

PART III  
Contagion and evolution

# 10

## THE ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHIES OF TRANSNATIONAL ORGANISED CRIME

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### Introduction

This chapter explores one of the largely overlooked elements within the literature of transnational organised crime. It considers the economic geographies of organised crime. In pursuing this, the chapter aims both to excavate those geographical ‘traces’ that exist, often implicitly, within the literatures of TOC and to raise a number of questions that would repay further investigation. It is worth, first, considering the contributions that might be opened up by a dialogue between a discipline and a phenomenon that have only recently begun to develop any substantive links through the research literature (Hall, 2013, 2018; Hudson, 2014, 2019). In addition to expanding the empirical terrain of economic geography, this chapter argues that a geographical perspective highlights a number of issues that have been underappreciated within the literatures of TOC to date. This includes a long-standing recognition that space plays a role in understanding the nature of organised crime. A more formal recognition of an economic geography perspective on the significance of place, space and their uneven and combined development (Hudson, 2005, 2016) provides the context within which this might be more fully theorised and explored than has been the case to date. Further, an economic geographical perspective highlights the significance of spatial variation in the nature, extent and causes of transnational organised crime. An explicit recognition of the spatial also

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highlights the potential of developing and strengthening comparative analysis of organised crime in different locations, something that has been relatively underdeveloped within its research literature. A geographical perspective further opens up analysis of transnational organised crime to recent debates around scale that have had significant implications across many areas of the social sciences but which have been little discussed within the context of transnational organised crime (Hall et al. forthcoming).

### The illicit present/illicit presence

The academic literature of transnational organised crime is characterised by a multidisciplinary consistency consisting primarily of contributions from criminology, sociology, economics and political science. However, transnational organised crime is not something that has traditionally disturbed the research agendas of economic geographers. We find isolated examples of economic geography analysis of the drug trade, for example (Allen, 2005; Rengert, 1996), that made little impact on the economic geography literature, and almost nothing else until more recent calls for economic geographers to recognise illicit and illegal economic activities as legitimate objects of their enquiry (Hall, 2013, 2018; Hudson, 2014, 2019).

Economic geography's failure to engage with transnational organised crime is a little puzzling, not least because of the range of sub-disciplines to which it is potentially relevant. For example, whilst economic geographers have done much to articulate the spatialities of the world economy and the processes of globalisation (see Amin, 2002; Dicken et al., 2001; Hudson, 2003; Sheppard, 2002; Yeung and Peck, 2002), their analysis rests almost exclusively within the licit economy. This work has failed to acknowledge that transnational organised crime constitutes an economic activity of global significance. Similarly, while there are long-established and extensive geographies of crime literature (see Evans et al., 1992; Smith, 1986), this has yet to engage with issues of criminal organisation or transnational criminal flows, despite Lowman (1986: 90) in a key critical intervention arguing for geographers to recognise alternative forms of deviance that had previously escaped their scrutiny, including those perpetuated by powerful actors and those occurring and impacting beyond the local. Whilst Lowman did not explicitly discuss organised crime to any extent, his call was part of a plea for geographers of crime to lift their eyes from the street and to see and to recognise the wider economies of crime. The geographies of crime literature, reflecting an earlier era of geographical analysis and its focus on pattern rather than process, has tended to be primarily concerned with mapping crime, risk, victimisation and policing at the local level. While this work has been characterised by a great deal of attention to crimes such as burglary, mugging and sexual attack, and as such been valuable, it has had little to say about crimes such as drug trafficking, people trafficking and money

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laundering. This focus within the geographies of crime literature is explained by its emergence from within the sub-discipline of social geography whose prime focus has been the mapping of phenomena within urban areas and at the local scale. Economic and political geography, for example, two sub-disciplines that have been more concerned with or acknowledged the macro and global scale, are only now becoming more concerned with issues of crime, illegality and the illicit and the questions of power into which these issues are folded (Brooks, 2012; Judson, 2014, 2019).

Given the failure of economic geographers to appreciate the relevance of transnational organised crime and advance empirical accounts constructed from within a geographical perspective, it is not surprising that scholars of transnational organised crime, writing from within its more traditional disciplinary perspectives, have not turned to the literatures of economic geography for inspiration. Put simply, it is clear that they see little of relevance within this work. However, there is reason to suppose that a dialogue between these areas would be of mutual benefit and would do more than simply expand the empirical horizons of economic geography. Academic accounts of TOC recognise a number of spatial dimensions and elements, including its unevenness across space, its mobilities and constraints upon these mobilities, the ways in which it connects spatially distant regions through its networks and its regional specificity (Levi, 2002; Saviano, 2008; Van Dijk, 2007; Varese, 2011), that have so far been under-theorised relative to other aspects of these analyses. It would appear, then, that there is some potential for the literatures of economic geography to contribute to those of transnational organised crime.

The markets associated with organised crime are significant globally. Obtaining accurate measures of organised criminal activity is inherently difficult, and those estimates that are available must be treated with caution (Holmes, 2014), however, it would seem that organised crime represents somewhere between 7 and 20 per cent of global GDP (Glenny, 2008; Lemahieu et al., 2015: 2; United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), n.d.: 1; World Economic Forum, 2014: 23). Any analysis of the global economic landscape that does not acknowledge activities that are illicit or illegal, then, is an inherently partial one. These markets are distributed unevenly across sectors and global space, displaying clear geographies. In some transitional regions and failed or failing states these markets account for significant proportions of national income, up to 40 to 50 per cent in some cases (Glenny, 2008; Van Dijk, 2007). However, significant criminal markets also occur in both the European Union and the USA. These include markets in illegal drugs, human trafficking, firearms trafficking, commodity counterfeiting, illicit trade in tobacco products, fraud, cybercrime and corruption (Europol, 2013; Ferragut, 2012; Glenny, 2011; UNODC, 2014).

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It is wrong to suggest, despite the intuitive appeal of many cultural and political ‘gangster’ discourses, that organised criminal markets are exogenous threats that lay beyond the economic and political mainstream. Multiple literatures have demonstrated the ways in which they overlap and intersect with the mainstream in diverse ways in both OECD nations as well as those of the Global South (Bhattacharyya, 2005; Brown and Cloke, 2007; Castells, 2000; Nordstrom, 2007). Criminal entrepreneurs, then, routinely infiltrate and exploit the architecture of economic globalisation, including onshore and offshore financial centres and institutions, information and computer technology and global logistics as well as multiple licit economic sectors (Deneault, 2007; Glenny, 2008; Nordstrom, 2007; Urry, 2014; Varese, 2011). Organised criminal markets then are important parts of the contemporary economic scene.

Organised crime is situated within a wider global economic terrain characterised by complex intersections of the legal, the licit, the illegal and the illicit. Building on earlier work (Hudson, 2014; Chiodelli et al., 2017), it is possible to map these relationships conceptually. Firstly, we have those activities that are legal or illegal and, secondly, those activities that are licit or illicit. The former refers to activities defined in relation to formal legal systems of regulation; the latter to the definition of activities that are socially sanctioned as legitimate and socially acceptable or, alternatively, as illegitimate and socially unacceptable. Crucially, definitions of (il)legal and (il)licit are not universal. Rather they are attributes that are spatially and temporally contingent. Following this, we are able to construct a simple time/space variable fourfold classification of economic activities, depending upon different combinations of the (il)legal and the (il)licit. We have, then, activities that are both legal and licit – namely economic activities and their constituent spaces that have, to date, formed the focus of the vast majority of theoretical approaches and empirical analysis within economic geography. However, despite its theoretical primacy, both within and beyond economic geography, wholly legal and licit economic activities are in practice a rare and unusual form of economic organisation. It is likely that capitalist economies that are constituted solely via wholly legal, licit economic activities are actually the exception rather than the rule, especially in some spaces of the global economy. We are not concerned with such activities within this chapter.

Next we have those activities that are formally legal but which are (widely) regarded as socially illicit, such as aggressive corporate tax avoidance, or transfer pricing to shift corporate profits to low taxation jurisdictions such as offshore tax havens (Urry, 2014: 46). Such practices are practically important and far from unusual in capitalist economies. They are facilitated by governance via laws and formal regulation that accommodate such practices because they facilitate capital accumulation (Baka, 2017; Libreti, 2013; Springer, 2013) and allow powerful economic and political

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actors and interest groups to benefit. They also contribute to widening geographies of inequality, which are apparent across multiple scales, not least because vast sums of capital are denied to governments that could be used for more socially progressive purposes (Stewart, 2012; Zucman, 2013).

Beyond these legal realms we have activities that, whilst formally illegal, are widely regarded as socially licit, acceptable in relation to custom and practice or because of their local or regional economic significance. These activities are very diverse and span some illegal activities that are deemed socially licit within certain regional contexts such as the cultivation and consumption of coca leaves, from which cocaine is manufactured, in parts of Latin America (“here even legislators chew them”, Cusicanqui, 2005: 128); activities that are legal but are performed by people who are not legally entitled to do so, but for whom their actions are seen as a way of ‘getting by’; and illegal business practices which are routinely accepted as legitimate in the everyday conduct of the formal ‘legal’ economy. Governance of these activities occurs through social relations of tolerance and trust beyond formal regulatory structures or through the concealment of these practices within them. This realm includes some forms of organised criminal activity within some regional contexts where they are tolerated for economic reasons or due to deep-seated cultural traditions. For example, the financial benefits of people smuggling and counterfeit commodity manufacturing to China’s economy have resulted in these illegal activities receiving the tacit approval of some provincial governments through no, or only limited, policing of these activities (Chow, 2003: 473; Glenny, 2008: 366–367; Hudson, 2014: 786; Intner, 2005; Phillips, 2005). There are similar suggestions that regulatory authorities in parts of the Global North have selectively turned ‘blind eyes’ to illegal activities that have become socially accepted as licit (as in the recent recognition of widespread wage levels below the national minimum in the clothing and textile industry as producers there seek to compete with the much lower – but legal – wage rates in much of the Global South) (Bland, 2020; O’Connor, 2013, 2020). Illegality, conferring both a risk and a competitive edge, becomes structurally embedded in the organisation of economic activities.

Finally, we have those economic activities that are both formally illegal and are (widely) deemed socially illicit. These include, but are not limited to, many forms of organised crime including human trafficking, trafficking hard drugs, arms dealing, cybercrime and money laundering. It should be remembered, however, that social condemnation of these activities will be far from universal and that they may form the basis of alternative forms of governance, economic organisation and development within some regions in which they are extensive and deeply embedded. For example, whilst cybercrime might be universally illegal, the development of extensive regional agglomerations of cyber-fraud in places such as Eastern Europe and West Africa suggests that within these spaces these activities are, to a

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significant extent at least, deemed socially licit. In Nigeria, for example, 419 (cyber) scams are widely celebrated in Nigeria pop music and hip-hop (Glenny, 2008: 207–210; Lazarus, 2018).

The economy, then, is routinely constituted via varying mixes of and connections among (il)legal and (il)licit practices. The contemporary global economy is one characterised by multiple forms of hypermobility and fixity. Commodities, people and money are fixed in space for varying times as they flow between places in the routine performance of the economy. Many if not all commodities, in their passage along a circuit of production, will pass through a variety of legally and illegally regulated spaces, and this passage may involve illegal activities and practices that are nonetheless regarded as socially licit (see Brooks, 2012). Organised criminal economies then sit within a far more fluid and contingent global economic landscape than a simple binary opposition of legal and illegal would suggest. Even within the fourfold conceptual mapping laid out here, the boundaries between different categories are significantly blurred and their intersections significant.

### **Transnational geographies of organised crime**

The most fundamental conception of the ‘geography’ of a phenomenon is its distribution across space. Questions that concern the concentration of organised crime in particular regions, variations in the nature of transnational organised crime across space and the interconnections between its many spaces are actually common elements of many accounts and case studies of organised crime (see, for example, Hignett, 2005; Kigerl, 2012, 2016; Lusithaus and Varese, 2017; Siegal, 2003). Often, though, these are not central or substantive aspects of analysis, whilst there is a great deal of variation in the extent to which these elements are present and considered significant within accounts, and they are certainly far from universal within this literature.

However, the absence of any sustained, substantive discussion of these aspects of transnational organised crime does not mean that transnational organised crime is in some way ‘aspatial’. Rather, like all economic activities, it demonstrates distinctive geographical patterns. It is distributed unevenly across space, there are reasons for this, and, further, its uneven spatial distribution around the world is significant because it affects a range of unfolding social, economic, political and even cultural processes. It is rare though to find much explicit reflection on, or discussion of, the spatial configuration of the global organised crime economy within the academic literature or to find questions of the spatialities of organised crime to be at the centre of analysis. Van Dijk (2007) provides a rare example of work which foregrounds this aspect within analysis. Drawing together a range of official statistical sources, he provides a global mapping of perceptions of levels of organised crime, highlighting the significant variations between

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different countries. Correlating this against other sources of statistical evidence, Van Dijk points to the importance of the weak rule of law in explaining high levels of organised crime in different regions, echoing some findings of other analysis of transnational organised crime (Bagley, 2005; Brophy, 2008; Castells, 2000; Costa and Schulmeister, 2005).

The complex spatial configurations of transnational organised crime are further apparent with reference to specific 'industries'. The United Nations' annual *World Drug Report* (see UNODC, 2019, for example) is a comprehensive, annual assessment of the global trade in illegal drugs replete with statistical data and mappings of various markets in illegal drugs at the global scale. These reports show the distinctive macro-geographies of drug production, trafficking and consumption. If the distribution data for heroin and morphine and cannabis herb, for example, is scrutinised within these reports, broadly speaking they show patterns of production concentrated in the Global South, with some exceptions, such as the significant levels of cannabis production that take place within North America. Despite these broad similarities, however, the specific geographies of the production of each drug vary considerably. Cannabis herb shows a relatively diffuse distribution of production throughout Latin America, Africa, the USA and beyond, while the production of heroin and morphine is found to a greater extent within the Middle to Far East and is especially concentrated within Afghanistan, although recently Mexico has shown some significant growth as a centre of heroin production (Wainwright, 2016: 233–239). These patterns reflect complex interactions of a number of factors, including history, market demand, crop characteristics, terrain and climatic factors, issues of law enforcement, smuggling routes and border security, amongst many others. Similarly, their networks of distribution show some significant differences. The inclusion of maps within these reports, perhaps the ultimate geographical icon, remind us that maps, for example of trafficking routes and production zones (Agozino et al., 2009), have long been deployed within texts concerned with transnational organised crime as descriptive and explanatory devices. This points to both the importance of the spatial as a dimension crucial to the representation, analysis and understanding of transnational organised crime and also to the absence of any substantive, explicit reflection upon this within its literatures.

The prevailing model of analysis that characterised the empirical literature of transnational organised crime is the regional case study (see, for example, Galeotti, 2005, and numerous contributions to the journal *Global Crime*). These accounts, while frequently acknowledging and situating themselves within their immediate geographical contexts, rarely recognise, explicitly at least, that they are the product of the interactions of activities occurring across multiple scales (Hudson, 2014: 780). This is significant because this approach inherently privileges a particular scale of analysis and hence, following this, constructs explanatory frameworks that incorporate the



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endogenous characteristics of regions at the exclusion of potential alternative explanations. These accounts identify, for example, factors such as institutional or state weakness, weak rule of law, close links between government and organised crime, a lack of legitimate economic opportunities available to populations or others such as strategic locations within a region or on trafficking routes, unprotected borders or poor border security, the existence of criminal traditions, the presence of foreign mobsters or, as is typical in these accounts, some combination of these, as the factors that account for the development of organised crime within these regions. Table 10.1 summarises these endogenous or location factors, to adopt the language of older economic geography, drawn from an analysis of a number of these accounts.

*Table 10.1* Endogenous location factors mentioned in individual accounts of regions in which organised crime is extensive

[Note to author: Tables are better viewed when changing your 'MS Word settings' to 'Web view'].

| <i>Factor</i>  | <i>Present in account</i>   |
|--|---|
| Institutional/state weakness/weak rule of law (11)   | Brophy (2008); Manzo (2005); Castells (2000); Hignett (2005); Bagley (2005); Abraham and van Schendel (2005); Costa and Schulmeister (2005); Kupatadze (2007); Aning (2007) |
| Close links between government and organised crime/institutional illegality (6)              | Lutner (2005); Hignett (2005); Castells (2004); Paoli (2005); Slade (2007); Kupatadze (2007)  |
| Contraction in legal economy/high unemployment/lack of legitimate economic opportunities (6) | Castells (2000); Glenn (2008); Hignett (2005); Bagley (2005); Slade (2007); Aning (2007)  |
| Strategic location within region or on trafficking routes (5)                                | Brophy (2008); Hignett (2005); Bagley (2005); Costa and Schulmeister (2005); Kupatadze (2007)   |
| Unprotected borders/poor border security (3)   | Hignett (2005); Kupatadze (2007); Aning (2007)  |
| Cultural idolisation of gangsets/normative influence (3)                                     | Lutner (2005); Slade (2007); Aning (2007)   |
| Regional context   | Manzo (2005); Glenn (2008a)   |

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|   |  |
|---|--|
| characterised by poverty and/or inequality (2)  |  |
| Existence of criminal traditions (2)  | Scott-Clark and Levy (2008); Castells (2000) |
| Inhospitable/remote geographical terrain (2)  | Brophy (2008); Glennv (2008)                 |
| Presence of foreign mobsters (2)  | Hienett (2005); Bagley (2005)                |
| <i>Present in one account</i>   |  |
| Access to large numbers of weapons, Brophy (2008); technological advances, Brophy (2008); prohibition policies, Brophy (2008); cultural traditions that create opportunities for criminals, Manzo (2005); rootedness of criminal gangs to locales, Castells (2000); traditions of violence, Castells (2000) |  |

While this literature has undoubtedly uncovered a great deal of empirical richness, we can recognise a number of limitations with it. First, accounts of individual regions inevitably lack any international comparative dimension, and no published work to date has sought to critically review and draw together these accounts (though see Hall, 2010, for an attempt to provide a rudimentary commentary on this). Consequently, in lacking this comparative dimension, we are unable to use them to build towards more general explanations for the development and concentration of organised crime within particular regions. While some explanatory factors identified within different accounts overlap, they do not appear to point towards a definitive set of specifically locational factors (Hall, 2010). Further, the locational analysis typical of these accounts seems to be somewhat out of step with some recent debates within the social sciences that have sought to establish new research practices for a global age. Law and Urry (2004) and Aas (2007), for example, have argued that individual delimited spaces might not be the most appropriate unit of analysis for an age characterised by interconnections between diverse and distributed spaces and flows through regions and across borders.

An alternative, though somewhat deterministic, theoretical explanation for the development of transnational organised crime within regions, that has enjoyed some limited purchase within its literatures, is the structuralist perspective. Rather than focusing on the endogenous location factors previously outlined, this perspective is concerned with the dialectical relationship between macroeconomic processes and spatial patterns. Passas, for example, has identified structural inequalities at a global scale “in the spheres of politics, culture, the economy and the law” (2001: 23) as the factors generating a host of illegal flows, which include most notably drugs, people and counterfeit goods and that run predominantly from the Global South to the North. These inequalities Passas terms “criminogenic asymmetries” (2001). Similarly, Castells (2000) identifies a number of

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structural factors within his discussion of the growth of organised crime in Russia during the 1980s and 1990s. These included the exploitation of numerous regulatory and institutional failures by local, national and international agents. Reactions to Castells's work, however, would suggest that it offers a far from convincing explanatory model for understanding the factors underpinning the spatial distributions of transnational organised crime. One of the most fundamental critiques of this work, and other structuralist accounts such as Passas's work, revolves around questions of scale. The validity of the concept of criminogenic asymmetries, for example, appears to be scale dependent. While it seems plausible that illegal flows will broadly follow the contours of structural inequality at a global scale, it seems less convincing at the micro scale. Here the complex patterns of criminal flows appear to respond more to local factors and elude explanation through recourse to any overriding structural logic (Abraham and van Schendel, 2005: 4; Aas, 2007: 125). The structural certainties within Passas's account seem to dissolve as the magnification increases. Castells's work has been subject to similar questions around its scale of analysis.

The critique of Castells' approach, and the proliferating discourse about transnational organized crime, has pointed out that it is too general and lacks nuance to local conditions and historic contexts . . . Castells' model thus overlooks the multiplicity of micro-practices and associations that, "while often illegal in a formal sense, are not driven by a structural logic of organization and unified purpose" (Abraham and van Schendel, 2005: 4).

(Aas, 2007: 125)

Focusing attention, therefore, on geographical concerns with the spatial configurations of transnational organised crime draws attention to issues that have received relatively little attention to date. Despite some, typically implicit, attempts to advance explanations for some of these patterns, we are some way from possessing a theoretical tool kit with which convincing empirical accounts might be constructed. In this sense our understanding of transnational organised crime lags some way behind that of most licit industries. These are not issues of mere academic interest. Many authors, writing within economic geography, have recognised that the relationship between economic processes and spatial patterns is a more dialectical one. Building on path-breaking work by geographers such as Massey (1991, 1993), this more nuanced conceptual perspective sees places not as closed and fixed containers but as fluid and changing, constituted via the interplay of both endogenous processes and resources and relations with other places as commodities, money and people flow in and out, across their permeable boundaries (for example, see Hudson, 2001). Thus the 'geographies' of

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transnational organised crime are not mere dead historical facts but rather are active in the mediation of ongoing processes of economic change.

### Scale(s) of analysis

The criticisms of the dominant perspectives outlined earlier point to the significance of scale of analysis in some recent debates within criminology and the social sciences, which are of relevance to the study of transnational organised crime. Critical engagement with processes of globalisation has opened up debates around questions of scale within a globalised world (Aas, 2007; Law and Urry, 2004). The majority of literature to date that looks at transnational organised crime adopts a single-scale approach focusing either on the global (Bhattacharyya, 2005; Glenn, 2008), national or regional (Galeotti, 2005) or local scale (Allum, 2006; Hobbs, 1998, 2004). We can discern two distinct concerns relevant to the critical evaluation of these literatures that have occurred within recent debates about scale. The first concerns questions about the appropriateness of particular scales of analysis. Put simply, which of these scales provides the most appropriate lens through which to study transnational organised crime? The majority of recent empirical analysis of transnational organised crime has adopted either the statist or global-transnational scales. These have drawn some criticisms, noted previously (Aas, 2007; Abraham and van Schendel, 2005), concerning a supposed lack of nuance and attention to local detail and further for their failure to articulate well with the connected realities of a global age. The first of these criticisms stems in part from the emergence of work that has explored the complex terrain of transnational organised crime at the local level (Allum, 2006; Hobbs, 1998, 2004; Hobbs and Dunnighan, 1998).

Felia Allum's (2006) study of the transformation of the Neapolitan Camorra in the post-war period is an exemplary close reading of the history and evolution of organised crime within a relatively small region. It is empirically rich, drawing on detailed interviews, testimonies and a range of other official, legal and media documents. One of its strengths is the extent to which the analysis embeds its subject within the local social, cultural, economic and political context. In doing so it is able to reveal the spatial and temporal contingency of organised crime and provides an excellent basis for comparative analysis with studies such as Schneider and Schneider's (2004) conducted in other regional settings. Hobbs's work mirrors that of Allum to an extent in its attention to the local, although it employs different methods, but has an added comparative dimension. It has taken the form of detailed ethnographies and interviews with players within the economies of organised crime in contrasting localities within the United Kingdom. This work, then, moves beyond a simple concern with the spatial distribution of phenomena but also aims to excavate the complex mosaics of local differentiation within these broader distributions. Place, the social, economic, cultural and political

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characteristics of space, becomes a key variable in the explanation of this variation. Hobbs's work identified characteristics such as the social make-up of neighbourhoods, local housing policy and the nature of the organisation of the formal economy, amongst other things, as crucial in determining the nature of organised crime in different localities. As Hobbs argues:

It is at the local level that organised crime manifests itself as a tangible process of activity. However, research indicates that there also exist enormous variations in local crime groups. In this report we found it possible to draw close parallels between local patterns of immigration and emigration, local employment and subsequent work and leisure cultures with variations in organised crime groups.

(Hobbs, 1998: 140)

This certainly adds to the literatures of transnational organised crime a level of detail that is absent from the majority of published accounts constructed at wider scales of analysis. However, it is also possible to trace an, albeit patchy and fragmented, concern with place in other work on transnational organised crime which has recognised the importance of the local to understandings of this phenomenon and which provides something of an antidote to the more monolithic representations of organised crime within global-transnational and cultural discourses of organised crime. Many analysts have sought to make connections between the nature of organised criminal groups and the geographical localities within which they arise. One of the earliest examples of this form of analysis was Donald Cressey's discussion of the differences between Sicilian and American organised crime groups (originally published in 1967): "The social, economic and political conditions of Sicily determined the shape of the Sicilian mafia and the social, economic and political conditions of America determined the shape of the American federation" (1997: 6).

Elsewhere, Levi has warned of the dangers of universalism in the analysis of transnational organised crime, arguing that it varies in its nature, as well as its extent, across space.

Why, after all, should an organisational model of crime that applies to parts of Italy in some historical periods apply either to the north-eastern US; and even if it accurately depicts crime there, why should it apply throughout, or indeed in any part of the UK, Germany or Canada?

(Levi, 2002: 881)

Despite this enduring, if patchy, interest in place amongst scholars of transnational organised crime, it was not until recent empirical investigations that the local dimension was more fully articulated within the research literature. This work has been heralded as a theoretically and

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methodologically significant contribution and can certainly be situated within a wider wariness of overly abstract accounts of globalisation. Aas makes the point that “The ethnographic study of culture and cultural variation therefore gains a particular importance as an antidote to the abstract nature of many theoretical claims about globalisation” (2007: 174–175).

However, somewhat disappointingly, despite the recognition of their significance, the works discussed here have failed, to date, to inspire any substantive empirical project that has resulted in a downwards shift in the scale of analysis.

The second question concerning scale that has arisen within recent debates in criminology and the social sciences involves the validity of the single-scale approach, one that we have seen dominate much of the literature of transnational organised crime research to date. In being isolated from the literatures of economic geography and cognate disciplines, it would appear that research into transnational organised crime has been somewhat immune from recent critiques that have questioned the appropriateness of single-scale approaches to understanding the various dimensions of globalisation. The problem of trying to capture and understand multiscale processes, such as globalisation, through the lens of any single scale of analysis is an enduring one within the social sciences. We can detect two responses to this issue within recent literature, particularly that of economic geography which has been at the forefront of attempts to produce (spatialised) understandings of globalisation. The first of these responses are calls for analysis to reflect the multiscale ways in which processes unfold. Coe et al., for example, argue:

There are, then, a variety of scales at which we might construct an analysis. The important point, however, is that none of them in isolation is adequate to develop a comprehensive understanding. In fact, the processes (of globalisation) that we have noted are operating within and across all of these scales. An important part of the geographical approach is, therefore, the awareness of how economic processes are constructed at multiple scales simultaneously.

(2007: 20)

It is rare to find examples of such multiscale approaches of the kind advocated previously within the literature of transnational organised crime. Such concerns chime closely with debates within economic geography which recognise the importance of acknowledging the multiscale processes that underpin specific economies.

### **The economic geographies of cyber-fraud**

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As [Hudson \(2014: 780\)](#) argues, “the contemporary illegal economy is grounded in the subtle interplay between activities at different scales”. This is not something, however, that has previously been recognised to any substantive degree within the multidisciplinary literatures of organised criminal economies. In the remainder of this chapter, drawing on previous work ([Hall et al., forthcoming](#)), we aim to explore the ways in which activities at different scales interact in the production of one criminal economy, that of online for-profit (cyber) fraud. The transnational geography of cyber-fraud is one characterised primarily by extensive agglomerations of cybercriminals in regions such as Eastern Europe and some states of the former Soviet Union, West Africa, Brazil and Turkey ([Glenny, 2008, 701](#); [Vasylenko, 2012](#); [Agwu, 2012](#); [Ibrahim, 2016](#); [Lusthaus and Varese, 2017](#)). These regional cyber-fraud economies are the sources of significant personal, commercial and national security threats ([Kshetri, 2005: 542](#)). The activities and processes operating at multiple scales that have produced this distinctive geography of cyber-fraud have been present across its literatures to an extent, but in ways that are somewhat diffuse, implicit and patchy. They have yet to be brought together in ways that explicitly acknowledge cyber-fraud’s multiscale origins.

There is a considerable literature of cyber-fraud that has observed cybercriminals active at the subnational micro scale in their local milieu, either through direct ethnographic observation or through analysis of police archives or through interviews ([Adeniran, 2011](#); [Arensiola and Asindemade, 2011](#); [Leukfeldt, 2014](#); [Leukfeldt et al., 2017a, 2017b](#); [Lusthaus and Varese, 2017](#)). These accounts reveal cyber-fraud to be locally embedded and, in some cases, tightly clustered spatially within distinct hubs. For example, it is estimated that Râmnicu Vâlcea, a Romanian city with a population of over 100,000 people, is home to between 1000–2000 active cyber-fraud perpetrators, almost all of whom are concentrated in a single neighbourhood (Ostroveni). Râmnicu Vâlcea specialises in advance fee auction fraud, where high-value goods are offered for sale through fake advertisements on online auction sites. These fake sales are used to solicit shipping fees in advance from gullible buyers. Scams of this nature are extensive and, potentially, extremely lucrative, and this illegal economy is an important contributor to local economic development in the absence of alternatives within the legal economy ([Bhattacharjee, 2011](#); [Lusthaus and Varese, 2017: 4–5](#)).

Whilst the tight spatial clustering of Râmnicu Vâlcea’s cyber-fraud economy in Ostroveni is recognised within the literature, there is little explicit reflection on what processes underpin this distinctive geography. Clues, though, to the clustering processes operating here can be found scattered throughout ethnographic accounts of cybercrime here and elsewhere. Cyber-fraud gangs tend to be initiated by ‘core’ members who oversee the various activities within the gang and control non-core members. Although the literature has yet to penetrate Râmnicu Vâlcea’s cyber-fraud

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gangs to any substantive extent thus far, analysis of the police files relating to multiple cyber-fraud gangs across Europe and the USA suggests that the majority of core gang members are organised criminals active in other local illegal markets including drugs, robbery and fraud (Leukfeldt et al., 2017a: 47; see also Leukfeldt, 2014; Leukfeldt et al., 2017b). Thus, it would appear reasonable to surmise that the neighbourhood of Ostroveni is home to a concentration of such criminal entrepreneurs. Here Hobbs's (1998, 2004; Hobbs and Dunnighan, 1998) observations on the urban geographies of organised crime are instructive. Ostroveni is a neighbourhood described as working class, run down and characterised in large part by Communist-era social housing (Bran, 2011). The concentration of organised criminals here, underpinning its emergence as a cyber-fraud hub, is unlikely to be the result of pure chance. Rather, this pattern is likely to reflect histories, unfolding at a variety of scales, of housing and education policy (Ostroveni's High School No. 10 is cited as a centre of cyber-fraud), policing and socio-economic deprivation. Further, despite the apparently 'placeless' nature of activities mediated via the internet, Leukfeldt et al. (2017a: 45) are able to conclude, with regard to the cyber-fraud gangs they studied, that "social ties play an important role in origin and growth processes". This centrality of social ties to gang formation ensures they display tight, local, clustered geographies. The social ties that underpin these gangs emerge out of local contexts including the street, schools, sports clubs, prisons and other local illegal markets (Leukfeldt, 2014; Leukfeldt et al., 2017a, 2017b).

One further question about the tight clustering of cyber-fraud gangs into hubs like that observed in Ostroveni remains. Namely, does this distinctively clustered geography confer any economic advantage on these gangs over that they would derive from a more diffuse distribution? Economic geographers have recognised the economic advantages that accrue to firms in the legal economy through the agglomeration of industrial activity. These advantages include sharing specialist pools of labour; inter-firm coordination and co-operation; influencing local institutions and economic development policies; networks of trust between local economic actors that emerge out of regular face-to-face contact within professional and social environments; and the development of advantageous networks of external linkages (Aoyama, 2011: 85–92; Porter, 1990: 80). The potential economic advantages of clustering within the illegal economy of cyber-fraud is not something that has been the focus of analysis within its literatures to date. However, we might discern tentative evidence that such economic advantages also accrue within clusters of illegal economic activities from clues scattered across cybercrime's wider literatures. Clearly though this is something that would repay further investigation. These potential agglomeration advantages include evidence of cybercriminals sharing practice, specialist knowledge, experience and software within spaces such as the cybercafé and other shared work and social spaces (Agwu, 2013; Leukfeldt et al., 2017a; Soudijn and Zegers,



2012; Yazdanifard et al., 2011); cybercriminals undermining law enforcement efforts and weakening their local institutional environments through corruption (Lusithaus and Varese, 2017: 6; Yazdanifard et al., 2011); regional cultural realms within which cybercriminals enjoy significant normative influence (Armstrong, 2011; Olavinka Akanle et al., 2016); and synergies between cybercriminals and related and supportive industries (Lazarus, 2018).

There is also a literature of cyber-fraud that has scrutinised its global distribution through a national-scale lens. Here cyber-fraud is presented as the product of the interactions between various national-level characteristics, the combinations of which vary across global space. A range of national characteristics has been identified within this literature and includes both those that might facilitate cyber-fraud such as high internet penetration, high levels of technical education, limited domestic anti-cybercrime legislation and low rule of law, as well as factors that might 'push' perpetrators towards cyber-fraud such as high unemployment rates and a lack of opportunities within the legitimate economy commensurate with the technical skills levels of young people (Kshetri, 2005, 2010; Kigerl, 2012). This thesis is present within many statistical analyses of global cyber-fraud distributions, which tend to deploy national-level data using economic, technical and institutional variables, and also within some of its ethnographic and journalistic accounts (Glenny, 2008, 2011; Lusithaus and Varese, 2017).

Analysis of this kind, in exploring these factor combinations, has highlighted something of the potentially facilitative national contexts within which cyber-fraud is incubated. However, we might recognise three limitations of this literature. First, potentially, we can recognise characteristics of high cyber-fraud nations that may have eluded this analysis. The difficulties of operationalising potential social and cultural predictors of cyber-fraud such as nationalistic ideologies and political contexts, materialist youth cultures or cultural realms within which gangsters exert a powerful normative influence (Glenny, 2011; Ibrahim, 2016) have resulted in this analysis primarily deploying economic, technical and institutional factors in explanatory accounts. Scrutiny of cyber-fraud's ethnographic literatures, however, suggest the potential significance of a wider range of predictor variables than is reflected in its purely statistical literatures (Hall et al., forthcoming). Second, there is evidence to suggest diverse regional, rather than universal, drivers of cyber-fraud development. Put simply, the factors that might underpin the development of cyber-fraud in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union might not apply, or apply to the same extent, or at all, in West Africa or Brazil. Agglomerations of cyber-fraud in these different regions seem to differ significantly in their nature, organisation and motivations (Hall et al., forthcoming). Finally, the subnational clustering of cyber-fraud, which has been clearly observed within its ethnographic and journalistic literatures discussed previously

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([Bhattacharjee, 2011](#); [Lusthaus and Varese, 2017](#)), inherently eludes analysis at the national scale.

Cyber-fraud, through both of the scalar lenses employed earlier, is viewed as something that emerges from within criminogenic places, be they the 'rogue nations' of statistical studies or the 'Hackervilles' ([Bhattacharjee, 2011](#)) of more ethnographic and journalistic accounts. There is a danger here though of attaching pathologies of place to these spaces, of seeing them as the result of a series of endogenous failures of, for example, economic development or good governance and overlooking the potential roles of external agents and linkages in the relational production of cyber-fraud. For example, Nigerian '419' email scams are typically portrayed as evolving out of schoolboy pen-pal, fax and telephone scams which have subsequently migrated online ([Agwu, 2013](#); [Glenny, 2008](#)). However, [Williams \(2004: 21\)](#) argues that their origins lie also in the abuse of import regulations enacted collaboratively by Nigerian public officials working with foreign business partners during the oil boom of the 1970s and 1980s. Here the over-invoicing of imported goods led to the routine transfer of massive amounts of money out of Nigeria. Later scripts employed by 419 email scammers drew upon this tradition of Nigeria as the source of easily obtained illicit funds. These scripts, presented as if from affluent but persecuted Nigerians urgently looking for a safe Western bank account in which to transfer their money, were simply means of obtaining bank details or fictitious transfer fees from victims who failed to spot the scam. The scripts that scammers developed and employed drew heavily on Western stereotypes of West Africa as unstable, dangerous, corrupt and underdeveloped ([Zook, 2007: 78–79](#)). It is rare for histories of Nigerian email scams to acknowledge the roles of external actors in their evolution in these ways.

Other examples of the relational rather than purely endogenous production of cyber-fraud include the corrupt business practices of British companies in Nigeria and the failures of the British government to address this and of British financial institutions to scrutinise the origins of illicit funds from the region ([Peel, 2006](#)). These external linkages were significant contributors to high levels of corruption in West Africa which have been recognised as a significant motivator for cybercriminals to obtain their own illicit funds ([Adeniran, 2011](#); [Agwu, 2013](#); [Ariansiola and Asindemade, 2011](#); [Ibrahim, 2016](#); [Fade and Ibrahim, 2011](#)). Further, authors have cited illicit flows of e-waste to West Africa through opaque supply chains that circumvent poorly enforced OECD e-waste regulations ([Doyon-Martin, 2015](#); [Hartwig, 2016](#)). The flow of this illicit e-waste to West Africa underpins an extensive identity fraud industry that harvests personal data from inadequately wiped e-waste from the West. These examples highlight that in addition to the internal qualities of places and regions that underpin their cyber-fraud economies, our analysis should also seek to trace the multiple external linkages, the actors involved and their roles in sustaining these illegal economies.

## Conclusions

There is no doubt that historically economic geography (something shared with much of the mainstream economics literature) has been blind to the significance of illegality in the performance of diverse economies, although as we have argued there is evidence of this having begun to change. Conversely, although again there are exceptions, there is no doubt that criminology and other social science disciplines studying illegality have generally been blind to the significance of place and space in the ways in which illegal activities in economies are organised and regulated. Given these developmental trajectories, there is clearly considerable scope for cross-disciplinary collaboration, a deeper engagement between political-economic geographers and criminologists and other social scientists working on illegality, and perhaps in the longer term a new interdisciplinary approach taking account of the synergies across disciplines. The example of cybercrime is one that could be fruitfully extended into, for example, people trafficking and the economic significance of modern slavery in specific places or the places of production of fake goods and ‘knock-offs’ and their relationship to legal production. Indeed, as we have noted, there is already some evidence of this.

In moving the debate and research frontier forward, it is crucial to recognise the symbiotic interconnections among and between the legal/illegal and licit/illicit in economic systems – rather than a dichotomy of separate economies of legal and illegal activities, what is needed is a more conceptually sophisticated view of economies as complex systems with emergent properties in which the (il)legal and (il)licit are inextricably intertwined as the double-helix constituting their DNA, that defines them as specific types of economies. It is important to emphasise that economies *are* diverse, varying through time and over space, and avoid regression to discussion of a singular economy or developmental trajectory. There is a by now extensive literature that recognises diverse capitalisms (Jessop, 2006; Peck and Theodore, 2007) and different forms of capitalist social formation with distinctive forms of economic organisation and social regulation (Jessop, 2001; Peck and Tickell, 1995), and there would be considerable benefits in integrating consideration of the illegal and illicit more fully into such approaches. Conversely, this would also allow a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the role of the illegal and illicit in these diverse economies and social formations.

In developing more sophisticated theorisations and understandings of the significance of illegality within economies, however, it is crucial also to engage the more nuanced theorisations of geographies of economies, explicitly recognising the significance of multiple spatial scales and relations between them. In short, to insist upon conceptualisation of economic geographies and reject a view of aspatial economies. There is an extensive

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literature which discusses the significance of scale in the structuring of economies (Amin, 2002; Dicken et al., 2001; Hudson, 2005; Sheppard, 2002; Yeung and Peck, 2003) and as we have noted there has been some attention to the scales at which illegality flourishes. Beyond this, however, it is vitally important to give due recognition to the subtle interplay between the internal characteristics of places and their complex relations with other places in the organisation of production and exchange constituted through shifting flows of capital, commodities, money and people, with the empirical realities of illegal and illicit economies. This again would provide a new window through which to view the position of illegality in the processes of (un)making places and their constituent economies.

In short, much is to be gained from greater engagement between economic geography, political economy and criminology and other social sciences in producing fuller and more comprehensive accounts of the ways in which actually existing economies are performed and work. In the end, however, this will require cross-disciplinary theoretically informed and grounded empirical research, deploying a variety of methodologies to show how in practice the illegal and legal, the illicit and licit, relate in the successful reproduction of economies. The proof of the metaphorical pudding will be in the eating.


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