusted Girl* (Thomas 1923), *The Hobo* (Anderson 1975), *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* (Thrasher 1963), John Landesco's report on organized crime in Chicago (Landesco 1968), and Paul G. Cressey's *The Taxi-Dance Hall* (Cressey 2008). Although these works are often credited with having invented the method of participant observation and systematic data collection, historians have pointed out that most of the data mentioned in these studies come from secondary sources, such as newspaper stories, courts' or coroners' records, census materials, and information collected by social work agencies, such as the Juvenile Protective Association (Deegan 1988; Platt 1994: 61, 63, 70).[3] Interviews with privileged observers and the subjects of the study were also carried out but were not given a great prominence in the narratives. More generally, participant observation was not given a significant role at Chicago until the mid-1940s, and, when used, it did not produce significant insights (Hervey 1987; Platt 1994).

We had to wait for the publication of *Street Corner Society* (Whyte [1943] 1993) by William Foote Whyte to have the work that sets the standards for future academic ethnographies of OC.

Street Corner Society, first published in 1943 and destined to acquire the status of a classic in sociology, is the account of life in an Italian-American "slum" (cheaply built residential housing). The author calls it "Cornerville," and later reveals that it is located in Boston's North End. The social relationships among the "corner boys," "college boys," politicians, and racketeers come to life in the pages. SCS uncovers how status and pres-

tige play out in the daily interaction of the people in the slum, a reality that appears disorganized and chaotic to the passer-by and the superficial observer. Instead, Whyte documents a hierarchy of informal relations based on "reciprocal obligations" (Whyte [1943] 1993: 272) that cross the legal and the illegal. By observing how the corner boys get involved in the "rackets and corruption," he is able to link the immigrant community to the American political machine and vote rigging. Ultimately, Whyte's greatest insights are that "Cornerville" is far from a disorganized microcosm, and that that crime is not a "social problem," but an "organized social system" (Whyte [1943] 1993: 286).

The book, published by the University of Chicago Press, constituted Whyte's doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago, although he conducted the research while enrolled as a Fellow at Harvard University and he did not have any connection—intellectual or otherwise—with the Chicago School, as he repeated several times over the years.[4] The book at first did not cause much of a stir. Low sales and the occasional positive review accompanied its publication (Whyte 1993: 286). Things changed when Whyte added a lengthy methodological Appendix, "On the Evolution of *Street Corner Society*," (p. 344) to the second edition, published in 1955. In the 1955 Appendix (Whyte [1943] 1993: 279–342), the author spells out his research strategy in the field and does not shy away from revealing the false starts, the ethical dilemma, the criminal acts he committed (e.g., he voted four times in a congressional election), as well as his general epistemology and theoretical orientation. This document has since been read as a manifesto and practical guide for participant observation studies to follow. The third edition (Whyte [1943] 1993: 342–357) contains additional paragraphs of the Appendix and a new text written by an informant and research assistant of Whyte, Angelo Orlandella (Whyte [1943]1993: 374–389). Whyte also revealed the location of "Cornerville" and the names of his informants. A fourth edition of SCS includes a discussion by Whyte of postfoundational, postmodernist ethnography and how it differs from his own epistemological stance (Whyte [1943] 1993: 357–373) (see discussion in the section "The Analytical Method").

SCS has been discussed extensively (see, e.g., the 1992 special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*) and is highly cited (almost 80,000 times according to Google scholar in 2019). The book continues to be in print and appears on syllabi across the world. The fieldwork undertaken by Whyte has entered the discipline's folklore. College students in the Boston area are taken on field trips by their instructors to "Cornerville," so they can observe the "slum" directly (Vidich 1992: 81). Yet it is the 1955 Appendix that constitutes a landmark in the sociological canon. What concerns us here is how SCS has set a model for academic ethnographies of organized crime. I will focus on the following six dimensions:

1. The ethnography of a place and/or an organization
2. Anonymity
3. The analytical method
4. Ethnography as living in the community
5. Ethnography as the observation of human interaction
6. The discovery of an informal social order hidden to the outsider

Dimensions 1 to 5 refer to the method, and dimension 6 speaks to a substantive empirical result. I will argue that SCS has shaped subsequent academic ethnographies of organized crime in all of the above domains.[5]

Street Corner Society: Setting the Standard

Ethnography of a Place and/or an Organization

Whyte's remarks in the 1995 Appendix are addressed to students who want to undertake "field studies of communities or organizations" (Whyte [1943] 1993: 279), although (p. 345) his book is a study of a community. Organized crime, "the rackets and corruption," are a feature of the society he studies, which is comprised of some 20,000 people (Whyte 1993: 289). Although he only deals with some aspects of life, he situates crime within the context of that community and he admits that it would be hard to penetrate a secret organization or even a political party: "I never did get in on the top-level political discussions where the real decisions were made," he writes in reference to political machination (Whyte [1943] 1993: 312). In addition, a researcher could put her life at great risk, especially when trying to penetrate the criminal organization. For example, when Joseph Pistone was discovered to be an undercover FBI agent embedded in the Bonanno family in New York, a hit was put on his head (Pistone [1987] 1989). Sánchez Jankowski (1991: 12) recalls that he gained access to the gangs he studied by submitting to a fighting test. His training in karate served him well to face these challenges, although it did not completely eliminate his anxiety. Over the course of his fieldwork, he was "seriously injured twice" (Sánchez Jankowski 1991: 12). *Ceteris paribus*, it is more dangerous to conduct ethnographic studies on the organization of the group rather than its activities and impact on the community at large.

Anonymity

Whyte gives fictional names to the area of Boston where he conducts fieldwork, as well as to the main characters. While the location could be easily guessed by some original readers, anonymity nonetheless makes it harder for scholars to evaluate the information presented in the book. Ethnographers studying crime have to strike a balance between protecting the reputation of the people they interview, ensuring their own safety, and allowing critics to double-check data. On the plus side, and contrary to the practice of some subsequent ethnographers (e.g., Ralph 2014), there is no indication that Whyte conflates real individuals into composite characters or alters dates, age, gender, and events. Each element retains its original distinctiveness. Finally, Whyte reveals personal names and locations forty years later, in the 1981 edition, suggesting that "there seems no longer any reason to maintain its fictional name, nor maintain the pseudonyms of some of the principal characters" (Whyte [1943] 1993: 342).

The Analytical Method

Whyte wants to contribute to a science of society and accepts the key distinction between objective and subjective reality. He believes that there is "one world out there" and it can be studied by a researcher. He accepts that causes can be established and explanations put forward. Indeed, he sets himself the task of "tak[ing] the theory to the field" (Whyte [1943] 1993: 287), while being open to changing his initial assumptions on the basis of the evidence collected. He sees his work as testing a theory and the selection of data reflects such attempts, but data are not selected to prove a preconceived assumption. In the 1993 (p. 346) edition (Whyte [1943] 1993: 365–369) and in Whyte (1993: 293–295), the author makes clear his distance from postfoundational ethnography. Postfoundational ethnography posits that any "discourse" is as valid as any other, and all reflects different forms of power, and does not believe that there is a culture or an organization "out there to be accurately represented by observers" (Whyte [1943] 1993: 366), a view strongly opposed by Whyte.

Whyte distinguishes theory from data, and sets out to collect information on the slum and the people who live in it using systematic and transparent methods. Issues of validity and reliability of the data collected are at the forefront of his work. He discusses at length how he gained entry into the social world of the slum, and how his key informant might have biased the data (Whyte [1943] 1993: 291). For this reason, he discusses the position of the author in the context, including his intellectual trajectory. Such a discussion is to the point and refers to the features that can have had an impact on the data collection process, such as the fact that Whyte is an outsider to the community, from a different ethnic, religious, and social background (Whyte [1943] 1993: 280–283). In the field, he follows basic rules to reduce distortion, for instance by typing up field notes as soon as possible (Whyte [1943] 1993: 287, 365). He strives to keep observations "completely divorced from moral judgement" (Whyte [1943] 1993: 287) and to not argue with people or judge them (Whyte [1943] 1993: 302). It is clear to him that the ethnographer should not shape events in the field, although he admits that it is not easy to remain detached, and breaches this principle at least twice. Finally, his work in the field is open to future public inspection: His notes are available to anyone in the form of archival data (Vidich 1992: 81).

Ethnography as Living in the Community

A lasting contribution by SCS is to spell out what ethnography is. In the 1955 Appendix, Whyte writes that "the researcher is living for an extended period in the community he is studying, his personal life is inextricably linked with his research" (Whyte [1943] 1993: 279).[6] Ethnography differs from conducting interviews in a field that is visited occasionally and briefly, or administering a survey to people living in a neighborhood (Whyte [1943] 1993: 288). As such, the description of one's method involves inevitably a personal account of one's time in the field and the researcher's background, insofar as it might affect the process of data collection. Clearly, there is no set length in the field for an ethnography to qualify as such, yet a credible study requires an extensive time commitment.

Whyte explains how he came to realize that relying just on prearranged meetings would lead the ethnographer to miss out on observing interactions that turn out to be revealing (Whyte [1943] 1993: 293). It is hard to predict in advance which situations will turn out to be significant. Encounters in the field often happen by chance (e.g., his meeting with the racketeer Tony Cataldo "came about almost by chance." Whyte [1943] 1993: 328). Ultimately, "the day-to-day routine activities of these men constituted the basic data of my study" (Whyte [1943] 1993: 320). In order to observe them, one has to be there as much as possible.

(p. 347) A corollary of this requirement is that the ethnographer tries to understand the cultural codes and manners of the people he studies. This effort starts with knowing their language. Whyte immerses himself in a neighborhood where most people speak Italian only, and he makes an earnest attempt to learn the language (Whyte [1943] 1993: 296), but it is unclear how much he ultimately mastered. In a scathing critique of SCS, Boelen (1992: 36–37) suggests that Whyte never learned Italian properly, although at a minimum trying to learn the language is a signal of commitment and respect for the people studied (Whyte [1943] 1993: 296).

Finally, SCS is a project unconnected with social work agencies, contrary to many studies conducted by the Chicago School (Platt 1994). In order to gain access to the field, Whyte contacts a vocational school serving the needs of recent immigrants in "Norton Street." The head of the girls' work department in the school understands Whyte's needs and puts him in touch with his key informant, Doc.[7] This contact proves to be crucial for the success of his project. Yet SCS is an independent research project, unconnected to official authorities. Perhaps most importantly, ethnography involves directly collecting evidence, rather than relying mainly on secondary data, especially on those produced by social agencies or the police.

Ethnography as the Observation of Human Interaction

Ethnography is the study of interactions among people in a natural setting. An extended period in the field allows the researcher to "establish objectively the pattern of *interaction* among people" (Whyte [1943] 1993: 287 emphasis added; see also Whyte [1943] 1993: 326). Whyte comes to see interaction as the essence of social studies during his time as a Fellow of the Harvard Society, where he is under the influence of his peer Conrad Arensberg, destined to become a prominent anthropologist (Whyte [1943] 1993: 286–287, 361; Whyte 1993: 288; see also Vidich 1992: 86). Arensberg was instrumental in turning Whyte's attention to "how often A contacts B, how long they spend together, who originates action when A, B, and C are together, and so on" (Whyte [1943] 1993: 287). Whyte quickly understands that one needs to spend considerable time in the field to observe such patterns. Rather than the grand, top-down theories of the likes of Talcott Parsons, Whyte's approach is observational, bottom-up, and relational.

The insights derived from such an approach are best seen in the now classic description of the game of bowling Whyte attends with the corner boys. He realizes that he is observ-

ing not just a leisure activity but the representation of informal authority within the community he is studying: “The scores of the bowling game approximate the structure of the gang […] The social structure [of the gang] was in action right on the bowling alleys” (Whyte [1943] 1993: 318). In effect, he mentally regresses two relational data sets, “who plays and wins at the game” onto “who holds authority in other settings, such as the street,” and finds a pattern of covariation. In SCS, Whyte also makes use of a key concept later associated with Social Network Analysis (SNA), namely, that the direction of a relation tells us something about the power of the actors. In other words, it matters (p. 348) whether an actor initiates, or is at the receiving end, of a given action. SNA models the direction of the tie. Whyte goes beyond an appreciation of direction and dyadic relations between actors. He distinguishes between *pair events* (interaction between two people) and *set events* (interactions among three or more people). Only the latter reveals patterns of influence and authority (Whyte [1943] 1993: 367). Whyte tests the proposition that repeated associations among men (e.g., who people play cards and/or drink with) would map onto “political” factions when the time comes to elect a new club president. He draws “positional maps” of where people sit when playing cards over a long period of time. He finds that most people interact with the same people. Only 16% of the individuals he observes fluctuate between the two main groupings. The reasoning he describes in the Appendix (Whyte [1943] 1993: 334–335) is consistent with community detection algorithms routinely implemented in social network analysis software such as UCINET.

The Discovery of an Informal Social Order Hidden to the Outsider

Whyte’s conclusion is that the key social institutions within “Cornerville” are founded on “a hierarchy of personal relationships based upon a system of reciprocal obligations” (Whyte [1943] 1993: 272). The lasting influence of SCS is to emphasize the informal system of conditional cooperation. While formal official organizations existed, the informality of the social fabric is crucial. The gang and the “rackets” lack a formal organization, he believes. They exist as a fluid pattern of interactions held together by repetition and obligation. Yet, this conclusion might be a by-product of his inability to penetrate the secret organization that operated in the area, namely, a mafia crime group. At the time, the Patriarca mafia family was active in the North Side of Boston. Giuseppe Joseph Lombardo, born in Italy in 1895, was a prominent figure in that part of Boston, involved in the number rackets, bookmaking, and bootlegging (during Prohibition). A suspect in the murder of Frank Wallace (the leader of the Irish mob), Lombardo was believed to be the first underboss of the Patriarca crime family from 1920–1932 when he then became the family’s first *consigliere* in 1932 until 1954. He retired in 1955 and died of natural causes in 1969. Whyte appears unaware of the existence of this mafia family, and especially that it was a formal organization. He consequently misses out on a crucial feature of organized crime.

In conclusion, SCS is a key text for those who wish to conduct ethnographies of organized crime. Indeed, it has set a standard for others to follow. The elements of ethnography advocated by Whyte are the following:

- The researcher is expected to live for a significant period of time in the community she wants to study.
- The researcher's personal life, for a period, becomes linked with her research.

(p. 349) • As part of this commitment, it is crucial to make a serious effort to learn the language of the people studied.

- Ethnography is independent of government agencies, although the researcher might use them to find informants and draw on the data they collected, and the ethnographer should be an independent scholar, rather than an agent of a government.
- The observations to be gathered in the field refer to the pattern of interaction among individuals as they carry out their daily activities.
- The way people interact reveals patterns of authority and social hierarchy that cannot be captured by one-to-one interviews.

Ethnography embraces the analytical method, which strives to separate theory from data, to collect information in a systematic and transparent way, and to offer tentative explanations of the patterns observed. The position of the ethnographer can be a source of bias in the process of data collection. Instead of being paralyzed by the inevitable limitation of the method, the scholar should discuss explicitly the sources of potential bias and address them as best as she can. Related to transparency is the issue of anonymity. Whyte struck a good balance by first hiding the names of the informants and the location of the fieldwork, in order to protect himself and others. On the other hand, he revealed this information forty years later. Other scholars can now double-check some of his conclusions. Finally, for Whyte, ethnography is the study of an informal order hidden to the outsider, yet he runs the risk of underestimating that formal, secret organizations might also exist in that context.

Selected Ethnographies of Organized Crime and the Mafia

In this section, I discuss a selection of subsequent ethnographies of organized crime. I focus especially on whether they are studies of the organization or rather of the community where OC operates, and how they relate to the model set by SCS.

A Family Business

A Family Business, by Francis Ianni with Elizabeth Reuss-Ianni (Ianni 1972), is the study of an organization rather than a place. Ianni sets out to penetrate a "family business syndicate, which was made up of four lineages" to which Ianni gives the pseudonym of Lupollo (Ianni 1972: 179; see also Ianni 1972: 12). The main author, Francis Ianni, who is of

Italian extraction and speaks fluent Italian, got his lucky break thanks to a personal acquaintance who introduced him to members of the family. He had already known some of them two years prior to starting his formal research, which lasted an additional (p. 350) two years. Ianni was able to "observe behaviour in settings which varied from large-scale family events such as weddings and christenings, to more intimate situations, such as dinners with one or more family members at home or in social clubs or restaurants" (Ianni 1972: 12). His project was independent of any particular government agency, in line with the lesson of SCS. He went further, disputing the validity of research conducted by social scientists working as consultants for law enforcement agencies (Ianni 1972: 8). Writing in the context of several government reports suggesting that the Italian-American mafia was a nationwide, large-scale, formal organization, he passionately argued that the answers to questions on the nature and activities of the mafia lie in "the field" and not in "official files" (Ianni 1972: 8). Thus, he set out to "observ[e] people in day-to-day interaction over a long period of time" (Ianni 1972: 9), and explicitly mentioned social network analysis (Ianni 1972: 9).

The anonymity protocols in *A Family Business* are fairly strict. In order to preserve "the anonymity and the confidence of the people we studied" (Ianni 1972: 13), Ianni changes all names, including that of the family he studied. He is vague on the setting of the study —the New York area—but reports some criminal activity conducted by family members. Very much like SCS, Ianni has a section "on the methods used in this study" (Ianni 1972: 175–189), where he details his personal background and how he entered the field.

Ianni reports that the crime family he studies engages in bootlegging, gambling, and usury. Since so little is revealed about the family, it is next to impossible to evaluate the validity of the findings. Ianni writes against the notion that the mafia is a formal organization. Instead, he argues that the family is a social group based on traditional culture and intersecting kin relationships. Executive members are chosen strictly on the basis of kinship. The mafia is no more than an attitude, a code of behavior, rather than a formal organization, and generates even a degree of "admiration" in this author (Ianni, 1972: 191). He also finds support for the "ethnic succession hypothesis," the view that the next generation of the family would "go legitimate." Crime has traditionally been the first step on the ladder for social mobility, but as the Italians improve their economic conditions, they will move from illegitimate to legitimate business, and the children will become more educated, joining the professional class. Indeed, he predicts the quick demise of Italian organized crime (Ianni 1972: 193–194).

With the advantage of hindsight, we can safely say that *A Family Business* turns out to be wrong on almost all counts. Conceptually, Ianni fails to introduce a basic distinction between the production of illegal goods and the production of threats and extortion/protection. One suspects that Ianni observed people related by blood who mostly engaged in legitimate business, but whose activities had initially crossed the line between the legal and the illegal. Rather than a mafia family, it was probably a group of individuals who were briefly protected by mafiosi while selling illegal goods and services. We also know that none of the five mafia families operating in New York City (Bonanno, Genovese, Gambino,

Lucchese, and Colombo) appointed bosses on the basis of kinship.[8] Bosses within a single family were not related to each other. The "ethnic succession hypothesis" has also been disproved: the Italian American mafia has remained a (p. 351) feature of the underworld for long after the publication of the book, and it is still active today, although much less powerful. Ianni takes Whyte's advice to collect one's own data a step further, disregarding testimonies by insiders, such as the 1963 Joe Valachi Senate hearings, and a wealth of police reports, but in doing so, he ignores evidence that could contradict his argument.

In conclusion, *A Family Business*—which comes with an introduction by Whyte himself—is the attempt to study the internal organization of a mafia family, yet it does not distinguish between production, distribution, and protection, and it seems to confuse a mafia family with blood relatives involved in some illegal activities. Ignoring any form of official account and testimonies by former mafia members, it takes Whyte's precepts too far. Finally, the strict anonymity protocol makes it next to impossible to double-check Ianni's findings.

The Mafia of a Sicilian Village 1860–1960

The Mafia of a Sicilian Village 1860-1960 by Anton Blok is the ethnography of a community. It is a study of a village (some 2,600 inhabitants) in the interior of Sicily, some 80 kilometers from Palermo, published in 1974. The book examines social relations and the role of the mafia over a century. The author, who has acknowledged the importance of *Street Corner Society* for his work, spent two and half years in the field, and immersed himself in the life of the village, while also collecting historical records (Blok 1974: xxxi, 2001: 63). An academic project, independent of any agency, the book is centered on the notion of "configuration" (interdependence) of relationships and draws explicitly upon social network analysis concepts mediated mainly through the work of Jeremy Boissevain (Blok 1974: 9–10; 137; Boissevain 1973). Blok interprets the role of the mafiosi as mediating power between large landowners, the state apparatus, and the peasants. A key contribution of the book, still relevant today, is the notion that the mafia is a modern phenomenon, tied up with the emergence of capitalism in Sicily in the nineteenth century, when "feudal rights and privileges were abolished by law, and the peasants were offered a prospect of land which had become marketable" (Blok 1974: 10; see also Gambetta 1993: 84). At the microlevel, he finds that the mafia is a modern producer of a local order, rather than a purely criminal phenomenon and remnant of a primitive past.

As in the case of *A Family Business*, the anonymity protocols are strict. Blok's chosen site is the village of Contessa Entellina, which he refers to as "Genuardo." As pointed out by Salvatore Lupo (1987: 188–189, 193–194), this is a "remote" village on a high plane with a special history: its inhabitants, including the peasants, are of Albanian descent, while the landowners are ethnic Italian ("Latin") and do not live in the village. Rather unusually for Sicily, the village elite were hostile toward large landowners, according to a survey conducted in 1908. Such an ethnic composition makes for special dynamics which go unaddressed in the book. Furthermore, the anonymity protocol appears excessive since the book is mostly an historical study of the village from the unification of Italy to the onset of

fascism. Removing the name of the place prevented Blok (p. 352) from exploring key aspects of his field site, including political and electoral processes (as noted by Pezzino 1987: 190; for a response see Blok 2001: 65). The village is cut off from the profitable businesses the mafia in Sicily was known for in those years, namely, construction, smuggling cigarettes, and the emerging international drugs markets. Although there was a construction boom in Palermo, no similar opportunities existed in the tiny village of Contessa Entellina. A mafia group existed there, but it was weak and rather inconsequential, a point often made by the inhabitants themselves. When the landowners decided to regain control of power on the ground, the local clan—the "Cassini"—was easily "annihilated," notes Lupo (1987: 193). Furthermore, another local group, the "Jaconi," described by Blok as a "mafia," is, according to Lupo (1987: 198), a local prominent family that had at times used mafiosi as enforcers. As other studies that emphasize the fluid and informal nature of mafia relationships, this one too does not have a clear definition of the mafia as an organization. Blok ends his book predicting the demise of the Sicilian mafia, a conclusion based on the fate of the local gang and clearly at odds with the history of Cosa Nostra, which grew in size and violence in the 1970s and 1980s. There is significant variation in the power of the mafia on the island of Sicily, and even within the province of Palermo itself. By not putting his study in the broader context of Sicily, Blok draws general conclusions on the basis of a very special case. Strict anonymity protocols make it hard for the reader to evaluate the key conclusions.

The Yakuza: Japanese Crime Incorporated

The Yakuza: Japanese Crime Incorporated is the unpublished doctoral thesis that David H. Stark submitted at the University of Michigan's Department of Anthropology in 1981. Although it was never published, it is possible to purchase a copy through the UMI dissertation services.[9] *The Yakuza* is a study of the internal structure of a crime group rather than the study of a community. The author details the cultural values and the social organization of a Japanese organized crime group, which is composed of several subbranches and is integrated into the national structure of the Yakuza, the name for the Japanese mafia. He explores the similarities and differences with other mafias (especially Cosa Nostra in Sicily and the United States). Stark shows how the organized crime group is "an integral part of a community web" (Stark 1981: 2), including politics and business.

The author spent two years (1977–1979) conducting intensive participant observation in the gang (he also collected additional evidence on the community and on organized crime in Japan). Being a complete outsider to Japan turned out to be an advantage, as he had generated a degree of curiosity among the interviewees. Quickly, Stark realized that conducing formal interviews was unhelpful. The gang leadership would simply offer an official version of their activities for public and media consumption. Stark then resorted to engaging in informal conversations during which he would introduce relevant topics. One-to-one conversations were more revealing than those occurring with multiple members, he notes, and he disguised how much information he already knew. "Being at (p. 353) the right place at the right time was the only guarantee to inclusion" in key events of the gang (Stark 1981: 6), a point made also by Whyte (Whyte [1943] 1993: 293). Ulti-

mately, Stark acquired an exceptional degree of access, and was able to conduct long interviews with members, hang around the headquarters, and even observe a jail release ritual and the exchange of brotherhood cups of sake to cement an alliance with another group. His access went further: he saw the process of tattooing the body of new affiliates, attended community festivals, participated in drinking sessions, and accompanied members in their daily routine, such as collecting protection money from businesspeople.

Stark elaborates extensively on his fieldwork strategy, in particular on the indirect ways through which he elicited information, the promise he made to the gang not to interact with the police and journalists, and how an initial false start (related to the authorities introducing him to a different group) almost ended his project. Gaining the trust of the group took a long time, and he had to repair his reputation, tainted, in the eyes of the gang, by his early association with the police. Anonymity protocols are quite strict: All names of places, persons and groups have been changed. Stark never published his dissertation or any academic journal article. It is possible that his success at penetrating the organization led to the paradoxical outcome that he could not publish his work.

The Hoods. Crime and Punishment in Belfast

The Hoods by Hamill (2010) is a study of a community. The author focuses on how the IRA acts as a form of extralegal governance structure in a catholic West Belfast community, punishing deviants. This study shows how governance-type OC can take the shape of what is routinely called a paramilitary or terrorist organization. Hamill observes residents reporting crime to the IRA and often supporting its system of justice. The author interviews local people, IRA and Sinn Féin members tasked to carry out the punishments, and a pool of persistent offenders on what motivates them to continue to carry out their actions in the face of likely severe retaliation. The study focuses on what paramilitaries do as opposed to how they are organized. The enduring theoretical value of this ethnography is the original application of signaling game theory. The fact that paramilitaries are known to exercise violence effectively suggest that the “hoods” are willing to face the threat in order to signal their strength and defiance, ultimately enhancing their social status. The ability of paramilitaries to punish motivates the “hoods” to defy the local, extralegal form of justice. The study shows then the limit of the IRA informal justice system and more broadly of deterrence theory.

Following in the footsteps of SCS, Hamill adopts the key elements of the ethnographic method: she spent eighteen months in the field (1997–1999), developed close relationships with the respondents and a deep understanding of the research site, while also using other sources of data. The Probation Board gave her some help, but the project is independent of any agency. In order to increase variation in her sample, she selected respondents who had different views on the informal system of punishment. The sample (p. 354) also includes youth who had grown up in similar circumstances as the offenders but did not get involved in crime and antisocial behavior, thereby generating variation in the “dependent variable.”

As in the case of Stark, Hamill finds that asking direct questions to people (especially those involved in paramilitary activities) would lead nowhere. Thus, she accesses IRA respondents “via other roles within West Belfast” (Hamill 2010: 7). Issues were discussed either as part of formal interviews or as points of interest in *impromptu* conversations. Consent emerged as the outcome of a long process of developing trust, as opposed to signing a form. Living in the field allowed Hamill to initiate conversations informally and to observe behaviour, in ways that discrete field trips would not allow (Hamill 2010: 6–12). In the methods section, Hamill also discusses how her background might have affected the data, and more generally how she strived to increase validity (for instance by not using a tape recorder, by using her memory of conversations, and by writing up field notes as quickly as possible after each encounter. She also carried a notebook to record observations of interactions). As suggested by Whyte (1993: 287), she does not show her moral objections to what she is told during conversations. In sum, for Hamill, as it was the case for Whyte, ethnography is an independent project involving an immersion in the field, where the scholar conducts interviews and observes day-to-day interactions, producing an analytical narrative. Hamill anonymizes the people interviewed, but not the place or even the organizations to which interviewees belong. Hamill shows that it is possible to reveal enough details about one’s site without endangering the scholar or research participants.

The Limits of Ethnography: Policy Implications and Directions for Future Research

We have identified some key elements in the model of ethnography inaugurated by Whyte’s classic work. Although some works that follow in Whyte’s footsteps provide invaluable insights into OC groups, they also have limitations. Ianni’s distrust of official data led him to disregard valuable sources, missing out on a fuller understanding of the phenomenon. Second, the focus on informality has led some, including Whyte, to conclude that organized crime is itself an informal order; although we now know that it could also be an organization, ethnography might not be the best method to elicit this information.

Third, the anonymity protocols can be taken too far. Blok’s decision to mask his field site appears unnecessary and prevents an evaluation of how generalizable his conclusions are. As cogently argued by Jerolmack and Murphy (2019), the practice of hiding or distorting identifying information reduces the ability to construct cumulative (p. 355) social science and might give a false sense of anonymity to subjects. In a small community, it is easy to unmask people, something made even easier by the Internet. The decision taken by some ethnographers to alter dates, ages, gender of informants, and details of events is also questionable. For instance, in his study of an elite hospital, Bosk ([1979] 2013) changes the gender of the only surgical resident who is denied promotion in the program. It turns out that the person is a woman and her gender might well explain the outcome Bosk observes (in the second edition, Bosk has admirably discussed—and regretted—that

choice). Creating composite characters is also questionable as it takes away agency from individuals (Lubet 2018: 95). Paradoxically, informants themselves might wish to be heard in ways that are not mediated by the ethnographer's reconstruction and want to be known by their name. For instance, Lusthaus (2018: 228) finds that (former) cybercriminals providing sensitive information were happy to be recorded. Furthermore, Wong (2015) suggests that there is a tendency among fieldwork reports on organized crime to exaggerate how "dangerous" the research is. This tendency helps generate the trope of "the anthropologist as a hero," as seen in works by, for example, Alice Goffman and S. A. Venkatesh. Ethnographers should consider whether extreme anonymity should be the default option for their studies.

The model of ethnography championed by SCS need not to be the only game in town. Recently, scholars have elaborated on the method of "rapid ethnography." Baines and Cunningham (2013) argue that rapid ethnographies, involving short, compressed time in the field and ideally teaming the outside researcher with an insider, can generate important insights into organizations (e.g., hospitals) and, most crucially, allow international qualitative comparisons at a relatively low cost. This type of data collection has been used for the study of cybercrime. Lusthaus (2018) conducted a seven-year-long study of cybercrime based on multisite rapid ethnographies and 238 interviews. The author strives to capture the local as well as the transnational nature of cybercrime, offering a macropicture of the industry. Since the phenomenon is relatively new, he argues, it would have been difficult to choose a single site before conducting the study (Lusthaus 2018: 229). The strength of "rapid ethnographies" is the possibility to carry out a comparative qualitative study at a relatively low cost. Yet this research design departs from ethnography as defined by Whyte, resembling short field trips. Its key limitation is that the scholar is unlikely to stumble by chance on unexpected yet revealing events (Varese, forthcoming).

There are limits to the ethnographic method. If the aim is to offer a complete picture of a single crime group, we should recognize that it is extremely hard for researchers to penetrate the high echelons of crime groups (Varese 2012). Even when bosses might agree to meet with a researcher (see, e.g., Varese 2018), the best that one can hope is to gain valuable qualitative information on self-perception and worldview of the interviewee, but it is hardly suitable to build a complete picture of a group's structure. Full immersion would put the scholar in danger. Stark (1981) is a notable exception, although to this day it remains an unpublished doctoral thesis, for reasons that might be related to the sensitivity of the information uncovered.

(p. 356) Law enforcement agencies, and more generally the criminal justice system, produce a wealth of information, which includes eavesdropping on phone conversations, surveillance, intelligence, and co-arrest records often reported in court documents and crime statistics. Court files containing testimonies at trials by defendants, as well as memoirs written by former members and/or their relatives, offer valuable insights into the organization and the activities of groups. Police wiretaps capture members talking about criminal activities and include conversations with both low-level and high-level members, as well as individuals drawn from society and politics who associate with OC. Arrest records

and police field intelligence observation cards have also proved to be valuable as well as retrospective interviews with OC members in prison (e.g., Reuter and Haaga 1989; Adler 1993). As any source of data, official records and interviews face the issue of validity (see discussion in Campana and Varese 2012; Campana and Varese 2020). A qualitative understanding of the way official data are produced is essential to address such issues, yet it would be ill advised to reject data sources that could complement ethnography as advocated by Ianni (1972).

In conclusion, this chapter has argued that *Street Corner Society* has set the model for subsequent, influential ethnographies of organized crime and the mafia. Extensive periods in the field carrying out a project that is independent of authorities, developing an intimate knowledge of the place, the observation of interactions, the concern for the validity and the reliability of the data collected, including the position of the ethnographer, and the substantive effort at uncovering a hidden order are enduring features of the most revealing ethnographies of organized crime. Such works appear best equipped to capture the community where organized crime operates rather than the inner workings of a crime organization. For that, we might need to go beyond ethnography.

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Notes:

(*) I address some of the issues discussed in this chapter also in: Federico Varese (forthcoming). “Rigorous Ethnography.” In Handbook of Sociological Science. Contributions to Rigorous Sociology. Edited by Klarita Gërxhani, Nan Dirk de Graaf, and Werner Raub. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

(1.) Such a perspective excludes some crimes, such as organized theft, sexual harassment, and frauds, from the definition of organized crime. For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Campana and Varese (2018) and Varese (2010).

(2.) I exclude from this partial list important ethnographies of gangs, such as Suttles (1968), Decker, Decker, and Van Winkle (1996), Densely (2013), and Fraser (2015). I should add that many gangs could be classified as “organized crime,” and to some extent the distinction between gangs and OC is artificial.

(3.) Platt (1994) also points out that systematic data collection on urban problems and crime in the city of Chicago started well before the Chicago School, and outside the work of the Department of Sociology. Many women, whose work has not been properly recognized, were at the forefront of these efforts (Deegan 1988).

(4.) “At that time [during my fieldwork], I had not read any of the University of Chicago urban studies” (Whyte [1943] 1993: 361). See also Whyte (1993: 288).

(5.) A theme I shall not touch upon is the role of the informant/gatekeeper in the field.

(6.) A clear influence on Whyte is Arensberg ([1937] 1988).

(7.) Whyte ([1943] 1993: 290). Whyte later reveals that this the North Bennet Street Industrial School.

(8.) The partial exception to this rule is the failed attempt by John Gotti to appoint his own son as the head of the Gambino family.

(9.) https://www.proquest.com/products-services/dissertations/Dissertation-and-Thesis-Author-Services.html

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