

# Havana, Cuba: Contraband Capitalism and Criminal Organization in North America

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## Introduction

It is widely accepted that the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and its enabling Volstead Act of 1919 prohibiting the production, sale, and transport of “intoxicating liquors” created the decisive conditions for the expansion of local Mafia groups of Sicilian provenience and their integration into a nationwide criminal phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Prohibition led these groups to communicate—and conflict—more intensely than before as members, sometimes in collaboration with Jewish American, Irish American, and other gangsters, organized the supply of foreign and locally produced spirits and beer and “bootlegged” this contraband to an ever-expanding market. It also coincided with infrastructural developments in truck, rail, and ship transportation and “improvements” in the technology and availability of firearms, all to the bootleggers’ advantage.

It goes without saying that Prohibition transformed America’s Mafia “families,” whose members had earlier specialized in racketeering and extortion within their respective territories, into something more complex. The question is, how? An easy answer is to represent the transformation as a “scaling up,” in which the various groups, scattered throughout the United States, achieved national integration, coordinated through a governing body or “commission” with a New York center of gravity. So straightforward an evolutionary account not only overconjuges the specter of a frightening alien conspiracy, as many critics have claimed, but also fails to appreciate the particular organizational, practical, and cultural requirements of so-called traffickers. An overview of what might be called “contraband capitalism” brings these requirements into focus. Following a brief sketch of Mafia formation in the United States, I present such an overview. The main purpose of this article is to explore how Cuba, and most particularly its capital city, Havana, provided a nourishing haven—an incubator of sorts—for U.S.-based *mafiosi* involved in contraband capitalism.

To summarize my argument briefly: Until the Cuban Revolution, Havana enabled contraband capitalists to invest and launder the substantial profits accumulated during the Prohibition era in casino gambling and associated establishments for entertainment and recreation. It shielded the investors from the intense and continued surveillance of U.S. law enforce-

ment that, despite the end of Prohibition, continued to target so-called vice—specifically prostitution, gambling, and, increasingly, drugs. Havana allowed for the production of cultural norms and practices that legitimized these forms of so-called vice, rendering them exciting and glamorous to, among others, well-heeled tourists who came on cruise ships and then airplanes, seeking forbidden thrills. In conclusion, I ask readers to imagine what might have happened to the American Mafia, and even to American history, had the Cuban revolutionary government not shut it all down after 1959.

### U.S. Mafia Formation

Salvatore Lupo's *Quando la Mafia trovò l'America* traces the early links between Sicilian criminal organizations and their counterparts in many American cities where, thanks to the dislocations of rapid capitalist development affecting Jewish and Irish as well as Italian newcomers, they found fertile soil in which to grow (Lupo 2008; English translation 2015). These early groups specialized in extortion, illegal gambling services in immigrant and poor communities, robberies, and political mediation. By the early twentieth century there were Sicilian American Mafia families in diaspora communities from New York to California, including such metropolises as Chicago, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, New Orleans, and Kansas City. Each group was oriented toward a particular city or, in the case of New York, which had multiple families, a particular neighborhood. Uniting these separate groups was a shared consciousness of belonging to a special category—"men of honor"—and adherence to shared behavioral etiquettes, rules of association, and rites of initiation. Members frequently intermarried, served as godparents to one another's children, and made efforts to mediate conflict, overseen by an admittedly intermittent but overarching commission or council. Imagine, Lupo suggests, a fraternal organization similar to Freemasonry, with "chapters" in Sicily and many American locales, whose members share a strong sense of identity and commensality. Actually, the analogy is not simply hypothetical; historical evidence demonstrates that a secretive fraternal Freemason order influenced Mafia formation in nineteenth-century Sicily (see Lupo 1993, 182; Pezzino 1992, 47–58; 1995, 5–7, 71–72; Recupero 1987, 313–314).

A further contribution of Lupo's work lies in his attention to the transatlantic comings and goings between *mafiosi* in Sicily and in the United States, complemented by an exchange of merchandise in both directions. The initial, pre-World War I migration included figures like Nicola Gentile, who, in 1903, migrated from Siculiana in the province of Agrigento to Brooklyn and from there to Pittsburgh and successively to

Chicago, Cleveland, and Kansas City, back home for a time in Sicily, then back to America to continue his peregrinations as a rising *capo-mafioso*. Gentile's far-flung itinerary was recorded in his remarkable autobiography (published in Italy in 1963), but there is no reason to think his story was unique. Also telling were the movements that resulted from state repression, whether in Italy or America—in particular the substantial clandestine migration from Sicily during Fascism and the occasional deportation from America back to Italy of *mafiosi* deemed “undesirable.”

In addition to envisioning the American Mafia as a localized fraternal organization renewed through a continued back and forth with Sicily, it is important to consider the operative networks through which American *mafiosi* realized projects in association, as well as in competition, with criminals of non-Sicilian origin. In a way this evokes what Alan Block designated as the tension in Mafia organizations between the territorial “power syndicate” and the far-flung “enterprise syndicate,” engaged in translocal economic functions (such as bootlegging alcohol) that are capable of spanning oceans as well as ethnicities (Block 1980, 1994). Lupo insists that both kinds of organization have existed, and have had to coexist, from the outset—and in both Sicily and the United States (see Lupo 1993, 81–85, 2008; Schneider and Schneider 2003, 38–39).

For example, after World War II, Sicilian American *mafiosi* cultivated immigrant networks, dense as they were with ties of kinship and friendship, as conduits for heroin traffic, as they did the businesses that exported olive oil, cheese, sardines, anchovies, and fruit. *Mafiosi* from towns on or near Sicily's western coast—Castellammare, Terrasini, Salemi, Alcamo, Partinico, and Cinisi, as well as Palermo—participated disproportionately in the linkages, both because they were places where these exports were processed and packed and because they had launched the clandestine immigration of *mafiosi* to the United States under Fascism (Lupo 1993, 190–197, 212; see also Pezzino 1995, 219). Even before World War I, Nick Gentile had trafficked in drugs, among his many other activities. In other words, although the American Mafia, like its counterpart in Sicily, conformed to the power syndicate model, it was also and at the same time harboring enterprise syndicates among its members. Prohibitionist law, first exemplified by the Eighteenth Amendment, caused the latter to flourish—to become, in effect, building blocks of contraband capitalism.

### Contraband Capitalism

Like industrial or finance capitalism, contraband capitalism implies a very high potential for capital accumulation, in which leading entrepreneurs join

already existing elites in the acquisition of wealth and power. Like these systems, contraband capitalism depends, from the outset, on state-made law, in this case prohibitionist law that creates a substantial black market for desirable goods and services by making them difficult to obtain. Whereas laws that sanctioned and protected private property framed industrialism and laws that deregulated banks opened the door for accumulation through finance, contraband capitalism rests on legislation that would eliminate, or erect fortresslike barriers around, those goods and services for which there is both a vibrant demand and intense moral controversy.

Although far from unique, the United States has been a pioneer of prohibitionist law, for reasons not unrelated to its particular ethnic and racial history. As historians of drug and alcohol prohibitionism have shown, the moral anxiety surrounding vice focuses on not only commodities perceived to be dangerous because they are morally degenerative but also the social groups that consume these commodities or consume them in new ways. Beginning with the emancipation of slaves after the Civil War and accelerating with the arrival of millions of new immigrants from eastern and southern Europe and from China, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans felt threatened by “others” believed to enjoy psychoactive stimulants and experiences more frequently, or differently, than they did. Feeling exposed to moral peril, the more so if they lived in middle-sized towns and cities in the nation’s heartland away from the coasts, they energized the social activism that produced laws—up to and including a constitutional amendment—prohibiting alcohol and drugs, prostitution, and gambling (see especially Blocker 1988; Clark 1976; Gilfoyle 1992; Kerr 1985; Musto 1987; Rumbarger 1989). The United States also became, over the course of the twentieth century, an imperial powerhouse, in a position to internationalize prohibitionist law across much of the globe (e.g., Gootenberg 2005, 189–245; Nadelmann 2008). Alcohol and drug prohibition regimes constitute paradigmatic instances of the legal context for contraband capitalism, supplemented by barriers to other morally contested commodities, such as gambling, sex work, arms and munitions, and, more recently, endangered species and body parts.

Accumulating profit from *illegal* markets, contraband capitalists deploy their own coercive muscle in order to regulate competition, collect debts, adjudicate disputes, enforce rules, police against theft, expand into new territory, and so on. They cannot always count on the state’s judiciary, military, and police forces for these tasks, even while they surely corrupt these institutions to their own purposes—hence the frequency with which weapons and ammunition are smuggled together with, or in exchange for, other prohibited commodities. Additional assets, crucial to the success of

entrepreneurs of contraband, are means of transportation (from aircraft to the human carriers); access to flexible transit routes and hiding places (tunnels and warehouses, for example); and a labor force familiar, or eager to become familiar, with violence. Demobilized soldiers, militias, and paramilitaries have contributed hugely to the “rise” of contraband capitalism—so too have already existing Mafias.

Most cross-border and cross-boundary transactions—yesterday and today—are socially acceptable and therefore licit, evoking little if any moral controversy, let alone prohibitionist law. The result is, in the words of Willem van Schendel and Abraham Itty, “a qualitative difference of scale and intent” between the structural logic and unified purpose of trafficking enterprises and the scores of everyday micropractices of “armpit smugglers” and “ant traders.” Although the latter may handle immense amounts of contraband, they are not tied in to potentially expanding mass illegal markets and do not approach the “scalar threshold” of contraband capitalism (van Schendel and Itty 2005, 2–9). Nor, precisely because they enjoy a fairly high level of moral consensus, do small-scale smugglers generate renewed episodes of moral panic, resulting in law enforcement crackdowns. The targets of these crackdowns are not only the prohibited commodities and those who consume them, but especially the “moral deficiency” of those who make them available. There is no greater example of this dynamic than the morally laced demonization of the Mafia in the United States, a process of criminalization that certainly contributed to the attraction of a Latin enclave in Cuba.

Michael Woodiwiss’s book of 2001, *Organized Crime and American Power*, reconstructs Americans’ emergent preoccupation with the sinister and polluting “alien conspiracy” known as “La Cosa Nostra” or “The Mafia.” Early harbingers of this trope followed the murder of the New Orleans Chief of Police David Hennessey in 1890 and of New York police detective Joseph Petrosino in 1909. The idea that *mafiosi* had crossed the Atlantic to contaminate “American values” did not, however, flourish until Prohibition; that it took off then is ironic, given that bootlegging entrepreneurs were in no way mainly Italian American but came from any and every ethnic background, including white Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

In the 1930s, New York’s politically ambitious prosecutor Thomas Dewey took aim at the “mobster” Charles “Lucky” Luciano, whom he was finally able to convict for organizing prostitution, drawing the attention of a fearful public to the foreign origin of the accused. In 1946, a *Herald-Tribune* reporter named Joseph Driscoll characterized the arrest of six drug couriers by the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) as follows: “Throughout the United States the largest dealers in narcotic drugs are . . . members of

the Mafia . . . a very dangerous criminal organization that is being used to undermine the principles of . . . law enforcement. . . . [It is] national in scope . . . [its] leaders meet annually, usually in Florida, and they agree upon policies for the control and correlation of their various criminal enterprises" (quoted in Woodiwiss 2001, 243–244).

Woodiwiss writes a compelling account of the 1950s when a mythic Mafia, foreign, conspiratorial, and terrorist, loomed with new force alongside the emergent Communist menace of the high Cold War. The story begins with the contributions of journalists Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, whose sensational book of 1948, *New York Confidential*, was followed by sequels on *Chicago* (1950), *Washington* (1951), and the *USA* (1952), all of them best sellers. In their account, a secret criminal brotherhood with roots in feudal Sicily had entered the United States through the slums of New Orleans, crowded with "the lower layers of brawling, boozing, fornicating laborers, and loafers and illiterate Negroes, who flocked there for the fleshpots." From here the brotherhood had spread to other urban slums, for example, Bronzeville Chicago, home to "drinking and doping (and) reefer parties with their dark, crowded rooms where the mixed sexes reached orgasmic stimulation" (quoted in Woodiwiss 2001, 102).

According to Woodiwiss, Senator Estes Kefauver read *Chicago Confidential* while preparing for his 1950–1951 "special committee" investigation of "crime in interstate commerce." As is well known, this committee's televised hearings focused predominantly on Italian American racketeering and narcotics rings in large and small cities, and its reports and conclusions were, like the *Confidential* books, full of hand-wringing about vice. An alien, conspiratorial Mafia, enlarged since Prohibition, continued to grow rich from "narcotics, pinball machines, slot machines, gambling in every form," not to mention "every racket promising easy money" (quoted in Woodiwiss 2001, 245).

Some of Kefauver's quite minimal, and often unreliable, evidence came from the FBN, headed by Harry J. Anslinger, appointed in 1930 as its first commissioner, a position he held until 1962. Anslinger saw the Mafia and Communism as twin perils; each was a centrally organized foreign conspiracy, bent on causing the moral degeneration of America. Meanwhile, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was surprisingly uninvolved in the Kefauver investigation. Its head, J. Edgar Hoover, was far more interested in policing Communism and in any case believed that the policing of racketeering and vice came under state and local, not federal, jurisdiction.

In 1957, however, after New York State Police stumbled upon a gathering of *mafiosi* at the country estate of Joseph Barbara in Apalachin, New York, Hoover's FBI weighed in with a hefty report analyzing the Mafia's (Sicilian

and American) history, structure, and activities. Books with attention-grabbing titles—for example, *Brotherhood of Evil*, by Frederic Sondern (1959) and *The Enemy Within*, by Robert F. Kennedy (1960)—compounded the emerging image of a purposeful and coherent danger targeting the integrity of America. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the FBI stepped up surveillance through wiretaps and bugs and by “turning” a low-level “soldier” of the Genovese crime family (formerly the family of Luciano), Joe Valachi, into a government witness. Still to come was Valachi’s spectacular testimony of 1963 before Senator John McClellan’s investigative committee, broadcast on radio and TV and well covered in the press.<sup>2</sup>

The combined effect of the demonization of the Sicilian American Mafia and increased efforts at law enforcement even in the early 1950s enhanced the appeal of Havana as a surveillance-free “Mafia haven.” As discussed below, Cuba’s capital city was this and much more.

### Havana Background

From the early sixteenth century, Havana, on the northwest coast of Cuba, was a key trading port and center of New World commerce with Spain. An important shipyard for repairing and provisioning vessels of the Spanish fleet was located in its harbor, as were the warehouses that supported its role as a break-of-bulk point for precious metals, Cuban sugar, and all manner of other products as well as human slaves in the notorious triangular trade between Europe, the Caribbean, and North America. Thus it should be no surprise that by the end of the nineteenth century this “Paris of the Antilles” was a flourishing cosmopolitan city, as large as New York, with burgeoning architecture, music, dance, theater, and, of course, gambling parlors and brothels—the many pleasures that could respond to the voracious appetites of the local bourgeoisie, plus the thousands of seamen, merchants, adventurers, bureaucrats, and other visitors who flooded the city every year.

As Alejandro de la Fuente points out in *Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century*, the composition and structure of Havana were also affected by the role Cuba played in successive imperialist regimes: Spanish, British, and finally American (de la Fuente 2008). Even after the U.S. occupation ended in 1902, Cuba remained a crucial node of geopolitical strategy and a central arena of U.S. Caribbean imperialism (Cirules 2003; Sáenz Rovner 2008). In consequence, North American governmental, commercial, and financial institutions participated in the economic and political development of Cuba and in the notoriously corrupt regimes that governed it (see Kinzer 2013, 284–286). Politicians, officials, bankers, and

entrepreneurs, Cuban and American alike, turned the early decades of the twentieth century into, as one source puts it, “heady times for Cuba. The fortunes of landowners, sugar mill owners, bankers, railroad magnates and American companies like the United Fruit Co., American Sugar Refining Co., John Deere, and International Harvester grew at such dizzying rates that the epoch came to be known as *la danza de los millones*” (Lowinger and Fox 2005, 27; see also Cirules 2003).

### American *Mafiosi* in Havana

Along with a multitude of other “liquor tourists,” U.S. *mafiosi* were frequent visitors to Havana during Prohibition; they came not only for the city’s good times but also to engage in the business of bootlegging (Deitch 2007, 61). By the early 1930s, “Anglo” organized crime figures had also taken an active interest in the city’s gambling scene. In a way this built upon an earlier cultural exchange. In the late 1800s, Cuban migrants to the tobacco industry in Tampa, Florida’s, historic neighborhood of Ybor City brought with them their favorite numbers game, *la bolita*, which was later controlled by Tampa’s famed Mafia boss Santo Trafficante, Sr., followed by his son, Santo, Jr. (Deitch 2007, 61; Sàenz Rovner 2008, 85).

The two Trafficantes from Tampa were among the most noteworthy American *mafiosi* to invest in Cuba once Prohibition ended in 1933. Trafficante senior, whose ties dated back to the Prohibition era traffic in rum, sugar, and molasses, was fluent in Italian and Spanish as well as English and groomed his son, Santo, Jr., to look after the family businesses by sending him “on trips across the country to ‘learn the ropes’ from mafiosi in different cities, as well as to Cuba, Europe, and Central America” (Deitch 2007, 24, 9–10, 61; Sàenz Rovner 2008, 85). After World War II, father and son together acquired large stakes in at least five Havana casinos, nightclubs, and hotels (Ragano and Raab 1994, 17); on the father’s death in 1954, the son inherited some of these properties. By 1958, he owned or had a substantial investment in the Sans Souci Casino, the Deauville Hotel and casino, the Havana Hilton, El Comodoro, and the Capri nightclub, where actor George Raft was the official greeter (Ragano and Raab 1994, 39).

Another major player was Meyer Lansky, the Jewish American ally of Luciano and other key American *mafiosi*. Lansky either owned, managed, or invested in the following: a casino in the renowned Hotel Nacional, the Montmartre Club, the Monseigneur, a gambling casino at the racetrack, and later the Havana Riviera Hotel, which he built in 1957–1958. After Fulgencio Batista’s first term as president of Cuba ended in 1944 and before he began his second term at the head of a military coup in 1952, he took up residence



in the United States, near the Florida home of Meyer Lansky. During that interregnum, Lansky left his Havana casino operations under the care of the Tampa/Havana *mafioso* Santo Trafficante, Sr. (Deitch 2007, 61).

An interesting wrinkle to this history is that Lansky's gaming tables were not only legal under Cuban law but they were honest in the sense that the casino operators did not take "unfair" advantage of those who came to play—odds would, of course, favor the house, but there was no additional trickery to separate the gamblers from their stakes. Indeed, "For the winter season of 1953–54—and for an annual retainer, according to Meyer's lawyer . . . in the region of \$25,000—President Batista invited Meyer Lansky to become his advisor on gambling reform" (Lacey 1991, 285). According to Lacey, "When asked why the presence of American gangsters was tolerated in Cuba, the U.S. ambassador, Earl Smith, replied candidly, 'It's strange, but it seems to be the only way to get honest casinos' " (Lacey 1991, 297; see also Sáenz-Rovner 2008, 91). Reflected here is Lansky's exceptional expertise as an entrepreneur of gaming in the United States. Besides his Havana interests, he was, like many American *mafiosi*, a longtime investor in numbers rackets and slot machines in working-class communities, in bookmaking, and in the casinos and river boats that blossomed, at least in the south and in Nevada, at the end of Prohibition (see Reppetto 2004, 154–161).

According to T. J. English, in 1933 Luciano met with a number of other Mafia *capi* in his Waldorf Astoria lodging in Manhattan to propose Havana as a likely place to channel bootlegging profits. In contrast to sites in the United States (which, as noted above, would also be developed), an offshore island meant protection from prohibitionist law enforcement. English quotes Luciano as saying, "We gotta expand someplace and we need a place to send our dough where it'll keep making money and also get those guys from Washington off our backs. Meyer's been down to Havana and he's made some good contacts" (English 2007, 15). The words are attributed to Gosch and Hammer's much disputed "autobiography" of Luciano (1974; for an interesting summary and analysis of the dispute, see Warner 2012). As much as it supports my thesis, one would still have to take it with a grain of salt. Another source, Thomas Reppetto, places the meeting in the spring of 1934 and notes that Lansky was among those present (Reppetto 2004, 151).

Luciano, of course, was soon to be imprisoned by Thomas E. Dewey. It is telling that he only perfunctorily satisfied the condition of his 1946 release, which was that he would reside in Italy. Briefly setting foot in Rome and then Naples, he soon slipped back to Cuba where, as will be noted below, he was roundly celebrated. Anslinger and the FBN, having

defined him as a preeminent drug dealer, pressured Cuba to return him to Italy, but not before he was able to realize the contraband capitalist project of investing mob money in the gambling haven of Havana.

So it was that Luciano, Lansky, and the Trafficantes (father and son) came to operate not only fabulous gambling casinos but also hotels and restaurants in Havana. Like so many other visitors and investors from the north (including a Mafia family of Montreal), they found in Havana a most congenial place to work and play. Moreover, rising indigenous entrepreneurs, most prominently Amleto Battisti and Amadeo Barletta Barletta, were eager to partner with them. So was Martine Fox. He had been a *guajiro* (peasant) who found work as a machinist in one of the sugar *centrals*—the industrial mills installed in the early twentieth century in the richest cane-growing regions of the island. After injuring his hand in the machinery and leaving the *central*, he became first a bookie, then a “banker,” in the *bolita*, the same informal lottery that had migrated to Tampa. Fox was such a brilliant gambler and so well networked into gambling life that in 1939 he was able to move his operation to Havana where in 1943 he took over and embellished the fabulous Tropicana Club (Lowinger and Fox 2005, 27–44). By the early 1950s, Fox’s world was, of course, intertwined with that of the American crime figures active in Havana. Lansky and Luciano arranged for their associate Wilbur “Lefty” Clark to function as credit manager of the Tropicana Club. The casino also “hired a succession of other figures with ‘unsavory’ connections. One of these was Dino Cellini, a close associate of Lansky, who ran the croupier school at the Hotel Riviera and later, after the Cuban revolution, ran Lansky’s casinos in London and Freeport, Grand Bahama. Another was Lewis McWillie, a close associate not only of Santo Trafficante Jr, but of Jack Ruby” (the eventual assassin of Lee Harvey Oswald) (Lowinger and Fox 2005, 181). Still another Trafficante associate held the concession for supplying the Tropicana’s linens.

Apart from serving as a “fiscal haven” permitting the American Mafia to launder and invest wealth accumulated from Prohibition and other varied North American ventures, Havana constituted a more or less surveillance-free zone where *mafiosi* from many cities, and occasionally from Italy, could plan and coordinate joint operations, free from the gaze of the FBI and the FBN, in particular. There was no surveillance in part because most gambling in Cuba was legal (*bolita* was illegal but tolerated by authorities) and because the Mafia-linked hotel/casino/club owners, investors, and managers—along with their Cuban colleagues, most notably Barletta (Cirules 2003, 137–145)—were well positioned to influence key officials who might otherwise have interfered with their operations. According to Sàenz Rovner, *mafiosi* and their Cuban colleagues carried favor with and exercised

considerable influence over Cuban banks and other commercial entities. They also enjoyed favorable relations with such American institutions as the Rockefeller financial enterprises and the various intelligence services of the United States. Perhaps most important, they ingratiated themselves with and received the collaboration of officials of succeeding Cuban regimes—especially that of Batista—who were in any event eager to promote casino tourism in Havana, in part to stabilize an economy that was vulnerable to fluctuations in demand for Cuban sugar (Sàenz Rovner 2008, 89–91).

Quoting T. J. English, “Luciano and Lansky had spread bribes far and wide in Cuba. From the beginning their plan for Havana had involved laying the proper groundwork. Key government figures—congressmen, senators, and political operatives reaching into the presidential palace—were bought off and compromised” (2007, 46–47). It was not, however, simply a matter of cash bribery. The relationship between *mafiosi*, Cuban and U.S. political leaders and government officials, and Cuban and North American financial and commercial interests involved reciprocal personal friendships and mutually profitable collaborative investments as well as moments of tension and conflict (see, e.g., Cirules 2003; English 2007; Sáenz-Rovner 2008). The playground atmosphere of Havana gave substance to the mutuality. That the city overflowed with luxurious hotels, casinos, the Hippodrome, brothels, and beaches added to its appeal. That it attracted glamorous elites and renowned entertainers like Frank Sinatra added still more. One has to imagine that friendships were cemented through memorable good times.

According to the FBI, North American organized crime figures from many different jurisdictions met at least ten times between 1928 (in Cleveland, Ohio) and the infamous 1957 Apalachin, New York, meeting, when sixty-one alleged *mafiosi* from as far away as Los Angeles, California; Kansas City, Missouri; and Tampa, Florida, were arrested by the New York State Police while attending the Barbara “wiener roast” (FBI 2013). The FBI monograph describing what little it knew about these meetings makes no mention of another significant conference that took place in Havana, at Lansky’s Hotel Nacional, in December 1946 (FBI 2013). This event was held to celebrate the clandestine return of Luciano from Italy to Havana—as mentioned above, he had been imprisoned in New York State and then deported to Italy after his release—and to engage other issues of common concern such as the leadership of New York’s five families, the uncertain fate of Benjamin Siegel’s Flamingo Hotel venture in Las Vegas (in which some of the attendees had a stake), gambling and other investment opportunities in Cuba and the Caribbean, and, perhaps of special note, the postwar revitalization of narcotics trafficking (English 2007, 32–37). Besides Lansky

and Luciano, the participants included a pantheon of Mafia *capi* from New York, New Jersey, Buffalo, Chicago, Cleveland, New Orleans, and Tampa/Havana as well as some of their more junior associates. Frank Sinatra was a special guest (Cirules 2003, 64; English 2007, 32–37).

## Conclusion

As we have seen, from the 1930s on, the U.S. mainland, the site of the Mafia's primary territorial bases, was rife with threats to organized crime from law enforcement and political reform. Nor did moral crusades against vice disappear, the spectacular failure of alcohol prohibition notwithstanding. On the contrary, pressure continued vis-à-vis prostitution and gambling; by the 1950s, moreover, movements that would eradicate such psychoactive substances as marijuana, heroin, and cocaine were already gathering steam, anticipating the war on drugs. Kefauver and McClellan, the FBN and the FBI, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Jr., state and local police forces, and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) all portrayed the Mafia as a danger to the moral integrity of the United States. *Mafiosi* needed a haven from these pressures—a place to launder, shelter, and invest accumulated profits; to meet with other members of their sodality and reinforce ideologically their shared sense of membership in an exclusive fraternity; to coordinate translocal operations; and to legitimize and glamorize the very commodities that prohibitionist law would suppress—all without the interruption of U.S. (or Canadian, or French, or Italian) authorities. Havana, ninety miles south of Miami, was preferable to Las Vegas or any comparable mainland site. It was a veritable, and protected, fiscal, organizational, and recreational paradise.

This raises a telling question. What would have happened to the American Mafia, and its role in American history, had it not been for the Cuban Revolution of 1959? After World War II, the cosmopolitan port city of Marseilles assumed a preeminent role in contraband capitalism. So-called Corsican gangsters smuggled Turkish morphine paste to Marseilles, where it was refined into heroin for the U.S. market, setting up the notorious "French Connection." By the 1950s, Trafficante, Jr. and his associate Norman "Roughhouse" Rothman had forged heroin smuggling relations with the Corsicans. Meanwhile, these traffickers also dealt with persons whom Lupu refers to as "Sicilian interlocutors of Sicily"—Sicilian *mafiosi* investing in heroin deals. They, too, were in touch with Corsican gangsters and with Trafficante and Rothman (see Deitch 1997, 119–124; Lupu 2008, 164–165). Was Havana, Trafficante's playground, becoming a way station on the heroin smuggling route? Put somewhat differently, were Lansky,

Trafficante, and their Mafia allies about to become more involved in the distribution of contraband drugs, with Havana as an operative base?

Subsequently, in 1968, according to Alfred McCoy, Trafficante was in Hong Kong and Saigon, meeting with leaders of the Corsican syndicate (McCoy 2003, 253–254). Then, following the demise of the French Connection and Marseilles as the center of gravity for contraband heroin, chemists and refining laboratories shifted to the environs of Palermo. Sicilian *mafiosi* now dominated the traffic. New immigrants from Sicily, called the “zips,” helped to establish the U.S. distribution scheme known as the “pizza connection.” But the dominance was short-lived. Through the combined anti-Mafia efforts of law enforcement agencies in the United States and Italy, whose investigations were stunningly advanced by justice collaborators—the so-called *pentiti* who turned state’s witness—the “drug Mafia” was suppressed (see Schneider and Schneider 2003). Had Havana evolved through the 1960s and 1970s as a break-of-bulk point for contraband drugs, it might have (for awhile) postponed what happened next: American and Sicilian Mafias lost their leverage in drug-related contraband capitalism, leaving behind a much more fragmented field in which localized Mafias continued to do what Mafias traditionally did—extortion, political brokering, labor racketeering, illegal numbers rackets, and so on. Meanwhile, the market for desirable but prohibited drugs endured—if anything, it continued to evolve and expand—to be served by new entrepreneurs of contraband: leaders of Colombian cartels, Mexican cartels, and the Calabrian *’ndrangheta*, to name some of the most dynamic.

Speculative as this reasoning is, it resonates with arguments about a sinister turn of events in American history in 1963. *Mafiosi* with a stake in Havana hoped, initially, to survive the Cuban Revolution, cultivate ties to the Castro regime, and carry on with business as usual. When this became impossible—when the regime shut down their casinos and drove them out of town—they sought redemption. Of course, they resented President John F. Kennedy’s decision to withhold air support for the CIA-orchestrated Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. They also bitterly contested the efforts of his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, to investigate and suppress U.S. organized crime. Several writers, among them Trafficante’s longtime lawyer Frank Ragano, have proposed that Trafficante, his good friend Carlos Marcello, who was a *capo-mafioso* from New Orleans who also invested in Trafficante’s Havana operations, and Sam Giancana of Chicago—all with a major and frequent presence in Cuba—contributed to a plot to assassinate the president (and later to assassinate another of their confederates, James Hoffa). (See Blakey 1981; Ragano and Raab 1994; Raab 2005, 125–138; Vaccara 2013.)

## Notes

1. This essay is based on secondary historical sources, one FBI document, and several excellent pieces of investigative journalism. It is also informed by the author's study of Mafia criminal organizations in Sicily. I owe special thanks to Jane Schneider, who collaborated in this research, and to the comments of two anonymous readers.
2. Hollywood, too, climbed onboard. In the early 1930s, it had deployed the new technology of sound to convey, in its gangster films, not only screeching cars and exploding tommy guns but also the speech of some rather sympathetic gang leaders—the marginalized but entrepreneurially talented heroes of *Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*. With the end of Prohibition, however, the Motion Picture Production Code withheld its seal of approval from *Scarface*, causing the producer, Howard Hughes, to add the phrase *Shame of a Nation* to the title (see Reynolds 1995, 125–127). There followed a wave of films, lasting well into the Cold War, which lionized “G-men,” evoking Eliot Ness and his Prohibition-era “untouchables” cornering Al Capone. As Woodiwiss notes, films like *The Enforcer*, in 1951, conjured an “invisible criminal empire of killers”—a syndicate of racketeers “working together in businesslike organizations behind respectable ‘fronts.’” Glamour settled on violent police, kicking in doors and roughing up suspects; “bad guys,” whether killed or sent to jail by courageous government agents and prosecutors, lost their voice (Woodiwiss 2001, 253–254).

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