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How Similar Are Modern Criminal Syndicates to Traditional Mafias?

ABSTRACT

Five organizations exemplify organized crime organizations, or “mafias”: the American and Sicilian Cosa Nostras, the Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta, Chinese triads, and Japanese yakuza. Newer syndicates have emerged that are often called organized crime organizations but most importantly differ from the exemplars. Drug trafficking syndicates in Colombia and Mexico are large, wealthy, and extraordinarily violent but have proven fragile in the face of aggressive law enforcement, do not have fully formalized internal structures or elaborate cultures, and only occasionally attempt to exercise political power or provide dispute settlement services in the criminal world. The Primeiro Comando da Capital in Sao Paulo, originally a prisoner self-protection group, comes closer. It has a formalized internal structure and an elaborate culture that permit it partly to control drug markets and provide an alternative justice system in parts of Brazil. Rio de Janeiro’s Comando Vermelho, also originally prison-based and now extensively involved in drug trafficking, has some mafia-like characteristics. Other criminal syndicates are better thought of as “candidate criminal organizations” because they are not fully consolidated (e.g., the Neapolitan camorra), are not fully criminalized (e.g., Hells Angels), or aim mainly at political subversion and have only subsidiary involvement in profit-making crimes (e.g., the Colombian FARC).

Electronically published June 1, 2020

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0192-3234/2020/0049-00XX\$10.00

The label “organized crime” is freely conferred in modern times on a heterogeneous set of entities. Official definitions allow the term to be applied to very modest illegal enterprises; three men and a dog regularly selling cannabis may be called organized crime. For example, the definition adopted by the United Kingdom’s Serious and Organized Crime Agency in 2012 is broad and loose, has a clear focus on profit-making crimes, and sets no organizational requirements: “Organised crime is defined as those involved, normally working with others, in continuing serious criminal activities for substantial profit, whether based in the UK or elsewhere” (SOCA 2012; see also BKA 2018).¹

The legal offense of criminal organization, increasingly treated as a synonym for organized crime (e.g., Europol 2013), is also broad and loose. In European Union criminal law and, thus, in the criminal laws of all EU member states, criminal organization requires no more than two people to cooperate for a certain period of time in the commission of serious criminal offenses (Council of the European Union 2008; Calderoni 2010). In such official definitions, and in some proposed by scholars (e.g., Felson 2009, pp. 159–60), organized crime seems to mean little more than co-offending by more than two perpetrators. Known as the illegal enterprise paradigm, this understanding equates organized crime with profit-making criminal activities, in particular the provision of illegal goods and services (e.g., van Duyne 1997; Edwards and Levi 2008).

Despite these loose definitions, in public imagery and political rhetoric, organized crime is still identified with large-scale, long-lasting, well-structured, and presumably powerful criminal organizations. Since about 1960, the American mafia or Cosa Nostra has served as the embodiment of this second understanding of organized crime. Since the 1980s, Cosa Nostra’s Sicilian counterpart and a few other organizations have taken on similar mythical status. The alleged growing presence and reach of criminal organizations have been repeatedly used to justify expanded state powers. For example, the European Union’s first policy intervention concerning organized crime opened with the claim: “Organized crime is increasingly becoming a threat to society as we know it and want to

¹ The UK government (see p. 11 at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/752850/SOC-2018-web.pdf) has shifted to the even broader category of serious and organized crime, defined as “individuals planning, coordinating and committing serious offences, whether individually, in groups and/or as part of transnational networks.”

preserve it. Criminal behavior no longer is the domain of individuals only, but also of organizations that pervade the various structures of civil society, and indeed society as a whole” (European Commission 1997, p. 1).

Given this dual understanding of organized crime in terms of both criminal activities and criminal organizations, the term has lost coherence as the basis for justifying expanded powers of the state or for research. We do not in this essay propose a new and competing definition of organized crime but attempt to learn from organizations to which application of the label is uncontroversial. Five sets of criminal organizations are considered exemplars of organized crime, namely the American Cosa Nostra, Sicilian Cosa Nostra, Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta, Chinese triads, and Japanese yakuza. These are regularly called “mafias” or “mafia organizations” (see, e.g., Catino 2019, 2020; Paoli 2020; Varese 2020). Catino (2019) also includes the Neapolitan camorra and the Russian mafia. We explain below why we disagree, but note that some parts of the so-called Russian mafia, specifically the fraternal association *vory-v-zakone* (thieves with a code of honor), and some groups of the camorra, come close.

In this essay we examine some of the most prominent of the newer entities that are consistently called organized crime. To what extent are they criminal organizations in a sociological and not just legal sense? Do they share the distinctive characteristics of the “iconic five” mafia organizations?

The definition of criminal organization used here is much more restrictive than the legal offense of criminal organization or conventional understandings of the term “organized crime.” We apply the classical definition of organization given by Max Weber ([1922] 1978, p. 48): “a social relationship which is either closed or limits the admission of outsiders [and whose] regulations are enforced by specific individuals: a chief and, possibly, an administrative staff, which normally also has representative powers.” Definitions that draw on Weber are widely used in organization studies (e.g., Tolbert and Hall 2009). Criminal organizations, as we use the term, are social entities that are relatively large, have clear barriers to entry, an internal structure, and their own rules. They are either entirely criminal in purpose or routinely engage in criminal activities, whether for profit or for other purposes, directly or indirectly (i.e., through their members). Like other organized crime scholars, we do not include terrorist organizations in this category, unless

their involvement in profit-making criminal activities comes to rival their original political cause, as for example in case of the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia]) in Colombia. In this respect, the term “organized crime organization,” which Jacobs (2020) has recently proposed, would be more precise than the generic expression “criminal organization.” However, the term “organized crime organization” rings awkwardly to the ear and would add yet another label to an already bulging armory.

Drawing on the extensive literature on the five mafias, we believe that the following seven characteristics typify them:

Longevity. The five mafias have all existed for at least a century. That longevity has been a source of power, since it creates an expectation of survival and enhances reputation and thus the capacity to intimidate by threat alone. Mafias’ extraordinary longevity implies that they developed in premodern contexts in which state authorities had not yet monopolized the use of violence or were, as in the first Chinese settlements in Southeast Asia (e.g., Ownby and Somers Heidhues 1993), utterly absent. The American mafia is an apparent exception to the claim of premodernity but was explicitly modeled on the Sicilian Cosa Nostra. Mafias’ premodern roots also influence their structure and culture.

Large size. All five mafias have in their histories had at least a few thousand members for several decades. The Chinese triads and Japanese yakuza had more than 230,000 and 180,000 members, respectively, at their peaks (Morgan 1960; NPA 2018). Although not all triad members were criminally active, these figures refer only to members who have been ritually affiliated. As is typical of true organizations, mafias clearly distinguish members from nonmembers.

Formalized and complex structure. As is required for a true organization, each of the five mafias has an internal set of rules and hierarchies; these are highly formalized and complex. They also have ruling bodies within each group and often also across groups that make up the consortia. Mafia organizations are segmentary societies—that is, consortia composed of several units that recognize each other as part of the same consortium. All five have mechanisms for dispute settlement, though their strength varies substantially.

Elaborate cultural apparatus. This constitutes an effort to generate an enduring commitment to the organization and a sense of family and identity. Mafia organizations often have initiation rituals, written sets of norms and penalties, and procedures to deal with violations. This enables

them to create a collective identity, justify their existence and generate lifelong commitments, new identities, and fictive kinship ties among their members.

The contracts binding members to mafias are very different from the narrowly drawn employment contracts that are standard in contemporary bureaucracies and corporations, as well as in many illegal enterprises. The long-term and broad mafia contracts, and the fictive families they create, give mafia bosses extraordinary flexibility; in principle no order can be disobeyed by the members. However, in order to be effective, these contracts can be imposed only on candidates who are already socialized into certain values and norms, thus limiting the pools of eligible members.

Multifunctionality. All five mafias have engaged in a wide variety of activities, both legal and illegal. Some aim principally at increasing the organization's power within the community or even further afield; others are purely profit-making. There is rarely an effort to control the money-making activities members participate in. Profit-making activities, propelled by the late twentieth-century emergence of mass drug markets, have become more important, but historically the development and wielding of power were the mafias' distinctive feature. With the possible exception of the American Cosa Nostra, profit maximization even today is not their exclusive, or even their main, aim.

Goal of political dominion and long-standing ability to provide governance services. Mafia organizations are different from illegal enterprises and from other criminal organizations because they claim to exercise a local political dominion that extends beyond their members and collaborators. They also deliver certain governance services, particularly related to settlement of disputes and provision of personal security. They are thus inherently political organizations that have tried over time, with varying degrees of success, to enforce their rules on certain communities. They have attempted to endow themselves with legitimacy but have never succeeded in neutralizing all rival centers of power (Tilly 1985, 1988).

Popular legitimacy and power sharing. With their claim to exercise a political dominion, mafias have long enjoyed a considerable degree of popular legitimacy and have entered into de facto, or sometimes even official, power-sharing arrangements with local state institutions. No other organized crime actors have enjoyed such long-standing legitimacy from both the communities within which they operate and local state authorities.

Using Weber's definition of organization and this list of mafias' typifying characteristics as benchmarks, we focus first on the criminal syndicates of three Latin American countries, Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil. These are described in some detail since this requires integrating a scattered literature. Our comparative analysis shows that few of these criminal syndicates can be formally defined as organizations. In particular, all the prominent drug trafficking syndicates in Colombia and almost all in Mexico fail the most basic test of an organization. They have neither strict criteria to distinguish members from nonmembers nor a formalized internal structure with clear command positions. Moreover and perhaps surprisingly, neither the earlier nor the newer drug trafficking syndicates in Colombia and Mexico rely on a premodern, elaborate cultural apparatus such as those of traditional mafias to secure their members' allegiance. They usually show much less ambition than traditional mafias to exercise political power or provide dispute settlement services to other criminals or the broader population. The Sao Paulo Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) is by far the most developed in its internal structure, culture, and governance functions. The PCC is clearly a criminal organization in the Weberian sense and, though only 25 years old, appears well launched to become a powerful and enduring mafia if it can survive the departure of its charismatic leader. The Commando Vermelho (Red Command in Portuguese, also known as CV) in Rio de Janeiro may have many mafia characteristics; the evidence is less clear.

We then consider more heterogeneous sets of entities more briefly. One set comprises "not fully consolidated criminal organizations" such as the Neapolitan camorra, groups that emerged in Eastern Europe after the end of communism (Russia and Albania), and some emergent groups in Western Europe. We treat the camorra in detail because in the distant past it almost certainly was a mafia organization. Another set comprises offshoots of voluntary or sports associations, including the motorcycle gangs. These are true organizations, but we refer to them as candidate criminal organizations because they are not fully criminalized. The final set includes terrorist, paramilitary, and military groups that draw a growing share of their revenues from profit-making criminal activities, thus shifting away from their original subversive or military objectives.

The literature on the relatively new Latin American syndicates is not nearly as rich as that on the older five mafias. For example, there are no studies of the internal dynamics of Mexican drug-trafficking syndicates based on long-term undercover investigations (as with Donny Brasco for

the American mafia; Pistone 1988) or extended statements by high-level informants (such as the *pentiti* for the Sicilian Cosa Nostra; e.g., Commissione Parlamentare Antimafia 1992).² The Brazilian literature is better but still weaker than for the historical syndicates. Lessing (2018) provides an outstanding analytic account of the dynamics of drug wars in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico but with primary emphasis on the relationships between the syndicates and government policy. Our analysis of these syndicates is correspondingly limited. Time and space limitations prevent consideration of comparably powerful groups in three smaller and poorer Latin American countries, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, which constitute the Northern Triangle of Central America (Miguel Cruz 2010; Seelke 2016).

Why is it useful to establish whether some of the most prominent contemporary criminal syndicates are organizations and which traits they share with mafias? First, we see this essay as the beginning of an effort to develop a categorization of contemporary organized crime actors. Despite the subject's media salience, the burgeoning literature on organized crime, and numerous policy initiatives targeting organized crime, systematic comparisons of criminal entities are rare (i.e., Krauthausen 1997; Paoli 2002; Catino 2019). Comparative analysis has been hampered not only by the lack of data but also by confusion and ambiguities surrounding the concepts of organized crime and criminal organization. As a result, the varieties of organized crime actors have not been categorized. The comparative analysis of organized crime actors also provides a novel approach for bringing some clarity to the confused and confusing debate about the nature of organized crime. Previous efforts have looked for a consensus definition of organized crime but have mostly ended in identifying only basic, generic features and have not generated much progress.³ Given the fuzziness of the concept and the increasing focus

² A rare exception is Human Rights Clinic (2017), analyzing testimony in a number of US federal trials of the Zetas, a Mexican criminal syndicate. It is telling that this represents detail not generated within Mexico itself.

³ Varese (2010), for example, analyzed a database of 115 definitions of organized crime primarily from criminologists, criminal justice agencies, and statutes, which had been created by Klaus von Lampe; see von Lampe (2019) for the most recent version of the database. Varese presented statistical descriptions of the occurrence of specific features of the definitions over time (1915–2009) and across 23 countries (but mostly from the United States). He distinguished between organizations and activities in his review of definitions. For organizations, concepts such as specialization, hierarchy, and networks are most frequently mentioned. For activities, the list of relevant dimensions is slight: just monopoly and provision of illegal goods and services.

on prohibited profit-making activities, it is no surprise that several scholars (e.g., Naylor 2003; Edwards and Levi 2008) have suggested getting rid of the term “organized crime” altogether and focusing instead on the organization of crime for gain.

Since the 1980s, scholars (e.g., Bouchard and Morselli 2014) and a growing number of policy and law enforcement agencies worldwide (e.g., Europol 2003; White House 2011) have observed that true criminal organizations are the exception rather than the rule in the vast panorama of organized crime. Most exchanges in the illegal or criminal markets of developed countries are carried out by criminal enterprises, which are also frequently referred to as organized crime but are smaller and more ephemeral than mafias or other criminal organizations.

Second, we believe that research would profit from a focus on the distinctive features of mafias. This is not only because the five mafias—most prominently the American and Sicilian Cosa Nostras—have since the 1960s been considered exemplars. The ambition to exercise political dominion and provide competing dispute resolution and other governance services presents a distinctive threat of mafias to the legitimacy of the state. The five mafias all developed as responses to the failure of government to provide security of property and sometimes persons; profit-making criminal activities were not necessarily the first activities they undertook. If more modern criminal syndicates are able to imitate the mafias and present themselves as credible alternatives to the governments of failing states, that failure will be more difficult to reverse.

Multiple dimensions of research are affected by whether mafias and other criminal organizations are present. For example, there is a growing interest in the criminal careers of those involved in organized crime (Kleemans and van Kopen 2020). Mafias, with their emphasis on lifelong commitment and demanding initiation rituals, create distinct pathways; sheer economic ability counts for less in advancing in the organization. Military or political skills might also be essential to make a career in other criminal syndicates that share mafias’ governance ambitions or are involved in open conflicts with state authorities or competing syndicates. Network analysis, used to understand the relationships among offenders in organizations or markets (Bouchard 2020), will require a different interpretation if mafias or other real organizations are present, whether or not these organizations are fully criminalized or are military bureaucracies or militias once fully dedicated to a revolutionary cause.

The essay is organized as follows. Sections I through III present relatively detailed descriptions of the Colombian, Mexican, and Brazilian drug-trafficking syndicates. Section IV presents a comparative analysis of the Latin American cases. Section V provides a much briefer discussion of a variety of entities that have been, we think, mischaracterized as organized crime and why they differ from mafias. Section VI concludes.

I. Colombian Drug “Cartels”⁴

The growth of the United States cocaine market in the 1980s provided the basis for a large refining and export industry in Colombia. That generated the most visible and politically active criminal syndicates of modern times. The cocaine “cartels,” the standard but inaccurate name given to these trafficking syndicates, challenged the Colombian national government in the late 1980s. In 1989 they assassinated the leading presidential candidate (Luis Carlos Galan) and shot down a civilian jet plane with 139 passengers that they believed carried another political leader threatening their activities. This violence led to a military crackdown; the US government provided substantial resources and expertise to that effort. The result by 1995 was the removal by death or incarceration of the leadership of these syndicates. The cocaine trade continued unabated but in a very different form, with a relatively large number of small enterprises. It is useful then to divide the analysis between the pre- and postcrackdown periods.

A. The Cocaine Cartels in the 1980s

Two syndicates dominated the Colombian cocaine industry in the 1980s, one associated with Medellin, the other with Cali, Colombia’s second and third largest cities. Each was identified with a few prominent leaders. Each one adopted its own distinct strategy in dealing with the government. They are called cartels, which suggests a capacity to fix prices and control markets; there is no evidence that they had such power and they are best thought of as syndicates, with many individual groups as members coordinating some of their activities, such as contributing cocaine for large shipments to the United States.

⁴ A comprehensive English-language history of Colombian drug trafficking organizations is apparently not available. Useful sources include Thoumi (2014), Ramirez (2017), and Norman (2018).

The cartels were involved in politics, but for narrow self-protective purposes. A critical issue for the leaders was whether Colombia would sign an extradition treaty with the United States (Restrepo and Guizado 2003, pp. 261–63). They were confident they could evade much restriction if sentenced in Colombia but correctly feared confinement in the United States. Many political assassinations in this period were aimed to deter the government from signing an extradition treaty, with varying success over time (Lessing 2018).

No criminal figure so captured the popular imagination in the late twentieth century as Pablo Escobar, the most prominent of the Medellín traffickers.⁵ Escobar created a complex myth, involving both extreme violence and social activism (Restrepo and Guizado 2003; Arias 2010). The violence was brazen; Escobar was willing to announce the amount he would pay for the killing of a police officer in Medellín (Lessing 2018). After some years of cooperation, he also became aggressive in his treatment of other traffickers, killing many in disputes about transactions or territory. At the same time Escobar ostentatiously donated money for low-income housing in his home city and succeeded in getting elected as an alternate member of Congress (Restrepo and Guizado 2003; Bowden 2007).⁶ In a country long dominated by an oligarchy that provided little social mobility, a rich drug dealer apparently with a social conscience had a certain appeal (Thoumi 2002, 2012). Carlos Lehder, another prominent member of the Medellín cartel also had political ambitions, albeit of a generally fascist tendency (Lee, 1991 p. 9). However, there was no effort to create a legend of social justice in the trafficking enterprises themselves; the philanthropy was personal, associated with the leader rather than the syndicate—similar to the Gates Foundation rather than the Microsoft Foundation.

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) estimated at the end of 1980s that about 24,000 people were part of the Medellín and Cali cartels (Krauthausen 1997, p. 162). It is unclear, though, how many of these people really were members of the two syndicates. The major exporters, as well as the traffickers that controlled specific export routes, sometimes internalized the services, paying regular salaries to their

⁵ A good discussion of Escobar's grip on the twenty-first-century Colombian imagination is provided in a 2018 *New Yorker* article (Anderson 2018).

⁶ Escobar was forced to resign 2 years after his election, when the source of his wealth was revealed.

employees. At other times they bought the same services on the market. Low-level participants in the drug industry primarily worked under conventional job contracts similar to those of employees of legal businesses owned by the *narcos*. Big shipments often consisted of product from several drug-trafficking groups; they shared the risks, with some *narcos* “controlling” a specific route. In this sense they played the role of historical figures such as caravan leaders in the desert (Krauthausen 1997, pp. 162–76) or ship owners sailing from Genoa or another Italian sea republic in the late Middle Ages.

The core of the drug-trafficking groups composing the cartels often included brothers, such as the brothers Rodríguez Orejuela, who founded the Cali cartel, or several relatives as in the case of Pablo Escobar. According to Krauthausen (1997, p. 187), Escobar’s group even at its peak consisted of only a modest number of people, probably not many more than 50. Escobar surrounded himself with a few trusted relatives, accountants, and other low-level employees, who were principally responsible for organizing his hiding places. This suggests that even at its core the Medellín cartel did not rely on lifelong status and fraternization contracts, as mafias do. Krauthausen further notes that the cartels, much like legitimate businesses, screened their employees and partners, avoiding people with addiction or other psychological problems.

The Colombian syndicates also insisted that employees and partners respect the code of silence but again, unlike the mafias, did not seek to inculcate these values in members through initiation rituals, ad hoc norms, and symbols. Instead they attempted to secure allegiance through compensation and threats. The best documented study of traffickers (Kenney 2007) points to recruitment that was much closer to corporate hiring than to initiation into a mafia family and relied more on threats and deterrence than the internalization of a specific subculture. “Recruits may be asked to provide contact information for their immediate family members as a hedge against cooperating with the police. For similar reasons, some enterprises require potential employees to fill out an application that details previous work experience and supplies personal information to their employer” (Kenney 2007, p. 250). Nor were individuals permanently identified with a specific enterprise. “Traffickers that avoid apprehension readily migrate to other nodes or networks when their former colleagues are jailed. ‘This happens a lot, depending on your role,’ explains Nestor. ‘Say one guy gets popped, you go work for another group or another guy’” (Kenney 2007, p. 256). Kenney notes

that friendship and family relations play a role in recruitment, but that is true of conventional enterprise hiring as well.

While the units at the core of the cartels were never very large, there is evidence that some distribution cells organized by the cartels in the United States were more substantial. Fuentes (1999) describes organizations primarily in the New York metropolitan area with hundreds of employees. He invokes Weberian concepts of organization to describe the individual components (“cells”), though he also emphasizes the turnover in the workforce.

The Colombian cartels, like other criminal syndicates, had to protect themselves from the challenges of competitors and other underworld figures without resorting to police and courts. In particular their leaders had to demonstrate command of violence to maintain their credibility and market shares. However, the exercise of violence was not equally distributed across the component parts of the cartel; some suborganizations were more willing and able to command violence than others. Even within the Medellín cartel itself, the Escobar and Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha groups had far fewer qualms than other drug-trafficking groups about employing violence to punish people who committed infractions and kill uncooperative representatives of the state authorities. This is why Krauthausen (1997, p. 185) concludes that Escobar’s and Rodríguez Gacha’s “goals and action were distinctively military and political,” even if they also earned huge sums with drug trafficking. In particular, Escobar emerged as the guarantor of most trafficking deals and even set up *oficinas* (in effect, bureaus) that could help other traffickers reclaim cocaine or money if their business partners tried to cheat them (McDermott 2015). Because of such service, Escobar was often invited by other trafficking groups to take a share of shipments (Hylton 2008).

Because of its pronounced military functions, Rodríguez Gacha’s group had the appearance of a paramilitary formation, with a formalized hierarchy and a clear division of labor. Despite its even more pronounced function of protection, Escobar’s group was less formalized. Rather than developing an in-house capability, Escobar outsourced the use of violence and relied on the leaders of Medellín street gangs; he bought violent services on the market, mostly from young members of city gangs or other thugs (Lamb 2010). These worked for Escobar as long as he could pay them. “Recuerde: Los extrabitables sí pagamos” (“Remember that we the Extrabitables really pay”) stated a flier distributed by Escobar in Medellín. And thanks to a large pool of mercenary hit men, Escobar

exercised firm control of the drug industry of the whole department of Antiochia right up to his arrest.

There are references to very large numbers of traffickers, both large and small, suggesting that the individual units were moderate in size. For example, Bunker and Sullivan (1998) mention “223 top traffickers” who formed the MAS,⁷ an alliance that challenged left-wing guerillas who had kidnapped the sister of a leading Cali trafficker. Lee (1991) says that one official report estimated that there were 200 individual trafficking groups in the Medellin cartel.

For the dozen or so years that the Medellin cartel operated, there were numerous instances of battles among the leaders, at the same time that the same men were involved in collaborative trafficking efforts. A massive cocaine refining facility found in the jungle in 1984 (Tranquilandia) was apparently the result of collaboration among 14 different trafficking groups (Lee 1991). However, numerous accounts refer to Escobar’s killing of others in the cartel (e.g., Duncan 2014; Lessing 2018). In the end, other traffickers assisted the state in tracking down Escobar; indeed, they formed a team specifically for that purpose (Bowden 2007). There seemed to be no dispute resolution mechanism, though the cartel had a board of directors for operational purposes. That board met only occasionally and apparently focused on coordinating shipments (Kenney 2007).

The Medellin and Cali cartels were substantial enough entities that they met on a number of occasions with senior members of the national government to discuss potential deals under which the traffickers would be able to retain some of their wealth in return for abandoning the drug trade (Clawson and Lee 1996). It is claimed that in these meetings the traffickers offered to pay off the Colombian national debt in return for a peace agreement; the government reportedly declined the offer (Lessing 2018).⁸

The two cartels adopted different protective strategies (Thoumi 2014). Where Medellin consistently challenged the state with assassinations, Cali relied on corruption. Many members of the Colombian congress

⁷ Muerte a Secuestradores (Death to Kidnappers).

⁸ We are skeptical about this claim. No reference we have found provides any direct documentation of these meetings or of the content of the discussions. In heavily sourced studies such as Lessing’s (2018), this is a notable absence.

were known to have taken bribes from Cali traffickers.⁹ The government responded to the 1989 Medellin assassination of Galan and the shooting down of a civilian airline with a campaign involving use of the military as well as police forces. Escobar was initially locked up in a luxurious prison following negotiations; he escaped and was killed in a shoot-out in 1993. The Cali group was eliminated by 1995 via a different mechanism. After it became known that the Cali cartel had funded the successful campaign of President Ernesto Samper, his administration had no option but to crack down on the major traffickers, in particular the Rodriguez-Orejuela brothers (Felbab-Brown 2009; Snyder and Durán Martínez 2009, p. 84).

Also important for their development as criminal syndicates were differences in how they invested in the legal economy (Thoumi 2014). The Medellin cartel purchased large tracts of farmland for cattle grazing. They created heavily armed gangs to purchase land at low prices from local farmers and to protect against guerillas. The gangs also challenged the national authorities in the rural areas. The Cali traffickers instead invested in urban properties and sought political protection for those properties rather than challenge the government directly. That made Medellin a more tempting target for a government crackdown, even before it directly attacked the national government.

The two cartels undertook other criminal activities; having assembled such massive firepower, it would be surprising if they had not. For example, Garzon (2010) reports that they were involved in general extortion. However, the very paucity of description of other activities suggests that they were not important sources of revenue. Moreover, no source suggests that the cartels or their representatives were interested in providing effective governance services to either the rest of the non-drug-related underworld or the general population. The two cartels were active in the United States but only in marketing cocaine; they never established a broader criminal presence in American cities (Florez and Boyce 1990, pp. 83–84).

⁹ Twelve Colombian legislators were imprisoned for accepting bribes from the Cali Cartel during the 1994 “Proceso 8.000” election scandal. Insiders, including President Samper’s campaign treasurer, Santiago Medina, estimated that at least 70 percent of congressmen accepted cartel funds (Lee and Thoumi 1999, p. 71). At one point, 170 of 230 legislators were under investigation for cartel-related political corruption (Carrigan 1996, p. 6).

The cores of the Cali and Medellín cartels might have constituted small true organizations with well-defined memberships, but they were still much different from the mafias. The dispute resolution mechanism was weak and abjectly failed in the latter stages of Escobar's career. The political claims were associated with individuals and not the syndicates. In addition to the differences in internal structure, culture, degree of multifunctionality, and claims to exercise a political dominion, the two cartels failed the longevity test; they lasted less than 20 years and did not survive beyond the first generation of leaders. The Medellín cartel challenged the national government frontally, as did the Sicilian Cosa Nostra in the 1990s. While the Sicilian Cosa Nostra was diminished as a result, the Medellín cartel as such was eliminated. The Cali cartel, though it avoided confrontation, was also eliminated by the government once the Samper administration (1994–98) was forced by US pressure to crack down.

B. Post-Cartel

The elimination of the cartels' leadership in the early 1990s created only a temporary interruption to the flow of cocaine to the United States but had a lasting effect on the organization of the drug trade (Lee 2002, pp. 538–39). Certainly there were no successors to Escobar and the Rodríguez-Orejuela brothers, larger-than-life figures who presented challenges to the Colombian establishment. However, it is not clear that much changed operationally. The smaller syndicates remained capable of cooperating and bringing large quantities of cocaine together to ship to the United States, as is indicated by very large individual seizures (multiple tons) that have consistently occurred since the end of the two cartels.¹⁰

The drug trade has been through perhaps three successive transformations, more than we can elaborate on in this subsection. Drawing on an unpublished 2012 study by Peter Reuter and Daniel Rico, we describe the major drug-dealing syndicate in the second phase of the cocaine trade, between about 2002 and 2012.

¹⁰ Attesting to the cartel's capabilities, 92 percent of cocaine samples seized in 2016 in the continental United States were of Colombian origin (DEA 2017, p. 2). On February 28, 2019, officials at the Port of Newark seized 3,200 pounds of cocaine, worth an estimated \$77 million, on board a container ship that had recently arrived from Colombia (Watkins 2019). In a similar incident on June 2, 2016, Miami-based Customs and Border Protection agents seized approximately 2,000 pounds, with a reported street value of \$27 million, from a general cargo vessel recently arrived from Haiti (*Maritime Executive* 2016).

Following the dismantling of the Cali and Medellín cartels in the early 1990s, there was a period in which cocaine trafficking was conducted by small, essentially anonymous, criminal gangs. Starting around 1998, right-wing paramilitary groups emerged under the loose heading of the AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia) that eventually depended on drug revenues for most of their income.¹¹ After 2002, when the government began negotiations to reintegrate the paramilitary groups back into society, a set of purely criminal groups emerged, loosely labeled BACRIM (“bandas criminales”; McGovern 2016; Nussio 2018).

The biggest of these gangs, Los Rastrojos, was formed in 2002 as the armed wing for one of the leaders (Varela) contending for control of the Cartelo de Norte Valle (NDVC). Internal fighting led to Varela’s murder in 2008, but his armed wing remained a powerful player in the drugs, extortion, and kidnapping businesses (*InSight Crime* 2017). After 2008 it was led by two brothers, Javier Antono Calle Serna and Luis Enrique Calle Serna.

As the name of its predecessor syndicate (Norte de Valle) suggests, Los Rastrojos was for some years regionally focused, operating in the Pacific coast region of Colombia. After 2008 it expanded into other regions previously dominated by one of its rivals, Los Urabenos, particularly in the Caribbean coast (the department of Antioquia).

Given their paramilitary origin, Los Rastrojos most probably had some formalized internal structure with (pseudo-)military command positions. There were both regional- and municipal-level management structures. As in the case of the Medellín cartel, it is difficult to estimate its membership not least because the syndicate was not highly centralized and considerable autonomy was given to the individual units. Los Rastrojos was estimated to have more members than any of the other BACRIM groups and possibly as much as 50 percent of the BACRIM total, with influence in 100 municipalities. As a Colombian national security officer noted in an interview, “It is not an easy task to define who is a member of Los Rastrojos: the individual that provides the cars and transportation for the commanders is a supplier but is not a member of the structure. We also found that smaller organizations use the name to commit extortions, but when we conducted investigations we found

¹¹ The International Crisis Group (ICG 2007, p. 4) reports that Castano, the AUC leader, admitted that in 2000, 70 percent of the paramilitary income came from drugs.

that they have no relationship with the structure, they are only using the 'bad will' reputation for extortive purposes. The name had become a 'trademark,' sometimes paid for and sometimes not" (Reuter and Rico 2012, pp. 6–7).¹²

For about a decade, the syndicate exported large quantities of cocaine. In December 2010, Colombian police seized 6 tons of cocaine in the port of Buenaventura that was purportedly the property of Los Rastrojos, which was also connected to a seizure of \$27 million in US currency on a ship coming from Mexico, believed to be payment by Mexico's Sinaloa cartel (*InSight Crime* 2011). In contrast to their predecessor syndicates, they retailed drugs in Colombia itself. A distinctive feature of this syndicate was its active involvement in all stages of production and export to Mexico (transiting to the United States) in close cooperation with the Sinaloa cartel, which was a business partner, not just a buyer. However it stuck to its core competence, the management of criminal activity, rather than direct participation in the drug trade, in particular the upstream activities of growing and processing.

Los Rastrojos was involved in a wide variety of other criminal activities. For example, there were reports after 2010 that both the principal left-wing guerilla group FARC and BACRIM (including Los Rastrojos) extorted the rapidly expanding illegal gold mining industry, which is largely populated by micro-enterprises (Romero 2011). However, there is a dearth of specifics on other profit-making activities. They extorted both legitimate and criminal entrepreneurs in the areas they controlled. They were also participants in siphoning oil from Colombian pipelines, as well as smugglers of contraband gasoline from Ecuador. In Medellin, the regional leader of Los Rastrojos has been a principal in the pirate CD market (Reuter and Rico 2012).

The syndicate, like all its competitors and predecessors, had a fearsome reputation for use of violence for instrumental purposes. Government officials believe that the national leadership of Los Rastrojos in its later years attempted to restrain the regional units from undertaking high-profile violent activities, in particular massacres, a common occurrence in the past. The reasoning was that these attract unnecessary government attention. To reinforce this message, financial fines were levied

¹² From the same interview: "It sounds simple but to estimate the real size of the organization and the areas of influence is a very complex task" (Reuter and Rico 2012, p. 7).

on regions in which such events occurred, which caused a reduction in the share of cocaine revenues returned to the regional leadership. However, like the Medellín and Cali cartels, Los Rastrojos made no effort to offer governance services to the broader population (interviews with officials in Reuter and Rico 2012).

C. Relations with Political Actors

Despite its right-wing paramilitary origins, Los Rastrojos built working relationships with both FARC and ELN (National Liberation Army), the two main left-wing guerillas active in Colombia. These alliance decisions were made at the regional, rather than national, level. Thus some units still fought FARC, as indicated by a February 2011 report of a clash between the two entities in which 15 people were killed.¹³

The FARC sold Los Rastrojos the coca base; it also provided protection for the processing labs. In exchange Los Rastrojos provided other raw materials for the production process, especially gasoline, which was a critical resource for the FARC; Los Rastrojos owned gasoline stations and trucks for gasoline transportation (interview with Navy official; Reuter and Rico 2012, p. 12).

The gang was well armed but reluctant to attack the government. “Los Rastrojos had a big arsenal of rifles and munitions that they have decided not to use against the army or the police, for strategic reasons. They know fighting is a costly activity, and let the FARC attack our forces” (interview with Army intelligence analyst; Reuter and Rico 2012, p. 12).

Los Rastrojos was deeply involved in corruption, aimed primarily at local rather than national government officials. The purpose seemed to be less concerned with protection of drug-trafficking activities, at least directly, than with obtaining access to government contracts and facilities for money laundering. It did not neglect national influence; for example,

¹³ See <http://colombiareports.com/colombia-news/news/14291-15-dead-in-farc-los-rastrojos-clash.html>. An Army intelligence officer speculated as to why the relationship was cooperative in only some areas: “In Cauca the FARC is strong enough to conduct the narcotics business without Los Rastrojos, so they don’t want them around; the FARC decided to cooperate with other BACRIM that are enemies of Los Rastrojos.” The decisions about alliance under this interpretation lie with the FARC. However, even this observer offered a counterexample in which it appeared to be Los Rastrojos that initiated the relationship: “Two years ago the Urabeños worked with the FARC in the northwest of the country, smuggling cocaine to Central America, but Los Rastrojos offer a better deal for the 58th front of the FARC and now both groups are fighting against the Urabeños” (Reuter and Rico 2012, pp. 11–12).

in the 2010 national elections, it was accused of intimidating some voters and paying others in the department of Narino (Borkan 2010).

InSight Crime, the most authoritative independent source of information about Latin American organized crime, more or less declared Los Rastrojos to have been eliminated as an important player by 2012: “The group imploded in 2012 with the fall of three of its main leaders” (*InSight Crime* 2017). However, in 2019 *InSight Crime* reported major incidents, such as a massacre of 12 Los Rastrojos members in a factional fight on the Venezuelan border, where the syndicate has been involved in the theft of fuel (Venezuela Investigative Unit 2019). It seems to have survived despite the frequent turnover in leadership but to have been weakened, particularly in its core drug-selling activities.

It is easy to dismiss the candidacy of the post-cartel criminal groups as mafias. In the case of the Rastrojos (and a few other federations of the same generation such as Los Urbanos), it can be safely argued that they were organizations at least in their core groups, not least because of their military setup. They were successful criminal enterprises with unstable leadership. However, they made no effort to create fictive families or other social bonds, had a minimal dispute resolution mechanism, no apparent succession rules, and no claim to broad governance or popular legitimacy. They undertook a range of criminal activities and had a substantial geographic spread within Colombia but not elsewhere.

II. Mexican Drug-Trafficking Syndicates

For more than three decades, Mexican drug-trafficking syndicates (usually referred to as DTOs, the acronym of “drug-trafficking organizations”) have occupied a prominent place in the American vision of the drug supply problem. Essentially all illegal drugs imported into the United States are either produced in Mexico (heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine) or pass through (cocaine) on their way to US markets (US Department of State 2019, p. 212).¹⁴ This has led to a view that the Mexican DTOs are uniquely rich, with estimates of annual revenues regularly in the tens of billions of dollars (e.g., National Drug Intelligence

¹⁴ Synthetic opioids, in particular fentanyl, are now the principal source of fatal overdoses in the United States, even though the quantity consumed is tiny. These new drugs are produced mostly in China, but a substantial share is imported via Mexico (Pardo et al. 2019).

Center 2008), though a more realistic estimate puts it in the low billions (Kilmer et al. 2010). Since 2006 the extraordinary number and gruesomeness of homicides involving Mexican DTOs have riveted attention. For example, in 2008 La Familia Michoacana threw five decapitated heads onto the dance floor of a disco club to demonstrate its power; it also threw a bomb into a crowd celebrating Independence Day for the same purpose (Felbab-Brown 2011). A good quality literature on the effect of government actions against DTOs has emerged; for example, there are sophisticated analyses of the consequences of incarcerating a DTO leader on violence in his territory, showing that it led to greater violence both in that territory and in those neighboring (Calderón et al. 2015; Osorio 2015; Duran-Martinez 2017). However, less attention has been paid to many of the dimensions of our concern, such as recruitment, organizational structure, nondrug activities, and governance.

A further complication is that Mexico now has many large-scale criminal syndicates that have a variety of origins, structures, and behaviors. For example, the Zetas is a relatively recent syndicate formed out of defectors from elite¹⁵ military units in the late 1990s and initially affiliated with the Gulf cartel.¹⁶ The Zetas' power rested primarily on its willingness to use extreme and spectacular violence in almost any situation, including assassinations of politicians, grenade attacks, car bombs, and display of bodies or body parts of murdered victims (Correa-Cabrera 2017; Felbab-Brown 2019, p. 2). Although the Zetas also bribed local and state politicians and government officials, it did not seek high-level government protection or power-sharing agreements. It was also not interested in gaining popular legitimacy through the delivery of dispute settlements or other governance services. It instead used its military power to achieve political dominion by fear, to extort both legal and illegal activities such as the smuggling of migrants in its areas of settlement, and to become involved in a variety of illegal profit-making activities,

¹⁵ The adjective "elite" is almost universally applied to the Zetas' origins; this seems to refer to the training that its original members received in the Mexican and Guatemalan Armies from Israeli and US Special Forces (Grayson and Loga 2012, p. 46, Correa-Cabrera 2017, pp. 21–22, 57–58).

¹⁶ The Zetas was originally a component of the Gulf cartel; its members separated into a competitive group in 2003, following the arrest of the Gulf cartel leader, Osiel Cardenas Guillen (Atuesta and Perez-Davila 2018).

including kidnappings, prostitution, pirating DVDs, and sale of black-market oil in addition to drug trafficking (Correa-Cabrera 2017).

The Sinaloa cartel can trace its origins back to pre-WWII drug trafficking and has at least until recently largely remained focused on drug trafficking. Rather than openly challenging government authority, the Sinaloa cartel was through the second half of the twentieth century closely tied to the political structure and has shown a capacity to negotiate the resolution of community conflicts, at least on occasion, thus gaining some partial local legitimacy (Astorga 2012). Thus any effort to summarize the whole set of DTOs in a single characterization risks distortion.

Our focus is on the current configuration of DTOs. An assessment of their capabilities is likely to be different from the situation in the late twentieth century. To that extent, Mexico resembles Colombia. Relationships with the state have changed dramatically over the last 20 years. When the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) dominated politics at all levels (federal, state, municipal), the party maintained a close corrupt relationship with approximately five drug-trafficking syndicates that kept violence at a modest level (Snyder and Duran-Martinez 2009; Lessing 2018). The corruption involved both law enforcement and political authority (Astorga 1999). One former governor wrote of adherence by the drug-trafficking syndicates to 10 principles in return for protection:

- (1) there should be no bodies on the streets;
- (2) criminals were not allowed to sell drugs in schools;
- (3) there should be no media scandals;
- (4) traffickers should allow periodic drug seizures and arrests of low members;
- (5) traffickers must generate economic revenues for their communities;
- (6) there should be no proliferation of gangs;
- (7) criminals should not pact directly with the police or the judiciary;
- (8) mistakes are to be punished with imprisonment by the authorities, not with execution by rivals;
- (9) criminals must respect territorial boundaries; and
- (10) profits from illicit markets should be reinvested in Mexico. (Monreal Ávila 2008)¹⁷

The gradual erosion of PRI's political dominance, starting with the loss of some state governorships in the 1990s and then the 2000 election of Vicente Fox, the first non-PRI president in 71 years, led to a more

¹⁷ This summary has a beguiling crispness and comprehensiveness. It should probably not be taken too literally but rather as a rough guide to the nature of the agreement.

complex relationship between government and DTOs. Drug-trafficking-related violence rose sharply during Fox's administration, though the national homicide rate fell from 13 per 100,000 in 2000 to 8 in 2007 (Heinle, Ferreira, and Shirk 2014). According to Correa-Cabrera (2017), the increase in drug-related violence was not only due to the decline of one-party rule. It was also promoted by the Zetas, its extensive and brutal use of violence, and its attempt to impose its power in the northeastern Mexican state of Tamaulipas and other parts of Mexico: "a new militarized criminal organization brought with it the militarization of other criminal groups and the militarization of the security strategy in Mexico" (Correa-Cabrera 2017, p. 39). Existing drug-trafficking syndicates felt obliged to set up enforcer wings. The Sinaloa cartel, for example, established Los Negros, an enforcer group similar to Los Zetas, while the Empresa in Michoacán founded La Familia Michoacana, after breaking up a previous alliance with the Zetas and the Gulf cartel.

Drug-related homicides included intersyndicate killings, assassination of police and local political figures, and occasional killings of innocent parties apparently aimed to amplify the violent reputations of the newer syndicates and the armed wings of the older ones (e.g., Lacey 2008; Reuter 2009). Many of the victims' bodies were accompanied by notes declaring which group had committed the murder and what message the killing was supposed to send (Atuesta 2017). Syndicates also started using traditional media and social media to justify their brutal deeds, distributing shocking narco-videos of assassinations and publishing communiques in important newspapers, thus spreading the impression of an unmanageable country (Correa-Cabrera 2017, pp. 30–31). The homicide rate dramatically accelerated with the decision by President Calderon in late 2006, following his very narrow victory over the left-wing PRD's (Democratic Revolutionary Party) Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, to bring in the military to crack down on the criminal syndicates. From 2007 through to this writing in 2019, the national homicide rate has been extremely high by historical and global standards, at approximately 25 per 100,000 in 2018 (INEGI 2019). Moreover, in 2020 the government estimated that 60,000 individuals had "disappeared" between 2007 and 2019, presumably homicide victims but with bodies that had been buried in mass graves so they did not show up in the official statistics; many are thought to be killings related to the drug trade (Sheridan 2020).

Mexican criminal syndicates are very large, but systematic membership or employment estimates do not exist in the published literature. Astorga (2012), in the course of debunking estimates of various dimensions of the Mexican drug trade (e.g., revenue, cultivation area), offered no estimates of the syndicates' membership. Bunker (2010) reports a total of about 100,000 in just the largest two DTOs (Sinaloa and Gulf cartels), without providing a specific source for the number or specifying the inclusion criteria. A review of many sources has turned up no estimates, but the impression is of individual syndicates that have thousands, if not tens of thousands, of members or regular associates.¹⁸ As in the case of the Colombian cartels, membership has to be understood in a loose way; the estimates refer to the people who variously participated in drug trafficking or other criminal activities. No data suggest that, as in the mafias, there is a clear-cut distinction between members and nonmembers.

Some syndicates have become institutionalized, in the sense of surviving the departures (typically through killings) of their founders. For example, the Gulf cartel lost its long-term leader Osiel Cardenas Guillen in 2003 but continued to function as a major syndicate, though losing its armed wing that became Los Zetas. However, many of the more recent syndicates have proven fairly ephemeral. For example, Los Caballeros Templarios emerged as a breakaway from La Familia in 2011 but did not survive the capture of its leader in 2015 (Atuesta and Perez-Davila 2018, p. 245). Even the Zetas has not been able to consolidate. Although it was reported to be "the criminal group with highest presence in the nation, even above the Sinaloa cartel" in 2012 (quoted in Correa-Cabrera 2017, p. 49), by 2014 it had started to disintegrate. It was targeted by Mexican, US, and Guatemalan law enforcement agencies and by rival syndicates. As Daniel Haering observes, "the old networks were disrupted by the Zetas, and now the Zetas have disintegrated into Zetillas. They are splinter groups (*grupúsculos*), not big operators" (International Crisis Group 2014, p. 12).

¹⁸ Estimates place the number of persons employed by Mexican cartels at approximately 450,000 (Chew Sánchez 2014, p. 26). Although there is some consensus that Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) is currently one of the largest and most powerful (Jones 2018, p. 20; Congressional Research Service 2019, p. 18), size estimates for individual cartels are few and far between. Chalk (2011, p. 26) noted that the La Familia cartel had 4,000 members in 2010. None of these figures is well documented.

Recruitment seems often to be open rather than based on kinship. For example, it was claimed in 2012 that the cartels used social media for recruitment (Looft 2012). The Zetas recruited its core members from specific Mexican and Guatemalan army units, using military training and discipline to secure members' allegiance and create a sense of belonging. From 2003 onward, once it expanded beyond its original basis in Tamaulipas, the Zetas also allowed local criminal groups and thugs to use its brand (Correa-Cabrera 2017).

The Sinaloa cartel, one of the most durable and significant syndicates, appears to be different. "The Sinaloa cartel's central bond is blood. Many of its members are related by birth or by marriage" (*InSight Crime* 2019). Some of both the older and newer syndicates have spawned their own popular music, ballads that are regularly performed on local radio stations (Guevara 2013, pp. 141, 147; Campbell 2014, p. 72).

There are no reports of any rituals associated with membership or the creation of fictive family ties. La Familia Michoacana and its splinter group Los Caballeros Templarios (or the Knights Templar) may be exceptions. They have used evangelism, an eccentric Christian credo, and regional identities to enhance their legitimacy among their members and the local population and justify their extreme use of violence (Grayson 2010; Felbab-Brown 2019).

Some features we infer from absence of any mention in the extensive literature that has developed. No study except Felbab-Brown (2019)¹⁹ refers to governance functions provided by the syndicates either across product or service markets or across syndicates in drug trafficking. The extraordinary level of violent conflict between various groups provides evidence that no mechanisms have developed to replace the PRI in its role of ensuring peace in the drug trade.

Correa-Cabrera (2017) and Atuesta and Perez-Davila (2018) suggest that the violence is not merely a direct response to the government crackdown but also results from the fragmentation of existing syndicates generated by the spread of Zetas' militarized tactics and the fractionation of political authority with the breakdown of the PRI monopoly.

¹⁹ "In contrast to the criminal groups choosing to rule through sheer might alone, others, such as La Familia Michoacana, Los Templarios, and the Sinaloa cartel, have been providing a variety of governance functions beyond the distribution of handouts, such as the adjudication of disputes and enforcing judgments, thereby acquiring authority and political capital" (Felbab-Brown 2019, p. 13). We have been unable to find any confirming evidence for this statement by a well-regarded scholar.

This fragmentation is illustrated by the 5-year time line for the 2006 Sinaloa cartel in Atuesta and Perez-Davila (2018). Over those years it fractured into as many as 10 coexisting criminal groups. Atuesta and Perez-Davila (2018) concluded that the five DTOs that existed in 2006 had become 80 distinct syndicates/formations by 2011. Beittel (2019) offers different figures but makes the same point. Golz and D'Amico (2018) argue that the pressure against leading traffickers benefited smaller DTOs.

Atuesta and Perez-Davila (2018) identify six shifting alliances among various syndicates, combining temporarily to resist attacks by a common enemy. For example:

- i. The Gulf cartel and Los Zetas to confront the Sinaloa cartel;
- ii. The Gulf cartel and La Familia Michoacana to confront Los Zetas, which wanted to enter Michoacan;
- iii. La Resistencia, Los Zetas, and the Cartel del Pacifico Sur to confront La Barbie.

The alliances are quite short-lived, dissolving when the threat goes away and easily generating conflict among DTOs that were just recently allies.

There are passing references to other income-generating activities of the DTOs in recent years (e.g., Felbab-Brown 2019²⁰). According to Correa-Cabrera (2017), the Zetas was the first to use its military power to impose its presence in non-drug-related criminal activities, and the same strategy was copied by other syndicates. Kidnapping and extortion of legitimate businesses in major cities are important potential revenue sources, though no systematic revenue estimate is available. Theft of oil from the poorly maintained distribution system of the national oil company, PemEx, may provide substantial revenues (Beittel 2019). None of the other sources that are regularly mentioned (e.g., services for human smuggling or extortion of farmers in rural areas where poppy and marijuana growing is concentrated) have much plausibility as providing revenues comparable to those obtained from drug smuggling (Kilmer et al. 2010).

²⁰ "Criminal groups have also become directly involved in fuel theft and its illegal distribution, kidnapping, and many other prohibited activities, such as illegal logging" (Felbab-Brown 2019, p. 12).

In sum, the current Mexican criminal syndicates, even the largest and most enduring ones, have few of the characteristics associated with mafias. They are large, and some have broad geographic spread within Mexico and operate (in terms of supply chains and sales) in other countries. Their longevity is in question, though a small number have lasted already a half-century with successful leadership succession. They may also have a formal management structure, but related only to drug trafficking rather than to broader purposes. There is no clear-cut distinction between members and nonmembers. Recruitment is for employment in an illegal business, not joining a fraternal type of organization. There are no rituals or, with the partial exception of the Familia Michoacana and Knights Templar, an elaborate cultural apparatus. The primary aim of most syndicates continues to be making money from drug production and trafficking. However, following the Zetas' example, more and more groups have used their military power to diversify their criminal activities and increase their multifunctionality. With the spread of military tactics and the increasing use of violence, many current formations have begun behaving more like "power syndicates" rather than mere "enterprise syndicates," to refer to Alan Block's (1983) famous dichotomy. The Zetas and its rivals have also claimed control over specific territories. However, with few exceptions (La Familia Michoacana, the Knights Templar, the Jalisco Gang, and New Generation in its earliest days), they have made no serious effort to provide governance services and thus secure popular legitimacy, beyond terrorizing the local population. Although all syndicates bribe or intimidate local and state government officials and politicians, they no longer seem able to establish stable power-sharing agreements with governments even at the local level.

The drug-trafficking syndicates of the PRI era have a greater claim to mafia status in relation to their stability, legitimacy, and power-sharing agreement. However, even before 2000 there were important differences. In their heydays, the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels were loose alliances of fairly autonomous groups mostly formed around a successful drug producer or smuggler and run by a dominant blood family. There was never a formalized internal structure with clear-cut command positions and procedures to assign them. The cultural apparatus was also much less strong. None of the sources consulted ever mentions initiation rituals, founding myths, organizational symbols, or codes of written rules. Although some syndicate members engaged in other criminal activities, drug production and smuggling were the dominant activities. And

although they occasionally provided governance services (and jobs) in their areas of settlement, thus gaining some popular legitimacy, they never tried to exercise political dominion or impose generalized extortion regimes to gain control of legitimate economic sectors. Notwithstanding their considerable revenues and the local influence of their leaders, the traditional syndicates were more instruments of the government than independent entities with the capacity to influence or even control government. A collapse of monopoly party control of government at all levels led to their decline.²¹

III. Brazilian Criminal Syndicates

There are two major criminal syndicates in Brazil, associated with the two largest cities, Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. Both have emerged fairly recently. They have distinct histories and structures. They present more complex interpretive issues for our framework than do the DTOs in Colombia and Mexico, but both can be considered organizations in the Weberian sense and are closer to the mafia model than the Colombian and Mexican syndicates.

A. Rio de Janeiro

Since the mid-1980s, the Comando Vermelho (Portuguese for Red Command, also known as CV) has been the dominant criminal organization in Rio, run from prison but rooted in the favelas of the city (Lessing 2018). The CV command is collective and has changed over time. There appear to be no rituals of initiation or claims of fictive brotherhood. The CV originated as a prison gang aimed at protecting prisoners from a brutal prison management system; the founders included both ordinary convicts and left-wing political prisoners with whom the former were incarcerated during the military dictatorship of 1964–85 (Garzon 2010; Ramos da Cruz and Ucko 2018). Penglase (2008) describes how the early leadership emphasized the diffusion of norms to improve communal prison life, quoting a participant: “The repercussion in the entire system was enormous. Very quickly the rules of the Fundo [the code of conduct] were adopted in all prisons: death to anyone who assaults or rapes fellow

²¹ This is consistent with the well-known model of organized crime offered by Tom Schelling (1971), in which the mafia is hired by a monopolist police department as an efficient means for collecting the rents extracted by a corrupt agency.

prisoners; conflicts brought from the street must be left outside of prison; violence only to attempt to escape; constant struggle against repression and abuse” (p. 126).

Having developed a capacity for contingent violence, the CV lost its political ideology and branched out into drug selling (Lessing 2018). The CV does not control the drug trade at the local level, but its members and agents contest specific territories against affiliates of two smaller prison gangs (Hirata and Grillo 2019). “The CV is most accurately described as a loose association of drug traffickers who come together for reciprocal assistance yet who act with great degrees of autonomy” (Penglase 2008, p. 123). “The so-called ‘commands’ of the drug trade in Rio are basically networks formed by tacit and precarious accords between ‘owners’ of the various sales zones (some of whom also serve as distributors for smaller zones), most of whom are serving jail terms in maximum security prisons” (Misse 2007, p. 149).

The CV is involved in other criminal activities beyond drug trafficking. Though the list provided by Misse (2007) does not suggest that these are major sources of income, other studies indicate that some kinds of theft and extortion are significant in terms of revenue (Penglase 2008, pp. 128–30; Garzon 2010, pp. 63–67; Ramos da Cruz and Ucko 2018, pp. 47–48).

Since the 1980s CV has battled the government openly, and the resulting violence is extraordinary, generating annual homicide rates of more than 50 per 100,000 in the city (Zdun 2011; Murray, Cerqueiro, and Kahn 2013). The police in Rio regularly kill more than 1,000 persons annually, roughly 10 percent of all homicides; most of these deaths are suspected to be executions of drug dealers (Lessing 2018). Police violence is accompanied by extreme police corruption. The relationship between the CV and police is complicated; in some areas they compete in offering extortionate protection, in others they are collaborators (Araujo 2019).

CV’s drug gangs constitute a broad presence in the favelas of Rio (Garzon 2010; Hirata and Grillo 2019). They act as enforcers of norms, for example brutally punishing rapists; the extent and form of such enforcement vary according to the whims of the locally dominant trafficker (Arias and Rodrigues 2006). The traffickers are also brought in to resolve local disputes, again with considerable local variation in the formality and fairness of the process: “The politics of trafficker dispute resolution focus intensely on maintaining support among the critical segment of the population closest to drug dealers” (Arias and Rodrigues 2006, p. 74). Wolff

(2015) provides a similar analysis, comparing the emergence of drug gangs as the resolvers of disputes in Rio with the failure of their counterparts in Recife to achieve the same status. There is no suggestion in the literature that the CV as a federation of traffickers has rules about these matters. Rather, individual gang leaders sometimes seek to develop community support and prevent informing to the police by providing a rough justice. As Penglase (2008, p. 123) notes, “It is difficult to generalize about a group as amorphous as the CV. Because favela-level drug bosses have a wide degree of local autonomy, there is considerable variation in practices among those who consider themselves to be part of the CV.”

B. Sao Paulo

Sao Paulo has been dominated for 25 years by a syndicate controlled from prison (Millard and Hundleby 2015).²² This group was formed by eight prisoners in 1993 under the name of Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), following a deadly riot that resulted in the death of 111 prisoners in one prison. The PCC, like the CV, started as an effort by prisoners to prevent violence within the prison, both by guards and by inmates. It developed a lengthy set of principles, excerpts of which are included in Garzon (2010, p. 74). Typical of the high moral tone is: “The Party does not allow lies, betrayal, envy, greed, slander, selfishness, or personal interest. It requires truth, loyalty, manliness, solidarity, and common interest for the good of all, because we are one for all and all for one.” Just one study refers to initiation rites, taking the form of baptisms (Dias and Salla 2013).

Though there has been turnover in leadership, the leaders have all been in long-term imprisonment. A coup in 2002 replaced the eight-person command with a single individual (pseudonym Marcola) who established a very different system of control, relying largely on explicit rules, procedural fairness, and detailed record keeping. This is so distinctive that we provide a relatively lengthy summary of its operation and consequences (Lessing and Willis 2019; Perla Diógenes de Aquino 2019).

The vast majority of PCC members at any one time are incarcerated. Size estimates are highly variable ranging from 6,000 incarcerated and 5,200 outside prison in Sao Paulo (Millard and Hundleby 2015) to 29,000 altogether (Lessing and Willis 2019). All authorities and observers agree that the PCC operates in many Brazilian states and a growing

²² An excellent concise history of the PCC is provided by Coutinho (2019).

number of other Latin American countries. For example, in June 2019 *InSight Crime* reported that the PCC was responsible for a massacre of 10 prisoners in Paraguay (Marcela Zuñiga 2019). In June 2018 it reported that the PCC was very active in Bolivia and Venezuela (Albaladejo 2018).

PCC has a multilevel hierarchical structure, even including some specialized bureaus providing functions such as legal and financial services outside of prison. It also has a highly formalized system of tribunals to judge specific offenses by members, for example of stealing organizational funds (Willis 2017). The PCC keeps tribunal records of the nature of the offense and the sentence delivered; only a few offenders are executed. There is a graded set of punishments for the most common of offenses, which is nonpayment of drug debts; a first offense leads to a 15-day suspension and no access to drugs for selling during that period. The third offense leads to expulsion from the organization. The system deals also with other crimes, even those that are in no way connected to the PCC, manifesting the organization's founding as a resistance to state violence in the prisons. Lessing and Willis (2019) obtained hundreds of seized PCC documents covering a 13-month period in 2011–12. These included “everything from membership rolls, excel spreadsheets of marijuana, crack and cocaine sale by area code by week, the organization's ‘gun library’ and an outline of a new fund to help members get ‘back on their feet’ following release from prison with a \$2500 equivalent loan and access to a gun.” Lessing and Willis (2019) find “vast, consignment-based trafficking operations whose profits fund collective benefits for members' families; elaborate bureaucratic procedures and recordkeeping; and overwhelmingly nonviolent punishments for debt-nonpayment and misconduct” (p. 584). These are the kinds of records one would expect to find in a legal bureaucracy or corporation.

Biondi (2016) notes a remarkable decline in Sao Paulo homicides that have accompanied this shift to a formal system of “justice by criminals,” in stark contrast to the arbitrariness of the state-operated criminal justice system. Whereas in 1999 the Sao Paulo state prison system with 52,000 inmates had 117 killings (a rate of more than 200 per 100,000), in 2007 a prison system with over 150,000 inmates had only 11 killings (about 7 per 100,000). In the state of Sao Paulo, the overall homicide rate fell from a peak of 44 in 1999 to about 10 in 2014 (Lessing and Willis 2019). The PCC, in contrast to Rio's CV, has generally avoided confrontation with the state. Nonetheless, the PCC under Marcola's leadership has not hesitated to use violence strategically. Most notoriously, in May 2006,

it initiated a series of attacks against the government that led to 560 deaths, including 59 public agents, mostly police. That led to negotiations with the government that produced agreements about the conditions of incarceration of the leadership (Coutinho 2019).

Available PCC income estimates suggest that it is modest. The organization is funded by fixed monthly payments, with higher rates for outside members (\$130) compared with the incarcerated (\$13) (Garzon 2010). In 2005 an official inquiry using seized PCC financial records estimated annual dues income of only about \$5 million (Garzon 2010, p. 76). Millard and Hundleby (2015) estimate a total of \$50 million per annum, with another \$100 million being earned by its members but not flowing to the organization. Perhaps the incarceration of most members explains that relatively low figure. If all the money is earned by the outside members, Millard and Hundleby's membership estimate suggests an average of about \$30,000 per annum. In a state with average annual earnings of \$8,000 in 2012 (probably the year to which the drug revenue data refer), that may be enough to attract a lot of young men. Lessing and Willis analyze the seized records for one large area of the Sao Paulo state market, with a population of 14 million (2019, p. 597). They identify 500 PCC customers (presumably low-level wholesalers) handling a total of 650 kilograms of crack and cocaine in 19 weeks (roughly 1,800 kilograms per annum). The implied annual cocaine revenue is only about \$10 million. Lessing (personal communication, May 1, 2019) reports that PCC is not the dominant cocaine supplier to the regional market. It is hard to reconcile all these estimates, but they are consistent in suggesting that the PCC is not, by the standards of drug-trafficking syndicates in other countries, a rich organization.

Millard and Hundleby (2015) report a large variety of violent income-generating offenses conducted under PCC auspices: kidnap and ransom, vehicle and cargo robberies, and residential condominium assaults are typical of the list. Aquino (2019) emphasizes the importance of the PCC's early role in organizing and carrying out very high-value armed robberies; not only did that provide substantial income but conferred considerable prestige on the organization.²³ Coutinho (2019) makes similar

²³ In 2018 Sao Paulo officials seized a large set of PCC records. They concluded that "in its home state of São Paulo, authorities estimate the PCC has nearly doubled its ranks from 6,000 in 2012 to almost 11,000 today. Elsewhere in Brazil, the number of PCC members is estimated to have grown from just over 3,000 in 2014 to more than 20,000 today." They

points, estimating that the PCC may be responsible for about half of the 3,000 ATM robberies that occur each year in Brazil. Lessing (personal communication, May 1, 2019) suggests that nondrug activities are undertaken by members, whose prestige in the criminal world is enhanced by membership in the PCC but that their activities do not require permission from the PCC leadership.

IV. Comparative Analysis

All three Latin American countries discussed here host very prominent criminal syndicates. In each country the numbers of members and affiliates is large by historical standards, almost comparable to the triads and the yakuza at their peak. For Colombia and Mexico, official estimates of revenues may be exaggerated, but the true figures are undoubtedly very large, in the billions of dollars. For Brazil the revenues might be smaller, but the geographic and criminal breadth of the CV and the PCC is substantial.

Latin American criminal syndicates are distinct in many other ways from mafia organizations. Almost none of them have a very long history, and, with exceptions of a few in Mexico, they have not survived through several generations of leadership. Except for the PCC, their internal structures are much less formalized, so much so that it is difficult even roughly to estimate their memberships. Moreover, the old, large, apparently dominant syndicates in Colombia and Mexico have become increasingly fragmented as a result of government action and, in Mexico, intergang conflicts. Even if some Latin American criminal syndicates and groups promote self-legitimizing songs and, in Rio de Janeiro, even parties to promote their image and find new recruits, their cultural apparatus seems to be much less developed than that of mafia organizations. Unlike the latter, moreover, they are not based on premodern lifelong status or fraternization contracts but attract their personnel on the basis of utilitarian exchanges and maintain their loyalty primarily through deterrence. They show limited multifunctionality, and most are principally identified with just one criminal activity, drug trafficking. Only the PCC in Sao Paulo also aims systematically to provide some general governance

also estimated organizational income at \$100–\$200 million. None of these figures have a strong enough provenance to be given much weight (Albaladejo 2018).

services beyond attempting to solve conflicts among their own members, while some CV gang leaders also do that more sporadically. Consequently even their popular legitimacy is generally contested or at least fleeting, even if some syndicates or, more frequently, their leaders in specific periods spent considerable sums of money on benevolent projects.

In Mexico, the traditional syndicates had long-standing agreements with the once-dominant political party, PRI, which occupied the entire state structure for over 70 years. In all other contexts, though, power-sharing agreements between the criminal syndicates and state representatives have been based on bribes rather than a shared *Weltanschauung*. The agreements have largely focused on guaranteeing impunity—or at least mild treatment—for the syndicate leaders. In contrast to the five mafia organizations, some Mexican syndicates since the end of the PRI monopoly have employed violence unrestrictedly, causing thousands of innocent deaths in their operating areas.

Brazil is the most interesting case. The recent literature on Brazilian organized crime, even just that available in English, is relatively rich.²⁴ The sketch provided above is very summary. It suggests that the PCC in Sao Paulo not only meets our definition of criminal organizations but is more ambitious in its purpose and aims than its Colombian and Mexican counterparts, or even Rio's CV. The PCC, much like the iconic mafias, is truly a multifunctional organization, aiming to provide governance in addition to making money from crime. It offers in some ways a new form. None of the historical models have been continuously controlled from prison, even though leaders often spent time in prison and could maintain control while doing so.²⁵ While some of the five mafias have had their roots in providing an alternative to a weak state, providing an alternative justice (as in the famous opening scene of *The Godfather*), the PCC's strong normative base, with its effort to challenge the state by offering a highly bureaucratized and apparently fair system of justice both to its members and to at least some other citizens, is extreme. It differs from the Colombian and Mexican cases in that drug trafficking, though perhaps the largest source of revenues, is not its motivating activity.

²⁴ For example, the second issue of the new *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development* is devoted entirely to Brazilian illegal markets and their consequences.

²⁵ Jacobs (2020) reports that in the American mafia there was no rule that a capo had to give up control when incarcerated.

A critical issue is how much the PCC depends on the charismatic authority of one man, Marcola. Surviving for 15 years in prison as head of a criminal organization is itself an impressive achievement. Whether the organization can continue after his departure, voluntary or not, is a fair question.

Table 1 summarizes our view of the extent to which the Colombian and Mexican drug-trafficking syndicates and Brazilian criminal organizations exhibit the characteristics of the five mafias. The task is complicated by the occasional exceptions. For example, Correa-Cabrera (2017) and Felbab-Brown (2019) observe that the short-lived La Familia Michoacana, notwithstanding its gruesome behavior, tried to inculcate a religious quality to membership; that is unique or at least very rare. Some cells have question marks, representing gaps in the literature. Others have quite tentative judgments, reflecting the same limited insights from research and journalistic sources.

V. Candidate Criminal Organizations

Next to the mafia organizations and the Latin American syndicates, we identify several candidate criminal organizations and classify them into three main categories:

- Not fully consolidated criminal organizations,
- Offshoots of voluntary associations, and
- Terrorist, paramilitary, and military organizations gone awry.

For each category we explain why we do not regard them as yet to be a fully criminal organization. The aim is to demonstrate the range of large-scale criminal entities and of countries in which they appear.

A. Not Fully Consolidated Criminal Organizations

Using the sociological, Weberian definition of organization, the Neapolitan camorra and other Italian short-lived criminal associations and post-Soviet Russian and Albanian organized crime groups are prominent examples of the first category of candidate criminal organizations. Some instances of illegal governance and entrepreneurship in western Europe also fall short of meeting the basic characteristics of an organization. Though sometimes called organized crime, they are even more distant than the first examples from mafia organizations.

1. *The Camorra*. According to many commentators and government agencies (e.g., Saviano 2008; US Department of Treasury 2012), the camorra constitutes a criminal organization and Italy's third mafia organization after the Sicilian Cosa Nostra and Calabrian 'Ndrangheta. We consider it only a candidate criminal organization, because the camorra is not even a confederation of crime groups.

Catino (2019) provides a history of the Neapolitan camorra, emphasizing its emergence in the nineteenth century as a set of geographically defined criminal groups with a powerful higher level body to coordinate activities. However, he emphasizes what has changed. "This model vanished in the early decades of the twentieth century and no trace remains nowadays of this original organizational structure. . . . Rather than speak of a single mafia organization we should speak of 'Camorre' in the plural. . . . Unlike other mafias, where it is possible to locate one prevailing organizational model, the Camorra has four quite different competing models" (pp. 169–70). Catino (2019) goes on to note that "the most significant phenomenon in the evolution of the Camorra is the multiplication of clans and families. While in 1861 there were 16 clans and families, today there are around 128" (p. 172).

Catino (2020) continues to refer to the camorra as a mafia but emphasizes the many differences between it and the other Italian mafias. For example, he notes the lack of a coherent strategy and the much higher level of homicides, representing the camorra groups' inability to resolve disputes. Between 1983 and 2018 these groups were responsible for almost as many homicides as the Sicilian Cosa Nostra and the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta combined. This is also why Campania, the region hosting camorra, has historically had a much higher homicide rate than either Sicily and Calabria, even though that rate has declined significantly since the early 1990s (Massari and Martone 2018).

The camorra thus offer the instance of a one-time mafia that broke up into a set of competing criminal groups. Contemporary camorra groups are not only competing, but also varied. In its most recent report, the Italian Ministry of the Interior speaks of a "camorra system . . . characterized by the coexistence of clans with diversified setups and operative strategies." The Ministry further notes that "these characteristics make it difficult to give an unequivocal definition" and "very different criminal realities continue to cohabit in the same territories" (Ministero dell'Interno 2020, p. 138). While a few of the current camorra groups form syndicates, if not fully fledged organizations according to our Weberian definition, others are much more disorganized and ephemeral.

TABLE 1
Latin American Syndicates: To What Extent Are They Mafias?

	Colombia pre-1993	Colombia post-1993	Mexico pre-2000	Mexico post-2000	Rio de Janeiro CV	Sao Paulo PCC
Longevity (leadership succession)	Lasted <20 years; failed to survive leadership loss	Frequent turnover of syndicate names and leaders	A few going back at least to the 1950s, with multiple generations of leaders	Few older syndicates still existing but also numerous new, mostly short-lived syndicates	>35 years; multiple generations of leaders	>25 years; dominant single leader for 20 years
Size:						
Clear-cut distinction members/nonmembers	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Number of members (associates)	Many tens of thousands	Many tens of thousands	>100,000 in total (including occasional service providers)	>100,000 in total (including occasional service providers)	~20,000 (probably members only)	>10,000 members
Internal structure:						
Type of syndicate	Consisted of not formalized, largely autonomous units, mostly run by blood family	Some followed on smaller scale pre-1993 model; others originated from right-wing paramilitary groups	Consisted of not formalized, largely autonomous units, mostly run by blood family	For older syndicates as pre-2000; Zetas founded by defectors of military units and special forces, as armed wing of other syndicate, later independent; later groups either followed Zetas model or attempted to create ritual family ties	Rose as unitary single prison gang, but operate with large degree of autonomy	Rose as unitary single prison gang; autonomy of units outside prisons unclear
Higher-level coordinating bodies?	Prominent leader(s) in each syndicate, but	Prominent leader(s) in each syndicate,	Prominent leader(s) in each syndicate, but	Elite of older members in prison; unclear if it		

Ranks and command positions	No ranks, only basic command apparatus with few formalized positions or procedures to assign them	No known ranks, but (pseudo-) military command positions in some, e.g., Los Rastrojos	no formalized higher level coordinating bodies	No ranks, only basic command apparatus with few formalized positions or procedures to assign them	no formalized higher level coordinating bodies	As of pre-2000 but more frequent shifts of alliances and splits	constitutes a formal coordinating body	Yes, eight-person command, substituted in 2002 by supreme leader
Cultural apparatus: Status and fraternization contract	No; some low-level positions assigned through regular employment contracts	No, paramilitary discipline functions as partial substitute; some low-level positions assigned through regular employment contracts	No; some low-level positions assigned through regular employment contracts	No; some low-level positions assigned through regular employment contracts	No; military discipline functions as partial substitute in Zetas; some low-level positions assigned through regular employment contracts	Probably yes	Probably yes	Yes
Initiation rituals	No	No	No	No	No; military training functions as partial substitute in Zetas	Unclear, but probably yes	Unclear, but probably yes	Yes
Founding myths, ideology, and membership symbols	No	No	No	No	No, with exception of Familia Michoacana; military training and discipline function as partial substitute in Zetas	Unclear, but probably yes	Unclear, but probably yes	Yes
Dispute resolution mechanisms Legal code	In most no, but <i>ofiatnas</i> in Medellín cartel	No	No	No	No	Unclear, but probably yes	Unclear, but probably yes	Yes

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Colombia pre-1993	Colombia post-1993	Mexico pre-2000	Mexico post-2000	Rio de Janeiro CV	Sao Paulo PCC
	No written rules; loyalty achieved through family ties, monetary rewards, and violence	No written rules; loyalty achieved through family ties, monetary rewards, military discipline, and violence, especially employee hostage identification	No written rules; loyalty achieved through family ties, monetary rewards, and violence	No written rules, except in La Familia Michoacana; loyalty achieved through family ties, military discipline, monetary rewards, and violence	Rules of behavior in prison; at least a commercial code for outside activities	Yes, highly structured rules and sanctions
Multifunctionality:						
Illegal activities	Specialized in cocaine production and trafficking; used coercion to protect/enhance land ownership	Specialized in cocaine production and trafficking; extortion of both criminal and legal markets	Specialized in heroin production and drug trafficking; occasional engagement in other criminal activities	Most specialized in heroin production and drug trafficking but growing involvement, especially of newer syndicates, in other criminal activities	Active in many criminal markets and crimes	Active in many criminal markets and crimes
Presence in legal economy	Presence primarily meant to facilitate drug trafficking and launder proceeds; no or very limited extortion; no known ambition to control legal economic sectors	Presence primarily meant to facilitate drug trafficking and launder proceeds; no or very limited extortion; no known ambition to control legal economic sectors	Presence primarily meant to facilitate drug trafficking and launder proceeds; no known ambition to control legal economic sectors	In most cartels same as in pre-2000 period; newer ones, especially Zetas, attempt to impose extensive extortion regimes and aim to control legal economic sectors	Extent and purpose of presence in legal economy is unclear; no known ambition to control legal economic sectors	Extent and purpose of presence in legal economy is unclear; no known ambition to control legal economic sectors

Governance services:					
Goal of political dominion	No goal of political dominion	No goal of political dominion, but occasional, limited governance services in areas of settlement	No governance services; dominion imposed by fear	Political dominion in prison but no generalized claim to exercise it outside; resolve disputes in community	Political dominion in prison but no generalized claim to exercise it outside; resolve disputes in community
Protection services	No or very limited extortion	No or very limited extortion	Mostly not, but some newer ones, especially Zetas, extort both legal and illegal businesses	Extortion of legal and informal businesses but extent unclear	No information
Control of criminal world?	No claim to exert control	Unknown	For most syndicates, no claim to exert control, but some newer ones, especially Zetas, exert such claim in areas of settlement	Claim to control local prisons and Rio favelas but extent of effective control unclear	Extensive control of local prisons and criminal world
Extent of violence	Unrestrained use of violence, especially by Medellin cartel	Substantial	Unrestrained and strategic use of violence, especially by newer syndicates, e.g., Zetas	Unrestrained use of violence	Limited use of open violence; effective control of violence in prisons
Popular legitimacy and power-sharing agreements	Legitimacy pursued by a few leaders as entrepreneurs/benefactors, not the syndicates; no power-sharing agreements but extensive corruption and intimidation of government officials and politicians	No legitimacy claim or power-sharing agreements; extensive corruption and intimidation of government officials and politicians	Very limited popular legitimacy despite popular songs romanticizing syndicates; no power-sharing agreements but extensive corruption and intimidation of government officials and politicians	Considerable legitimacy in prisons and favelas, primarily through providing an alternative to police; de facto power-sharing or rivalry with local corrupt police, but no backing by central government	High level of legitimacy in prisons; quasi-official power-sharing in prisons and, to a lesser extent, outside

SOURCE.—Authors' original.

Most current camorra groups consist in their core of one or more blood families, which can rely on a circle of associates for their criminal activities. This circle can expand or contract depending on current needs. Associates are recruited in the extensive local underworld, the numerous participants in the local underground economy, and from legitimate companies, liberal professions, and even the political class. Unlike the mafias, these family-based camorra groups do not routinely conduct ceremonies of initiation so that it is difficult to distinguish the members from the nonmembers.²⁶

The ruling bodies of both the single camorra groups and their alliances are rudimentary compared with those of Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta. They neither are fully institutionalized nor are ruling body members selected through formal procedures. Within the alliances, there is no higher level body coordinating the groups' activities and mediating intergroup conflicts. Within each family-based camorra group, the leader is the most skillful or violent member of the core blood family. He rules together with his brothers, close relatives, and sometimes a limited number of associates. Within the alliances, decisions on key matters are taken through negotiations among the leaders of the dominant camorra groups. Occasionally a particularly skillful *camorrista* may obtain the position of first among equals, as Francesco Schiavone (aka Sandokan) did in the 1990s in the Casalesi cartel.

The cultural apparatus is also reduced to a minimum. As a rule, family-based camorra groups use no symbols or rituals to secure allegiance. For that purpose, they rely on financial and other material benefits and on threats. In both their internal structure and culture, family-based camorra groups are more similar to Colombian and Mexican drug trafficking syndicates than to the mafias of neighboring Sicily and Calabria.

Camorra groups frequently form alliances, further complicating the investigator's task of establishing who belongs to which group. While many alliances are short-lived, some have lasted for several decades. One long-term alliance is the so-called Casalesi cartel, which is based in the Caserta province north of Naples. Since the 1990s, it has had three family-based crime groups at its core: the Schiavone, Zagaria, and Bidognetti groups. The Casalesi have been one of the most, if not

²⁶ A few *camorristi*, such as Antonio Bardellino and Michele Zagaria, were ritually admitted to the Sicilian Cosa Nostra during the 1970s (Tribunale di Palermo 1985). However, the link with Cosa Nostra broke down soon afterward, and no Cosa Nostra rituals were imported into the camorra.

the most, powerful camorra syndicates. Through their networks of associates, including less powerful crime groups, the Casalesi could mobilize up to 9,000 associates at the peak of their power in the 1990s (CSM 2020). The units constituting the cartel have always maintained a considerable degree of autonomy, but both the core and the satellite crime groups and even their looser associates have profited from the reputation and power of the Casalesi cartel. Similarly, the so-called *Alleanza di Secondigliano* was founded by four family-based camorra groups of Naples and its outskirts—Contini, Bosti, Licciardi, Mallardo—and has been operating since the 1980s (Ministero dell'Interno 2020, pp. 146–47). Three of the founders, each representing a constituent camorra group, had married three sisters, thus becoming relatives. The core groups, and others that have at times joined the alliance, have maintained an even higher degree of entrepreneurial autonomy than the groups of the Casalesi cartel.

The Casalesi and the other “established” camorra groups are similar to mafia organizations in Sicily and Calabria in aiming to exercise political dominion in their areas of settlement. Some constituent families of the Casalesi cartel, for example, provided protection services in rural areas, much as the Sicilian and Calabria Mafiosi did, from about the 1950s to the 1980s (Sales 1993), and they have not given up this activity in recent times. Another element of similarity with the Sicilian and Calabria mafia organizations is the ability of many camorra groups to infiltrate local government, which has helped them manipulate public tenders and gain many public contracts. In the Caserta province, for example, the Casalesi cartel’s influence on local government is pervasive: even the Italian Ministry of the Interior observes, “the public administration of the territory has aimed to meet camorra’s interests at the same time as the local corrupt policy-makers, thanks to their links with criminality, have consolidated their decision-making power and satisfied their personal ambitions” (Ministero dell’Interno 2012, p. 166).

The Casalesi cartel distinguishes itself from all Cosa Nostra and many ‘Ndrangheta groups in the entrepreneurial acumen shown by its leaders since the 1970s. Thanks to that acumen, the cartel’s power of intimidation and the readiness of many Campanian entrepreneurs to become associates, the Casalesi have been able to acquire, or at least influence, many businesses in the Caserta province, gain control of several local economic sectors, and expand their business activities outside the province (Corte di Assise Santa Maria Capua Vetere 2006; Saviano 2008).

Other camorra groups are less durable formations that developed around a charismatic chief. These gangs might expand very rapidly for a while and make money through a variety of illegal activities. However, they usually have a more limited number of associates in the legal economy and public administration than the more established family-based groups and are less able to exercise political dominion in their specific areas. The Nuova Camorra Organizzata (or NCO) constitutes the most prominent example of this second type of camorra group. The NCO was founded by Raffaele Cutolo while he was in prison in the early 1970s and lasted until the late 1980s. Much like the leaders of the Brazilian and Central American prisons gangs, Cutolo remained imprisoned throughout the NCO's existence. To attract new affiliates and secure new allegiances, Cutolo resorted to the rituals, ranks, slang, codes, and rules of the nineteenth-century camorra. Presenting itself as a brotherhood, the NCO also paid salaries to the poorest of its imprisoned members. It set up a court to settle internal conflicts. Thanks to its elaborate cultural apparatus and solidarity vis-à-vis poorer members, Cutolo was able to enlarge the NCO's ranks very rapidly. At its peak in the early 1980s, the NCO had about 7,000 members (Sciarrone 1998, pp. 65–68). Cutolo also gained the unconditional loyalty and allegiance of most NCO members. “The correspondence in prisons among its affiliates,” the Parliamentary Antimafia Commission noted in 1993, “is very intense and full of expressions of gratitude to the chief who sometimes presented himself as a guru and in other cases as a modern criminal boss” (Commissione Parlamentare Antimafia 1993, pp. 43–44).

The NCO's revenues were generated through a variety of criminal activities, including drug trafficking and dealing, cigarette smuggling, illegal gambling, and extortion of legitimate businesses. The NCO (and other camorra groups) also profited from the acquisition of many emergency public contracts issued after the 1980 earthquake in Campania (Commissione Parlamentare Antimafia 1993). In the late 1970s, Cutolo felt strong enough to attempt to impose a tax on each box of smuggled cigarettes that landed in Naples and to seek control over the central neighborhoods of Naples (Corte Suprema di Cassazione 1987). These attempts, though, prompted rival clans to form a coalition, the Nuova Famiglia, which initially copied the NCO's rituals to secure their members' allegiance. Weakened by very violent fights with this coalition and subsequent criminal investigations, the NCO disintegrated in the second half of the 1980s. The Nuova Famiglia disbanded soon afterward

when a conflict arose among the crime groups composing it, which soon reverted to their usual “patriarchal” style of domination (Monzini 1999).

Next to family-based syndicates and the gangs led by a charismatic leader, there are also loose gangs of juvenile and adult offenders, primarily drawn from the city working class. Even the police acknowledge that these gangs are primarily co-offending groups of criminals rather than organized crime (Ministero dell’Interno 2020, pp. 138–41). The composition of many gangs and the alliances among them are so unstable that law enforcement agencies often have difficulties in finding evidence of the offense of mafia-type criminal organization (Ministero dell’Interno 2012, pp. 130–37).

Organizational differences are matched by entrepreneurial diversity. Some groups, especially in the city of Naples, draw most of their revenues from the control of local drug distribution DNA (2017, pp. 66–75). Others are specialized in international drug trafficking. Giuseppe Polverino from the Marano group from the town of the same name at the outskirts of Naples was long known as “Mr. Hashish.” According to Italian law enforcement agencies he was the main smuggler of Moroccan hashish into Europe at least until his arrest in Spain in 2012 (Allum 2016, pp. 157–58). Thanks to high-level drug trafficking and the clever reinvestment of drug-trafficking proceeds in several economic sectors, Polverino and his associates accumulated considerable wealth. Assets worth over 1 billion euros were seized from them on a single occasion in 2011 (Europol 2013, pp. 12–13).²⁷ Other camorra groups have become very skilled in the distribution of a wide range of counterfeited products. They both manufacture these products in the Naples and Caserta provinces and import them from China. Camorra groups are also proficient in counterfeiting currencies, which they then sell to crime groups all over Europe (Europol 2013, p. 17).

Some of these groups have been much weakened or even dissolved as a result of enhanced law enforcement pressure in the first two decades of the twenty-first century (DNA 2017, p. 67). The law enforcement successes have been facilitated by the decision of many camorra representatives, including the bosses of several groups, to become state witnesses,

²⁷ Seizure figures can exaggerate the value of the assets lost by the criminals. For example, properties are often subject to mortgages; the owner will lose only his investment, not the full value of the property.

following arrest. As of June 30, 2016, there were 561 former criminals from Campania in the state witness protection program; the numbers in Sicily and Calabria were 305 and 164, respectively (Ministero dell'Interno 2017, p. 12). This testifies to the weakness of associational bonds and the prevalence of a more utilitarian logic within camorra groups compared with those of the Sicilian Cosa Nostra and the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta. In 2018 and 2019, for example, the sons of the leaders of both the Bidognetti and Schiavone families started cooperating with criminal justice authorities, thus weakening the Casalesi cartel.

In sum, despite the fact that some camorra groups score high on the more external typifying characteristics of mafia organizations (e.g., multifunctionality, claim to exercise political power), we classify the camorra as a candidate criminal organization, because no single such organization exists. Some cartels coordinating camorra groups are clearly syndicates and have many similarities with the Colombian and Mexican drug-trafficking syndicates. We stop short of calling them organizations because they fail to meet the basic defining criterion of organization, namely clear boundaries, and do not have institutionalized command positions. Conversely, the NCO met the requirements of our sociological definition of organization, but lasted less than two decades.

2. *Russian and Albanian Organized Crime.* Russia's *vory-v-zakone*, "thieves-in-law" or "thieves professing the code," constitute the criminal organization that most closely resembles the five iconic mafias, even if some significant differences remain in the internal structure, breeding ground, and evolution. Catino (2019) includes them as a mafia. The *vory's* society is at least as old as the youngest mafia, the American Cosa Nostra. It most probably emerged in the late 1920 and early 1930s in the Soviet prisons and labor camps, although some sources (e.g., Rossi 1989; Shinar 2016) maintain that the society existed in prerevolutionary times (Varese 2001, pp. 146, 160–61; Cheloukhine 2008). Like the mafias, it only admitted men. Unlike the mafias, the *vory's* society included only a selected elite group of professional criminals and not their criminal manpower or even the *avtoritety*, the heads of many crime groups (Varese 2001, pp. 125–41). There were, in other words, no groups belonging to the *vory's* society, only individuals. Six hundred *vory* were known to police sources just before the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 (Handelman 1995, p. 28). Given the organization's selectivity, there was no elaborate ranking system or command structure within it. *Vory* were classified only as junior or senior. Within the senior category, some

had more prestige than others and sometimes took strategic decisions for the whole society; however, they did not form a well-defined ruling body (Handelman 1995, p. 39).

Like the mafias, the *vory*'s society had an elaborate cultural apparatus, including rituals, a jargon, tattoos, and even a parallel normative code in open opposition to state laws. Much like the mafias, it also imposed a status and fraternization contract on its members, expecting a lifelong commitment and brotherly solidarity, which was symbolized by the *obschbak*, the communal fund. Their ideology was even stricter than that of the mafias. *Vory* were expected to live exclusively on thefts and black-market dealing when not in prison and were prohibited from having any contact with state representatives (Handelman 1995, pp. 28–45; Varese 2001, pp. 145–59).

The *vory* long constituted a parallel authority in the Gulag archipelago despite the Soviet state's efforts to weaken them in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Given their bases in prisons and the lack of direct manpower, the *vory* never, unlike the mafias, tried to rule the broader society beyond the criminal underworld. And even within the underworld, their power was largely due to their reputation and capability to solve conflicts, rather than their direct command of violence. As an informer told Varese (2001, pp. 140–41), "it is not the case that each group pays into the *obschbak* once a month, as a company does with his employees. The groups pay when they feel like it, as a sort of charity to support the criminal population in prison, or as a sign of respect for the *vory*. The treasurer of the *obschbak* asks for money when he needs it. Alternatively, groups pay into the *obschbak* when the *vory* does something in particular. Also the *vory* of our city is very respected in Moscow and can get help from all over Russia."

The *vory* had their heydays after the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991. They obtained or extorted contributions for their *obschbak* from many criminals and used their parallel justice tradition and skills to settle disputes both among criminals and among businesses that state courts were unable to deal with (Varese 2001, pp. 123–41).

But even in the 1990s, *vory* were just one branch of post-Soviet Russian organized crime. Many, less formalized formations arose from sports societies and martial arts clubs and the military, especially the Cossacks, Afghan war participants, and later mercenaries who fought in conflicts in Abkhazia and Transdniestria (Volkov 2014). Other crime groups, such as the Chechens, were ethnically based, with no clear-cut boundaries or institutionalized command positions (Varese 2001, pp. 177–79). Galeotti

(2012, p. 2) notes that “unlike other international criminal organizations (yakuza, Chinese triads, or Cosa Nostra), Russian criminal groups do not have a rigid control structure. They act opportunistically.” A Russian police officer specializing in the control of organized crime similarly reported at the beginning of the 1990s that “representatives of the new type of criminal world pay no attention to the *vory*. In prison, of course, everyone has to bow to the traditions. But outside, if a criminal has money and his own fighters, he can act independently” (Handelman 1995, p. 42).

In the early 1990s, many of these different crime groups were not only active in the liberalized post-Soviet illegal markets, but also extorted legitimate businesses and occasionally offered effective protection, exploiting the power void left by the implosion of the Soviet state. Although some of these groups consisted of dozens, if not hundreds, of members and had a hierarchical structure, most have disbanded since the turn of the century and lost their governance functions (Sokolov 2004). Volkov (2014, pp. 170–75) has no qualms speaking of “extinction of the Russian mafia” and identifies three structural causes for such process: the consolidation of a private security industry, which provides protection services more reliably than criminal groups did; the strengthening of the state and of its law enforcement under Putin’s leadership; and that many leaders of the most successful criminal groups preferred to become associates or investors in legitimate businesses. Many *vory* lacked necessary skills; the *vory* and many lower level, less skilled, more violent associates have been progressively marginalized, arrested, or killed. As of 2008, according to the then Russia’s Minister of the Interior, Rashid Nurgaliev, fewer than 100 *vory* remained active on Russian territory (Schwartz 2008).

Albanian organized crime has been prominent in Europe since the 1990s, using violence to further its drug dealing and other illegal market ventures, such as sex trafficking and loan sharking (Xhudo 1996; Zhilla and Lamarri 2015). Jana Arsovska (2015, 2016) has authoritatively shown that much like the camorra, Albanian organized crime consists of a variety of criminal groups largely reliant on family or friendship ties. It has no formalized internal structure, elaborate subcultural apparatus, or political power.

3. *Illegal Governance and Entrepreneurship in Western Europe.* Even in western Europe, with its high degree of government legitimacy and power, some groups occasionally provide temporary governance services in illegal markets. Such figures have been identified in a few English

cities and towns by Campana and Varese (2018). However, lacking a formalized structure, including institutionalized command positions and a well-defined cultural apparatus, the groups surrounding these figures do not possess any of the seven typifying characteristics of mafia organizations. Even their provision of governance has never become fully institutionalized before the group was broken up by the police.

A few blood families in the southern part of the Netherlands have shown a surprising degree of intergenerational involvement in various criminal activities, including thefts, other property crimes, and smuggling of a variety of illegal goods across borders (Moors and Spapens 2017). Since the 1960s, the southern province of North Brabant has played a key role in the production of ecstasy and amphetamines for the whole world market. With extensive cannabis plantations, it also feeds the illegal and semi-illegal markets for cannabis in Netherlands and many surrounding countries (Colman et al. 2018; Tops et al. 2018).

Despite their entrepreneurial success and occasional attempts to infiltrate legitimate economic activities and public life, southern Dutch crime groups remain only candidate criminal organizations. They are generally small and mostly ephemeral; they do not possess a formalized criminal structure or elaborate cultural apparatus. Moreover, their sole aim is making money from crime, and they have no interest in imposing governance services on the broader population or becoming an alternative to the state (van de Bunt and Kleemans 2007; Spapens 2016).

B. Offshoots of Voluntary or Sport Associations

A second category of candidate criminal organizations consists of offshoots of voluntary organizations. Several crime groups in Russia—and in other eastern European countries (e.g., Kaplan 1998)—emerged from sports societies and martial arts clubs. As Volkov (2014) notes, in the chaotic post-Soviet period, members of these clubs—and especially boxers, wrestlers, karate masters, and the like—possessed qualities that made them fit for violent entrepreneurship, including the ability to use violence, discipline, and countrywide networks. However, much as the Uralmash, one of these criminal groups, has transformed into an influential regional business group, most Russian criminal groups based on sport associations have either much reduced their criminal activities or have disbanded due to the increasing pressure of Russian state authorities.

In Western countries, the most prominent example of this category is represented by outlaw motorcycle gangs such as the Hells Angels and

Bandidos and Europe-based gangs such as Satudarah (see von Lampe and Blokland 2020). These gangs meet most of the requirements of large-scale criminal organizations. The most established go back to the 1930s and have thousands of members spread across many countries. They are also divided into chapters, each with well-defined command structures and detailed appointment procedures. Though they do not have outright ceremonies of initiation, they clearly separate members from nonmembers, much as mafias do. Much like mafias, they expect a long-term commitment from their members and expect quasi-brotherhood ties and mutual aid among the latter. Like the mafias, outlaw motorcycle gangs were not founded to conduct criminal activities or just to make money. They also show considerable multifunctionality, including their members' engagement in a plurality of criminal activities. Last but not least, some of their leaders claim to, and sometimes effectively, govern part of the underworld, especially the sex industry.

Nonetheless, they remain candidate criminal organizations because these gangs are still considered legitimate, if problematic, organizations in most countries despite the frequent epithet "outlaw." As von Lampe and Blokland (2020) report, most outlaw motorcycle gangs are registered legal entities and some even have copyrighted their colors and patches to prevent unauthorized use.

This means that, despite frequent use of the epithet "outlaw," these organizations are not fully criminalized, even if they have been listed as organized crime syndicates by several US public bodies (e.g., President's Commission on Organized Crime 1986). The US Department of Justice (2014) characterizes them as "organizations whose members use their motorcycle clubs as conduits for criminal enterprises." Dutch courts were the first to issue nationwide bans on some whole organizations or "clubs," including the Bandidos in 2017 and the Hells Angels in 2019 (Agence France-Press 2019), and not just some of local branches, known as chapters. Even leaving official categorizations aside, observers disagree on whether motorcycle gangs should be classified as criminal organizations. According to Barker (2014, pp. 13–14), for example, this is an empirical question, which has been answered separately for each club or even chapter depending on their members' and leaders' involvement in criminal activities. The relationship of the gang to member criminality varies a great deal. In some chapters the criminal activities involve the chapter itself; in others there are individual offenders who find the chapter a useful setting in which to operate.

C. Terrorist, Paramilitary, and Military Organizations

The last category of candidate criminal organizations consists of terrorist organizations and militias. In a few extreme cases, it even includes offshoots of military organizations gone awry, when they start drawing a large share of their resources from the organization and protection of organized crime activities, typically drug production and trafficking. Following Schmid (2004) and others, we note the inherently controversial nature of the label “terrorism” and the fluidity of the distinction between terrorist organizations and militias.

Whereas many terrorist groups are short-lived and ephemeral (LaFree, Dugan, and Miller 2015), some of the largest and longest-lasting terrorist groups and militias, such as the Irish Republican Army (e.g., Dingley 2012) and the Colombian FARC, have long been considered criminal organizations by governments. It is beyond the scope of this essay to establish to what extent each of the many prominent terrorist groups is comparable with mafia organizations. In the following subsections we briefly discuss just the FARC and Colombian paramilitaries and two Burmese²⁸ examples: United Wa State Army and Party, and the Kuomintang, the latter being an extreme case of a military organization that has transformed itself into an organized crime entity.

1. *The FARC and the Paramilitaries in Columbia.* Founded in the 1960s, the FARC lasted until at least 2017, when it formally agreed to terms effectively of surrender to the Colombian government.²⁹ With an army of 20,000 “soldiers” at its peak in the early 2000s (Otis 2014), it certainly was large. At least until 2009, it also had a formalized, hierarchical internal structure and an elaborate subculture, which were more bureaucratic and thus more “modern” than those of mafia organizations. Like mafias, the FARC long showed considerable multifunctionality and de facto operated for a long time as a quasi-state authority in about a third of Colombia’s territory, enjoying a certain degree of legitimacy (Eccarius-Kelly 2012).

Moreover, despite its original Marxist program of agrarianism and anti-imperialism, the FARC entered the drug business during the 1980s, thus adding a standard organized crime component to its original insurgent

²⁸ We refer to them as “Burmese” simply because the events narrated here occurred mainly during the time before the country was renamed Myanmar.

²⁹ In 2019 a major faction of the FARC announced that the government had failed to provide the basic protections set out in the peace agreement and that its members would return to conflict (Acosta and Cobb 2019).

aims and practices. Until the 2017 peace agreement, the FARC not only extracted protection money from the peasants growing coca and poppies and from the traffickers trading in semimanufactured or finished products, but it had also become a key player in the refining and sale of coca paste, earning at least US\$1 billion per year (Otis 2014).

In 1997 most right-wing paramilitary groups coalesced into the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (known as AUC, the acronym from the Spanish initials), which profited extensively from the cocaine industry through both extortion of producers and traffickers and direct participation in the trade (Vargas 2005, pp. 212–14). However, like many other insurgent groups, the AUC is too ephemeral to seriously merit the term “organization,” being almost completely demobilized in 2005 and 2006.

2. *The United Wa State Army and Party.* The United Wa State Army and Party are certainly organizations, again more bureaucratic and modern than mafia organizations. However, they are not clearly “criminal.” Respectively known as UWSA and UWSP,³⁰ they have undergone a spectacular transformation from an insurgent Marxist group to a major opium- and heroin-producing organization and, more recently, to an almost fully fledged, though not internationally recognized, state authority that has banned opium production since 2005.

The UWSA was the largest splinter group from the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), consisting of 8,000–10,000 men at the time of the split in 1989 (Milsom 2005).²⁵ It incorporated a smaller group dominated by three ethnic Chinese brothers, the Wei, with decades-long experience in the opiate trade.

Within a few months of the creation of the UWSA, cease-fire agreements were struck between Burma’s military government and the main former CPB forces. In exchange for promises not to attack government forces and to sever ties with other rebel groups, the CPB mutineers were granted permission to engage in any business, including, almost inevitably, opiate production and trafficking (Davis and Hawke 1998; Altsean-Burma 2004, pp. 50–51). A nonmedical opiate industry was de facto legalized.

Initially, Burma’s opium production boomed under the ex-CPB quasi-state authorities. Between 1988 and 1993, the opium harvest grew by

³⁰ For reasons of simplicity we refer to both of them by using the more common acronym of UWSA.

60 percent, and a string of new, large heroin refineries were set up near the main growing areas (Lintner 2002, pp. 263, 272–74). At least until the beginning of the twenty-first century, the refineries were run both by the militia commanders and by independent traffickers who were obliged to pay a “protection” tax to the militias.

Though the UWSA was designated as a “drug kingpin” in 2003 by the United States, the Burmese government long gave the leaders of the UWSA legitimacy as “leaders of the national races” (Ball 1999, p. 4). It allowed them to invest illicit proceeds in the legitimate economy. More recently, though, the relationship has become tenser, and three rounds of inconclusive peace talks were held between 2016 and 2018 (Lintner 2019).

Unexpectedly in 2005 the UWSA banned opium production in the areas under its control, following earlier bans of two other splinter groups. It forcibly moved many opium-farming villages from their hill locations to riverine plains to induce them to grow other crops (Paoli, Greenfield, and Reuter 2009, pp. 139–42). As a result, Burma’s potential opium production fell from 1,760 tons in 1996 to 310 tons in 2005. Although Myanmar’s production has fluctuated since 2006 with a total of 550 tons in 2017, “there are hardly any poppy fields” left in the Wa region (UNODC 2017, p. 8).

3. *The Kuomintang.* The de facto stateless northeastern Burmese Shan State also provides an extreme example of a regular military organization that turned criminal. This is the Nationalist Chinese Kuomintang (KMT), which operated for several decades in northeastern Burma after being expelled from China by Mao Zedong’s communist troops in 1949. The newly independent Burma, weakened by the assassination of its designated leader and his closest associates in 1947 by ethnic rivalries, and by army mutinies, had no means to oust this leftover army. The KMT received plenty of weapons, supplies, and technical support from the Nationalist Chinese headquarters in Taiwan and its covert allies, most notably the United States and Thailand. From late 1952 onward, the KMT became the only effective government authority in the territories between the Salween River and the Chinese border (Kokang, Wa, and Kengtung states), extracting taxes and customs duties (McCoy 1991, pp. 162–78; Lintner 2002, pp. 236–38).

Unsurprisingly, because the territories conquered by the KMT were Burma’s major opium-producing regions, a significant part of KMT revenues came from the taxation of opium producers and traffickers; the KMT required that every hill-village farmer pay a heavy annual opium tax. The KMT centralized the wholesale transportation of opium into

Thailand, where it long enjoyed the full protection of Thai authorities (Lintner 2002, pp. 242–44). This may explain why there was a rapid increase in local opium production (McCoy 1991, p. 173). In 1962, the KMT's two main Burmese armies moved their headquarters into Thailand, and, once Taiwan cut back financial support, they increasingly relied on the opium traffic to finance their military operations. They remained major actors in the opium trade, and later heroin production, of the Golden Triangle until the 1980s. Only in 1984 after a new democratic government was installed did the Thai government crack down on the remnants of the KMT (McCoy 1991, pp. 354–55, 432–33).

As these last examples (FARC, UWSA, KMT) show, in conditions of total breakdown or absence of state authority, it becomes difficult to draw clear-cut boundaries among organized crime groups, criminal profit-driven organizations, terrorist organizations, militias, and even states. No doubt, in their heydays, the FARC and Kuomintang exercised, and the UWSA still exercises, governance functions to an even larger extent than any mafia has ever done (with the exception of the triads in Southeast Asia until the nineteenth century). As Tilly (1988, p. xx) noted long ago, "One might imagine a continuum running from anarchy to banditry to mafia to routine government. The defining feature of that continuum is the extent to which control over the use of force is concentrated in a single organization." As in the case of mafia organizations and most collective entities active in (de facto) stateless contexts, for militias, too, it is hardly possible to distinguish economic from political functions. Neither militias (including military organizations gone awry) nor mafia organizations can be classified as exclusively governmental or business enterprises. Profit- and power-oriented activities are present and closely intertwined in these clusters of actors. Moreover, it is even awkward to apply the adjective "criminal" to many militias or mafia organizations because the closest state authorities have sometimes not even formally criminalized or attempted to suppress them. They have themselves exercised power and even held a considerable degree of popular legitimacy. Crime is a term that modern state authorities use to express censure and disapproval, and in the case of both sets of organizations the state was instead conniving, tolerant, or just not there.

VI. Concluding Comments

We began by identifying seven common characteristics of organized crime organization that we and almost all observers and scholars call

the five “iconic” mafias. Though each of the five has a distinctive history and setting, there are enough commonalities that bundling them in one category is reasonable.

We mostly discussed whether other modern criminal syndicates share many of the same characteristics. The powerful syndicates that have in the latter part of the twentieth century emerged in Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil are often considered exemplary of organized crime. These syndicates, however, do not possess many of the typifying characteristics of the iconic five, and in some cases it is unclear whether they should even be considered organizations in the sociological sense; they do not have a clear boundary between members and others. The prison-based PCC in Sao Paulo seems to come closest, with longevity as yet the one missing element, which, by definition, can be achieved over time. It is surprising how few of the obvious candidate entities, particularly the Colombian and Mexican DTOs, have many of the typifying characteristics of the iconic five. However, we make no claim that we have conducted an exhaustive study of potential criminal syndicates. For example, the prison-based gangs in El Salvador and Guatemala, such as the MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha 13) or 18th Street gang, facing extremely weak and brutal governments, have many similarities with the PCC and, like the latter, may share some characteristics of the five iconic mafias, even if they are relatively young.

Mafias are not necessarily the most damaging form of organized crime. If a country had to choose between the recklessly homicidal Mexican drug-trafficking syndicates and the more subtle Sicilian Cosa Nostra, no doubt the latter would cause less social harm at least in the short run. However, mafias persist as many other criminal organizations and syndicates do not. The Colombian government was able to eliminate the Medellin and Cali syndicates. The successor syndicates were comparably effective at smuggling cocaine but posed a much lesser threat to state authority. In contrast, even after a campaign of nearly 50 years by the US Department of Justice, the American Cosa Nostra still operates, even though it is much weakened (Jacobs 2020). Which characteristics of the seven identified above are most important in explaining the persistence of the mafias is unknown, but plausibly it is a combination.

The brief discussion of a range of candidate criminal organizations found more differences than similarities with the five mafias. It may be that it is hard to develop these organizations in modern societies, in which compared with premodern societies there is so much more emphasis on wealth as the single measure of success.

The most important factors that enable mafias to cohere over long periods of time are perhaps those that distinguish them from mere profit-making enterprises. Corporations, even the largest, rarely survive as long as 100 years; there is rapid turnover in the S&P 500, a listing of the 500 largest US firms by capital value.³¹ Just as corporations have proven to be quite mortal, purely profit-making criminal syndicates may fail to endure. Money does not breed loyalty. True, the criminal syndicates here considered distinguish themselves from legitimate corporations for their routine and sometimes excessive use of violence. Violence can prevent defections in the short run.

Violence alone, however, does not breed loyalty and cannot substitute for a cultural apparatus engendering a long-term commitment from the members and group legitimacy. It is worth noting that the two Brazilian federations, the most mafia-like of the newer syndicates examined, both had their origins in efforts to improve prison conditions for large numbers of inmates and created elaborate systems of rules and sanctions. It may be that other enduring mafias will only develop in circumstances that create the need for protection against an oppressive, failing, or weak state and when they are able to develop a cultural apparatus capable of legitimizing them vis-à-vis their own members and the surrounding population. We hope that this essay will engender further research on the topic.

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³¹ A more precise statement is impossible. For a sense of just how difficult it is to measure long-term corporate survival, see the exchange of comments on a blog post (Perry 2016).

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