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## **IMMIGRANTS' EXPERIENCES IN AMERICA: TOWARD UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZED CRIME**

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### **Abstract**

*Using the emergence of Sicilian Mafia in the United States of America as the focal condition, this article investigates why the emergence of organized crime in the United State of America is widely misunderstood. The author aims to provide a renewed theoretical analysis of the social problem. Central to this analysis are two contradictory perspectives on the emergence of organized crime in the United State of America. These perspectives are: a) an importation model, and b) a deprivation model. Unlike most studies on the subject, this article raises important, but previously undiscussed questions, makes greater efforts to address the questions, and provides serious lessons learned in the process. These lessons may be too important and too costly to ignore in 21st century criminology.*

### **Introduction**

Deviant behaviors are major widespread social facts. There is no society without deviance (Durkheim, 1966). However, they occur in various forms from one society to another. Whatever forms they take, some deviance is defined as more problematic (i.e., criminal deviance) than others (i.e., noncriminal deviance). Some deviance presents greater reaction than others within a neighborhood as well as across a larger society. No matter the forms and nature of a given deviance, society tries to define it in some way. Sometimes, a

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society's definition of the emergence of a given deviance stops at a point where more theoretical analysis is needed. Such an endeavor is imperative in order to facilitate further understanding of that particular deviant behavior.

In the United States of America, for example, one of the most sensational but least understood forms of deviance is organized crime (especially its origins). This is, of course, true partly because of the public image of this complex social problem. The image of this social problem can be captured in the public fascination with the "Mafia," the "Mob," the "Syndicate," "the secret society," and other suggestive descriptions used in popular culture (Barkan, 2006, 2001; Albanese, 2004; Puzo, 1969). These descriptions of organized crime have remained strong for a long time and probably will continue to be so in the future. For the truth of this, one need only look at the immense popularity of "The Godfather," a very popular book turned into one of the highest grossing movies. The Godfather demonstrates the insatiable public appetite for stories concerning organized crime (Puzo, 1969).

The sensationalization of organized crime in the United States of America has led to the misunderstanding of several aspects of it by a large number of people. This major reason the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America is so misunderstood is also the major reason for this theoretical analysis. Simply put, this essay investigates why the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America is widely misunderstood. In doing so, this essay identifies and explores two major theoretical approaches (importation and deprivation) on the issue. In contrast to the

conventional wisdom (i.e., the importation approach) relating to the understanding of the origins of organized crime in the United States of America, this paper tries to carry out a renewed theoretical alternative analysis (i.e., the deprivation approach) of the emergence of the social problem, which is a very significant aspect of it.

### **The Focus of the Study**

This essay investigates why the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America is widely misunderstood. In doing so, it examines two major theoretical explanations of the issue. Instead of adopting the conventional wisdom--importation model explanation of the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America, this study aims to present a different conceptualization of the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America. Specifically, the deviant category that would serve as a (yard stick) toward a credible understanding of how organized crime emerged in the United States of America is the "Sicilian Mafia." This is true because Sicilian Mafia is widely regarded as the dominant organized crime organization in the United States of America (Albanese, 2004, 1985; Barkan 2006, 2001; Barlow and Kauzlarich, 2002). In order to acquire that understanding, the following questions are worthy of scrutiny: How did the Sicilian Mafia emerge in the United States of America? What led to its emergence? In place of the conventional explanation of the origins of the problem, what credible alternative explanations can be given for its emergence? What relationships, if any, the Sicilian Mafia have with other perceived organized crime groups in the United States of America? These are just a few of the questions this study tries to answer. The theoretical approaches that

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follow attempt to address some of these questions.

### **The Importation Theory**

The importation theory (i.e., the alien conspiracy theory) is the conventional framework for the explanation of the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America (Albanese, 2004; Barkan, 2006). This approach is part and parcel of the notion of the Italian connection paradigm - a common explanation of the emergence of organized crime in America (Albini, 1971; Bequai, 1979). The theory argues specifically that the structure, membership, and ideology of the Sicilian mafia in America were imported by Italian Sicilians who were already in the business of organized crime in Sicily, before emigrating to the United States of America. As they came to America, they brought along with them their norms and values, some of which were defined deviant in America - their new-found land (Candler, 1975; McWeeney, 1987; Nelli, 1976).

The approach further argues that the Mafia is an outgrowth of Italian Sicilian society and mentality. In many respects, it is a culture whose survival is tied to that of Sicilian society and tradition. The rise of the modern syndicate in America was a result of southern Italians' migration to America's eastern cities, and with them came the secret criminal societies and tradition that laid some of the groundwork for the present criminal underworld in America called "the Mafia" (Albanese, 2004; Albini, 1971; Bequai, 1979; Lombardo, 2002; Smith, 1990).

The above argument concerning the emergence of organized crime in

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the United States has become an article of faith among the overwhelming majority of Americans. For example, as Smith (1990:32) notes in his book titled, *The Mafia Mystique*:

in retrospect, it appears that a desire to believe in a local mafia society outstripped any objective investigation of fact. Shreds of evidence--even hearsay assertions--that would support the theory were accepted without reservation, and contrary evidence was ignored.

Unfortunately, it appears that this belief system noted by Smith has continued to overshadow the thinking of a vast majority of the public and consequently prevented them from critically seeking an alternative understanding and explanation that might shed some light on a deeper and clearer understanding of the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America. This line of thought has affected those who are supposed to know better such as students of criminology and social problems. For example, many students of criminology and social problems that I taught at five different universities in the United States of America, profoundly held this view in explaining the emergence of organized crime. This suggests that many other students at different universities across the nation probably subscribe to the same view about organized crime.

However, it is important to note that this pitfall, in which the majority of the public have fallen, is not without exception. A number of scholars have noted the lack of merit in the importation approach model of explanation about the origins of organized crime in America. For example, in his book titled, *"The American Mafia:*

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Genesis of a Legend," Albini (1971:135-136) found no evidence of an organization called "Mafia" in Sicily, Italy that could have helped to explain such similar organization in the United States of America. Instead, "Mafia" merely refers to the role of the mafioso in Sicilian society. Thus he states:

Mafia then is not an organization. It is a system of patron-client relationships that interweaves legitimate and illegitimate segments of Sicilian society. Mafioso is not a rank or position within a secret organization. Rather it represents a type of position within the patron-client relationships of Sicilian society itself. It refers specifically to one who can and does use violence to enforce his will.

That being the case, Sicilian mafia in the United States of America couldn't have been imported from Italy because there were not already such an organization in Sicily during the time it emerged in the United States of America. This evidence makes the Italy connection explanation about the origins of organized crime in the United States of America questionable. Instead, it points toward a different line of explanation that can be captured in the work of Lombardo.

In his study titled "The Black Hand: Terror by Letter in Chicago," Lombardo (2002) found that extortion racket ("Black Hand" activity) in the Italian-American Community in Chicago in the early 1900s was not imported from Sicily as is commonly believed, but its roots was instead in America. In noting the lack of merit in the importation approach model of explanation about the emergence of organized

crime in America, the above studies are not alone, as evidence by the agreement found in works such as Albanese (2004, 1985), Block (1978), Blok (1974), Bynum (1987). The accounts of these studies on the issue may have been appropriate in their own rights. However, they stopped precisely at a point where more analysis was needed.

The very few studies such as some of those above that saw the need for the deprivation theory in the explanation of the emergence of organized crime in America, did not deal with it adequately in the sense that the theoretical ramifications of such a need were left unexplored. In fact, the centrality of the deprivation model in the understanding and explanation of the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America must be made with vigor. Unfortunately, it was slighted by most studies on the subject. For the more ambitious purpose of this study, however, a fertilization of ideas, insights and understanding of the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America is attempted here with the deprivation thesis taking the center stage. However, this does not mean that the deprivation theory is a "cure all" approach that explains every thing about crime in general and organized crime in particular. The reality is no single theory does. Nonetheless, in investigating the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America, the deprivation theory can offer a deeper insight and credibility than the conventional importation theory (Lombardo, 2002).

### **The Deprivation Theory**

The deprivation theory is the antithesis of the importation approach

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explanation of the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America. Unlike the importation theory, the deprivation theoretical explanation for the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America argues that the Sicilian Mafia is an American creation, meaning that it was not brought from Italy as the importation theory would want us to believe. Rather, it emerges as a form of adaptation by some of the early Sicilian immigrants in America who wanted to integrate into the American social system and found the system seriously antagonistic and alienating. This argument is in line with what Lombardo (2002) found in his "Black Hand" activity study. He notes that the extortion rackets in the Italy-American community in Chicago in the early 1900s was not imported from Sicily as is commonly believed, but instead had "roots" in America. There is a point to that roots and it is the deprivation alternative explanation about the origins of organized crime in the United States of America. This point made by Lombardo was also implicitly or explicitly supported by other works operating from the positivistic tradition such as Albanese (2004), Bell (1962), Candid (1964), Cloward and Ohlin (1960), Hagan (1993), Neilli (1981), (Merton, 1938) to mention only a few.

According to Albanese (2004), among the positivistic explanations that implicitly or explicitly shed light on the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America, Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) work on "Delinquency and Opportunity" at least implicitly is the most complete. This is because, Cloward and Ohlin's "Delinquency and Opportunity" theory provides a deprivation explanation of crime as well as why most deprived people do not commit crime. Thus, Albanese (2004:81-82) notes that:



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Although they focus on juvenile delinquency, their theory has direct implications for organized crime. The authors argue, as Robert Merton did before them, that crime results from lack of access to legitimate means (i.e., "blocked opportunity") for achieving social goals (e.g., make a good living, have a family). They also believe, however, that even illegitimate means for obtaining social goals are not available to everyone. .... If a person cannot successfully gain access or status in the criminal subculture, "the possibility of a stable, protected criminal style of life is effectively precluded." Therefore, blocked opportunity does not lead directly to the life of crime, according to this theory. Instead, there must exist both opportunities to form the relationships with the criminal subculture, as well as personal ability to gain status in the milieu.

Unlike the conventional wisdom, this essay focuses its argument for the deprivation thesis explanation of the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America. This decision was a result of the fact that the public fascination with organized crime has led to an urgent quest by the public to explain the emergence of organized crime in America (Puzo, 1969; Barkan, 2006). This sense of urgency has resulted in an incomplete and insufficient explanation of the emergence of organized crime in America, thus contributing to its misunderstanding. A critical and a rigorous examination of the literature on the subject is testimony to this observation (e.g., see Albanese, 2004; Albin, 1971; Barkan, 2006; Lombardo, 2002). A great deal of the studies on the subject, adopt a popular and

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conventional explanation of organized crime -- the importation theory. On the other hand, they give little or no attention to the deprivation theoretical explanation.

However, it is the view of this essay that the deprivation theoretical explanation of the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America, is a much more grounded perspective that should be given serious attention. This is because the explanatory power of the deprivation theory is based on the assumption that human behavior is generally an inherent, social act that can be traced to powerful forces and pressures in the social environment in which an actor is located (Barkan, 2006, 2001; Bynum and Thompson, 2005, 2002; Lombardo, 2002). This assumption is clearly in line with the holistic framework of sociological imagination (Mills, 1959). Sociological imagination is an approach, which challenges sociologists and criminologists alike that in their pursuit for knowledge, they must have a broader vision that moves away from the particular to the general; from the narrow, familiar, and easy explanation of social life to the larger, interconnected, and more profound social milieu (Barkan, 2006). Arguing within the framework of this groundbreaking approach to human behavior and social life, Bynum and Thompson (2005:26) note that:

armed with this view of the social world and approach to human behavior, keen observers are free from the confines of common sense and the apparently obvious. They are finally able to mentally explore all kinds of fascinating factors and variables in the social background of an individual or group that may be related to behavior.

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With the sociological imagination approach as a tool kit, one way to make a serious case in favor of the deprivation theoretical explanation of the emergence of organized crime in America, is to argue against the importation model as have been attempted above. Furthermore, despite studies supporting the notion that Sicilian Mafia in the United States of America is an American creation (Albanese, 2004; Albin, 1971; Bynum, 1987; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Lombardo, 2002; Merton 1938), many still strongly believe that mafia criminal ring was imported into the United States from Sicily, Italy. However, an examination of this popular claim, for example by Albin (1971) through historical investigation to determine the existence of a mafia organization in Sicily, which could help to explain its similar organization in the United States, show that there was no formal organization that could be called a mafia in Sicily. Instead he found a less organized arrangement. Albin (1971:125) states that:

It is not a centralized, highly complex systematic national and international organization with a supreme head in Palermo. It does not have a rigidly defined hierarchy of positions. It does not have specific rules, symbols and rituals. In other words it has none of the characteristics generally attributed to it in popular and clandestine descriptions.

The findings of the above study were also supported by a more recent work by Albanese (2004:122) who states that:

Testimony from Tommaso Buscetta, a Sicilian organized crime figure who became a government informant in 1985, put all this historical research into perspective when he

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testified that there was no central organization of criminal groups in Sicily until the 1950s. Interestingly, the suggestion for such an organization, according to Buscetta, was made by Joseph Bonanno, a well-known American organized crime figure. The purpose for the organization of criminal groups (via a "commission") was to resolve disputes among the various criminal groups.

In noting the absence of these characteristics in the Italian Connection of the emergence of organized crime in United States of America, the above authors are not alone, as evidence by the agreement found in other works such as Blok, 1974; Bell, 1962; Bynum, 1987; Hess, 1986 to mention only a few. Thus, these studies conclusively agree that there was not a centralized, highly complex systematic national and international organization with a supreme head in Sicily called the mafia organization, nor does it have organizational structure and culture (Hall, 1996; Hummel, 1987; Perrow, 1986; Scott, 1999; Weisbord, 1991). In other words, there exist none of the characteristics generally attributed to the mafia in popular descriptions and culture.

In accordance with Albanese's thinking, the important question then is, how can we explain the persistence of the belief in the importation of the Italian "mafia," from Sicily to the United States, despite the fact that evidence shows otherwise? Albanese (1985:24) reports that, "it persists because it is easier to believe that crime emanates from outsiders and its causes and prevention are their responsibilities, as opposed to a domestic problem that must be dealt with locally." It is about time to stop giving easy explanations about the emergence of

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organized crime and perhaps other similar social problems in the United States by blaming immigrants for them. Doing so would help us toward identifying the root causes of social problems such as organized crime and begin to deal with them accordingly.

This situation where despite historical investigations which point toward the deprivation thesis (Lombardo, 2002), the importation theory still dominates the public view, is ironic but instructive. It is illustrative of a "carnival mirror" image understanding and explanation of many social problems we face (Reiman, 2007, 2004). A carnival mirror is a mirror that hides as much as it reveals. It is a carnival mirror understanding and explanation of the emergence of organized crime in America in the sense that it did not give adequate attention to the deprivation theoretical explanation of the problem. By focusing mainly on the easier and comfortable explanation, and giving little or no attention to the difficult and uncomfortable explanation of the problem, the importation view distorted and continues to distort the image of, the more insightful and credible explanation (i.e., the deprivation worldview) of the problem up to this present time, in that, the "Italian connection paradigm" rhetoric and assumption are usually the major school of thought of the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America (Albini, 1971; Bequai, 1979, Candler, 1975; McWeeney, 1987; Nelli, 1976).

This "carnival mirror" image understanding and explanation of many social problems we face, also raises issues about the so-called organized crime of other immigrant groups in the United States such as: Jews, Germans, Caribbeans, Irish, Chinese, Mexicans, the recent immigrants like Nigerians etc?. On one hand, it is not clear that the

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criminal activities that are occurring among some members of these immigrant groups is really organized crime in the real sense of the term, much less imported from their foreignland (Albanese, 2004; Hall 1996; Scott, 1991). As Albanese (2004) suggests, what appeared to be the case here, are actions of individuals who have similar interests, shared the same profession and the same problems and who may occasionally turn to each other as colleagues for help. Such relationships and interactions of these groups seemed to have been misinterpreted as actions planned and supervised by a single command group while in reality they are not. Similar to the suggestions of historical and investigative studies of the Sicilian mafia, it may be more accurate to think of the criminal activities of the above immigrant groups as a loose collection of individual criminals and criminal groups than a single entity--organized crime (Albanese,2004; Hall 1996).

On the other hand, there is reason to believe that explanations of the emergence of the above mentioned deviant groups in the United States of America that focus on foreignlands, would be improbable in providing a grounded understanding of the root causes of the social problems as was the case with the Italian mafia. Two examples can be given here. The first example has to do with the recent New York JFK airport plot that was exposed on June 2, 2007. It was reported that the man accused of being the mastermind of the plot, Russell Defreitas, who immigrated to the United States of America more than 30 years ago, told the federal informant that exposed the plot that his "feelings of disgust" toward his adopted homeland had lingered for years (NPR reports and the Associated Press, 2007). There is a point to Defreitas' feelings of disgust and it has to do with

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the deprivation alternative explanation about the origins of organized crime in the United States of America. On the other hand, the second example has to do with Albanese (2004:117) insightful observation in which he asserts that:

In some way, the assertion of an imported Italian "mafia" is similar to allegations made against more recent immigrant groups, such as Cubans, Mexicans, and Asians, that they are somehow part of the criminal conspiracy."

It is instructive to suggest that instead of making allegations of criminal actions of the above mentioned immigrant groups from the standpoint of the importation theory, we should seek for explanations of such activities in the American social system by focusing on the notion of the deprivation theory. This shall be done by giving added attention to structural factors in America that impinge upon and disenfranchise a majority of immigrants in their attempt to assimilate into the American society. Structural factors like a queer ladder of social mobility which is in line with Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) differential opportunity structural theory, Robert Merton's (1938) strain theory -- the disconnect between cultural goals and institutionalized means, Lombardo's (2002) ethnic succession theory -- the process by which different immigrant groups have used the provision of illegal vice activity such as alcohol, prostitution, gambling and narcotics as a means of social mobility, culture conflict type of language problems that exist among immigrant groups in the United States of America especially Africans, Germans, Mexicans, Russians, Asians, and of course, the Italians (Gordon, 1964; Sellin, 1938; Wirth, 1931). However, this should be done by keeping in

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mind that most deprived immigrants do not turn to crime as a way of dealing with their situation in the United States of America their new-found land. The insights of the deprivation theory for the explanation of the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America, can further be captured in the notion of immigrant's crisis experiences to which we now turn.

### **Immigrant's Crisis Experiences**

The degree of marginality and alienation experienced by new immigrant groups in the United States of America, specially, in their attempts to acculturate into the mainstream of American society is profound (Schaefer, 2005; Gordon, 1964). As a result, some of them, who could not cope with the situation, probably as a result of weakened social bonds (Hirschi, 1969), and who were able to successfully gain access or status in the criminal environment turned to deviant behavior as a way to resolve their marginality and crisis experiences (Barkan, 2006, 2001; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Merton, 1938). Crisis experiences are experiences that occur out of revelation, discovering, and awareness of a situation that sharply contrasts from what one is used to (Stonequist, 1961). A good example of one form of crisis experience and marginality may be a first time experience of race-consciousness. A consciousness, which arises in a person, when he/she becomes aware, that others treat him/her in a certain way, because he/she belongs to a particular race or distinctive foreign land (Schaefer, 2005; Ubah, 1997; Taft, 1977; Gordon, 1964; Schutz, 1964; Stonequist, 1961).

The etiology of this situation can be captured in Stonequist's



(1961:122) three significant phases in the personal evolution of a marginal person. These stages are: (1) a phase when he/she is not aware that the racial or nationality conflict embraces his/her own career; (2) a period when he/she consciously experiences this conflict; and (3) the more permanent adjustments, or lack of adjustment, which he/she makes or attempts to make in his/her situation.

These crisis situations and marginality can be so profound on the individual that he/she becomes confused with the world around. The person may experience loss of direction and may become overwhelmed. In the case of some of the Italian Sicilians, who migrated to urban America during the turn of twentieth Century urban America, the mafia organization which settled in New Orleans became a way of attempting to resolve their crisis experiences and marginality emanating from the American social system (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Merton, 1938).

### **Summarizing the General Lessons Learned**

A number of lessons can be learned from this study. The first lesson that can be learned from this study was that the conventional wisdom--the importation theoretical explanation of the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America--was much encouraged by a climate of belief that the social problem emanates from outside, as opposed to emerging from within.

Second, this study tried to call attention to the main issues future studies on the subject should explore. Thus, they should try to go

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beyond the importation theoretical explanation of the emergence of Sicilian Mafia. Doing so, would enable scholars to recognize and appreciate that a critical and rigorous alternative explanatory model is needed.

Third, this essay offers an alternative thinking in the attempt to further understand the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America. In doing so, it focuses on an unpopular but insightful theoretical explanation (i.e., the deprivation view) of the problem. In presenting this holistic view of the problem, a great deal of lessons were learned from a number of interesting subsidiary themes: the relationship between immigrants and deviance, anomie theory, strain theory, differential opportunity theory, cultural differences and deviance, ethnic succession theory, and the theory of crisis experience and the marginal person.

Fourth, certainly this essay takes the position that the deprivation theory seems to be a better explanatory model than the importation theory in the understanding and explaining the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America. However, all the technocratic language notwithstanding, it is clear that the debate over whether the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America is best explained by the importation model or the deprivation model has not been resolved. Instead, it continues to divide scholars, students, policy makers, criminal justice practitioners, and the general public. As such, more research is needed on the subject.

Fifth, it can be concluded that the deprivation ideals as presented in

this study, will perhaps raise issues to a new level of visibility and controversy concerning the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America. After all is said and done, this holistic view of organized crime as a complex and critical social problem existing more from internal instead of external interacting social processes, seems like a grounded perspective of the social problem. However, this does not mean that it is a "cure all" approach that explains all about crime in general and organized crime in particular. Sixth, after careful explanation of the conventional wisdom i.e., the importation theoretical explanation of the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America, it is the belief of the author that the lessons learned in the presentation of the deprivation theoretical explanation view of the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America offer an interesting, insightful, and different theoretical perspective of the problem. A perspective that is in tune with the framework of sociological and criminological imagination. Perhaps this perspective may trigger a shift in the conventional thinking on the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America.

Finally, in part or in whole, the lessons that can be learned from this study would, if taken seriously, help advance thinking and understanding not only on the emergence of organized crime in the United States of America but several other social problems in 21st century criminology.

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