



McMafia: Seriously Organized Crime (Book Review)

Mon Nov 23, 2009 3:55pm BST

“If you have a lot of what people want and can't get, then you can supply the demand and shovel in the dough”. – Lucky Luciano

It's a simple enough concept, and one that helped make the father of modern organised crime in the United States cited above 'one of the most influential builders and titans of the 20th century' according to Time magazine. Yet, when that demand is driven by a steadily growing middle class in Western Europe that possesses ever greater amounts of disposable income, with supply reliant upon weak states around the globe for their production and distribution, the inevitable result leads to not only billions in wasted tax payer dollars spent on law enforcement, but also threatens the foundations of political and economic stability in emerging markets around the globe.

Having previously laid out the benefits to decriminalisation, Misha Glenny's McMafia: Seriously Organised Crime simply reinforces the view that a host of legislation in the West is helping to fuel unrest, hindering efforts at eradicating corruption, and consequently slowing economic development around the world. While a large part of the book focuses on Eastern Europe – not surprising given the author's previous work as the BBC's Central Europe correspondent, or that he has penned three books on Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans – Glenny traces the supply chain for illicit goods across continents, from the slums of Mumbai to the jungles of Colombia, from the six-star hotels of Dubai to the grow-ops of British Columbia. Indeed, the same forces that helped bring the glory of the McRib to the edges of the globe have also played a role in fuelling the rise of criminal syndicates well away from the centres of power in Washington or Brussels.

While organised crime as an institution in itself is often perceived as a separate non-state actor, an organism which is able to operate and thrive away from the heavy hand of the state, Glenny effectively highlights how it is rather the connections between the two – the marriage of the sovereign and the criminal – which gives birth to the most dysfunctional and dangerous of offspring. Indeed, as the book makes clear, while the criminal entrepreneurs who step in to fill the void in the supply of illicit goods and activities are able to accrue millions in profits, few of these are as powerful as those who get direct support from the state, or in some cases, effectively are the state.

The book provides an abundance of real life examples of how the cooperation of key players within government, whether explicit or not, is often a necessary precondition for these criminal syndicates to thrive. This can come in the form of simply not asking questions about the origins of large sums of unaccountable bank deposits (as is the case with some states in the Middle East), to the direct control of top level ministerial posts (with the Western Balkans singled out in particular). That said, while these accounts are undoubtedly the book's underlying strength, particularly given the fact-is-stranger-than-fiction megalomaniac personalities that often embody the kingpins of this global network, Glenny's tendency to jump back-and-forth often overwhelms, and distracts from an otherwise highly enjoyable read.

Moreover, the author's solution which calls for the establishment of a global regulatory mechanism that can help states battle organised crime and corruption seems particularly far-fetched at this juncture, especially given the distinct lack of leadership from global powers on any transnational issue of pressing importance. More importantly, however, with governments around the world sometimes explicitly involved in the trade, we can expect the political will necessary for such a task to remain wholly absent. As a result, while the characters, plots and underlying themes recounted throughout McMafia certainly make for an entertaining read (it is hardly surprising that the rights to the book have already been acquired by a film production company), in terms of actual policy prescriptions on how to move forward, the book falls well short of pushing the debate ahead. I look forward to the movie.

McMafia: Seriously Organized Crime, by Misha Glenny. Published by Random House, 2008.
ISBN-13: 978-0887848186