

# H-Net Reviews

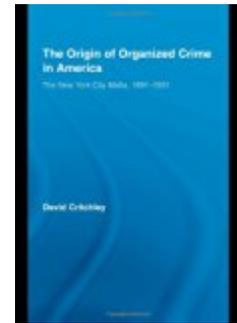
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Critchley. *The Origin of Organized Crime in America: The New York City Mafia, 1891-1931*. New York: Routledge, 2009. xiv + 347 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-99030-1.

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Published on H-Law (July, 2010)

Commissioned by Christopher R. Waldrep



## Before “The Godfather”

Perhaps it is fitting, given the topic, that David Critchley begins his book on the origins of the New York City Mafia in brash, bombastic fashion, dismissing the historical literature on organized crime in America as inadequate and amateurish. “American historians,” he charges, “have fought shy [sic] of devoting the required time and resources to systematically exploring this topic using archival assets” (p. 5). Critchley explains that “with a handful of exceptions, efforts to address the early Mafia issue have been poorly formulated, sketchily drawn, and empirically weak” (p. 6). Such a “reductionistic historiography,” he asserts, has shaped public policy, dovetailing with caricatured journalistic accounts and helping to portray the Mafia as a centralized, hierarchical network of gangsters and murderers (p. 239). This “misleading historiography of the formative organization of New York City Mafia crime has arguably distorted governmental priorities, diverting scarce resources to fight a largely mythical foe utilizing tools that threaten civil liberties and democratic accountability” (p. 2). Critchley insists, however, that rich primary-source material on the history of organized crime abounds, and in *The Origin of Organized Crime in America* he seeks to debunk the enduring myths surrounding the development of the New York City Mafia.

Critchley frames his analysis with thickly detailed descriptions of a series of incidents, episodes, and case histories of early Mafia activities, drawing from newspaper accounts, legal records, government reports, memoirs, and “true crime” books. He then pieces together infor-

mation from birth records, death certificates, and similar sources to construct dozens of biographical sketches of those involved in these crimes, with each vignette set off as a discrete section in the text. Thus, the prose unfolds with a staccato rhythm and in dense, encyclopedic detail. While celebrated, notorious gangsters, such as Lucky Luciano and Joseph Valachi, command prominent attention in the narrative, Critchley also charts the lives and tracks the criminal exploits of less-known “Mafiosi,” including Aniello “The Gimp” Prisco, Gaetano “Tommy the Bull” Pennachio, and Salvatore “Sam Sings in the Night” Catalonette.

While the litany of sketches and background information sometimes overwhelms his larger argument, Critchley nonetheless makes an important contribution. The thumbnail biographies, for example, reveal a complex web of connections among the organized crime families and figures. Marriage, place of birth, Sicilian ancestry, and neighborhood ties linked “men of honor” to one another and provided the level of trust that forged criminal alliances. The range and variety of these networks, Critchley explains, underscored the diversity of Mafia activities. “U.S. *borgata* [or Mafia family groups] were never ‘offshoots’ of a command structure with headquarters in Palermo,” and local social and economic conditions shaped Mafia enterprises, reinforcing the modest, decentralized scope of criminal enterprises in the city (p. 36). The New York City Mafia, for instance, was most active in local industries dominated by Italian immigrants, such as construction and dock work. Although Critchley is not

the first scholar to reach such conclusions, he provides copious detail to support this interpretation of the limited scale and considerable diversity of Italian illegal enterprises during the early twentieth century. Simply put, the New York City Mafia lacked the organized, centralized structure portrayed in Hollywood movies and other popular depictions of “the mob.”

Critchley also argues that the city’s Mafia proved to be more resistant to change than some scholars have suggested. He disputes the notion that either Prohibition or generational shifts “Americanized” the Mafia and made its activities more businesslike and bureaucratic. Instead, Critchley avers that local market conditions insured that bootlegging remained decentralized and that both the personnel and the methods of the Mafia changed little during the first third of the twentieth century.

Yet, for all of Critchley’s emphasis on neighborhood ties and loose alliances, he also describes a larger, wider level of Mafia organization, connecting local criminal activities to a national and even international network of illegal enterprises. Critchley’s Mafia has no “godfathers” but is replete with “underbosses,” “bosses,” “bosses of bosses,” trans-local “admissions criteria,” “dual membership” in the American and Sicilian Mafia, and a formal hierarchy binding local families to the national and international Mafia (pp. 196, 62). Overseeing the activities of *borgata*, according to *The Origin of Organized Crime in America*, were a Mafia “general assembly” and a “Mafia Grand Council” (pp. 131, 160). These bodies met in national gatherings of high-ranking figures and mediated disputes between local and regional Mafiosi. Although Critchley argues that such a “governo central” did not “interfere with the ability of Mafia groups to respond according to local conditions,” his portrait of Italian organized crime is not entirely inconsistent with more popular images (p. 232). Similarly, Critchley’s occasional lapses into “true crime” prose—describing, for example, how “Mafiosi” “bumped off” rivals, “cut down” or “gunned down” enemies, and embraced “justice Mafia style”—undercut some of the book’s strident revisionism and myth shattering (p. 186).

More important, despite the title of the book, Critchley does not explore the “origin of organized crime in America.” Rather, he begins his analysis by stating that

“neither its [the Mafia’s] existence, nor its presence in America since the late 19th century, is any longer in doubt” (p. 8). Thus, Critchley’s Mafia is well established before he starts his analysis. Nor does he define “the Mafia,” making it difficult to determine if the New York City Mafia was different from other criminal networks that relied on informal ties and loose alliances and that exploited neighborhood bonds and local conditions. Put differently, Critchley provides remarkable detail about the Italian illegal enterprises, but his analysis would have been even stronger if he had placed such criminal activities in the broader context of early twentieth-century New York City crime and criminal networks. Moreover, Critchley might have further developed his argument about the localized framework of Mafia activities by consulting the work of immigration historians and placing Italian criminal enterprises in the context of the more prosaic social networks that sustained immigrant life in the city, for interlocking spheres and support systems were not unique to Mafiosi.

Critchley’s research is impressive, though occasionally his evidence can be read differently. His reconstruction of the lives of small-time criminals represents the strength of the book. But the key details linking a local crime or an Italian immigrant to “the Mafia” are sometimes culled from newspapers that casually and routinely elided “Italian” with “Mafia” or from more questionable sources, such as the magazine *True Detective Mysteries*, published in 1926, 1929, and 1931. Furthermore, Critchley might have more firmly connected newspaper depictions and other popular characterizations of “Mafia” activities to the social construction of the Mafia mythology. By placing his source material in cultural context and by consulting the historiography on this topic, Critchley could have added greater depth to his analysis.

In sum, *The Origin of Organized Crime in America* provides a useful examination of the diversity and localized nature of Italian criminal networks in early twentieth-century New York City. Although he occasionally contributes to the Mafia mythology that he seeks to debunk, Critchley’s careful analysis of illegal enterprises and his skillful sketches of those participating in these activities constitute a valuable contribution to our understanding of the history of organized crime in America.

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**Citation:** Jeffrey S. Adler. Review of Critchley, David, *The Origin of Organized Crime in America: The New York City Mafia, 1891-1931*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. July, 2010.

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