

Blood and Power

◆ Organized Crime in ◆
Twentieth-Century America

STEPHEN FOX

author of **The Mirror Makers**

B L O O D

AND

P O W E R

ORGANIZED CRIME IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA

STEPHEN FOX

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NEW YORK

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CONTENTS

	Preface	7
ONE	The Cause of It All	11
TWO	The Fork in the Road	52
THREE	Their Own World	77
FOUR	The WASP Response	130
FIVE	Private Sector: Gangsters, Unions, Employers	174
SIX	Public Sector: Gangsters and Politics	221
SEVEN	The WASPs Persist	261
EIGHT	Kennedys	306
NINE	After Dallas: Prosperity and Mafia Chic	347
TEN	Getting Serious	391
	Acknowledgments	421
	Manuscript Collections	423
	Abbreviations of Government Publications	426
	Notes	431
	Index	506

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For the Boston Public Library

PREFACE

This history of organized crime in the United States since the 1920s treats both cops and robbers because the American underworld has developed through mutual provocations between the two groups, each responding to the other's initiatives. Inevitably I have allotted much space here to Italian gangsters in New York and Chicago. The historical record plainly demands such an emphasis. At the same time, whenever appropriate, I have introduced gangsters of other ethnic backgrounds, in other places, because their stories have been relatively neglected. Even among different groups and different locales, though, certain patterns have stayed remarkably consistent.

Public perceptions of the underworld, especially of the Mafia, have passed through four distinct phases: a long period of denial; then tentative recognition after the Apalachin meeting, the Valachi hearings, and *The Godfather*; a second period of denial and romanticization; and, since around 1980, the current level of understanding, occasioned mainly by serious federal prosecutions and the publication of gangster memoirs. I have written this book from a perspective informed by the fourth phase, but I have attempted to treat the earlier phases without undue hindsight. As a historian, I am always struck by how partial and subjective our knowledge of an epoch must be, how we all must grope around and do what we can with fragments of information.

My general theme in this book is that any serious study of

American organized crime cannot avoid its ethnic aspects. Gangsters have always dealt in blood and power—blood in several senses of the word. Perhaps more so and longer so than in any other area of American life, ethnicity has mattered in the underworld, affecting methods, powers, associations, and job specialties. For many observers of the American scene nowadays, ethnicity has become a touchily delicate topic, to be discussed only with diplomatic throat-clearings and carefully balanced qualifying statements. Gangsters have never felt bound by such discretion, and I have tried here to follow their lead. Some readers may note that this book describes many Irish, Jewish, and Italian Americans in harsh terms, and many WASP Americans rather more favorably. I would ask such readers to bear in mind that I am usually treating racketeers in the first instance and racketbusters in the second. “I’m not talking about Italians,” Joe Valachi said at his hearings in 1963. “I’m talking about criminals.” A vital distinction, for both Valachi and this book.

—STEPHEN RUSSELL FOX

Cambridge, Massachusetts

CONTENTS

	Preface	7
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ONE

THE CAUSE OF IT ALL

Organized crime afflicted American life before the 1920s, but in small ways. Groups of crooks with entrepreneurial visions paid off the right cops and politicians, and in return controlled a neighborhood, or a section of a city, or at most an entire metropolis. But the enterprises under “protection”—mainly street crime, burglaries, prostitution, and gambling—were essentially restricted to certain places and people. Most good citizens could go their own way without being affected. A clear line divided the underworld from the upperworld. The gangs, confined by geography and relatively modest ambitions, did not operate on national or even regional scales. During occasional spasms of reform the cops and politicians, bribed or not, could still at their whim subdue the gangs for a while.

Beginning in the 1920s, all these circumstances worsened because of Prohibition, in ways nobody predicted or understood at the time. Gangsters have always operated in a shifting, layered, shadowy world. They leave inscrutable histories replete with accident and misdirection, the imponderables of personality, appearances that correspond to no realities, and many surprises. Thus at the outset, by an exquisite historical irony, WASP anxiety helped establish organized crime. An imagined alien conspiracy led to a real conspiracy. Fantasy produced its own twisted reality.



From about the mid-1800s on, American life was modernized by three overlapping social revolutions. Industrialization turned a slower agrarian society powered by muscle and wind into a factory world racing on steam, electricity, and fossil fuels. Urbanization took farmers and others from their isolated, homogeneous island communities and deposited them in heterogeneous cities and towns. Immigration from abroad, in its ethnic diversity, challenged the easy domination by the British-descended Protestants who had originally settled their portion of North America and run things for two centuries.

To old-stock Americans of the late 1800s, society was cracking open and losing definition in alarming ways. It was called progress, and most people played along. But amid the blazing successes of technology and industry, the old WASPs detected a polity careening out of control, out of *their* control. Building the railroads, working the factories, crowding the cities, alien immigrants made an obvious scapegoat. How then to reimpose control? By wellborn efforts to reform corrupt politics; to extend the vote to women, with their well-known higher moral qualities; to restrict immigration; to encourage the eugenics of selective breeding and scientific racism. And in particular, to cap the most universal petcock, the drinking of alcohol, with its capacity for heedlessly releasing human energies and emotions.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, as immigration peaked at an average of a million new Americans each year, Prohibition took hold, first in twenty-seven states acting individually, then on a national level by the Eighteenth Amendment. Historians have interpreted the movement for Prohibition in essentially three ways: as an assertion by Protestants against non-Protestants, by rural Americans against urban Americans, or by the middle class against the working class. Each interpretation is mostly true but incomplete.

The prohibitionists were overwhelmingly Protestants, especially Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists. By contrast most Catholics and Jews were hostile or indifferent to the dry crusade. "The minute regulations and prohibitions of personal conduct which are found in what may be called the Puritan churches," said Monsignor John A. Ryan, a prominent Catholic, "make them 'the natural home' of the prohibition dogma." But

this alignment on the issue broke down in the South. There both whites and blacks generally worshiped in Protestant churches, yet the whites embraced Prohibition and the blacks resisted it. Most southern states had already banned liquor before the Eighteenth Amendment was passed, largely because the potential wet vote by blacks was disenfranchised.

The prohibitionists drew their political strength from rural areas and states. In other ways, though, the rural-urban distinction does not hold. The leaders of the Prohibition party and the Anti-Saloon League, the two main dry lobbies, were actually more urban in origin and residence than the American norm of the day. And in California, the two principal urban centers disagreed on this as on most other issues: San Francisco was wet; Los Angeles was dry.

In general, the middle class voted dry while the working class voted wet. But here again a major exception presents itself: the *organized* wet forces drew their financial support and political clout from solidly middle-class commercial interests. Prohibition obviously threatened the liquor business, so saloonkeepers, liquor retailers, winegrowers, and brewers—men of at least middle-class incomes—gave the money that sustained wet lobbies.

The only wet-dry distinction that applies in each case is an ethnic one. WASPs supported Prohibition while non-WASPs opposed it. In the South the dry whites were overwhelmingly British-descended Protestants, worried about the drinking habits of the black Protestants. In California, dry Los Angeles was populated mostly by transplanted midwestern WASPs, while wet San Francisco had higher proportions of Irish, Italians, Chinese, and other non-WASPs. The wet liquor lobby consisted basically of Irish saloonkeepers in the Northeast, German brewers in the Midwest, and Italian winegrowers in California. Booze was one of the few major American businesses of the time not dominated by WASPs.

Prohibition therefore amounted to an ethnic experiment in social control, “to preserve this nation and the Anglo-Saxon type,” as the journal of the Anti-Saloon League declared. In hindsight, it seems that what really drove the prohibitionists were the large, unidentifiable strains of modernization and diversity, of social upheaval and new ways of life: the side effects of “progress.” But the problems the dries could see and identify at the time were crime, political corruption, saloons, and foreigners, all tied to-