

Revisiting the Link between Italian Americans and Organized Crime: The Italian Americans and Polish Americans in the Community Context

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Since the turn of the last century, the concepts of organized crime and Italians in American society have been linked. This affinity has raised necessary questions regarding the “realities and representations of organized crime.”¹ One of the most basic questions asks how Italian Americans, in particular, have come to dominate organized crime for the greater part of the last century. While no one ethnic group has had an exclusive control over these organized criminal operations, Italian Americans, nevertheless, have achieved “unprecedented criminal powers” in the American context (Reuter 1994, 109). This article asks how are we to make sense of this link without resorting to time-worn stereotypes that relate this involvement to the abnormal personality traits of Mafia leaders, the historical legacy of the Southern Italian peasantry, or the affinity of the Italian culture to the operations of a criminal enterprise—in other words, how do we explain this connection without dropping back to the essentialist or predetermined conclusion that there was something inherent in Italian Americans or the Italian way of life that could have predicted this involvement?

We explore this question with a particular focus on the branch of Chicago organized crime known as the Chicago Outfit. More precisely, we examine the Chicago Heights crew—a critical component of the Outfit for much of the twentieth century. We place the Heights crew in the community context by examining its connections to the relatively large Italian American population in Chicago Heights, a suburb thirty miles south of Chicago. We ask what the unique social and economic conditions were in this particular setting that brought about the emergence of an Italian American-led organized crime operation. For comparison’s sake, we also include a discussion of the Polish American experience in Chicago Heights. In many ways, the Polish Americans were exposed to the same social and economic disparagements as the Italian Americans. Yet, the Polish Americans have historically had a much more limited involvement in organized crime than their Italian American counterparts. By comparing these two groups, we discover necessary clues as to how organized crime and ethnicity are coupled in a nondeterminative, nonessentialist fashion. We begin, however, with a review of the more

traditional explanations of this historical linkage of Italian Americans and organized crime.

The Public and Academic Context

In law enforcement agencies, public opinion, and academic circles, many have assumed, in Max Weber's terms, an "inner relationship" (1975, 192) between Italian Americans and a Mafia-style criminal behavior. The U.S. Immigration Commission of 1911, in its reports, conducted an exhaustive review of the foreign born and criminality. Perhaps foretelling its own conclusions, the commission began with a "dictionary of races" wherein Southern Italians were defined as "given to brigandry and poverty" (Handlin 1948, 107). Though the commission found that prior conditions in Italy had had a good deal to do with Italian criminality, it nevertheless argued for "the not unfounded belief that certain kinds of criminality are inherent in the Italian race" (U.S. Immigration Commission 1911, 209). Over half a century later, the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice, in their report titled *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society* (1967), ignored much of its own evidence regarding the multiethnic character of organized crime and virtually defined organized crime as an Italian American invention and preoccupation. In particular, organized crime was said to consist of a nationwide alliance of twenty-four Mafia families composed of Sicilians or people of Sicilian descent.

This association of Italian Americans with criminality has also found its way into the general public opinion. Thus, the leading mass periodicals at the beginning of the last century (e.g., *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *North American Review*, *McClure*, and *Forum*) often maligned Italian Americans for their low intelligence, animalistic nature, and propensity to engage in crime. For instance, Arthur Sweeney, the often-quoted and well-regarded psychology expert, ranked Italian Americans at the bottom on a test for mental intelligence and concluded "we have no place in this country for the man with the hoe . . . guided by a mind scarcely superior to the ox whose brother he is" (Sweeney 1922, 611). In the same influential article (included in its entirety as an appendix to the report of Congress's 1923 immigration hearings), Sweeney placed Italian Americans squarely within the degenerate horde "who think with the spinal cord rather than the brain" (Hearings before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, 1923, 592).

Beginning in the 1930s, public opinion polling became a more scientific mechanism for gauging general beliefs toward Italian Americans and criminality. While the polling results were less inflammatory, they conveyed

similar stereotypical sentiments. As Gay Talese suggests, “in opinion polls reflecting native-born American preferences in new neighbors, Italians ranked near the bottom. They were seen as clannish, uncouth, instinctively criminal” (Talese 1993, 462). In more recent times, a substantial number of people in the American population still hold to the belief that an “Italian-ness” and organized crime overlap. Thus, a 1990 national survey found that 74 percent of Americans believe that Italian Americans “are into a lot of the organized crime in this country” (Commission for Social Justice 1991, 5), and a national poll of teenagers by Zogby International (2001) revealed that 44 percent thought that “crime boss” was the most typical characteristic of Italian Americans.

Over the years, the sociological literature has also contributed, sometimes subtly and sometimes not, to this constitutional linking of Italian Americans and organized crime. Influenced by the ongoing debates on eugenics, a number of American sociologists offered a harsh condemnation of Italian Americans. Richard Mayo-Smith, Columbia College sociologist, characterized Italian Americans as “ignorant, criminal, and vicious, eating food we would not give to dogs” (Mayo-Smith 1908, 133). Edward Ross, the otherwise liberal reformer and one of America’s first sociologists, echoed the general sentiments of early-twentieth-century America by situating Italian Americans at the bottom of a hierarchy of biologically based superiorities and inferiorities. In particular, Ross speculated about the strong ties between Italian Americans and organized crime. He held that the Italian connection with organized crime was all but inherent in the Italian race, especially Southern Italian Americans, who “lie more easily than North Europeans” (Ross 1914, 117), who are “ready with the knife” (118), and who commit “ferocious crimes that go with the primitive stages of civilization” (98–99).

Around the same time, however, other sociological explanations attempted to rise above these racial classifications and instead to tie an involvement with organized crime to the consequences of the social organization and disorganization in the neighborhood environment. John Landesco’s firsthand study of gangs in Chicago in the 1920s concluded that gangsters are most likely to emerge from neighborhoods where the “gang tradition is old” (Landesco 1968, 207). In such “criminogenic” locales, individuals in adverse socioeconomic situations are susceptible to the role models, traditions, and subcultural values that present a gangster lifestyle as a viable and realistic option for economic success. In this way, Landesco could argue that, even though there was substantial involvement of Italian Americans in organized gang activity, this was a consequence of the unfavorable economic status of immigrant Italian Americans who were

attracted to the low-rent areas where the “whole social life and organization of the community” acted as a lure to organized crime (1968, 268).

With few exceptions, the sociological study of organized crime remained fairly subdued, if not muted, over the next several decades, especially in light of the chilling effect of the Kefauver and McClellan congressional committee investigations. The Kefauver Committee concluded, with little substantive evidence, that organized crime in American society was largely imported from Italy and was led by a sinister group of criminals known as the Mafia. The McClellan Committee, based primarily upon the testimony of organized crime insider Joe Valachi, concluded that this confederation of criminals was indeed in the hands of people with Italian nativity or lineage.

It was largely in response to the Kefauver Committee that Daniel Bell published his classic essay “Crime as an American Way of Life” (1962, 127–150). Here, Bell brought new information to bear on ethnicity as a predominant influence in an individual’s involvement with organized crime. Shed of its biological underpinnings and determinism, ethnicity was viewed as an adaptive mechanism formed in response to the strains of a society that produced unequal access to the legitimate opportunities for social mobility. Thus, excluded from more traditional routes of economic success, one ethnic group after another carved a niche for itself in various sectors of the economy through a reactive series of ethnic alliances, connections, and favoritisms. Italian immigrants, however, came after the influx of Jews, Irish, and other Eastern European immigrants and found “the more obvious big-city paths from rags to riches pre-empted” (Bell 1962, 142). This put the Italian Americans at a distinct disadvantage. Faced with these social and economic realities and having become “wise in the ways of the urban slums” (Bell 1962, 142), Italian Americans turned to an involvement in organized crime as a step up on the “queer ladder of social mobility.”²

In subsequent years, Bell’s explanation was taken up and extended by Francis Ianni (1974). Based upon his own ethnographic research, Ianni concluded that the Mafia in America started out as a secret society based on traditional clan or kinship ties and a set of cultural values emphasizing a strong family, a distrust of social institutions outside the family, and an abiding sense of honor over and above the rule of law. These cultural forces were strategically suited to the development of a criminal underworld and a climb up the illicit ladder of success. Because these Italian Americans “managed to cling to their familialism more tenaciously than any other ethnic group,” their ascent up this ladder lasted for decades (Ianni 1971, 89).³

The studies by Landesco, Bell, Ianni, and others did a great deal to advance the sociological explanation of organized crime. Such studies provided critical counterpoints to the popular, academic, and law enforcement

accounts that relegated involvement to instinctive antisocial personalities or sinister criminal tendencies of the Italian population. However, these explanations, albeit to varying degrees, still tied this involvement to marginalized life-worlds. That is, participation in organized crime was best explained if not by a unique racial aptitude and morality, then by a “criminogenic” neighborhood, a “queer” experience of social strain, or the machinations of a “secret society.” In effect, these scholars held that Italian Americans were socially and culturally culpable for their criminality, not as Italian Americans per se, but as ethnic groups out of step with the larger social patterns in American society. As Reynolds has argued, such explanations assumed “the offender and the offended were from two different social worlds. Criminals had qualities which made them different from conventional folk” (Reynolds 1995, 151). In more muted tones, Italian Americans were not different or defective in a genetic sense but different and substantively defective along cultural and structural lines.

These explanations did not go unchallenged. Dwight Smith’s spectrum-based theory of enterprise presented one of the most incisive critiques of this “view of organized crime as a class apart” (1980, 371). Smith argued that, at its core, organized crime is not fundamentally different from business enterprises, for both are concerned with the provision of goods and services in the pursuit of profit, and both must organize and run their operations to satisfy an array of suppliers, customers, regulators, and competitors. In fact, Smith contends that the most salient difference between organized crime and legal businesses is their *degree of legitimacy*—in other words, few are entirely illicit and few are entirely legitimate.

Alan Block also draws a tight connection between organized crime and legitimate society, insisting that organized crime is not a “peripheral institution” but enmeshed in the political economy of American cities (1991, 1). Specifically, Block and Chambliss (1981) extend the boundaries of organized crime to include not only members of a criminal syndicate per se but also those who initiate and profit from illicit vice operations, such as law enforcement officials, politicians, businesspersons, and economic elites. It is this more-encompassing criminal network that is at the heart of organized crime in a city. Nevertheless, Block and Chambliss contend that this larger network is ignored as the analytic and law enforcement focus has shifted to an examination of the more stereotyped organized crime figures. Specifically, this has led to a concerted attempt to identify the special characteristics that predispose Italian Americans to criminal activities while ignoring the motives and involvement of the more respectable, non-Italian members of this criminal network. “It is not an accident,” Block and Chambliss state, “that organized crime is inevitably seen as consisting

of an organization of criminals with names like Valachi, Genovese, and Bonanno" (1981, 113).

From a quite different starting point, this line of thinking has been extended in recent years by a group of scholars who stress the more active, rational calculations involved in the commitment to a life of organized crime. Characterized as rational choice theorists, these scholars offer explanations of involvement and commitment to organized crime in terms of the individual's prosaic assessments of costs and benefits. These theorists see little, if any, psychological or cultural differences between organized crime figures and conventional folk. At best, these differences are of secondary importance; at worst, they are figments derived from prejudices found in popular culture. As Diego Gambetta suggests, "Ultimately, one wonders whether scholars have not been unduly influenced by stereotypes well established in fiction, in which criminals are portrayed as altogether different from ordinary people, either evil creatures of supreme intelligence or shortsighted brutes" (1993, 102). On the contrary, rational choice theorists argue that the decision to participate in organized crime is made according to the universalistic intention of maximizing profits and minimizing costs. In short, a guiding principle of this rational choice perspective is that "crime can be understood as if people choose to offend by using the same principles of cost-benefit analysis they use when selecting legal behavior" (McCarthy 2002, 422).

These more recent explanations argue, therefore, that the distinction between organized crime figures and respectable members of society is not as clear as we have been led to believe. However, in driving the analysis away from a specific focus upon Italian Americans (or any other ethnic group), these enterprise and rational choice perspectives run the risk of offering an overly disembodied view regarding the emergence of these criminal activities. Specifically, these approaches have difficulty explaining how Italian Americans, in particular, became involved in organized crime to such a great extent, how they achieved these "unprecedented criminal powers." Were Italian Americans more successful simply because they were better rational choice actors or more rational in their assessment that the American value system provided perverse opportunities "to take 'suckers' and seek easy money" (Lupsha 1981, 22)? Or were Italian Americans simply better businessmen or more entrepreneurial, morals aside, than other ethnic groups placed in similar disadvantaged situations? To put it differently, while Block and Chambliss (1981) were correct to argue that Italian Americans have been unfairly singled out for their participation in organized crime, nonetheless it is still the case that people with "names like Valachi, Genovese, and Bonanno" did find their way into these organized crime ventures.

With this in mind, the challenge is to bring Italian Americans back into the discussion, to acknowledge the links to organized crime but to do so in a manner that avoids the overly deterministic personal, cultural, or structural explanations of the past. In doing so, we have benefitted greatly from contemporary scholarship on organized crime both in Italy and in America. Specifically, Jane Schneider and Peter Schneider (2005) go to the heart of the matter with a focus upon the origins of the Mafia in Sicily. Yet, instead of accepting the prevailing view that the Mafia emerged out of a totalizing Sicilian culture of backwardness and pessimism, they suggest that the dysfunctions of the Italian state and the collusion of various political parties created conditions in Southern Italy that tolerated and, more insidiously, united the various Mafia families and made substantively more relevant the traditional Sicilian values of honor, respect, and localism. More generally, Schneider and Schneider present a culturally pluralistic description of Sicily or one that acknowledges the emergence of criminal organizations but that also recognizes that contrasting values and practices facilitated the emergence of an artisan culture, a socialist presence, as well as a number of anti-Mafia groups. All told, Schneider and Schneider suggest we should resist explaining the Sicilian Mafia by resorting to a mythical “Sicilian essence” (2005, 505) and instead should look more closely at the unique cultural and social processes connecting Italian Americans to organized crime.

Letizia Paoli takes this line of reasoning further. While rejecting the ideologically based cultural theories of the past, she argues that the illegal enterprise and rational choice models have gone too far in attempting to “eradicate the ethnic stereotypes of crime” (Paoli 2003, 223). These “minimalist” explanations have not adequately explored the traditional ethnic codes and local alliances that created bonds of trust and solidarity within Mafia networks and led to the success, and limitations, of these criminal operations. Yet Paoli is well aware that the Italian style of organized crime cannot be reduced to these traditional ethnic associations and cultural rituals. Organized crime is also a product of modern, *gemeinschaft* forces that transcend ethnic and communal social relationships. “Membership in a mafia group,” Paoli writes, “is, hence, typified by a crisscrossing of instrumentality and solidarity . . . anyone giving weight to only one side of this opposition fails to understand the deeper meaning, as well as the strength and resilience, of this relationship” (2003, 90).

This more nuanced understanding has also been undertaken by Italian historian Salvatore Lupò (2001, 2015). Drawing upon the works of other scholars as well as original research, Lupò challenges the assumption that the connection between Italian Americans and organized crime is a bygone

product of an “Old World” culture dominated by provincialism, clannism, and ritual ties or that the emergence of the Mafia can be reduced to the “context of Mediterranean anthropology” (2001, 22). He calls into question the belief that those who were engulfed by these archaic values and associations were out of step with the modern world and would therefore be lured to organized crime as an alternative path to mobility, honor, respect, or justice. More generally, he objects to the linear narrative that views modernity—with its emphasis upon industrialization, education, and universalism—as the constitutional enemy of Italian American organized crime: “that the Mafia would vanish once the sound of locomotive whistles echoed through the villages of the desolate Sicilian hinterland” (Lupo 2001, 10). Instead, Lupo holds that the long-term success of the Mafia has been built upon a strategic use of traditional values and associations but also upon the skills Mafia members exhibited in adapting to the complexities and opportunities of the modern world. Organized crime succeeds when it occupies the hazy spaces between these two worlds, when it extracts itself at least in part from “the system of godfathers and clients exercising favors” and engages the “notables, professional politicians, policemen, and judges” (Lupo 2001, 21) in the outside world. As Lupo suggests, “Palermo and New York . . . were metaphorically represented as two worlds: the old one and the new one. But in reality, they coexisted at the same time, and in the same space created by migration itself” (2015, 33). This was the genius, criminal as it was, of the Mafia leaders. These were the connections and spaces that they mined to create their dominance of organized crime in the United States and Italy.

The Chicago Heights Context

To pursue these connections and spaces more fully, I undertook a study of organized crime in the Chicago Heights context. Specifically, by drawing upon census materials, oral histories, personal interviews, FBI documents, and other historical materials (personal letters, naturalization petitions, and newspaper archives), I sought to characterize the social and economic conditions for both the Italian and Polish immigrants in Chicago Heights from the early years of the twentieth century to the decades immediately after World War II. At the same time, having grown up in Chicago Heights in this postwar period and having family members and friends connected to the Chicago Heights crew in various capacities, I was able to gain access to and knowledge of the Italian connection to organized crime in the city.⁴

Because of these quantitative and qualitative sources of information, I was able to draw a picture of both the Italian and Polish experience and the conditions leading to the emergence of organized crime in the Chicago

Heights context. Following Bernstein's suggestion that "gangsters . . . surely tell us something about the communities from which they emerge" (2002, 23), it seems reasonable to conclude that what they tell us is that these community contexts are complex and that to suggest that organized crime emerged simply out of an alien culture or that Italian Americans in particular came to this country socially and culturally predisposed to a criminal involvement does not capture this complexity. Instead, these community dynamics reveal a more contingent process whereby social inequalities in this larger society made it most difficult for Italian Americans to achieve a measure of social and economic advancement in society. As such, a segment of the Italian American population pursued a range of nontraditional, unconventional strategies for mobility—labor organizing, mutual aid societies, ethnic businesses, and organized crime.⁵ Italian Americans were variously successful in these ventures because these social inequalities produced (or prioritized) a set of social, structural, and cultural strategies that functioned as social resources for mobility. Specifically, processes of prejudice, discrimination, and segregation helped formulate various mechanisms of social capital—for example, social networks, a communal identity, an ethnic identification—which Italian Americans drew upon to overcome these structural disadvantages and create their own paths to mobility.

To examine these community dynamics in greater detail, I explore one segment of the Chicago Outfit—the Chicago Heights crew. At its zenith, the Chicago Outfit covered a vast geographic area and had an extensive organizational structure. One critical component of the Outfit was the Chicago Heights crew or what came to be known as the Chicago Heights "boys." From the slot machine trusts in the early 1900s to the takeover of the local stills by Al Capone in the 1920s and 1930s to the prosecution of city officials for racketeering in the 1990s, organized crime found a home in the social and political structures of this suburb. No less a figure than Eliot Ness cut his teeth in the crime-fighting field with an early exposure to the Chicago Heights bootlegger operation. According to Ness, the Chicago Heights operation was "the pickup depot for most of the illicit alcohol trade in the entire Middle West" (Ness with Fraley 1957, 61). Schoenberg argued that in the 1920s "conditions in Chicago Heights had become scandalous beyond bearing, even in Cook County" (1992, 232). Years later federal authorities in their prosecution of the Chicago Heights mayor and police chief for extortion and racketeering described the Chicago Heights setting as an "unholy alliance of mobsters, politicians, and police" (O'Brien 1992, 6).

As I have suggested, Chicago Heights draws our interest because of its long history of organized crime. At the same time, Italian Americans have constituted a sizable percentage of city residents ever since the "second

wave" of immigration ran its course in the period from 1890 onward; in 1930, 10.1 percent of the city's 22,321 citizens were "foreign-born" Italians (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1932, 640). As the sons and daughters of these Italian immigrants started their own families and as third-generation Italian Americans began theirs, the presence of Chicago Heights citizens with Italian roots increased. Dominic Candeloro estimated that by 1970 roughly 40–50 percent of the Chicago Heights population had an Italian lineage (1981, 182).

As in most other cities during the twentieth century, the Italian Americans of Chicago Heights faced a number of hurdles in attempting to achieve a measure of social and economic advancement. Their own lack of marketable skills, especially in language and literacy, added significantly to this struggle. However, the cultural, political, and economic constraints in the larger society were also highly restrictive and consequential. Culturally, Italian Americans were excluded from the mainstream clubs and organizations and were treated as second-class citizens in the schools and churches. This cultural opprobrium even extended to an abiding geographical exclusion. As one Italian American resident put it, "[We were discouraged from setting foot in] the whole west part of town, starting from the railroad tracks, the CNI railroad tracks moving west. We hit the downtown area and then beyond that you couldn't even go . . . cause they just wouldn't allow you, think you would be stealing" (Zaranti 1980). Politically, Italian Americans were excluded from holding elected office in Chicago Heights for decades. Thus, in the aftermath of World War I and with the rising anti-immigrant sentiment, the voters in Chicago Heights approved an at-large (as opposed to by-ward) method of city elections, a method that resulted in the near elimination of Italian Americans in electoral office for over thirty years. In addition, economically, Italian Americans were at the bottom of the occupational structure: "The Italians, being mostly unskilled laborers, were the first to be affected and thrown out of employment as a result of the depression, and with the exception of comparatively few, they have not returned to work since" (DeLuca 1936, 5).

The Italian Americans were not alone in facing these exclusionary processes. Black migrants from the rural south and Mexican laborers from Mexico also experienced these discouraging conditions (Garcia 1976). However, both of these groups constituted relatively small segments of the Chicago Heights population in the early part of the last century. The one "second-wave" immigrant group that did have a sizable presence in Chicago Heights was the Polish Americans. In 1930, 3.2 percent of the city's population were "foreign-born" Poles (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1932, 640). If we include the second generation, another 6.1 percent had a Polish ancestry.

Like their Italian American neighbors, the Polish Americans faced a most disheartening social, economic, and political environment in the Heights. At a meeting in 1914 attended by a large contingent of Polish, Lithuanian, and Slavic residents the president of the East Side Civic League stated, "There's a natural division here which works great hardship on us. We have all the foreign population and all the manufacturing plants. The west side gets all the improvements, while our children sicken and die through the wretchedly insanitary [*sic*] conditions which have obtained on our side of town" ("Woman Leads Aliens' Fight" 1914, 3). In the following decades, the economic plight of the typical Polish family did not see dramatic improvements, especially with the onset of the Depression. Many Polish men lost their factory jobs and spent their days gathering coal that had fallen off passing trains or scouring the neighborhoods for discards that could be sold to the junk man. As John Wozny writes, "The young children were not aware of any hardships. The Polish Americans were a frugal and conservative people, so they were not used to lavishing many extravagances on their children. As a result the youngsters did not see any dire changes in their economic situation. Being poor or poorer was the same" (1993b, 33). Politically, after some early successes, the Polish Americans were also thwarted with the advent of the commission (and election-by-ward) form of government. Wozny concludes, "This was a big blow to 'ethnic' politicians" (1993b, 105).

Like their Italian counterparts, many Polish Americans in Chicago Heights sought to address these social mobility challenges by pursuing nontraditional strategies. They drew upon their ethnic alliances in the community and joined labor unions, especially in the steel plants of Chicago Heights. Yet, despite a good deal of activism, they faced strong management opposition and more subtle attempts to undermine their ethnic loyalties.⁶ At the same time, they formed a large number of mutual aid societies and social clubs as mechanisms, at least in part, of social support and advancements. Foremost among these were the Polish American Citizens Club, the Polish Falcons, the Polish National Alliance, the Polish Political Club, the Casimir Society, and the Polish Veterans Alliance. They also set about the task of establishing ethnic businesses that catered to the needs of the Polish enclave. These included Polish taverns, corner groceries, candy stores, drug stores, funeral homes, and plumbing and construction companies.

They did not establish, however, an ongoing, systematic organized crime presence in the Heights. While youth or street gangs populated the streets⁷ and many Polish "soft drink" parlors supplied the neighborhood with the illegal "hooch" during the years of Prohibition, there is little evidence of a sustained Polish criminal organization. Involvement of

Polish Americans in organized crime appears to have been more sporadic or at the peripheries of the criminal power structure. For example, one Polish resident commented, "I had relatives who were Mafia cohorts. They were Polish-Americans, however, they grew up in the Italian section of Chicago Heights, Illinois. . . . My uncles were involved in collections, either 'insurance' or gambling money, as well as robbery. My cousins were paid a few bucks to have holes dug in the yard . . . for safes, not bodies" (Regionpolski 2009, 7). This uncertain connection between Polish Americans and organized crime was apparently not confined to Chicago Heights, for John Radzilowski states more generally, "Why Polonia did not spawn more high-level gangsters is unknown" (2011, 64).

Problematic and ideological answers to that question are not difficult to find. Again, at the turn of the last century stereotypes found in both the popular press and academic circles provided readily available explanations as to why Polonia did not create a sophisticated criminal organization. In particular, the physicality associated with Polish Americans (sometimes disparagingly called "Hunkies") led to a widely held belief that they were undisciplined, mentally insufficient, and incapable of functioning in higher-level organizational contexts, legal or otherwise. At the same time, the 1911 U.S. Immigration Commission's characterization of Polish Americans as of "limited mental capacity" could easily lend itself to the idea that the Polish Americans did not possess the rational choice awareness necessary for a sustained involvement in organized crime. Edward Ross, again, lent some credibility to such an interpretation in criticizing Southern Italian Americans because they "lack the conveniences for thinking," thereby suggesting that the Polish Americans were only marginally more advanced (1914, 114). In a more positive sense, organized crime was viewed as inimical to Polish Americans because of their "law abiding" cultural character. As Karel Bicha states, "The Slavs had no penchant for serious criminality" (1982, 32). In particular, Bicha argues that Slavic Americans possessed a morality that, while allowing for episodes of public drunkenness and petty thievery, drew the line at those criminal activities that involved stealth and planning or "sex crimes, organized prostitution, and economic offenses" (Bicha 1982, 32).

Climbing the "Queer" Ladder: Italian Americans and Polish Americans in Chicago Heights

As I have suggested, Bell (1962) argued that organized crime takes place because ethnic communities often find few traditional routes to advancement open. For this reason, some segments of this population pursue alternative routes to success, whether this involves ethnic businesses,

labor organizing, mutual aid societies, or organized crime. However, it is important to extend this analysis with an examination of the concomitant processes of social capital. Blocked opportunities may create the need to adopt a nontraditional ladder of mobility. However, this need is not sufficient to predict whether or not a particular ethnic group will have the connections, the degree of trust, the effective norms, and the entrepreneurial vision to be successful. This is especially relevant when it comes to organized crime, for such ventures are plagued by a number of obstacles—especially given the challenges posed by law enforcement and other illegal competitors.⁸

Therefore, a reservoir of social capital would seem essential to the ongoing success of these illegal operations. Social capital, in this context, means the social networks and relationships called upon as a resource in accomplishing one's objectives. For example, the dense communal ties often associated with ethnic groups provided a rich source of trusted workers, a supply of secretive information, and an acceptance of a benign attitude toward the clandestine criminal operations in the neighborhood. Ronald Burt (2007) refers to these types of social capital resources as "closed networks." At the same time, Burt also speaks of social capital in terms of "brokerage." By this, Burt means a structural positioning between different clusters of otherwise unconnected or marginally connected people or groups. By occupying a position in a social network that spans this structural hole, one has the capacity to detect opportunities not generally available to one who is embedded or engulfed by the tight, redundant relationships of closed networks. As Burt suggests, occupying a structural hole provides a vision advantage in terms of being exposed to new ideas, anticipating potential problems, and brokering relationships between other groups. In the end, Burt holds that those groups or individuals who have access to both types of social capital—closed networks and brokerage—are more likely to succeed: "Brokerage is about seeing variation by escaping the constraint of one group. Closure is about subjecting a person to control to lower the risk of trusting the person" (Burt 2007, 108).

It is within this larger framework, then, that we can compare the organized crime trajectories of the Italian Americans and Polish Americans in Chicago Heights. We begin this analysis with the knowledge that the Italian Americans created a powerful, long-running crime operation in the Heights. We also know that while the Polish Americans had a degree of involvement in organized crime, they did not create the "high-level" organizational enterprise found in the Italian American community. To begin to unravel these differences, we examine the ways the Italian Americans and Polish Americans compared in terms of the climb up the mobility ladder.

We have given indications of this previously. Both Italian Americans and Polish Americans found themselves on the bottom rung in terms of their social, economic, and political standing. More systematic data seem to confirm this conclusion. In 1930, the adult Italian males in Chicago Heights occupied a disproportionate share of the lowest occupational rankings in the city. Seventy-one percent ($n = 1,613$) were located in either the semiskilled or unskilled categories.⁹ These jobs provided bare subsistence-level wages for a noxious, degrading work environment. As one worker commented (La Morticella 1979, 2):

They worked under brutalizing conditions. . . . Every place was a place of heat, grime, dirt, dust, stench, harsh glares, overtime, piecework, pollution, no safety gadgets, sweat, etc. The workers were, as the Italians called them, "Bestie Da Soma," beasts of burden. Emphysema, stomach ailments, heart ailments were common.

The Polish Americans did not do much better. Though they had a slight advantage over the Italian immigrants because of their work experiences in the factories and foundries in Poland, they were similar to the Italian Americans in terms of low occupational standings: In 1930, 67 percent of Polish adult males ($n = 517$) self-identified as semiskilled or unskilled workers, and within this grouping the vast majority occupied the lowest ranking.¹⁰

The patterns of housing for both the Italian Americans and Polish Americans also stand as indicators of diminished social and economic well-being. In Chicago Heights, the Chicago and Eastern Illinois Railroad lines constituted an observable division between the more prosperous west side of the city and the more industrial East Side. As we learned previously, the East Side was beset by "wretchedly insanitary conditions" as the chemical plants, steel factories, and railroad switching yards competed with substandard housing for the available land. Living on the East Side, while providing the advantages of being close to work and in close contact with fellow ethnics, still meant that one, as well as one's children, was exposed on a near daily basis to foul odors, white ash falling from chemical plants, railroad soot, the clanging of heavy machinery, as well as a host of other "objectionable features" (*Chicago Heights Star* 1921, 9). Notions of clannishness aside, it would seem that residence on the east side of town as opposed to the nearby "scenic west side of Chicago Heights" (*Chicago Heights Star* 1921, 9) would not be the preferred residential locations for most immigrants.

Despite these highly unfavorable living conditions, the Italian Americans and Polish Americans were overwhelmingly located on the east side of town. Over 88 percent of Italian Americans lived there in 1930. A more

refined measure of residential segregation is the index of dissimilarity, a measure that gives evidence of the degree to which minority and majority groups in a city are evenly spread out or conversely segregated in residential neighborhoods. Specifically, the index can vary between 0.00 (no measured segregation) and 1 (a complete or total residential segregation between one group and another). In most instances, a measured index of 0.60 and above is seen as evidence of substantial segregation. For Italian Americans in Chicago Heights the index of dissimilarity was 0.775, numbers comparable to African American patterns of residential housing segregation today. The patterns for the Polish Americans were quite similar. Eighty-six percent of Polish Americans lived on the east side of the city with a dissimilarity index of 0.710.¹¹ Therefore, both groups were at or near the bottom of the occupational mobility ladder and both groups experienced high degrees of residential segregation. Along with the more encompassing cultural, political, and social discriminations discussed previously, it is reasonable to suggest that both Italian Americans and Polish Americans were motivated to find nontraditional paths of ascent up this ladder.

Blocked opportunities are not sufficient to explain the development of an organized crime enterprise. This requires, at least in the long term, a bountiful supply of social capital—in particular, dense, closed networks of people who can be trusted. Specifically, placing stills in people's homes or sheds, running gambling operations in the back of a tavern, and organizing a prostitution ring depend upon a stable of workers who can be trusted with large sums of money, who will not skim profits off the top, or who will not engage in loose talk. Recruiting workers who can be counted on in this manner would be incredibly difficult if not for the advantages of social capital. Intimate networks provide cheap, detailed, insider information and a mechanism of social control. The social capital ties among co-ethnics, often stretching back into previous generations, provide the "organizational suture that tightens coordination" (Burt 2007, 164).

A look into the Chicago Heights context reveals once again a great deal of similarity regarding the closed networks of Italian Americans and Polish Americans. Both groups exhibited a dizzying connection of overlapping social ties and relations within their ethnic boundaries. The Italian Americans belonged to a large number of mutual aid societies, fraternal organizations, athletic associations, political clubs, sewing groups, and other communal solidarities. Domenic Candeloro describes one such group, the Marchegiani Society: "Fish fries on Friday, family dances on Saturday, and dramatic performances on Sunday right there in the neighborhood helped keep the Marchegiani in close touch with one another" (2002). Another person spoke of the communal ties that accompanied most any event or

rite of passage—for example, building a house, celebrating a wedding, or participating in a religious festival. “It was a community event,” long-time, Chicago Heights resident Ida Marks said (Newquest 1988, 3). These closed networks provided a rich series of social ties that the Chicago Heights crew could call upon to advance their criminal operations. At least in part this may help to explain their long-lived success: One FBI informant claimed that of all the Chicago Outfit crews, the Chicago Heights members were the “tightest group in the Chicago area (U.S. Department of Justice 1961, 90).

The Polish Americans in Chicago Heights were not to be outdone when it came to developing an embedded set of social ties in the community. The patterns of residential segregation placed nearly every Polish person in the community within a few blocks of one another. This created ample opportunity for the Polish residents to meet at the myriad social clubs, political organizations, parish fests, and neighborhood grocery stores. One resident describes the network building processes (Wozny 1993a, 143):

Stores were usually operated by the mother and the children, while the father worked in one of the factories where he could bring home a steady paycheck. . . . The women who operated these stores found their work satisfying. Most of the customers were women, so a visit to the store, turned into a social call. They could keep up with the neighborhood scandal and gossip.

Another strong source of closed social capital resources was Saint Joseph Church, the local Polish church. As Wozny suggests, the daily, rhythmic sound of the church bells symbolized the Polish unity and collective identity—the common “devotion to their religion, devotion to their community, devotion to their family” (1993b, iv). The church was especially adept at cementing the tight bonds of trust and coordination among the Polish residents through the creation of common rituals such as spiritual retreats (the *Rekolekcje*) or the Christmas Midnight Mass (the *Pasterka*), where after a long procession through the city streets “worshippers started converging on the church from the west side, the east side, the north side, and the south side”—in other words from the entire neighborhood (Wozny 1993b, 63). In a structural sense, the church provided for a rich supply of overlapping social ties by establishing parish committees, auxiliary groups, and sodality associations such as the Alter and Rosary Society, the Apostleship of Prayer, the Third Order of Saint Francis, and the Men’s Rosary Sodality. All told, the church, as in many other Polish neighborhoods, was a central unifying force. As the classic study of the Polish community in Chicago by William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki concluded, the Polish parish performed as both church and village (1920, 41–51).

Up to this point, the Italian Americans and the Polish Americans in Chicago Heights were quite similar. Both groups found themselves at the lower end of the social and economic ladder, and both groups were awash in social capital—at least in terms of strong, inward-focused network ties: There is little to suggest in a structural sense why Italian Americans developed a formidable organized crime operation and Polish Americans did not. Yet, before we examine the third comparative component—namely, the social capital of brokerage—it will be worthwhile to look at the ideas of Herbert Gans and Mark Granovetter regarding the contrasting functions of these closed social capital ties within the Italian American community.

One of the classic studies of Italian Americans was Herbert Gans's *Urban Villagers* (1982). This study of Boston's West End details the difficulties and ultimate failures of the Italian American community to halt the urban renewal in the neighborhood, this *despite* the strong cohesiveness in the neighborhood. The standard interpretation of this anomaly—that is, strong network ties and unity but little objective success—runs toward personality or cultural factors. Gans held that the Italian American working-class subculture and its provincialism nullified the advantages of being a cohesive, close-knit community. Mark Granovetter (1973), however, offers a different interpretation. He suggests that it may very well have been the cohesiveness of the community itself that undercut the efforts of the West End Italian Americans. In particular, the strong ties within the community did not make way for the fruitful “bridging ties” to the clusters of potentially favorable groups outside the neighborhood. This is Granovetter's well-known “strength of weak ties” argument.

The development of organized crime in Chicago Heights cannot be compared in a direct sense with the efforts of Boston West End residents to thwart urban renewal in their neighborhood. Still, we may be able to glean some important lessons from Granovetter's analysis. Perhaps of greatest importance is the difference in brokerage or bridging social capital found among Italian and Polish residents in Chicago Heights. Chicago Heights Italian Americans had a lot of it; Chicago Heights Polish Americans not so much. For the Italian Americans, these weak ties extended in several critical directions. Most prominently, they extended to the larger components of the Chicago Outfit in Chicago, especially Johnny Torrio and Al Capone early on and other Chicago Outfit leaders in subsequent years. In the early part of the century, the Chicago Heights vice operations were run by a local resident, Antonio Sanfilippo. Sanfilippo ran a bootlegging operation in the Heights in large part nurtured by his political connections and ties to respectable west side Chicago Heights leaders, connections formed when Sanfilippo himself served for a short time as a city commissioner. However,

Sanfilippo may have been done in by the closed network of workers he used to carry out his vice operations. In particular, as Prohibition took hold, Sanfilippo seemed reluctant to extend his criminal operations outside the local Chicago Heights market. In the words of Burt, the closed networks of the Sanfilippo crew may have been valuable in creating organizational efficiencies and coordination but they did not, however, “provide a vision of options otherwise unseen” (2007, 59). This was left to another group of Chicago Heights Italian American men (Domenico Roberto, Jimmy Emery, and Frank Laporte) who had brokerage relations with Torrio and Capone. Occupying positions on the other side of the structural hole from the closed Chicago Heights community, these men saw the potential in expanding the vice operations both in terms of geography and criminal activities. Thus, with Torrio and Capone’s willingness to expand their own operations, with the firepower and muscle provided by Capone, and with the “vision advantage” gained from establishing network ties with people outside the closed Chicago Heights community, Roberto, Emery, and Laporte saw an opportunity to establish a more sophisticated criminal empire. In a short time, Sanfilippo was eliminated with four shots to the back of his head, and the Chicago Heights boys established a criminal operation that was to last for over seventy years.

The Polish Americans in Chicago Heights, however, were not accorded the social capital advantages of brokerage. In the early years, the Polish Americans had an incipient criminal organization in the Heights. Vice operations were run out of a number of Polish taverns and brothels. Informal moonshine operations spread throughout the east side enclave. As Wozny suggests, “For a modest fee, the ‘soft-drink’ parlor owners would supply their neighbors with the prohibited libations. This generosity proved quite profitable” (1993b, 157). However, these operations never spawned “more high-level gangsters.” There may be a number of reasons for this, and the disadvantages of closed networks or social capital may be especially useful in explaining this retarded development. In particular, the strong communal identity and ties found within the Polish community in Chicago Heights may have hindered the emergence of weak ties outside the community and, specifically, the opportunity to detect and mine these external relationships. These closed networks dominated the Polish experience in Chicago Heights. For example, Candeloro and Paul said the Polish Americans “had their own stores, taverns, businesses of all sorts, completely isolated from the establishment’s downtown stores” (Candeloro and Paul 2004, 101). Another observer pointed out that the social, religious, and economic isolation in the neighborhoods “helped to enforce the ethnic identification that was so strong in the area” (Kozdras

1977, 15). Still another said the Polish Americans lived in a concentrated area with “strong ethnic ties to bind them” and as a result “did not need to rely on outside help” (Wozny 1993b, 89). Finally, a study of Polish immigrants on the south side of Chicago in the early decades of the century concluded (Pacyga 1991, 125–126):

The realities of life in industrial Chicago faced the Poles as they settled in Chicago. Their initial response was a communal one. Instead of attempting the impossible task of melting into the dominant society, they strove to build their separate community and continued to preserve or adapt their culture. Polish Chicagoans developed an intricate communal system based on primary relations.

In short, the Polish Americans may have had the incentives and the necessary closed network ties to run a sophisticated criminal organization, much like their Italian counterparts. However, without a rich supply of open networks—networks that tied the Polish Americans to local politicians, to regional suppliers, to other Polish criminal organizations outside their separate communities—these criminal organizations would remain disorganized and sporadic. Thus, as the Polish Americans perfected the ability “to live amongst others” (Pacyga 1996, 55) while still maintaining a social segregation and separateness from these others, they made the development of a criminal empire most unlikely.

Conclusion

We began this discussion with a question regarding the connection between organized crime and Italian Americans. Italian Americans dominated the organized crime enterprise for decades. Yet how do we explain this social fact without falling into the trap of finding something essentially criminal or inferior about Italian Americans themselves—their genetic makeup, their culture, their structural position in society? Some scholars have argued that this connection could be explained as a result of a “few bad apples.” Italian American criminals were decidedly different from most Italian Americans. It is, of course, true that the majority of Italian Americans were not involved in organized crime. However, a good deal of research has demonstrated that organized crime ran deeper and was more embedded in Italian American communities than many believe. In this sense, organized crime cannot be dismissed so easily as a parasitic imposition upon the Italian American community or an alien group within an alien community.

However, if it grew out of the community—as other nontraditional routes to social mobility such as labor organizing, ethnic businesses, and

mutual aid societies also developed—how might we explain this without resorting to special theories about criminals and their motives or to an ideological and stereotyped view of Italian Americans? In this article, I have attempted to provide an alternative explanation by suggesting that the Italian experience in America, at least in one community, was fraught with a host of discriminatory practices along cultural, political, and social lines. These practices led to a geographic and social isolation of Italian Americans in the urban environment that, in turn, prioritized or created a number of social capital resources—the most important of which being a closed social network of trusted friends, workers, co-ethnics. As many Italian Americans struggled to achieve a social mobility against the obstacles posed by these discriminatory practices, they turned to these social capital resources to gain an advantage in their quest to establish a labor union, an ethnic business, a mutual aid society, or an organized crime operation.

However, closed social networks carry a cost. Over a period of time, these networks did not allow for the flexibility or an adaptive response to the vagaries and changing character of outside markets, competitors, and new realities. In Burt's (2007) terms, they did not allow for the "vision advantage." Thus, they must be joined to more open networks where additional resources, new alliances, and different sources of information can be called upon to further the goals of the organization. Our examination of the Polish Americans in Chicago Heights points in this direction. While the Polish Americans experienced discrimination comparable to that of Italian Americans at the beginning of the last century and created great social capital resources within the community, they did not develop an organized crime enterprise similar to that of Italian Americans. In large measure, they did not develop a criminal empire because their closed networks were so strong. They were unable to span the structural holes essential to put them at a higher risk of success in the field of organized crime. Salvatore Lupo (2015) is right: Organized crime succeeds when it navigates the spaces between the two worlds—one inside and one outside, one closed and one open.

Notes

1. This was the organizing theme and general question for the John D. Calandra Institute conference "MAFIAS: Realities and Representations of Organized Crime," held on April 25–26, 2014.
2. Bell's use of the term *queer* predates the more contemporary association with a sexual or gender orientation. Instead, Bell uses the term to denote an alternative, nontraditional, and somewhat suspicious form of thought and behavior with respect to social mobility.
3. For an Italian version of these illegal mobility ladders, see the discussion of the "violent middle class" by Pezzino (1993) and Pizzorno (1987).

4. For a more detailed explanation of these methods and personal connections, see Corsino (2014).
5. For a broad discussion of the various collective strategies used by Italian Americans to pursue social mobility, see Haller (1971).
6. For a more general discussion of these processes, see Cohen (1990, 159–211).
7. For example, Devatenos (1924, 29) writes, “The Polish and Lithuanian people seem not to be so strict in the matter of obedience . . . we find many delinquent cases among these people.”
8. Of course, the resort to force or violence is a critical element of organized crime. We do not wish to understate its significance. However, violence jeopardizes the long-term success of organized crime by decreasing organizational loyalties, diminishing the quasi-public legitimacy of many vice operations, and encouraging a more active role on the part of law enforcement. So while force or the threat of force is always present, the aphorism “you can’t shoot everyone” is also relevant.
9. These percentages were compiled based upon the identification and analysis of the occupations of Italian men over fourteen years old as reported in the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1932).
10. These percentages were compiled based upon the identification and analysis of the occupations of Polish men over fourteen years old as reported in the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1932).
11. The dissimilarity indices were compiled by using the 1930 Census and basing the calculations on city wards. We derived indices for “foreign stock” Italian Americans in Chicago Heights as distinct from native whites of native parentage, this latter grouping a rough approximation of the more-established residents in the city or those farthest removed historically from their immigrant roots. We followed the same procedures for the residential patterns of “foreign stock” Polish Americans in Chicago Heights.

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