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The Processes, Logics and Economies of Violence in Organised Crime

Abstract

This paper provides an introduction to the articles that comprise this special issue on violence and organised crime. Bringing together research into money laundering, local elections, state interventions and interrelated processes, firearms and home robberies, enforcers and contract killings, this issue explores the relationship between violence and various facets of organised crime. Taken together, the articles offer empirical and theoretical insights into the processes, logics and economies of violence. In doing so, this issue both advances our current understanding of the role violence plays in organised crime and raises additional questions about the context within which violence is employed, thereby highlighting further avenues for future research.

Key Words: Contract killing; enforcement; robbery; organised crime; violence.

Violence, particularly its specialised use, is often considered a signifier of organised criminal activity (Hobbs, 2013; Massari, 2019). It has come to be regarded as a major characteristic feature of Organised Crime Groups (OCG), constituting a necessary resource that they cannot do without (Hobbs, 2013; Rahman, 2019; Sciarrone, 2019). Defining violence is a difficult endeavour (Marsh, 2020), perhaps because it “can be just as diverse as its actors” (Wieviorka, 2009: 163). If, therefore, we take the actors of violence as our initial point of departure, then we can at least sketch out a rudimentary picture of the form and function of violence in organised crime.

From the outset it is worth acknowledging that violence takes many forms; it can be a physical act, it can be embodied in language and speech forms, it can even be understood to inhere in the smooth functioning of global capitalism (Žižek, 2009). In the context of organised crime, however, we can differentiate between the instrumental and expressive forms, or logics, of violence. In its instrumental form, violence is considered a tool, a means to an end, used to acquire wealth, ensure compliance, and create and sustain a legitimate reputation both within an organisation and beyond (Marsh, 2020; Sciarrone, 2019). Sometimes, just a convincing threat of violence is enough to secure these ends and potentially negate retaliation (Massari,

2019; Treadwell et al. 2020). Indeed, as Marsh (2020: 131) notes, “violence serves and protects”. This negation is part of the expressive form of violence, carrying a communicative symbolism that is universal, which signals to others that its architect is not to be messed with (see Massari, 2019). There is, therefore, a functional quality to cruelty and violent excess (Wieviorka, 2009), both psychologically and symbolically. With regards to the latter, since the past is the best predictor of the future, conspicuously violent exploits signal the likelihood of future violent actions should the need arise (Marsh, 2020).

Various ‘facilitators’ can be used to enhance the efficacy of violence. For example, Treadwell et al. (2020) note how firearms are an important dimension in ‘taxing’. Whilst not necessarily discharged, the presence of firearms can help facilitate the maintenance of control, improving the chances of success. Similarly, Vargas and González (this issue) highlight that the chances of a successful and profitable robbery are greater when firearms are employed. Vehicles, particularly high-end ones, technical equipment like beacons, and even contract killers feed into boosting the efficacy of violence (de Korte and Kleemans, this issue). Whether it be gear or specialist contractors, the use of facilitators can boost the efficacy of violence in both its instrumental and expressive forms. The right gear makes any job run a little smoother, making it easier to satisfy both instrumental and expressive goals by ‘getting the job done’ and/or making the right statement.

The instrumental and expressive logic of violence are therefore closely connected, and being able to employ these effectively provides one with marketable economies of violence. Demonstrable possession of these economies of violence is crucial if one is to climb the organised crime ‘career ladder’ (Sciarrone, 2019; Marsh, 2020). Rahman et al. (this issue) provide a particularly good example of this through the narrative of ‘Wi’, who found that the opportunities afforded to him grew in concomitance with his reputation for competent displays of violence. However, conspicuous displays of violence must be controlled and regulated so as not to attract too much unwanted attention. In fact, if it is not to prove counterproductive, violence needs to be employed selectively and strategically (Sciarrone, 2019). This point is highlighted particularly well by Ponce et al. (this issue) who demonstrate that violence is strategically deployed in an effort to influence the outcome of local elections in Mexico. Perhaps giving new meaning to the phrase ‘social influencer’, their findings suggest that violent efforts are maximised shortly before election day when voters are deciding whom to vote for. Whilst levels of violence remain relatively high during the month following election day, they do begin to rapidly decline. Certainly, “it makes good business sense to avoid violence where possible” (Marsh, 2020: 28).

Hobbs (2013) notes that overt violence not only attracts the attention of law enforcement but also deters potential partners and investors. If we consider the well-known indeterminacy between the licit and illicit marketplace (see Romero, this issue), it perhaps becomes more obvious why violence is bad for business. So, whilst violence is certainly a characteristic feature of organised crime, its cavalierly overt use can be considered an indicator of dysfunction and instability, and this is particularly true of the drugs trade (Pearson and Hobbs, 2001). Previous research focused on organised crime in Latin America has suggested that significant increases in violence are, at least in part, an unintended consequence of law enforcement interventions (see, for example, Atuesta and Pérez-Dávila, 2018; Garzón Vergara, 2012; Zaitch and Antonopoulos, 2019). Efforts to tackle organised crime by targeting its leaders have set in motion a complex process of fragmentation and competition that actually *increases* violence.

Where violence was perhaps used sparingly as a resource by established OCG, smaller groups – who represent the fragmented remnants of these larger groups – tend to employ violence as a key operational strategy (Vargas and González, this issue). Moreover, once the incentive to cooperate with other groups – stimulated by the need to form alliances to survive the initial fragmentation – evaporates, further fragmentation occurs as the split in the alliance generates additional separate factions. This results in yet more violence as each group competes to carve out their own slice of the action (see Atuesta and Pérez-Dávila, 2018). As groups fracture and multiply, more players enter the game and levels of violence rise as the competition for resources, like poppy crop cultivation sites, intensifies (see Martínez and Phillips, this issue).

The blurred lines between the licit and illicit have always surrounded the nebulous phenomenon of ‘organised crime’, even if the degree of social embeddedness has not always been understood (Hobbs and Antonopoulos, 2013; Sciarrone, 2019). Equally, the complex interrelationship between the instrumental and expressive logic of violence has long been part of the fabric of organised crime groups (Massari, 2019). Both of these – the blurring of market boundaries and the dynamic logics of violence – are constitutive aspects, or streams, of organised crime. We must also acknowledge that these two streams flow into each other with fluidity, shaping not only the terrain upon which organised crime groups operate, but also the *way* in which they function. The aim of this special issue is to bring together empirical research findings and theoretical suggestions to help further navigate the complex relationship between these core aspects of organised crime. Collectively, the articles that comprise this issue

highlight various processes, logics and economies of violence in organised crime and demonstrate how closely connected these facets of violence truly are.

The special issue

The articles in this special issue have been arranged in a way that hopefully highlights the way in which various processes influence both the logics and economies of violence in organised crime. The first three articles explore a specific set of conditions and processes that impact upon the level of criminal violence in Mexico. The strategic and instrumental utility of violence becomes apparent here but is grappled with further in the remaining three articles, the last two of which transcend the Mexican context.

In the first article, *Vidal Romero* explores the effects of money laundering on criminal violence. More specifically, he looks at the relationship between money laundering through illicit on-the-ground investments and future violence. If money laundering can precipitate future criminal violence, then it is far from a ‘victimless crime’. Authorities may be disincentivised to tackle money laundering because of the potential political and economic gains that may be derived, but Romero warns that the benefits may be relatively short lived. There is, he argues, a lagged effect of atypical positive economic shocks upon criminal violence. Economic improvement via the local investment of illicit gains not only incentivises local authorities to tolerate money laundering, but it also attracts other criminal organisations. The ensuing competitive struggle breeds conflict and, inevitably, violence. As visible improvement does not materialise overnight, the attraction of other crime groups is delayed and so there is a positive intertemporal relationship between money laundering and criminal violence. This lagged effect may help authorities turn a blind eye as they reap the immediate benefits but, as Romero points out, these gains are more than overshadowed by the subsequent rise in violence.

Also exploring a set of specific conditions and processes that impact upon the levels of violence, *Aldo Ponce*, *Rodrigo Velázquez López Velarde* and *Jaime Sáinz Santamaría* investigate the relationship between Mexico’s local election period and levels of criminal violence. The authors explain that drug-trafficking organisations (DTOs) actively try to influence local governance by strategically employing the use of violence during electoral campaigns, thereby ‘encouraging’ a favourable outcome. Set against the backdrop of sharp increases in the level of violence following the militarised war against organised crime, Ponce and colleagues explain that DTO control over local governments could be vital to succeeding in what is now a more densely populated and highly competitive marketplace. The strategic

and instrumental use of violence as a tool is evidenced well here since particular phases of the electoral process are targeted to yield maximum effect. Indeed, it is shown that DTO violence increases during the campaign period prior to election day. More specifically, the authors demonstrate that the increase in violence peaks in the month immediately before election day but then declines once this window of opportunity closes. However, these targeted interventions ignite more violent competition among other DTOs jostling for the same leverage, and this accounts for fluctuations in the levels of violence during the local electoral cycle in Mexico.

The next article by *Iván Flores Martínez* and *Matthew Phillips* drills deeper into the processes that increase lethal violence in Mexico. The authors acknowledge that the military interventions mobilised to combat organised crime and win the ‘war on drugs’ have played a significant part in rising levels of lethal violence. Rather than stemming the tide, the number of OCGs and DTOs increased as a result of the fractionalisation stimulated by targeted military intervention. As the number of groups grow so does the level of competition and, as a result, so too does the level of violence. However, Martínez and Phillips demonstrate that other forces besides military interventions have a role to play in driving the levels of lethal violence in Mexico. More specifically, there are other interrelated processes that influence the relative impact that military interventions have on levels of violence. For example, the authors highlight a ‘seasonality in violence’ whereby competition amongst DTOs for control of poppy cultivation sites causes seasonal spikes in homicides as groups battle for the harvest. The tighter the grip of intervention, the fiercer competition for strategic sites and resources will be amongst a growing pool of criminal organisations; and this is a competition within which violence is key to success.

These first three articles demonstrate quite clearly that various processes can impact upon the logic and economy of violence. In this way, we can perhaps consider violence to be a mediated consequence of various processes, a dynamic logic and economy that manifests under certain conditions and mobilised to achieve certain ends, whether those be of an instrumental or expressive nature. The former is highlighted in the fourth and final article to consider the Mexican context. Here, *Eugenio Weigend Vargas* and *Silvia Villareal González* explore firearms and injuries during home robberies, noting that most gun-related crimes in Mexico are perpetrated by OCGs and that home robberies are more attractive than street robberies to these groups because the former yield more profit. The authors identify an important instrumentality in the use of firearms, demonstrating that the odds of successfully perpetrating a home robbery are higher when firearms are employed. Moreover, higher success rates and profits are linked

to the infliction of injury during home robberies, but these are rarely the result of gunshot wounds. Instead, aggressors with guns engage in non-weapon-related physical violence, which according to the authors is less likely to be reported to the police by victims. This suggests that whilst firearms possess an instrumental utility key to success, their presence is perhaps more symbolic than applied, creating the context within which physical violence can be strategically employed to coerce victims and obtain higher profits without generating too much public attention.

The instrumental logic and broader economies of violence are themes that transcend the Mexican context as the last two articles of this special issue demonstrate. In the penultimate article, *Mohammed Rahman, Robert McLean, Ross Deuchar and James Densley* explore the motives and methods of ‘muscle for hire’ in West Scotland and the West Midlands, UK. Enforcers undertake a range of roles, many of which have significant instrumental value. Since OCGs may wish to insulate themselves from blowback by outsourcing violence, enforcement has become a commodified illegal activity within the criminal labour market that can be sold for profit. Indeed, whilst there are various routes into the business of criminal enforcement, motivations for pursuing this line of work are mostly economic. According to the authors, enforcement exists on a continuum and does not always involve extreme violence. Coercive activity like debt collection sits on one end of this continuum and whilst violence is often involved, it is not a defining feature. Intimidation, on the other hand, and the ability to convey a convincing threat of violence are crucial to the debt collector. Rahman and colleagues highlight that there is a degree of prudential consideration that goes into deciding whether or not to employ violence against debtors. Indeed, conspicuous displays of violence are seldom good for business and this is true even for things like contract killing, which sits at the other end of the continuum. These criminal undertakers are usually third parties contracted at arm’s length to conduct ‘hits’ without implicating the client.

The subject of contract killing is also taken up in the last article. *Laura de Korte and Edward Kleemans* investigate contract killings in the Netherlands through a crime script analysis and find that specific requirements and facilitators play an important role in the perpetration of this crime. The authors categorise ‘the hitman’ as a facilitator precisely because they are contracted to perform duties that the client is either unable or unwilling to perform themselves. These duties are performed in exchange for a financial reward, highlighting further the degree to which violence has become commodified. Large amounts of money can also be made by another type of facilitator, spy shop owners. de Korte and Kleemans point out that spy shops occupy a dubious position as they legally sell products that largely coincide with the

criminal underworld. Some of these products, such as beacons and Pretty-Good-Privacy telephones, for example, are considered key requirements in both preparing and executing a contract killing. By homing in on key requirements and facilitators the authors sketch out a more specific crime script for contract killings, providing a clearer picture of the whole process and highlighting areas for future research.

The context and nature of organised crime is constantly changing and what the articles in this special issue have made strikingly clear is that context matters. It matters in the way it shapes the logics and economies of violence and, therefore, to the way in which violence is perpetrated. Of course, wider socio-economic and politico-cultural forces play a part in shaping this context and even set the scene for two core aspects of organised crime. First, the blurring of boundaries between the licit and illicit marketplace, and second, the interrelationship between instrumental and symbolic violence. That is to say, the specific form and function of violence in organised crime. Certainly, what the articles in this special issue demonstrate is that the economies of violence, the efficacy of its instrumental and symbolic logics, are contingent upon various processes and conditions. Indeed, as highlighted in the Mexican context, the over-reliance on extreme physical violence is indicative of dysfunction and instability precipitated by the fragmentation of OCGs. In this way, we can see how certain conditions created by various processes influence the levels of criminal violence and the way in which it is employed.

There can be little doubt that violence occupies a position of salience in the operation and perpetration of organised crime. Yet, this characteristic and its position are somewhat paradoxical in that violence appears to be both central to, *and* bad for, business. Whilst its strategic and frugal use can yield desired results, its excessive and cavalierly overt use can be counterproductive. This special issue has contributed to enhancing our understanding of this complex and dynamic position and indeed the broader trajectory of organised crime in general. However, there is certainly space for future research into the role of violence in organised crime and the wider context within which it is employed. We would also encourage greater use of cutting-edge developments in 21st century criminological theory to help unpick the broader context of organised crime, and the various processes, logics and economies of violence central to it.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest: Justin Kotzé, Georgios A. Antonopoulos and Mohammed Rahman declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Human and animal participants: This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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