Institutions, Crime, and Violence
POLS2040 – Fall 2020

Preliminary version (8/18/2020). Changes may be made.

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Seminar times and location:
    Thursdays at 1:30pm online

Module Description

This class examines the relationships between institutions, criminal actors, and violence. State-based institutions play an important role in explaining the level of crime and whether crime is disorganized or organized. Organized crime groups, in turn, influence both state-based institutions (for example, through corrupting officials) and other criminal activity, often by creating the “rules of the game” by which other criminals can act. Finally, both criminal actors and state-based institutions influence the level of violence in society. Each of these three influences, and is influenced by, the others. This course offers the opportunity to better understand how these three factors relate to each other. It will engage with both major works on the topic and with recently published research and working papers. This will allow the student to develop a theoretically grounded framework to make empirical arguments and contribute to debates in the social sciences on crime and violence.

Educational aims
The aims of the module are:

- To develop an understanding of why mafia groups form, how they organize, and what they do.
- To develop an understanding of what factors give rise to or increase the prevalence of mafia groups during transitions from autocratic to democratic regimes.
- To develop an understanding of why some criminal groups evolve into mafias and other do not and why some mafia groups are capable of migrating to new regions and others are not.
- To develop an understanding of the conditions in which criminal groups engage in activities, such as the illegal trade of drugs, kidnapping for ransom, and extortion.

Learning outcomes
By the end of this module, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the literature on organized crime and mafias.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the broader literature that studies governance and institutions.
- Demonstrate extensive knowledge on an issue related to the course material. This may be demonstrated in the form of a lengthy research paper.
- Make a novel contribution to the study of the political economy of organized crime.
Grading
Your grade will be determined by two components.

- 0% - Weekly paper ideas
- 30% - Discussion leader and participation
- 70% - Final paper

Paper Ideas
Starting on the second week of class, you will submit weekly paper ideas that are inspired by the week’s readings. Each one should only be a few sentences. These are not fully baked or even semi-baked paper ideas. They can be completely infeasible or simply impossible to actually write. The purpose of doing this is to practice brainstorming ideas based on strengths and weaknesses in the what we read.

Participation
This class is discussion-based. Therefore, it is crucial that you show up for each seminar having completed all of the required readings. Each student will serve as discussion leader once. This will help us to generate more diverse ideas and perspectives, and it will provide experience for future teaching roles.

You should have comments and questions in mind for discussion. I will provide a guide on how to read an academic paper, but things to think about when reading an article include:

- Is this a descriptive or causal claim?
- What is the causal argument?
- What data are used? Are the data accurate, reliable, and appropriate?
- Does the paper use a theory to derive empirical implications?
- What is the theory and how plausible is it?
- What other empirical implications would the theory predict?
- Are there different interpretations of the findings?
- Did the author leave out other important factors or ignore problems of reverse-causality?

Most required readings are available or linked to on CANVAS.

I encourage you to read the guidance on how to productively read journal articles:

- ASR Review Guideline – General
- ASR Review Guideline – Comparative Historical
- ASR Review Guideline – Empirical and Policy

Final Paper
The final paper can address any of the themes or ideas that we discuss. It can be theoretical, empirical, or conceptual. It will probably not be a perfectly polished first draft of a journal article, but that is what you should aim for. It should have a clear research question. The paper should explain how it fills a gap in the literature. You should discuss what research methods you will use to answer the research question. Papers should be formatted along the guidelines of the APSR, AJPS, or JOP. We will discuss this further in class.
1. How is a mafia like a state? How is a state like a mafia?

September 10


Optional Reading:

2. What is an organized crime group? What is a mafia?

**September 17**


**Optional Readings:**


3. What explains the variation in mafia presence and activity? I

September 24


David Skarbek. 2014. The Social Order of the Underworld. Chapters 2-4

Optional Reading:


4. What explains the variation in mafia presence and activity? II

October 1


Optional Readings:

5. What are the political consequences of mafias?

October 8

Dipoppa, G. (2020). How Criminal Organizations Expand to Strong States: Migrants’ Exploitation and Vote Buying in Northern Italy


Optional Readings:


6. How does organized crime organize?

**October 15**


Optional Readings:


7. Elections, crime, and violence

October 22


8. When is illegality associated with violence and how does violence vary?

**October 29**


**Other Readings:**

9. Various topics

**November 5**


10. Various Topics

November 12


11. How does private and disorganized violence operate?

**November 19**


