

# Order and Crime: Criminal Groups' Political Legitimacy in Michoacán and Sicily

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## Summary

This investigation researches on contexts of disorder or crisis, in which criminal actors gain legitimacy. By affirming that criminal groups are already social agents, this research argues that they gain political legitimacy to the extent that criminal groups engage in an authority-building process. Thus, it focuses on two instances in which criminal groups launched campaigns—or at least engaged in planned activities—in order to gain political and social legitimacy. La Familia Michoacana (LFM) and Los Caballeros Templarios (LCT) de Michoacán, on the one hand, and Cosa Nostra (CN), on the other, offer rich and instructive cases to examine. Precisely, the research asks for how these groups seek to forge legitimacy, as well as for what are their strategies for that purpose. The research opens two avenues of conceptual discussion.

First, it recovers and organizes what has been written about political legitimacy in order to propose an operative idea. Thus, to tackle this issue, we need an operative idea of how legitimacy could be, rather than how it should be. The second conceptual discussion uses the two cases to explore how the ideas of legitimacy and authority relate to each other. The contexts of the respective cases offer fruitful opportunities to re-think accepted notions, including the disciplinary perspectives from which they come. The story of Michoacán, the primary case in this research, emerged over the last several decades, and thus is less investigated than the centennial Sicilian story, the secondary research case. Comparing them brings into focus both similarities and differences, which sheds new light on them, and offers new perspectives for the conceptual debate.

This study is structured into six chapters designed to tackle the stated puzzle. The first chapter is called “Illegal but Legitimate? Review on Legitimacy Concept towards a Social (Dis)Order Debate.” It collects, systematizes and dialogues with the key research concepts. Political legitimacy comes first, focusing on what has been studied and argued about this theme across disciplines. This exercise helps distinguish a strictly literature review approach from a more engaged theoretical perspective which can grapple with how the hypothetical legitimate *should* be compared to the debate on how this same subject *could* be. Also, key concepts in political legitimacy and authority are explored, such as social order, the state, and sovereignty. With this established, the second chapter's agenda is twofold.

First, to deepen discussion of the concepts as they relate to the specific cases of criminal groups interested and performing political legitimacy actions. Second, to describe and explain this study's methodology, including data collection, techniques, strategies, and so on, not only as they pertain to this study, but how they might apply to similar

investigations addressing other cases worldwide. Chapter 2, “The Ghost of Robin Hood,” lays out the epistemology behind the data collection carried out in fieldwork as well as the usage of secondary sources. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on Michoacán, the central case of this research, based on primary data and fieldwork. Chapter 3, “Tracking Local Robin Hoods,” contextualizes contemporary Michoacán, including the role of other agents involved in the war on drugs strategy carried out by the Mexican federal government.

Chapter 4, *The Art of Dying Twice*, focuses on the analysis of LFM and LCT legitimacy efforts and performances, using what is called the sources and resources of legitimacy, which inspired the data collection in the field, and guided the presentation of the information. This chapter ends by elaborating cases in which these sources and resources somehow play together when the criminal groups performed their legitimacy campaigns. After that, chapter 5 carries out in an abbreviated form the same kind of analysis, but this time for CN. The first part provides a critical overview of what the mafia is and CN’s role in local political legitimacy efforts across this criminal group’s long history. The second and most important part addresses the sources and resources of legitimacy following the same model. Finally, and again paralleling the Michoacán analysis, it examines an emblematic case in which all the sources and resources of legitimacy overlap.

With both the Michoacán and Sicilian cases presented and discussed, chapter 6 conducts a comparative analysis. Initially, the data from both cases in the previous chapters inform the conceptual debates identified at the outset of this dissertation. Each source of legitimacy guides an analytical comparison in which similar and dissimilar practices are evaluated. Curiously, what at first seem like significant similarities actually conceal vast differences; combined, they deepen and clarify our understanding of the conceptual underpinnings of each case, while highlighting their unique characteristics. Finally, inspired by these ideas, the dissertation closes with some reflective concluding remarks.