

HOWARD ABADINSKY

**THE
CRIMINAL
ELITE**

Professional and Organized Crime

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To Gloria and Pete

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Introduction

This study will examine two elite categories of the criminal “underworld.” The jewel thief and the “wise-guy” (or “made-guy,” member of Italian-American organized crime) are viewed by both criminal and law enforcement personnel as being at the pinnacle of the world of crime. The jewel thief population represented in this study is said by federal officials to number no more than twenty, while members of organized crime are estimated to total about 2000.¹ It is said that these jewel thieves would not attempt a “score” if the expected “take” would not be at least \$50,000 (retail value), while the income of organized crime has been compared to the profits of major corporations.² One middle-management level member of the Gambino crime “family” whom I studied previously had real estate holdings worth in the millions.³ The elite criminal is said to enjoy relative immunity from law enforcement efforts: the jewel thief by virtue of his extraordinary skill and connections to organized crime; the “wise-guy” by virtue of fear or the “fix.”

Previous research into professional crime has focused on shoplifting, confidence games, pickpockets, burglary, safecracking, fencing, and house prostitution.⁴ There has never been a study of the jewel thief.

This study addresses some of the issues raised by earlier theoretical and empirical studies of occupational theft. In particular I will: (1) describe how a person becomes an adept jewel thief, describe the organizational dimensions of this occupation, and determine how well the jewel thief conforms to the Sutherland model⁵ of professional crime; (2) provide a detailed description of the skills and techniques used by the jewel thief—knowledge which has not been

available in the literature on crime; (3) provide insight into how the jewel thief views his victims and his occupation; explore the dimension of "crime as dangerous fun," and the thief's desire for recognition of his skill and accomplishments as a motivating variable; and (4) display the relationship between jewel theft and other criminal occupations; in particular, the connection between professional crime and organized crime.

With respect to organized crime, I will offer a summary history of Italian-American organized crime in the United States with particular emphasis on the New York City area (where most of my informants operated), in order to properly ground the issues and data being presented. I will offer data and analyses on several questions, including:

1. How does crime appear to be organized in the United States: rational and formal, or traditional? Does the organization of criminals distinguish between members and associates? What are the prerogatives and obligations of membership?
2. What is the business of organized crime? Is it primarily a provider of "goods and services"?
3. What are the norms of behavior governing members of organized crime? Are these norms formal or traditional? Is violence a resource that is held in reserve or freely applied? What are the rules for its use?
4. What precautions are taken to avoid disclosure of information and how are orders transmitted? How does this affect what is known about organized crime?
5. What are the differences in organization and career patterns between professional and organized crime and what accounts for these differences?

Notes

1. U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, *Organized Crime and Use of Violence* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), p. 19.
2. Chamber of Commerce of the United States, *Marshalling Citizen Power Against Crime* (Washington, D.C.: Chamber of Commerce, 1970), pp. 6-7, 35.
3. Howard Abadinsky, *The Mafia in America: An Oral History* (New York: Praeger, 1981).

4. Edwin H. Sutherland, *The Professional Thief* (1937; reprint ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); David W. Maurer, *The Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man and the Confidence Game* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1940); David W. Maurer, *Whiz Mob: A Correlation of the Technical Argot of Pickpockets with Their Behavior Pattern*, 2d ed. (New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press, 1964); Neal Shover, "Burglary as an Occupation" (Ph.D. diss., Department of Sociology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1971); William Chambliss, *Box-Man: A Professional Thief's Journey* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); Carl B. Klockars, *The Professional Fence* (New York: The Free Press, 1974); Marilyn E. Walsh, *The Fence* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977); Barbara Sherman Heyl, *The Madam As Entrepreneur: Career Management in House Prostitution* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1979).

5. Sutherland, *Professional Thief*.

Contents

<i>Figures</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	xiii
1. Researching Crime	3
 PART I: PROFESSIONAL CRIME	 13
2. Introduction to the Issues	15
3. Skills, Language, and Differential Association	21
4. Techniques and Common Sense of Jewel Theft	35
5. The Jewel Thief Views Himself and His Occupation	55
6. The Organized Crime Connection	63
 PART II: ORGANIZED CRIME	 79
7. Introduction to the Issues	81
8. How Is Organized Crime Organized?	93
9. Natural History of Becoming a Mafia Member	115

10. The Business of Organized Crime	125
11. The Norms of Organized Crime	149
12. Professional and Organized Crime: Biographical and Career Similarities and Differences	165
<i>Bibliography</i>	171
<i>Subject Index</i>	183
<i>Author Index</i>	187

Figures

1. An Organized Crime Family	94
2. Sites of <i>La Cosa Nostra</i> Headquarters	101
3. Rules of Organized Crime	160

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Researching Crime

On September 10, 1931, four grim-faced men entered an office suite at 230 Park Avenue, the Grand Central Building, in New York City. They flashed badges and one of them brandished a revolver. They ordered the secretary and seven men in the front office to line up against the wall. The seven were there to protect Salvatore Maranzano, the Sicilian-born *capo mafioso* of New York. Three of the visitors walked past the secretary's desk and into Maranzano's private office. He thought they were federal agents who had visited him before (Maranzano was suspected of smuggling Sicilians into the United States), and walked over to greet them. He soon found himself set upon by the men, who were wielding knives. Stabbed and bleeding, Maranzano fought back and attempted to reach a pistol in his desk: "There was a sound of voices raised in angry dispute; blows, struggling, and finally pistol shots and the four men dashed out of the suite." Maranzano was found with "his body riddled with bullets and punctured with knife wounds."¹

Donald Cressey writes: "The day Maranzano was killed (September 11, 1931 [*sic*]) has long been known as 'purge day' in Cosa Nostra [the Mafia]. On that day and the two days immediately following, some forty Italian-Sicilian gang leaders across the country lost their lives in battle."² Numerous, and often less scholarly, sources refer to this episode as the "Purge of the Greasers," the latter term signifying old-time crime bosses who had been born and raised in Sicily. The episode has drama but, alas, no basis in fact—it never occurred. After the murder of Maranzano, there was no purge or mass murder of gang bosses.³ However, this oft-repeated

piece of organized crime legend highlights some of the difficulties inherent in separating fact from fiction when researching crime and criminals.

In 1977 two major crime stories appeared, one in the *New York Times* and the other in *New York* magazine.⁴ The stories revealed that Carmine (“Lilo”) Galente, boss of the Bonanno crime family, was emerging as the *capo di tutti capi*, “boss of bosses,” of the Mafia. Six months later an article in *New York* magazine revealed that the *real capo mafioso* was Frank (“Funzi”) Tieri, the seventy-four-year-old boss of the Genovese crime family. Galente, the article stated, was being proclaimed boss of bosses as “the result of a well-planned ‘leak’ by the [Federal] Drug Enforcement Administration.”⁵ In any event, on July 12, 1979, several heavily armed men entered an Italian restaurant in Brooklyn and executed Galente. The murder remains unsolved.⁶

The nature of professional and organized crime and criminals limits the sources of data. Previous studies of professional crime have utilized law enforcement sources, case studies, and the “life history.”⁷ It is axiomatic that the further away one is situated from the source of data, the greater the questions of reliability and validity. This is a particularly acute problem in studying organized crime, where indirect sources abound.

Cressey states that “basic methodological problems stem from the fact that the society of organized criminals, if it is a society, is a *secret society*. The ongoing activities of organized criminals are not accessible to observations by the ordinary citizen or the ordinary social scientist.” Further, “An organization of ‘organized criminals’ exists, but it must be studied by methods not ordinarily utilized by social scientists.” These “methods” actually boil down to using data from government sources, hardly a novel approach. However, Cressey maintains that it is not ordinarily utilized by social scientists because when it comes to organized crime “one must have ‘connections,’ such as an appointment as a consultant to the President’s Commission [on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice].”

The principal handicap here stems from the fact that there are no “hard data” on organized crime. The information in the files of law-enforcement and investigative agencies, even those whose principal function is the assembling of intelligence information, is by no means oriented to provid-