



# Organized Crime and American Power: A History

*Michael Woodiwiss*

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Organized crime, understood in a literal sense as systematic illegal activity for money or power, is as old as the first systems of law and government and as international as trade. Piracy, banditry, kidnapping, extortion, forgery, fraud, and trading in stolen or illegal goods and services are all ancient occupations that have often involved the active participation of landowners, merchants, and government officials. Many people today, however, follow the lead of the US government and American commentators and understand organized crime as being virtually synonymous with super-criminal 'Mafia-type' organizations. These are usually seen as separate entities, distinct from legitimate society but possessing almost unlimited regional, national, and even international power. As background to this understanding of organized crime there exists a consensus among most commentators that suggests that the United States has had the most experience and success in dealing with the problem. In *Organized Crime and American Power: A History*, Michael Woodiwiss argues that organized criminal activity has never been a serious threat to established economic and political power structures in the United States but more often a fluid, variable, and open-ended phenomenon that has, in fact, complemented those structures.

Conventional histories of the problem tend to focus on outlaws in peripheral feudal societies, most commonly Sicily, for their antecedents. Woodiwiss by contrast finds his antecedents in the systematic criminal activity of the powerful and respectable in those ancient and early modern societies that we usually understand to be at the centre of 'civilized' development and continues to emphasize the crimes of the powerful throughout his wide ranging overview. He surveys the organization of crime in the Southern states after the American Civil War; the organized crimes of American business interests; the causes and corrupt consequences of the US campaign to prohibit alcohol and other 'vices'; the elaboration of the Mafia conspiracy interpretation of organized crime and the consequent 'dumbing of discourse' about the problem, not just nationally but internationally.

Emphasizing the importance of collaboration, as much as confrontation, between government and criminals, Woodiwiss illustrates how crime control policies based on the Mafia paradigm have not only failed to address much organized criminal behaviour, but have, in many ways, proved counterproductive and damaging to individual rights and social stability.

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