Learning to Live with Crime

Wilson, Christopher P.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Wilson, Christopher P.
Learning to Live with Crime: American Crime Narrative in the Neoconservative Turn.
The Ohio State University Press, 2010.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/24301.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24301
At the close of the twentieth century, few stories about American crime received the attention accorded the scandal of the Boston-based gangster James “Whitey” Bulger. The story emerged from reporting in the local Boston Globe, from prosecutions in U.S. District Court—and then, most sensationally, in a series of nonfiction True Crime exposés, led most of all by Black Mass: The Irish Mob, the FBI, and a Devil’s Deal (2000), by Globe reporters Gerard O’Neill and Dick Lehr. Black Mass recounted how, starting in the mid-1970s, local FBI agents, principally John J. Connolly, Jr. and John Morris, had enlisted Bulger and his partner Stephen Flemmi in bringing down the local Italian American Mafia. In FBI jargon, Bulger had been brought in as what is called a criminal (or “confidential”) informant. And yet, in order to sustain that relationship, Connolly had turned a blind eye to Bulger’s role in loan sharking, drug dealing, and even murder. And as was shown in Connolly’s racketeering and obstruction of justice conviction in 2002, the agent had both helped Whitey Bulger evade prosecution and given him advance warning of an impending criminal indictment in 1995.¹ This outcome sent shockwaves rolling back through older prosecutions, some of which had been central to the closing down of New England’s leading crime families. New Department of Justice (DOJ) guidelines on informants (2001) have even been attributed to aftermath of the Bulger debacle.²

No matter what anyone claims about being clever or brilliant, there is only one way organized crime can be cracked. Unless someone on the inside talks, you can investigate forever and get nowhere.

—Sid Feder and Burton B. Turkus, Murder, Inc. (1951)
The Bulger case certainly made headlines. But it did not have the effect of bringing the history of mob activity together with that of the broader war on crime, a campaign that blossomed over virtually the same span of time as Bulger’s mature mob career (1965–95). Instead, the history of organized crime is most commonly treated as a distinct subject of its own, and with its own historical markers, personalities, and legacies.3 As a result, it is easy to forget that tactical innovations in crime control shuttled from one front to another, often under the sponsorship of some of the same players. In particular, it is clear that informant use, so celebrated in the war on the Mafia, would proliferate across the criminal justice system as the war on street disorder and drugs escalated in the 1970s and 1980s. In such a light, therefore, we can begin to see the pivotal importance of Robert F. Kennedy’s earlier campaign against organized crime, notably as its methods have been recently unveiled by key lieutenants such as Ronald Goldfarb or Gerald Shur, the godfather of the Witness Protection Program (or WITSEC).4 Reexamining RFK’s legacy, moreover, can help us understand the connections between fighting the war on crime and some of the fundamental ways that, in journalistic exposés of the Mafia, it came to be represented.

That the use of informants has exploded in the last four and half decades is beyond dispute. Law enforcement representatives and the press, for instance, often presented John Connolly as a “bad apple” or said his failures resulted from his shared “Southie” (South Boston) ethos with Bulger.5 In fact, as Ralph Ranalli has shown, Connolly’s strategy was part of what was called a “top echelon” informant program approved at the highest levels of the FBI.6 Indeed, as Clare Bond Potter has demonstrated, strategic informant use had defined J. Edgar Hoover’s exploitation of the war on celebrity gangsters as far back as the 1930s.7 Later use, however, dwarfed Hoover’s initiative. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), for example, established in 1963 by Richard Nixon, came to manage some 60,000 “cooperating individuals” by the late 1980s. In many federal divisions, new forfeiture and seizure statutes would make ever-greater sums of money available for paying informers. Government agencies were now allowed to share with informants up to 25 percent of seizure assets per case, beneath a cap of a mere $250,000. In a special series on informants for the Atlanta Constitution, Mark Curriden showed that search warrant affidavits filed in Atlanta’s U.S. District Court in 1989 had used confidential informants 90 percent of the time, up from 60 percent in 1980. By the mid-1990s, the former head of the DEA’s Boston and New York offices would admit that one “almost never [made] a case”
without using an informant. And if the federal government doubled its payments to informants between 1987 and 1989 to a whopping $63 million, local authorities handed out another $60 million on top of that. In U.S. cities especially, the war on crime’s reinvigoration of street policing, the use of random drug sweeps, and the broadening of administrative plea bargains would all contribute to the informant boom. And so, let it be said, would the horrendous expansion of prison populations. Many of the accused or imprisoned would become informers to circumvent the new mandatory sentences imposed for drug-related offenses. A harsh prison sentence thus became the main inducement not to reform, but to inform; as prison populations expanded, so did informing.

The Bulger scandal was therefore not the anomaly many claimed it was. Rather, it was all too characteristic of problems the informant system could create at many levels of the criminal justice system. On the one hand, crime warriors like Rudolph Giuliani—a pivotal figure, on many fronts, in his role as federal prosecutor of organized crime, New York City mayor, and chief sponsor of the “Broken Windows” style of policing—testified to the pivotal importance of the tactic. In 1994, Giuliani insisted that criminal informants, undercover officers, and citizen informers (even, he said, in our schools) were all made necessary in an era when we must learn to live with crime, largely because they sent an important message to the public at large. In a moment when crime permeated everyday living, he said, it was a matter of “whose values we are trying to protect.” On the other hand, the use of confidential and criminal sources often produced much-ballyhooed, short-lived victories followed by revelations of police misconduct and corruption. Showing the pervasiveness of the tactic, for instance, the Boston Globe reported that in 1988 virtually all of the warrants obtained in Dorchester, Roxbury, and West Roxbury courts by drug unit detectives cited what they called “unnamed” informants. Payments budgeted for informants in these units could run $5,000 to $10,000 for a two-week period. Yet little wonder that internal accounting safeguards had been easily circumvented and made useless. Under such conditions, the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts observed, with no small sarcasm, that the use of one informant—or so the Boston Police claimed in one case, for a dozen warrants for different areas of the city—“portray[ed] an informant with a remarkable—perhaps one should say incredible—range of knowledge.” The Court’s implication was clear: some confidential informants were little more than the police’s literary inventions. On the street, the use of confidential sources went hand-in-hand with a shotgun-style, no-holds-barred approach with, in two infamous Boston cases, disastrous results.
My goal in this chapter is not, however, to rehearse these sorry histories. Nor am I here to debate the tactic’s effectiveness in rousting criminals. Rather, I am interested in the relationship between its operational effects and those in the realm of culture. That is, I want to reexamine the institutionalization of this micropolitical tactic—micropolitical because it worked by leveraging the intelligence from individual mobsters into a mechanism of fighting crime in the aggregate—and how its use contributed to a broader narrative recasting of crime, organized and otherwise, in ways we have not fully appreciated. In the cultural moment when Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* (1972) garnered more sensational attention, the effects of the neoconservative turn to lower-ranking informants has had a subtler, but perhaps more enduring, impact. The reason being, as Giuliani’s admission suggests, that the narratives stemming from this tactic were some of the first where crime was made to seem a threat to everyday experience—or what, under Robert F. Kennedy’s leadership years earlier, had become known as the “American way of life.” In the journalistic portraiture of mob practices I discuss here, writers were compelled to scale down that threat, track its everyday footprints, and thereby address the paradox of an especially individualistic cast to criminality: “American” as we are American, corporate as we are corporate, loyal to ethnicities as we both are—and are not.

To get at these connections, I will first explore the general cast of RFK’s war on mobsters as it laid the groundwork for the formal establishment of WITSEC. Then, as I’ve suggested in my Introduction, I will turn to a tradition of in-the-trenches, journalistic depiction of organized crime. I will look closely at two of the books most directly connected to real-world battles with the Mafia: Peter Maas’s *The Valachi Papers* (1968), emanating from Joseph Valachi’s testimony before the McClellan Committee in 1963; and Nicholas Pileggi’s *Wiseguy: Life in a Mafia Family* (1985), recounting the testimony of mobster Henry Hill under Witness Protection. What these narratives would rewrite, of course, was the gangster narrative, whose story arc of “enterprise and success ending in precipitate failure” had been most famously described by film critic Robert Warshow in 1948. These newer exposés hoped to deflate the heroic outlines of what Warshow cast as high tragedy: to write the history of the mob from the bottom up. In Maas’s and Pileggi’s narratives, an informant in the law enforcement sense of the word became more of an informant in the ethnographic sense: a low-level wise guy whose wisdom provided an inside look into the workaday culture of the mob.

My argument is also that using criminal informants was a rationale
borne of pragmatism and expediency, not moral rectitude. And contrary to what we think about the “conservative” drives of the war on crime, such a tactic reflected the growth of state powers rather than their reduction. In fact, despite the public rhetoric of the war on crime—pace Giuliani, who knew better—there was something much more labyrinthine than moral straight shooting and a simple defense of “our” values, or ordinary life, at issue. Indeed, by coming clean, organized crime informants often insisted upon their own normalcy yet did so only to bewail the hypocrisy of a state that seemed to have extorted—in their argot, offered “protection”—for their witnessing.

I.

Along with referring to J. Edgar Hoover’s campaign against gangster bandits in the mid-1930s, historians generally point to the period from the mid-1950s and 1960s as a critical turning point in the war against organized crime. Again, the tendency of some chroniclers to stress the personal animosity and turf wars between RFK and Hoover disguises the fact that when it came to fighting organized crime a more cohesive program was emerging. As Lee Bernstein has reminded us, the 1957 raid on the so-called Apalachin Conference generated widespread law enforcement alarm about seemingly national alliances arising among what had been thought to be local or regionally oriented mobsters. Meanwhile, our histories commonly point to the seminal work of the so-called Kefauver and McClellan Committees in the U.S. Senate, the latter of which saw RFK working as chief counsel; the expansion of the FBI’s “Top Hoodlum” program, which Kennedy would revamp as a “Criminal Intelligence” effort within the Organized Crime and Racketeering Section of the Department of Justice; and, again, the establishment of the Racketeering Influence and Corrupt Organizations provision (RICO) and WITSEC. RFK’s tenure as U.S. Attorney General (1961–64), brief as it was, had especially enduring consequences. Whereas Hoover used informants largely as crime-busting leverage against individual “celebrity” gangsters, the emerging tendency Kennedy first signaled was to use informants as part of the reconceptualization of organized crime as a corporate “entity” or enterprise—and one that could be attacked as such: by seizing assets, blocking income flows, and dismantling its organizational structure (including its front operations) from the inside. Informants were used to map this supposedly corporate culture and then help undo it.
This approach, in part, stemmed from transformations within gangsters’ groups themselves. In tracing the longer development of what we now call “organized crime” itself, historians and criminologists often begin with its so-called incubation in the neighborhood gangs of the mid- and late nineteenth century. Originally, these criminal street gangs began as local self-defense confederations that, over time, were incorporated into political machines and became more formally run.\(^{23}\) In urban wards, these gangs had usually overseen vice operations, monopolized small old-world commodities, and run (through intimidation and kickbacks) the hiring and firing of local workers. These patterns persisted within some crime families well into the late twentieth century. Yet nineteenth-century gangs were not always “organized” in the way we often think. Dive into the famous book by New York Chief of Detectives Thomas Byrnes, *Professional Criminals of America* (1886), and one finds chapters ordered by criminal type, but in individual gallery shots only loosely connected to each other. To the extent that a figure like Byrnes pictured the organization of crime at all, his thinking remained noticeably artisanal, treating criminals as something like tradesmen or operatives within a criminal guild. Only the most daring crimes entailed integration of these individual talents. While there is some disagreement about how territorial local vice economies really were, wards generally provided the predominant setting for professional, collaborative criminality.\(^{24}\)

That is, until Prohibition. As the principal trigger to organization in the modern sense, Prohibition led to both a broader metropolitan orientation and to an integrated, even national, system for these criminal enterprises. Prohibition also invited a market orientation and a corporate form. These larger enterprises required covert financing, market control of production and distribution, and legitimate front operations.\(^{25}\) (Whitey Bulger’s predecessor in Boston, Dan Carroll, controlled liquor distribution from a nightclub and managed local prizefighting, one of Bulger’s own obsessions.) The turnabout was profound. The tendency of turn-of-the-century muckrakers, like Lincoln Steffens, to read organized crime through the political machine, in fact, would quickly seem dated. Before long, profits generated by crime’s expansion created more autonomy and thus less dependence on political machines over time.\(^{26}\)

Moving uptown also meant, as the 1920s would show, headline-grabbing gang warfare, the kind that became so central to the emerging popular image of organized crime. Figures like John Dillinger and Bonnie and Clyde, as Potter has shown, often appeared as romantic bandit heroes, their power interpreted through a folk idiom still resonant in the American
countryside. But back in the city, the young toughs played by Edward G. Robinson of *Little Caesar* (1930), or James Cagney of *The Public Enemy* (1931), recapitulated this modernizing trajectory from ward to uptown. As famously described by Warshow, “for the gangster there is only the city,” a closed space upon which he must impose his will. The modern gangster narrative modeled a linear story of ethnic ward apprenticeship that began with petty thuggery and escalated into a wider corporate competition. In this classic form, the gangster epitomized a “pure sadism” for which death was the only final fate possible. Often hinging on the loss of boyhood friendships or betrayals by older-style criminal *padrones* or ward figures, these narratives oscillated, Warshow said, between moments of “irrational brutality” and startlingly “rational enterprise.” They moved through an arc of high tragedy that returned to a bloody finale in the gangster’s original milieu of the streets. These narratives also offered satirical parallels to the American mainstream even as they seemed to repudiate its charms. In *The Public Enemy*, Cagney’s gangster is counterpointed, and not at all unfavorably, to a brother who fights his war in Europe instead of the streets, or to the college boys who lose their nightclub table, and their dates, when these celebrity gangsters show up. Robinson’s Rico is, arguably, more loyal than the uptown chum who betrays him to the police.

Following the 1930s, key journalists would also begin to accentuate the modernizing and Americanizing sides of mob activity. They began to highlight the role of national syndicates in diminishing local, ward-based, ethnic loyalties. Although many scholars now dispute the precision of the term, “Americanization” played a leading role in these popular accounts, as it would in Daniel Bell’s famous formulation about criminal ethnic succession in the early 1950s. Relying on testimonials from second-generation mob figures who exemplified, supposedly, their cohort’s assimilation, this Americanization theme went hand in hand with what Vincenzo Ruggiero has aptly called a “Fordist” conception of organized crime. Prosecutor Burton B. Turkus and journalist Sid Feder, for instance, generated the famous *Murder, Inc.* trademark in 1951 and used their term “the syndicate” to refer to a “single National Syndicate . . . bound by a government of its own.” Though they said the structure was too decentralized to be strictly like a corporation, they also said it was run just as tightly “as General Motors or the national Baseball League” (425). As we shall see, Peter Maas’s principal goal, likewise, would be to chronicle the Americanization of the mob, largely through the purging of Sicilian elements beginning with the so-called Castellammarese War of the early 1930s. Just as Maas would try to downplay Mafia rituals and instead show how lieuten-
ant positions were actually auctioned for cash, Gay Talese’s *Honor Thy Father* (1971) would show Bill Bonanno, the son of a Mafia Don, growing up not in the wards of New York but in Tucson, going to the University of Arizona and majoring in agricultural engineering.\(^{33}\)

In all, then, it might seem that this evolution from the urban ward to the corporate form was a natural, even inevitable, trajectory for representations of organized crime. However, we need to examine carefully the relationship between the tactical operations of law enforcement and this dominant rhetorical casting; otherwise, we will have little way to understand how these Americanizing and corporate themes were coordinated with their apparently opposite claim, the idea that organized crime was akin to an alien or Communist conspiracy. As Bernstein reminds us, Kennedy often preferred to liken organized crime to the Red Menace, just as Turkus before him had called organized crime “just as real as any fifth column of totalitarianism.”\(^{34}\) To these thinkers, organized crime needed to be approached not only for sensational crimes—Henry Hill’s Lufthansa robbery, after all, was quite a heist—but because, like other political “enemies,” the Mafia infiltrated the everyday. The journalistic emphasis on a corporate assimilation by mobsters was not, then, a simple reflection of the unmediated testimony that informants lent to writers and law enforcement officials alike. Rather, it was Robert Kennedy’s war on the Mafia that gave this dual cultural likeness—corporate and yet infiltrating—an operational meaning.

To put this point another way, we have to recognize that the assumption that organized crime was embedded in the national life was a keystone of Kennedy’s tactical approach. On the ground, Kennedy thought that organized crime’s alien conspiracy was a threat precisely because it mimicked developments in the mainstream economy, especially the cornering of markets and workplaces (in the case of corrupt labor unions). (Hence, as well, the real meaning of Turkus’s use of the older labor terms, “syndicate,” or “national combination” [68]). To Kennedy, that is, organized crime was a form of monopolist predation and combination, a conspiracy that simultaneously threatened the American free enterprise system and poisoned politics, often at the state or city level. And its criminal integration was a sign of its corporate practices. Gambling, for example, could no longer be seen as a victimless or merely local vice crime; rather, to Kennedy, as for Thomas Dewey before him, gambling receipts bankrolled larger interstate operations or funneled money to respectable fronts, and thus had to be challenged as an asset-producing stream.\(^{35}\) In other words, in an involution common to the cold war, the alien threat was both an enemy within and
a conspiracy that was *too like* the system Kennedy vowed to defend. On
the ground level, therefore, a nearly permanent tension was now installed
between the bureaucratic, corporate, and ethnic labels attached to orga-
nized crime and the often-*disorganized*, decentralized, or even impulsive
illegal activities it actually engaged in. In a post-liberal path suggesting the
ideological bridge between Kennedy’s war and that of the neoconservatism
to come, fighting crime became a way to protect the free enterprise system.

The state, however, was no sideline observer; rather, it was mobilized
in the cause. The Mafia’s putatively un-American activities were now
addressed as if they were quintessentially national byproducts: mobs were
 corporate organizations whose assets could be attached, monopolistic
practices broken up, and so forth. Though Kennedy and his lieutenants
would, in public, scandalize secret oaths and the mob code of *omerta—*
ethnic correlatives, they felt, to Communist Party pledges—in truth the
Department of Justice began increasingly to solicit private bargains and,
where needed, to play legal hardball with insiders. This included, as Ken-
nedy’s special prosecutor Ronald Goldfarb has recalled, more aggressive
use of conspiracy and deportation laws; extending immunity provisions
from obscure corners of the law, in order to leverage testimony from coop-
erating witnesses; and creating conditions where false statements (or, more
ominously, silence) could constitute criminal acts in themselves. It was as
if the state had become a dispenser of disloyalty oaths resulting from all
sorts of financial and prosecutorial pressure.

Meanwhile, the government adopted the idea of conspiracy as much
more than a metaphor. In the long run, the state made association itself
within these syndicates into a crime. The key transformation to be effected
by RICO, in fact, was less its focus on specific crimes; as William Geary
has pointed out, prior government commissions had actually discovered
few gaps in the criminal code as such. RICO helped to make membership
in an organized crime cell itself the predicate for prosecution. Whatever
the legal legitimacy of these tactics, there is little doubt that they resusci-
tated a Hooveresque climate where naming names could lead to additional
investigative leads; in turn, the threat of prosecution for membership in
a criminal conspiracy allowed a prosecutor to leverage testimony. And,
in turn, each bargain could be turned into another, generating a pattern
where the criminal informant placed an ever-greater stake in the bargain
he had struck, right down to the specifics of his identity. The protection of
witnesses, therefore, was also not so much revived as reinvented. Criminals
had long ratted on associates to cut a deal with prosecutors or police or
the FBI. But under the leadership of Kennedy, and subsequently his former
lieutenant Gerald Shur, the Federal Witness Protection Program—later reinforced, with absurd latitude, under RICO as “the care and protection of witnesses in whatever manner is deemed most useful”—took the state even more directly into the everyday lives of mobsters. That is, a criminal had to be considered both as a member of a conspiracy and as an employee—with a career plan, in some cases a family, and more.

Under Shur’s three-decades-long tenure, well past Kennedy’s personal campaign against Hoffa, WITSEC came to be used as more than the traditional carrot-and-stick device. Rather, it turned to enticing criminals with the promise of a newly constructed identity freed from their past and from possible vengeance by past associates. Ironically, the modernization of organized crime had itself underwritten this expansion: as it had itself extended beyond its ward bases, simple local guarding of witnesses could no longer be viable. (For a brief period, the use of protected witnesses had also offset the uncertain reception of wiretapping in U.S. courts and, in the case of Lyndon Johnson, presidential resistance.) In a pattern that would be repeated many times, the rapid rise in criminal applicants to this program also meant that it was often overwhelmed by the very bargains it had cut. To create new identities for its witnesses, as well, the government itself began to engage in forgery and other forms of identity fraud; before long, residences and mistresses and new businesses were being bankrolled, and career criminals were dumped unannounced into local law enforcement districts. Other forms of abuse followed.39 In hindsight, certainly one of the most startling developments here was that the state parlayed back organized crime’s own extortionate practices under the banner of protecting the American way of life.

Once again, however, the ethical or even practical considerations of this tactic are, for our purposes, less germane than what they tell us about the larger war on crime and how organized crime itself was being reconceived. After all, Kennedy, and after him Shur, had established a framework in which the capture of a mobster would be seen not simply as an arrest for a crime but (as Goldfarb remembered) a “major intelligence breakthrough.”40 Shur himself originally had larger ambitions for the device. At one point, he proposed that witness protection be integrated into a broader intelligence-gathering system that tracked criminal associations and patterns of activity. In a tactic of immense import for other fronts in the war on crime, in other words, he pressed for the strategy of rolling up criminal groups from lower ranks to higher.41 In an even broader sense, here the informant was seen as a storyteller, a bearer of intelligence about the very culture of the mob: someone who could tell the
public about its work patterns, its ways of life. Ironically, that is, criminals who had double-crossed their original pledge of criminality were now cast as the ultimate truth tellers. In these tensions—between the risk management of criminal intelligence, the desire to cast organized crime as corporate, and the actual everyday experience of these foot soldiers—much of the real drama of the new narratives would emerge.

II.

Robert Kennedy’s desire to have it both ways—to represent the Mafia as an alien and yet decidedly American, corporate body—did not impose a uniform template on the journalistic narratives that followed. Genre coordinates are always malleable. To paraphrase an insight from Stephen Crane, the gangster’s lair could always be a setting for comedy or tragedy. Puzo’s *Godfather*, after all, was still in the future; the influence of Warshow’s pattern could still be felt; not every organized crime narrative would rely on a turned informant from the lower ranks. Nevertheless, in the inner workings of those that did, we can often discover the shaping influence of what Albert Stone calls the “telling occasion” of transcription, the specific pressures of informing created by the emerging war on crime.

Nowhere more so than in the back story of Peter’s Maas’s *The Valachi Papers*, a book that emerged out of a pact with Kennedy’s Justice Department following Valachi’s Senate testimony. By comparing the Valachi that Maas reproduced with the testimony the mobster actually intended to deliver—available in typescript currently in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library—we can see the shaping influence of the informant strategy.

On its face, the sheer comprehensiveness of Valachi’s testimony seemed to legitimate the tactics Kennedy had used. In what is apparently a dictated typescript of over 1,200 pages, Valachi told his federal handlers a story about his rise from simple burglar to wheelman to contract killer for Vito Genovese, and then his initiation into “Cosa Nostra,” a term Valachi effectively bequeathed to the FBI for future use. As Alan Block has shown, this seemingly authentic first-person testimony also allowed many in the Senate to overlook the fact that the government recruited Valachi into testifying about a war of which, originally, he may have known very little. (“That is the way I was told,” Valachi told the Senate, when asked if he knew why he had been ordered to kill “All Castellammarese.” “I never found out the reason. I never asked for the reason.”) In the view of some historians, in fact, Valachi provided little more than TV entertainment
and publicity for the feds. In some instances, it can seem that Peter Maas simply enhanced certain of Valachi’s memories, like that of his initiation into Cosa Nostra (305), by drawing on Valachi’s Senate testimony, where such “ritual” elements had seemed so sensational.

In the surviving manuscript, however, we find some important clues to the transaction between Valachi and Maas himself. The first contrast is stylistic; the second is in tone. What we find in Valachi’s typescript is a rambling, often incoherent, naively literal act of remembrance without anything of Warshow’s arc of tragedy: instead, it amounts to something like a lament. Valachi originally dictated a confessional, crime-by-crime, who-said-what-to-whom memoir, only rarely departing from mundane conversations about specific crimes to comment on their larger significance, and often more intent on justifying his own cooperation with law enforcement. In truth, editing this immense and often-incoherent manuscript must have been an imponderable task, even given Maas’s talents. However, Maas also reworked the context for Valachi’s “telling occasion,” in part by eliding the mobster’s charges against narcotics agents, or what he called “frame artists” (616). In order to have the Valachi Papers published at all, that is, Maas had agreed to leave out Valachi’s charges of double-dealing by the federal government itself, much to Valachi’s own dismay.

From the start, therefore, a pivotal motivation for Valachi’s narrative, one which reflected on his role as informant, dropped out of view. Meanwhile, there were also some subtle rhetorical effects in the original manuscript that suggest how this mobster, sometimes calling himself “Joe Cago,” saw himself. Valachi, for instance, had himself used a war conceit to describe his experience inside the mob (117, 333c), and did draw distinctions between “greasers” (Sicilians) and the “Americanized” gangsters like himself (61, 250–51, 315). But unlike the speaker we would see later in Maas’s narrative, Valachi also imagines multiple readers for his own manuscript: certainly the general public but also his government handlers, interested politicians, and importantly his comrades inside the Cosa Nostra. As he informs on his mob, he often rationalizes having done so, often in the same sentence. The ideas simply run into each other, breathlessly:

. . . let me explain to the reader what I mean by a tough guy, a man that joins the Cosa Nostra and after he joins he is supposed to be a man not a lob for you Vito and company where were you when we fought Joe the Boss and his mob. I know where you were, sitting back and see who will come out on top. You don’t mind if I tell the reader the truth do you because they think that you earned your power. . . . (477)
I want the soldiers to read what I am writing because . . . they don’t know what this life really is . . . the Bosses like Vito Genovese work differently today. . . . Life got to be so sweet for the bosses and there is so much money involved today they don’t even want to retire. . . . (333f)

Don’t get mad at me Vito when you read this it is all your fault. I’m sure you’re going to read it Vito and you never guessed that I knew. You are no good Vito, you are no good you belong with the guy on Pelham Parkway, the old Mustard Gang. (418)

Just as intriguingly, Valachi himself refers not to broken “contracts” in the business sense so much as losing friendships with other men. “I rather have one friend that is half sincere,” he writes, “than to have a hundred guys that are looking to go a step forward on your expense” (162). This personalizing lament, in turn, seems loosely connected to the reason Valachi accentuates his early poverty more forcefully than Maas eventually would: “I stole because I was hungry,” he says (24), and because he was often on his own. This reference to his own lowly status, in turn, connected to the idea that he had been merely a common foot soldier who eventually became cannon fodder for bosses like Genovese, often with little actual knowledge of the ends of his assignments—again, a limit his handlers preferred not to reveal. But this was precisely why Mafia leader Joseph Bonnano would later complain about Valachi’s testimony. In Bonnano’s view, Valachi had never risen very high in the ranks and knew little of the Italian traditions he had betrayed.51

The remarkable thing here is that Valachi offers essentially a class-based reading of his Cosa Nostra membership. He speaks of his relationship to the mob, or his work in it, not at all as a corporate contract among equals but as being enlisted or drafted or employed, sometimes even against his full knowledge. When he calls himself a soldier, it designates his class status and lowly “rank.” In retrospect, it would seem that Valachi’s already-conspiratorial mind was made even more so by the fears provoked by his own informing. In addition, his colloquial use of the language of murder “contracts” for his “bosses” may have allowed others to exaggerate the formal, integrated, and corporate character to his outfit, playing directly into Kennedy’s hands. Perhaps even more fundamentally, Valachi’s manuscript reminds us that informants, usually less literate than they seem in popular transcription, can feel compelled to rationalize their movement out of the criminal association about which they have been asked to testify. And they can still have lingering grudges, debts, insults, or backward
glances. Called upon to give a comprehensive and coherent inside view of their gang’s culture, however, they can easily find these ambivalences marshaled into a tale of that culture’s disintegration. In Valachi’s original view, nevertheless, violent Mafia infighting had hardly been a simple byproduct of what Maas would cast as a corporate organization’s inevitable decay. Rather, that violence was part of his upbringing, the war he was always in. Valachi tells us, for example, that he had come of age in an infamous “murder stable” (16) of 116th Street in New York, and that was where he learned the art of war. His antipathy to native Italians stems not only from his class and generational perspective, but (he tells us) from humiliations forced upon his own neighborhood by the Sicilian bosses of his youth.

In the end, however, many of these themes were subordinated when Valachi appeared in Maas’s rendering. Instead of relying only on his unlettered voice, The Valachi Papers took a documentary approach, directly quoting the gangster’s first-person memories (clearly cleaned up, grammatically), framed by Maas himself, whose narrative overvoice—in a device, like Maas’s subsequent Serpico (1972), perhaps looking forward to movie adaptation—provided historical background on the mob. And in the main, The Valachi Papers used the sensational Fordist comparisons between the underworld and business organization that had been used by Feder and Turkus, and Walter Lippmann before them, and Lincoln Steffens before Lippmann. As I have said, Maas’s conscious aim was to debunk the idea that the Mafia’s “feudal” inheritances (64) from Italy dominated its current American form:

There has been a great deal of speculative nonsense written about the “ritualistic” aspects of a Cosa Nostra execution of one of its members: that no matter what the offense is, the victim must be killed suddenly and unexpectedly; that he must be wined and dined lavishly before he is disposed of; and that, adhering to an old Sicilian tradition, a shotgun must be used whenever possible. “Naturally,” Valachi told me, “you don’t want to let the guys know that he’s going to be hit, or he might hit you. I never heard of them other things. You just try to be careful and do the best you can.” (226)

Throughout, The Valachi Papers used this workaday voice to deflate the popular images of Mafia rituals. The code of silence or omerta, the mob’s elaborate initiation ceremonies, its secret council meetings supposedly all had little lasting effect. In particular, any notion of ritual or honor had
failed to forestall internecine war and, ultimately in Valachi’s case, personal betrayal.

To make that case, however, Maas also found himself relying heavily on the form Warshow had described: set back upon trying to show the banality and greed behind everyday violence, Maas reproduced, essentially, a gangland narrative. Throughout, Maas punctuated Valachi’s casual memories of murder with rapid-fire police reports of each falling body, the in-the-trenches journalist confirming Valachi’s claims:

When a soldier is given a contract, he is responsible for its success. He can, however, pick other members to help him carry it out. . . .

On the night of [one] hit, Valachi had arranged to meet [a mobster named] Little Apples in the coffee shop. “Hey,” he said, “let’s take a walk. I hear there’s a big game going on up the street.”

“Great! I got nothing to do.” [Little Apples said.]

According to Valachi, he positioned himself behind Little Apples as they were entering the tenement and suddenly wheeled away. “I heard the shots,” he says, “and naturally kept walking down the street.”

(New York police records reveal that at about 9:20 PM on November 25, 1932, a male, white, identified as one Michael Reggione, alias Little Apples, was found in the hallway of the 340 East 110th Street. Cause of death: three gunshot wounds in the head.)

Valachi went straight home. “After all,” he recalls, “I was just married a couple of months, and I didn’t want [my new wife] Mildred to think I was already starting to fool around.” (107)

The end result, it seems, was that Maas ended up struggling to superimpose Warshow’s arc of apprenticeship, recruitment, violent betrayal, and tragic abandonment over Valachi’s blasé renderings, and the mobster’s repeated need to justify his own informing, and the mobster’s repeated need to justify his own informing. A counterpoint thus emerges wherein Valachi verifies mob rules that, in fact, he then tells us he ended up breaking (181, 184). On the whole, Maas argued that the Mafia was dominated by “savagery, avarice, and torturous double-dealing” that belied its “increasingly sophisticated and vaunted togetherness” (63). Yet Valachi himself, as a consequence of this counterpoint, comes off as very much the battle-fatigued Cosa Nostra soldier, weary of this infighting, repeatedly complaining about being caught in the “middle” (208, 251) between warring camps. In the end, Valachi seems a vulnerable and abandoned man—as if, despite his own manuscript attempt, he is a man without papers.
He comes across, as well, as caught between the poles of Kennedy’s own interpretation.

In the end, even as Maas fought Kennedy’s control in court, the informant occasion had clearly suffused the writer’s treatment of Valachi. Along with the obvious endurance of the template Warshow had described, the prevailing (and contradictory) view of an “un-American” yet corporate enterprise clearly overrode Valachi’s class-based reading of his Mafia years. It was a trumping that Kennedy’s Department of Justice had put in motion and Maas’s text simply followed through on. Meanwhile, the condition of informing narrowed the target audience to political ends. As I have said, unlike Valachi’s manuscript, but following the traditional style of liberal exposé, The Valachi Papers speak to a unified, singular public both addressed by the journalist-transcriber and implicitly embodied in his voice. As obvious as this element may seem, it has significant consequences for how organized crime narratives often discount or stigmatize neighborhood or local attachments in the name of a disinterested public sphere. In an enduring contradiction, organized crime continues to look “too ethnic” and also “so American.”

Again, the telling occasion of informing seemed only to complement this dominant counterpoint. Valachi shows us how the informant must represent the culture of the very organization he is betraying; speak for bosses when he is but a soldier, with full access to their plans; advert to codes of ethnic loyalty even when he has abandoned them (or they him). This is why so many organized crime narratives do not subordinate ethnic melodrama, though they almost always claim to have done so. The finale of The Valachi Papers is a case in point. Despite his own claims to debunk the Mafia’s feudal image, Maas ends his book with a dire warning that despite its “businesslike” orientation (again the echo of RFK), the mob might well “revert to type” (259). And despite earlier dismissals of such ethnic “nonsense,” he shows Valachi being given the kiss of death by Vito Genovese before being threatened during a game of bocce in the federal prison courtyard.53

III.

The gangster narrative with the most intriguing relationship to witness protection is Nicholas Pileggi’s Wiseguy, the exposé capitalizing on the memories of gangster Henry Hill. Like The Valachi Papers, Wiseguy was clearly intended to deflate popular images of the Mafia, a task made all
the more urgent, now, by the publication of *The Godfather*. Pileggi’s book would delve into some of the most sensational crimes of the 1960s: the multimillion-dollar Lufthansa heist at Kennedy Airport, the scandalous point-shaving case involving the bribing of Boston College basketball players, at the top of the list. Meanwhile, the author said repeatedly that he wanted to present organized crime from the bottom up and to approach Hill much as if he were an anthropological informant (the approach, in turn, which attracted Martin Scorsese). To accomplish that task, Pileggi would turn back to elements of films like *Little Caesar* and *Public Enemy* to which even Warshow had not been sufficiently attentive. Meanwhile, *Wiseguy*, more than perhaps any other gangster narrative, shows us the enduring consequence of seeing its source, its informant, through the smaller scale of micropolitical tactics. Henry Hill is at once a boy-gangster and petty entrepreneur, one who is able to work a con, I think, even upon prosecutors and Pileggi himself.

The genesis of Hill’s relationship with Pileggi was quite complex. Perhaps because of his earlier work, mostly as a writer for *New York* magazine, Pileggi had been approached by Hill’s defense team right as the gangster had been placed in the Witness Protection Program (3). Pileggi admittedly had never even heard of Hill, despite years of writing on organized crime (3). But he was attracted precisely because Hill seemed to counter the glamour developing around the Mafia. Commenting on the cultural coinages generated by Mario Puzo’s popularity, Pileggi writes he already “had gotten bored with egomaniacal ravings of illiterate hoods masquerading as benevolent Godfathers” (3). Nevertheless, this mixed position—hired by Hill’s defense team, and yet clearly not intending to defend him—created unusual working conditions. On the one hand, advance funding from Simon & Schuster made it possible for Pileggi to fly around the country to interview Hill in undisclosed locations. On the other, Pileggi hoped to write a prosecutorial book. His dependence on Hill thus reflected the tactical ambiguity set in motion by the strategy of WITSEC itself. In a format similar to that of *The Valachi Papers*, *Wiseguy* directly quotes Hill, giving voice to its informant in seemingly unmediated ways. Yet the book keeps reminding us that its sympathies are not with its subject, but with the work of Edward McDonald, the head of the Brooklyn Organized Crime Task Force whom Pileggi had already favorably profiled two years earlier. (As we’ll see, McDonald also proves to be a pivotal character in the book.)

The direct transcriptions made possible by informing play a key role in this narrative. As admirers of the voiceover in *GoodFellas* also remember,
Pileggi’s account makes startling, even comic, use of Hill’s violently impulsive vernacular. In Hill’s voice, we hear a volatile mixture of arrogance and self-deluding energy. And as prosecutor McDonald himself had observed, Hill often expressed “casual” nonchalance about his ability to corrupt so many different layers of society. Corruption was so “everyday” that normalcy seemed the exception:57

Guys like Morton were front men for the wiseguys, who couldn’t have their names on the liquor licenses. Front men sometimes had some of their own money in these joints and essentially had wiseguys for silent partners. . . . But he also had to pay back a certain amount every week to his partners, and they didn’t care whether business was good or bad. That’s the way it is with a wiseguy partner. He gets his money, no matter what. You got no business? Fuck you, pay me. You had a fire? Fuck you, pay me. The place got hit by lightning and World War Three started in the lounge? Fuck you, pay me. (48–49)

Everybody reaches the jury. It’s business and it’s easy. During the jury selection, for instance, your lawyer can find out anything he wants to know about a juror—where he works, lives, family status. That sort of personal stuff. The “where he works” is what interested me mostly. Where a guy works means his job, and that always means the unions, and that’s the easiest place to make the reach. (106)

We used to get fake IDs from “Tony the Baker” in Ozone Park. He was a real baker. He had a bakery that made bread. (51)

However, as in Maas’s rendering of Valachi, Hill’s voice itself really only fronts for the argument Pileggi himself makes. Wiseguy thus mixes Hill’s first-person testimony with other techniques: occasionally framing and bracketing Hill’s voice with his own historical interpretation; including testimony from Hill’s wife and mistress, often in dialogue with Henry; and throughout, including his own ironic deadpanning of mob rationalizations, often through parenthetical asides. When one of Hill’s bosses claims he always “abhorred unnecessary violence,” for example, Pileggi inserts the parenthetical “(the kind he hadn’t ordered)” (9). Or, when Henry complains about being arrested, Pileggi writes: “It always struck Henry as grossly unfair” that Hill would serve his longest sentence for a “barroom brawl with a man whose sister was a typist for the FBI. It was as if he had suddenly hit the perfecta of bad luck. . . . [T]hey had literally made
a federal case out of it” (155). By countermanding Hill’s wisdom with his own mixture of irony, familiarity, and distancing formality, Pileggi hopes to make sure that we are, in other words, always making that federal case as we read.

Pileggi also wanted to deflate expectations of the Godfather template, specifically to undermine Mafia claims to mutual honor and patrician-like benevolence over their local neighborhoods. To execute his plan, Pileggi’s bottom-up approach used Hill’s personality and voice to create not the lament of a lost soldier but a frenetic, erratic, and even satirical portrait of what, in one interview, the writer called a “grubbier” Mafia existence. In some ways, this meant contrasting the Vario family with the man (Hill) they hired. Pileggi uses the Varios’s ethnicity, much as Maas does with Valachi’s bosses, to reflect an older world actually being displaced by the Americanizing trends in mob organization. Wiseguy presents the Vario world as that of transhistorical, eighteenth-century Sicilian thievery (26), a casting that allowed Henry himself to mock the idea that they constitute a syndicate of any kind. They are antimodern in the extreme: never using a telephone, never writing anything down, avoiding the credit economy that would involve registering their identities in the contemporary world. As in some of Pileggi’s other exposés, the Vario family is portrayed very much in the older vein of the mob’s incubation phase: a gang tied into a machine that corrupts urban wards through local attachments and bribery. But when it comes to Hill himself, the anti-modern strain could be reversed.

To effect that turnabout, Wiseguy turns back into conventions of juvenile narrative, specifically to the “street sparrow” orphan romances made famous in the nineteenth century, in books like Horatio Alger’s Ragged Dick; or, Street Life in New York (1867). Wiseguy thus actually turns to a tradition underwriting Warshow’s genre category, stories of the street urchins who apprentice to crime in their urban wards. In Pileggi’s opening chapters depicting Henry’s initiation into the corner cab-stand world of mobster Paul (or Paulie) Vario, young Henry is seen running errands in the time-honored way, sitting on a telephone book while parking cars (14), waiting for the chance to be adopted by a patron who will take him away from his own working-class parents. Hill becomes like an apprentice to a religious order, a “cardboard wiseguy” (17) who—in a touch right out of Alger—acquires a flashy suit before it really fits him. Young Henry Hill, whose last name unwittingly invokes the railroad magnate who enraptured Scott Fitzgerald’s Irish boy, James Gatz, is a mobile, independent, street-savvy kid, learning all the transactions of crime and capital at much too young an age. And thus, again, we remember Alger’s attempt to describe
why the boys many called “Street Arabs” were so resistant to the reform nostrums of rural farm retreats created by their middle-class betters. A street boy, Alger had written,

. . . gets so attached to his precarious but independent mode of life, that he feels discontented in any other. He is accustomed to the noise and bustle and ever-varied life of the streets, and in the quiet scenes of the country misses the excitement in the midst of which he has always dwelt. (10)

There is always such a throng of omnibuses, drays, carriages, and vehicles of all kinds in the neighborhood . . . that the crossing is formidable to one who is not used to it. Dick made nothing of it, dodging in and out among the horses and wagons with perfect self-possession.61 (20)

Of course, Henry is far too frantic to be this paragon of self-possession, and his patrons are probably closer to The Great Gatsby’s Meyer Wolfsheim than to Ragged Dick’s typically Anglo benefactors. But Pileggi pushes the middle-class parallel to extremes by giving Henry’s rise all sorts of comic markers: rejoicing over his first kickback at age thirteen; having a party thrown for him when he is first put in jail; or, perhaps best of all, first learning how to read—in prison (170).

In an era thriving on more prosecutorial exposés, this would seem a risky narrative strategy; inadvertently, Wiseguy could endear this boy to middle-class tastes, much as comic moments in The Sopranos or Analyze This could. But by returning to Hill’s boyhood, we also feel one residual effect of the micropolitical tactic of voicing the Mafia from the point of view of a single, lower-level worker in the ranks. Henry Hill allows Pileggi to shrink Mafia grandiosity down to size. Hill even called him a “miniature” mobster at one point (17), in order to get us to examine more closely the labor he does. Again signaling Pileggi’s own narrative departure from the Godfather ethos, Henry’s youthful savvy and mobility stem from the fact that he is actually an outsider to the strict bloodlines represented by Paul Vario’s family. (Hill is half-Irish and the son of a construction company electrician and union man. The family of his Italian mother was from Vario’s home region.) Henry’s skills, in other words, allow him to both escape the fate of his class and recover it, by asserting his status as an indispensable operative within the mob itself. It is no coincidence that the first regular guy Henry’s patrons must con is his own father, as they kidnap a postman and persuade him not to deliver truancy notices from school (25). In turn, Henry’s rise is marked by events that his own relatives would
have seen as signs of success (like getting a union card, this time through mob connections). Pileggi creates, in other words, a certain element of carnival and fantasy in this upending: “kids from the neighborhood who were always in trouble” (35) turn out not to have to unlearn those skills at all. And their parents are none the warier for it.

Despite Pileggi’s subtitle of *Life Inside a Mafia Family*, however, one family does not really replace another. Hill becomes simply useful to the mob rather than a “made” man in the Mafia sense; never a “soldier,” he is also not really inside. In turn, the gangster narrative is itself scaled down, made more labor-centered. (In one interview, Pileggi compared Hill to a “worker bee” who lets you see the whole hive.62) Or, to stress the Alger parallel again, Henry seems to stay self-made, albeit someone who (like any laborer) can be disposed of. Thus, just as his wife Karen is there to tell us that she doesn’t feel like she is married to the mob (80), Hill, when put on trial, scoffs at being called a member of a “syndicate” (158) or, by implication, a surrogate family.

In a style crucial for so many portraits to follow, Pileggi thus produces, in Hill, something like a temporary worker: a picture of a low-rent, impulse-driven operative, a man who keeps open duffle bags of clothes on the floor of his bedroom, who never wakes up in his pajamas (56), and whose domestic melodramas with wife and mistress and kids are explicitly compared to “comic soap opera” (272). Pileggi’s choice to include Hill’s wife in his story likewise generates a seriocomic downscaling, a domestication of the genre. She comically reports her parents’ anxiety over Henry not being Jewish, the lack of money she has for her kids (183), and of course complaints about Henry’s mistresses. The closure produced by Witness Protection itself also contributes to this effect. Instead of going out in “fiery blasts of Cagney gangster glory” (289)—here Pileggi refers explicitly to the arc Warshow delineated—Hill is described, at the book’s close, happily ensconced in a two-story neocolonial, his kids in private schools, in a vaguely homogeneous American town where his biggest complaint is that he can’t get a decent Italian meal. He now has a Keogh plan (289). In many respects, it is the telling situation itself that allowed Henry Hill to look so tame. Though WITSEC is actually the tactical grounding of Pileggi’s own exposé, the program now can be complained about as producing suburban banality. Hill is ultimately a premature retiree, or even a mock snowbird.

With the rise of *The Sopranos*, this suburbanization effect has dominated much recent discussion of the gangster narrative. But the more fundamental transformation Pileggi documents, I think, has happened in
Henry Hill’s workplace as much as in his home life. In keeping with the displacement put in motion by Robert Kennedy, we do not see mob initiations or codes any more than we do in *The Valachi Papers*. Instead, Henry turns his Vario apprenticeship into the role of a fixer or, to use the term from Alger’s day, a “mechanic”: he makes things work, often babysitting Vario’s own son, who is usually not up to the task at hand. And rather than expressing, as Valachi had, soldier-like discipline or ward-based antipathy to greedy bosses, Hill mainly runs afoul of his mob fathers because of this freelancing. In a clear countermanding of Mario Puzo’s mythos, Hill describes the appeal of being a “wiseguy”—and here the vernacular means something like “smart mouth”—as being clever, or “getting over” on others (20, 191). Hill’s pleasure and power comes from duping the everyday stiff (like his own father). Seeing from the bottom-up and outside-in, in other words, allows Pileggi to redefine organized crime as a series of schemes run on a small-scale, entrepreneurial model: as Herbert Gutman famously told us about Hill’s nineteenth-century counterparts, Henry is essentially a laborer whose orientation is producerist, even middle-class in aspiration. But now he is a man who aspires to a mock ownership of front enterprises. In *Wiseguy*, in other words, the craft of organized crime is now a microenterprise, a one-man version of the hostile takeover: the bribe, the fix, the “busting out” (40) of legitimate businesses by loaning them money and then buying up or selling everything they own. And thus it is here that the influence of Robert Kennedy’s rethinking of organized crime really bears narrative fruit.

This transformation also is felt in how *Wiseguy* treats the traditional assimilationist thread of the gangster story. It might seem, at first, that Pileggi’s intentions are akin to epic, following an Americanization story in its grandest outlines. Hill follows his white-ethnic community from places like Mulberry Street (32) to suburban Long Island; not coincidentally, his biggest heist will take place at JFK Airport, which had been transformed from a Long Island golf course (91). However, *Wiseguy*’s smaller-scale canvas means that Hill sees his landscape in localist, and again microeconomic, terms. Pileggi prefers to attend to the byplay between local geography and an area’s vulnerability to crime: how tenement houses could shelter sweatshops; how immigrant arrivals in seaports made ripe territory for extortionists and kidnappers; how the adjacency to Long Island, during Prohibition, set the stage for overland bootlegging runs to barges and smugglers on the shoreline. On the one hand, JFK Airport is one sign of even globalizing times: some of the thefts are from servicemen’s luggage, perhaps a Vietnam hint that comically slips into this narrative. But
on the other, the airport itself is more characteristically seen in terms of its local vulnerabilities. To Hill’s avaricious eye, the new airport is much like that beehive, a clustering, once again, of small entrepreneurial transactions: ticket counters, baggage handlers, storage lockers, all prime for the picking. Ironically, the ability of the airport to stimulate local labor markets only extends the mob’s influence, again, into these interstitial transactions. The micropolitical tactic of individual informant testimony has, in other words, served to scale crime down to consumer- or employer-contact points.

Thus, in what is perhaps the clearest example of a witness protection narrative we have, crime goes forth, as Robert Kennedy had described it, as something that feeds off the mainstream economy and its affluence by a reordering of these micro transfer points. In a telling cycle of mutual back-scratching, the larger economy is actually what makes organized crime possible. On one end, hijackers can steal goods that are made all the more saleable, at cut rates, because of monopolies that have overcharged in the mainstream economy; hijackers need not use guns because the drivers who are asked to step down from their trucks understand that they will not be fired (because of control over their union); the police need not be involved because insurance companies will pay for the loss and pass the cost back to the consumer again (98ff.). *Wiseguy* shows us an underground economy fully integrated into the aboveground one, in a synergistic relationship. That symbiotic tie explains why Henry Hill can look so entrepreneurial, so much the everyday schnook that witness protection, all too fittingly, makes him out to be (284). These small-scale contact points also provide places, as it were, to plant dynamite into the mob’s foundations. Like Valachi, Henry Hill has been called upon to testify both to the mob’s integration and, in the end, its inevitable disintegration. Hill shows us not only organized crime’s ingenuity but also the ways in which its internal betrayals catch up with it.

However, even beyond these scaling effects, or the portrait of synergy with the mainstream, Hill had some final cons to play. As it turns out, it may be that Hill was not entirely captured by the plan his federal handlers, and even Pileggi himself, had imposed upon him. For instance, it should surprise no one that Hill seems just as often to shade his testimony in order to direct attention away from himself. He uses the past tense, for example, to distance himself from crimes or schemes no longer undertaken, and the passive voice to describe killings ostensibly carried out by others. In certain moments—for example, when a federal prison is made to look like a Holiday Inn, for the mobsters it holds—Hill’s first-person testimony feels
mostly like bragging about something impossible to either verify or contradict. One can easily feel that Pileggi overextends the limits of his carnivalesque intention. Meanwhile, *Wiseguy* also inherits a certain pitfall characteristic of the “street sparrow” narrative tradition, where the street-savvy, yet golden-hearted, hero is always counterpointed to the really violent, more criminal counterpart in his milieu. In Henry Hill’s telling, it is his sidekick Jimmy Burke who is the genuinely pathological killer.

As with Valachi, these touches may only suggest how an informant tries to build a justification for his own informing, or a justification for his own abandonment of the mob. At times, *Wiseguy* often has the feel of a story told by an escapee, much like the famously mediated example of the slave narrative. Hill sets himself up as the brake on Jimmy Burke’s threatening violence, as if to make a case for his own unease with family rule and internecine warfare. (In effect, it is the Jimmys and the Paulies who become Warshow’s heroes of sadistic violence.) If the journalist wants to emphasize organized crime as an enterprise, the informant is only too willing to distance himself from anything too violent, as “bad for business,” as Hill frequently does. One revealing incident Hill recalls, for example, concerns a neighborhood outsider who is punished by local Mafia rule for snatching a purse, during the very time that the famous Apalachin Meeting had turned up the heat from the FBI. In the classic fable of neighborhood self-defense, this purse snatcher is thrown to his death from a rooftop. Hill recalls how he saw the guy hanging in the air, “flailing his arms like a broken helicopter, and then [coming] down hard and splattered all over the street” (40). Shortly after, however, young Henry decides to leave the Vario family by enlisting in the army: tellingly, he joins the paratroopers, a symbolic choice that suggests he is thinking ahead (and back) to his own golden parachute from Witness Protection.

Perhaps the most unsettling element in Hill’s testimony, however, may not have been in Pileggi’s control at all: the way that Hill speaks back against his own manipulation by McDonald’s task force. The riposte Hill constructs, perhaps even “getting over” on his task force handlers, seems quite personally targeted. We soon discover that one of the central crimes to which Hill confesses—bribing Boston College ballplayers—refers to the very college that was McDonald’s own alma mater, where he too played on the freshman basketball team. As if reprising Robert Kennedy’s reaction to Jimmy Hoffa, the prosecutor was so incensed by Hill’s confession of this particular crime that he nearly leapt across the interview table (285). But by so clearly targeting the investments of the prosecutor’s own identity, Hill may have only been initiating one of the classic gambits
of the confidence game, turning a handler’s pride to the con man’s own advantage. McDonald’s own reflection certainly suggests that he took the matter quite personally: “I came to realize Henry didn’t have too much school spirit. He never rooted for anything outside of a point spread in his life” (285–86).

Now, we can never really know if Hill was setting McDonald up. It is certainly intriguing that Hill gives him a crime—gambling—that was so high on Robert Kennedy’s list of priorities. It was also a crime that drew attention to the basketball players as much as it did to Hill himself. As a result, one feels that what Whitey Bulger would raise to an art form, Henry Hill was adept at improvising. There are two additional, albeit circumstantial, elements that certainly point to such a possibility. First, it is clear that throughout his negotiation with McDonald, Hill sees the entire process as one in which the state has simply decided to play by his rules. As if delivering the informant’s revenge upon his own incorporation, he casts McDonald simply as the mirror image of his own criminality: as extorting cooperation from him by hinting that Burke and others will kill him; by “blackmailing” him by threatening to prosecute Karen, and thereby leave their children unprotected (277). In the end, Hill actually says that cooperating with the feds was simply working another con (268). In this respect, it is certainly intriguing that, in the second place, Hill largely undersells the effects of his point-shaving bribery, clearly playing down a crime one would think he would have played up. In the end, he tells us that, following a blown effort to fix the Holy Cross game, the BC players actually left him high and dry, and he simply walked away, content to take his losses (200–201). In a sop perhaps intended to reassure McDonald and his alma mater, Hill says that the BC players were just too noble to make the scheme work profitably (200). But in the Sports Illustrated article in which he recounted the same scheme, Hill confesses—contrary to what he says in Wise guy—that there was actually one more playoff game after Holy Cross. Apparently, Henry and his friends made back lots of money they had lost, and left, as he tells it to SI, “wearing happy faces.”

IV.

Given that Henry Hill would soon betray the trust his federal handlers put in him, and be expelled from Witness Protection itself, he exemplified some of the incomplete and contradictory outcomes of the war in which he played such a key part. Little wonder, for instance, that some citizens,
notably victims’ rights advocates, felt betrayed by the publisher advances and eventually profits channeled to him by his participation in *Wiseguy*. Under what became known as “Son of Sam” laws, Pileggi would be sued (and exonerated) in a case that went all the way to the Supreme Court.67 Amid the public furor, however, few seemed to notice that Hill’s celebrity status contradicted a war on crime that had often claimed zero tolerance for the smallest of criminal infractions, or which vaunted moral vigilance as the touchstone of community order. Indeed, according to the logic of the war on organized crime itself, royalties would seem quite rightly a fruit of Hill’s criminal labors for the state. What these moral complaints overlooked, in other words, was the more fundamental fact that criminals like Valachi and Hill (and eventually Whitey Bulger) had actually been incorporated into law enforcement operations and made a mechanism of the everyday administration of power. Instead, these contradictions of the neo-conservative turn would typically be papered over by ever-renewed calls to straight shooting and moral vigilance—calls sometimes reinforced, albeit unwittingly, even by the war’s detractors.

Efforts at the reform of informing currently seem just as liable to fall short. The 2001 Justice Department Guidelines, for example, do set up regulations for formal registration, internal review, and interagency cooperation. Yet there remain serious questions about whether any such guidelines could overcome the structural ambiguities inherent in the informant relationship. Even if we accept the odd semantics of the oxymoron “tough guidelines,” such mandates often have the feeling of bureaucratic rules with all sorts of trap doors, internal winks, and less-than-candid breast-beating. From stories like Valachi’s and Hill’s, we acquire a glimpse of the nuances of a relationship that is, by its very nature, one of ingratiating, luring, and the subtle offering of implied incentives that are often promised but not delivered, said but not recorded.68 Even comparatively straightforward measures like bribery or anti-fraternization guidelines therefore seem almost comically inapt to the practices they mean to regulate.69 Try as one might, the tough love of straight dealing falls victim to processes of mutual manipulation, ingratiating, and even occasional intimidation that are intrinsic to the informant strategy, and that the recent turn has made ever-more common practice.70

For cultural texts about organized crime, meanwhile, the enduring issues may be as much interpretive are they are ethical. The revisions that both Maas and Pileggi tried to impose upon the gangster narrative tradition reflect back the institutional strategy that gave them birth. The tradition of describing an Americanizing arc was now given operational value,
while what had long been emphasized as corporate or syndicated activity was made, especially with Henry Hill, a matter of microeconomic invasion, a parasitism of the everyday. In retrospect, the portrait of organized crime in a figure like Henry Hill would actually look situational or instrumental rather than corporate in the organizational sense; it was even cross-ethnic in some of its primary worker and client networks, an element that looks forward to the more recent attempts to move beyond the corporate paradigm Kennedy and others used. By the first decade of the next century, criminologists and police would be using not billy clubs to combat street gangs but social-networking software.71 As a result of portraits such as Wise guy, even the most mundane of gangster portraits often bring with them an implicit call for vigilance in the public and private spheres. If a mobster was, as in the mid-century formulation, an enemy within, he was now within everyday transactions, not simply vice operations on the margin. Necessarily, his integration into mainstream economies was used to legitimate, in a telling feedback loop, the self-same pragmatic law enforcement tactic of informing itself.

Pileggi’s portrait of Hill, especially, is meant to show us the importance of closing the breaches in the everyday. Hill himself dutifully describes all the improvements that now make his past conning and “busting out” more difficult. In his depiction of the too-vulnerable past, Pileggi shows us that the crime of hijacking formerly had no clear delineation in the criminal code, just as he shows that judges had been too lenient, or that prisons had lacked the necessary discipline to prevent mobsters from racketeering behind bars. But mostly it is Hill himself who mentions, exhibiting a new wise knowledge—“wise” here acquiring its final meaning, that of being tipped off or made aware—that computer traps have now been put in place, that credit card limits now generate consumer notification, and so on (51, 63). In other words, defeating organized crime implicitly required not just law enforcement vigilance, but citizens’ own alertness. This mixture of retrospection and updating serves to reassure the reader and reinforce Pileggi’s intention to undermine the notorious Public Enemy effect of glamorizing organized crime. Moreover, Pileggi’s historical narrative shows us how we have already been learning to live with crime.

That turnabout was central to the cultural work of these witness protection narratives. If we do remember that organized crime narratives may double as portraits of the state, then we also see the world that RICO and the Witness Protection Program ultimately helped to fashion around mobsters like Henry Hill. What is often dismissed as the inevitable disintegration of mob organizations—or worse yet, intra-ethnic squabbling—may
actually point to the state’s own refashioned strategy. At the end of Wise-guy, we can focus on Henry Hill’s growing paranoia, but only if we ignore how infiltrated his world (and ours) actually was, in the end, by the very practices he helped to put into place. Ultimately, what is most ironic about the arrest of Henry Hill is not only that he is doggedly tracked down by the warriors on crime, with their phone taps and even helicopters hovering over his house—perhaps the typical ways in which we visualize this “war” (225). Instead, we should see that he is brought down, even surrounded on his final day, by a beehive of other informants (224, 247, 249, 265). By speaking to a journalist who addresses a unified public sphere, the erratic and violent informant can thus serve to galvanize his audience into action and show us some of its ill effects. Perhaps most fundamentally, a figure like Henry Hill called both state and citizens to a greater level of vigilance: he entered into the interstices of the everyday, making crime itself seem unavoidable unless met by an understanding of the skills he tutors. In the end, the informant’s very existence seemed to call upon all of us: to get with the Program, to get wise.