An introduction to the special issue on ‘Organised crime and illegal markets in the UK and Ireland’

Klaus von Lampe¹ · Georgios A. Antonopoulos²

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Abstract This paper provides an introduction to the articles and report excerpt submitted to the special issue of *Trends in Organized Crime* on ‘Organised crime and illegal markets in the UK and Ireland’. The aim of the special issue is to draw together empirical research findings and theoretical accounts on various manifestations of organised crime in the particular geographic context(s), the evolution of organised crime, the links between organised crime, the legal sphere and paramilitary groups, as well as an account of the demographic profile and attitudes of citizens in areas in which organised crime groups thrive.

Keywords Organised crime · Illegal markets · United Kingdom · Britain · Ireland · Northern Ireland · IRA · Paramilitary groups · Gangs · Collective efficacy

Britain and Ireland are not notorious for organised crime in the same way as Italy or the United States. Where Italy has the Sicilian Mafia, Camorra and ‘Ndrangheta, and the U.S., apart from its own Italo-American version of Mafia, has iconic gangsters such as Al Capone and John Gotti, one is hard pressed to come up with British and Irish examples that epitomise organised crime in a similar fashion. Closest to iconic organised crime figures are perhaps the Krays and Richardsons, working-class criminals who briefly gained positions of power in the London underworld during the 1960s and managed to attain celebrity status in tabloid papers while lacking the kind of political influence their Italian and American counterparts enjoyed (Jenkins and Potter 1986). The Krays and Richardsons had to compete for the public spotlight with a different kind of ‘organised crime’, the Great Train Robbery of 1963 which was carried out by a group of criminals assembled specifically for this one crime. In fact, it was this

✉ Georgios A. Antonopoulos
g.antonopoulos@tees.ac.uk

¹ John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 524 West 59th. Street, New York, NY 10019, USA

² School of Social Sciences, Business & Law, Teesside University, Middlesbrough TS1 3BA, UK

singular event that fuelled “a palpable moral panic concerning ‘organised crime’” (Hobbs 2010: 293), and that was regarded by one British criminologist as the most outstanding achievement in the entire history of organised crime (cited in Mack and Kerner 1975: 171). Against this backdrop, organised crime in Britain has been widely considered to deviate from the examples set by the U.S. and Italy in that it is primarily about “task forces of criminals organized for expeditions into” robbery and other predatory crimes (Cressey 1972: 1; see also Levi 1998). In light of these differences it is not surprising that the notion of ‘organised crime’, which since the 1960s had found its way into the European conscience via Hollywood movies and the missionary efforts of the U.S. government (Hobbs and Antonopoulos 2013; Woodiwiss 2001; Woodiwiss and Hobbs 2009) was only rather reluctantly embraced in the UK and Ireland. “For many years organised crime in Britain was a Cinderella concept within both academic and policing circles,” as Dick Hobbs (2004: 414) has noted. And this reservation is still noticeable in a certain terminological preference for “serious” over “organised” crime in official and legislative parlance (see Campbell 2013), which is somewhat ironic because the historically first consistent use of the term ‘organised crime’ occurred in the British Empire, more specifically by the British colonial administration in India in the mid-1800s (von Lampe 2016).

Although mafia-like criminal associations have been absent from traditional depictions of the crime landscape in Britain and Ireland, there are various other types of criminal structures characterised by remarkable continuity. First, there are the “urban underworlds” in London and other cities that have been traced back centuries (Sharpe 1984). In the words of Mary McIntosh, the term ‘underworld’ meaningfully refers to a “social milieu that is relatively segregated and autonomous” and that provides “stable patterns of professional crime” (McIntosh 1975: 20). A second fixture in the British and Irish crime landscape are the so-called family firms, clusters of criminals centred on, but also extending beyond kinship ties (Hobbs 2001). A third type of criminal structure specifically linked to Northern Ireland are paramilitary groups that have allegedly been morphing more and more into criminal gangs (Clarke and Lee 2008; Moran 2004).

Apart from these indigenous structures, organised crime is increasingly viewed in a transnational and global context where attention is paid to illegal cross-border trade and to crime linked to ethnic minorities and foreigners (Antonopoulos and Hall 2016; Caulkins et al. 2009; Densley 2012; Ruggiero and Khan 2006; Silverstone and Savage 2010; Tilley and Hopkins 2008). In the European context, the UK and Ireland are integral parts of what Europol (2008) regards as the ‘Northwest hub of organised crime’ in its Organised Crime Threat Assessment (OCTA): a region characterised by “*major transport infrastructures, different tax regimes, geographical proximity to various Member States and a flourishing economy which offers possibilities that can and are exploited by organised crime*” (Europol 2008: 33).

The aim of the special issue on ‘Organised crime and illegal markets in the UK and Ireland’ is to draw together empirical research findings and theoretical accounts on various manifestations of organised crime in this particular geographic context(s), the evolution of organised crime, the links between organised crime, the legal sphere and paramilitary groups, as well as an account of the demographic profile and attitudes of citizens in areas in which organised crime groups thrive. Following this introduction, this special issue comprises four peer-reviewed articles and one report excerpt.

In the first article, *Paul Lashmar* and *Dick Hobbs*, inspired by the 2015 Hatton Garden Heist that was described as “the largest burglary in English legal history” (Thompson 2015), explore how Hatton Garden, the UK’s centre for jewelry production and retail, facilitated the development of organised crime in the UK in the last 30 years. The authors pay particular attention to VAT fraud, which has been naturally embedded in the legal trade that has flourished in the particular ethnically diverse locality but also show how ‘project criminals’ (McIntosh 1975), predominantly 1970s and early 1980s armed robbers with specialist skills, integrated with resourceful legitimate actors in Hatton Garden, while responding to ‘shifting terrains’ (Hobbs 2001) and law enforcement strategies, before moving into drug trafficking. Lashmar and Hobbs (this issue) argue that “[a]reas such as Hatton Garden... epitomize the notion of organised crime as a flexible and constantly mutating ‘community of practice’ encompassing gradations of legitimate commercial expertise alongside its numerous unlicensed variations” (see also Hobbs 2013).

The second article by *Niamh Hourigan*, *John F. Morrison*, *James Windle* and *Andrew Silke* offers a systematic overview of the emergence and development of organised crime in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland since the latter part of the 1960s. The authors also explore how organised crime in Ireland has been shaped by conflict and feuding within and between organised crime and paramilitary groups. In the Republic of Ireland, organised crime has been associated primarily with the expansion of drug markets but also with armed robberies, kidnappings, extortion and a variety of illegal markets of legal and illegal commodities. The ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland impacted on organised crime both in the north and in the south. In many instances, paramilitary groups have sought to extort money or engage in vigilantism against organised criminals, predominantly drug traffickers, in order to draw support by the local community and enhance their social and political capital. In many cases, organised crime groups and paramilitary groups “have engaged in mutually beneficial arrangements” (Hourigan, Morrison, Windle and Silke, this issue).

Robert McLean, *James Densley* and *Ross Deuchar*, in the third article, attempt at extending the Scottish evolving gang model, which provides a typology of gangs in Scotland (‘youth street gangs; ‘youth criminal gangs’; ‘serious organized crime groups’) in order to provide an account on the level of involvement of gangs in the drugs market. The authors’ research participants included 35 individuals involved in drug trafficking collectivities as well as 5 practitioners. While the supply of illegal drugs occurs within ‘youth street gangs’, this mostly takes the form of social supply. On the other hand, ‘youth criminal gangs’ may engage in drug supply but this is mostly “an outcome of social relationships between intrinsically criminal individuals who are young and now faced with external threats and financial pressures” (McLean, Densley and Deuchar, this issue), whereas ‘serious organised crime groups, “are not... gang[s] per se, but rather loose partnerships” of adults who have maximum profitability as their main objective.

In the final article, *Stuart Kirby*, *Michelle McManus* and *Laura Boulton* examine the demographic profile and attitude of citizens in areas in the UK where organised crime groups (OGCs) thrive. The authors collected information through 431 questionnaires from households from these areas, and analysed data in relation to demographic information, views on the community and the police, and, finally, how participants were expected to react to illegal incidents. Kirby, McManus and Boulton, then,

compared their findings from these high density/higher saturation of resident OCG areas with findings from 343 questionnaires from a ‘control community’. Although the group of participants from the control community manifested higher levels of ‘collective efficacy’ (Sampson 2006), and there was an expectation for citizens from these communities to confront “*general crime and anti-social behaviour incidents, this confidence was not extended to scenarios of street drug dealing or offences explicitly associated with organised crime*” (Kirby, McManus and Boulton, this issue).

These four articles are followed by a report excerpt by Transcrime research centre of the Catholic University of Milan (authored by *Francesco Calderoni, Martina Rotondi and Serena Favarin*) on the illegal trade in tobacco products in Ireland. Given the close geographical, social, economic and cultural connections, the report also focuses, where appropriate, on Northern Ireland. The main sources used by this study have been the Revenue Commissioners data on the illegal trade in tobacco products and on illicit tobacco products seizures, KPMG and Euromonitor International data, empty pack surveys commissioned by the tobacco industry, interviews with officials, key informants, and media sources.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest Klaus von Lampe and Georgios A. Antonopoulos declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Human and animal participants This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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