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'EXPLORING THE PRACTICE OF PROCESS'

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SUMMARY

With respect to the currently popular 'process perspective' in organisation studies, this paper responds to claims that after a lengthy gestation period during which great attention has been directed at mapping out its philosophical, theoretical and methodological terrain, the focus now needs to look more systematically at what putting this way of thinking about organisations and their management might mean in practice. In order to illustrate what the '*practice of process*' might involve in a complex setting, this paper looks at the problem of organised crime and the law enforcement response to it. The paper argues that while there may be a degree of philosophical incommensurability between the relatively static 'object'-based, and the more dynamic process thinking, in practice they almost always co-exist and it is very much a matter of where the balance lies between the two. With this balance in mind, the paper argues that global trends in organised criminality strongly suggest that a law enforcement strategy tilted in favour of process thinking is potentially much more effective than an object-based approach. However it is also significantly more challenging. In illustrating how all of this plays out organisationally the paper draws upon general trends in law enforcement as well as the experience of the UK's Serious Organised Crime Agency between 2006-2014.

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EXPLORING THE PRACTICE OF PROCESS

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the recurring pleas in organization studies over the last few decades has been for more process-informed research. The response, promulgated through dedicated monograph series, key journals, special issues, symposia, and on-line communities, has been impressive. As a result, there is now a substantial literature that traverses the philosophical, theoretical, and methodological aspects of process research (see, for example: Weick, 1979, 1995; Pettigrew, 1990; Langley, 2007; Hernes, 2008; Shotter, 2010; Langley and Tsoukas, 2017). These intellectual contributions have been augmented by various process thinking perspectives on key topics such as strategy, entrepreneurship, organisational design, organizational change, innovation, knowledge transfer, to name but a few (see, for example: Eden, 1992; Barrett et.al. 1995; Barry and Elmes, 1997; Blackler et.al. 2000; Cunliffe, 2001; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Chia and Holt, 2006; Van de Ven, 2005; Garud et al, 2016; Pina e Cunha et.al, 2016; Hardy and Thomas, 2016).

Although it is entirely likely that some of these application focused contributions will be filtering through to relevant stakeholders in the world of practice, this is by no means certain, not least because the great majority appear in highly ranked academic outlets that have strict criteria for publication and where quality control is largely in the hands of those whose interests by and large tend to be somewhat more abstract than practical. With this in mind, long-time process scholar John Shotter (2010), made the point not so long ago that having mapped out the terrain intellectually emphasis now needed to shift towards looking more closely what is involved in adopting a process orientation, *in practice*. Naturally this involves thinking about the opportunities of such a shift as well as the difficulties that arise.

In supporting Shotter's call, I would further argue that adopting a process worldview in the world of practical affairs is at least as important as are the heavily intellectualised debates that have preceded it. How we human beings construe and think about any 'thing' impacts upon how we act in relation to whatever that 'thing' is. This makes the question addressed here particularly interesting because, in general, the power and influence wielded by publishing academics pales into insignificance when measured against that wielded by policy makers, those officials who interpret and implement policy, and other key stakeholders who routinely make important decisions that directly affect the lives of people. I am interested then in asking what adopting a broad process worldview might involve to actors such as these. In other words, if one were to take on board what contemporary process thinkers are saying, what would it mean to act in such awareness? How, compared to acting in a less

dynamic more object-oriented way, would things be done differently? What opportunities and challenges would it present?

In order to establish a firm basis for the argument the paper begins by making some rudimentary theoretical distinctions between what one might broadly characterize as '*object*' (or '*substance*') and '*process*' views of the world. Understanding why process thinking in the world of practice matters hinges upon an understanding of these differences and working through the ramifications of some important theoretical propositions. Perhaps the least contentious aspect of process thinking is the emphasis that it puts on the dynamics of social life. This lies at the very core of process thinking. Beyond that, a key theoretical distinction relates to how people go about distinguishing and '*bringing forth*' '*objects*', '*entities*', and the multitude of '*things*' that both constitute and populate our experienced worlds. Partly key to understanding why process-guided activity can be so important is tied up in how this '*objectification*' of the world occurs, what '*blindspots*' it creates and what intervention opportunities might be lost as a result. All of this will be explained in more detail later. This section also outlines the particular perspective on process thinking used in the discussion and how it is positioned relative to other process perspectives in the literature.

Following this theoretical discussion, and in order to illustrate the case, the paper examines a particular *thing* that is of great concern to society at large and, as a result, is attracting the attention of policy makers, government officials, and law enforcement agencies worldwide. Organised criminality includes activities such as arms trading, the manufacture, importation and sale of Class A drugs, people smuggling and trafficking, counterfeit goods trading, cyber-crime, and money laundering. Although, in 2019, some controls are gradually being introduced, the general trend over the last few decades has been to create conditions that are highly enabling of organised global criminal activity. Some of these are the result of globalisation forces such as quick, easy and relatively cheap international travel, and the relaxation of controls surrounding the movement of money, people, products and services from one country to another. Meanwhile relatively inaccessible regions of the internet have allowed criminal networks to coordinate their activities, to market and sell their illicit goods and services, and, through the use of crypto-currency, to conceal their financial transactions. Little wonder then that official data indicates the level of organised crime to be steadily increasing (see, for example Europol, 2018; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2017).

Using the lenses of both 'object' and 'process' thinking this section of the paper looks at how the law enforcement response to the trends outlined play out organisationally in general terms; i.e. through the policies and strategies of the various agencies involved. This is followed by taking a brief look at how it has played out more specifically through the experience of the UK's Serious Organised Crime Agency between 2006 and 2014.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Given the amount of attention that the process perspective has received over the last decade or so, it seems highly likely that to the extent that today's practitioners think about it at all, they do so somewhat differently to how their counterparts did say thirty of forty years ago. Back then, the idea of process was typically aligned with the so-called 'open' systems perspective; it was underpinned by a strong unitary conception of the firm, and the main message for practitioners was to work towards identifying and implementing the optimum set of mechanisms for transforming a range of financial, material, human, and informational

inputs into pre-determined outputs (Thompson, 1967; Katz and Kahn, 1978; Kast and Rosenzweig, 1973).

Although systemic thinking and the unitary perspective still carry weight, the greater volume of published work now appearing in the process arena is being produced by interpretive and more critically-inclined scholars. Although it covers a diverse territory a common theme of this literature seems to be the desire to better capture the '*actual goings on*' of organizational life than is possible through mechanistic and systemic studies, or through '*variance*' studies where aggregated data seeks to demonstrate show how supposedly pre-existing phenomena relate to one another. Process theorists claim that while such theorizing is undoubtedly useful to practitioners, they also need to know how phenomena and patterns come to be in the first place. Hence process researchers will often employ ethnographic studies of one kind or another to produce richer, less '*coarse-grained*' insights (Tsoukas 2005:344);

Seeking to get closer to the action of organizational life than is possible through mechanistic and/or variance-type research, brings with it an imperative to focus on the dynamic aspects of human life. Hence the process approach brings movement, activity, events, change and temporal evolution, to centre stage (Langley 2007). More generally, it asks us to imagine organisations as '*flux and transformation*' (Morgan, 1986), and, in research, to investigate phenomena over time (Pettigrew 1990, 1997; Van der Ven et.al. 2005),

Process thinking also asks that we think more critically about the context of action. As Pettigrew puts it:

"If the process is our stream of analysis, the terrain around the stream which shapes the flow of events and is in turn shaped by them is a necessary part of the process of investigation . . . (hence) the irreducible' purpose of processual analysis is to account for and explain the what, why and how of the links between context, process and outcome " (Pettigrew 1997:340).

Against this background, language, discourse and narratives, as well as the cultural and political structures that shape and, in turn, are shaped by these things, take on great importance. Thus, amongst other things, Langley (2007), urges process researchers to '*listen to language*', and to '*destabilize stability*' i.e. to consider how language and discourse as part of an ever changing '*organisational becoming*' (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), shapes and reshapes what otherwise might be perceived as relative stable components of our lived realities.

At this point, it is necessary to point out that the argument developed in this paper pertains to what is commonly referred to as the so-called '*strong*' variant of process research. (see, Hernes, 2008, 2014) for interesting discussions on this). The philosophical distinction between this and its '*weak*' counterpart is an important one. Whereas '*weak*' process thinking ultimately reduces change, transformation, flux etc. to the action of '*things*' which, ontologically, are viewed as primary, '*strong*' process thinking takes process to be primary. Fundamentally we are asked to think about the world *as* process.

Not all process researchers are comfortable with making this major ontological shift and, even for those who are, taking on board a process perspective need not involve the complete jettisoning of objects and/or substance. As others have pointed out, objectified abstractions are essential to help us navigate the world we inhabit (see, for example, Weick, 1995; Hernes,

2008). Hence stock-in-trade organizational phenomena such as ‘*the company*’, ‘*its environment*’, ‘*its strategy*’, ‘*its structure*’, ‘*its opportunities and threats*’, ‘*its leader*’, ‘*its culture*’, ‘*its brand*’ and so on, are very much part of our lived experiences and clearly exist if only in that sense. What we are being asked however, is to think of these more as an outcome of constantly negotiated and re-negotiated processes occurring in a social and political context, rather than as though they exist as independent entities-in-themselves.

Carrying out investigations according to these understandings reverses the sequence of conventional research. Much organizational research begins with some sort of proposition about the relationship between two or more pre-existing phenomena. These are then explored, with the relationships between them ‘*tested*’ empirically. In process thinking, instead of starting out with a view to observing or examining some pre-existing ‘*thing*’, more commonly the researcher will be interested in looking at how particular processes (cultural, political, symbolic) eventually turn into ‘*things*’ or events (see Chia, 1996; Carter, Clegg, Kornberger, 2008; Langley, 2007; Veyne, 1997). ‘*Objects*’ then become more of an end point for research than they are a starting point. As Hernes (2008:xii) puts it: “. . . *process thinking observes the journey between immaterial events and material entities*”.

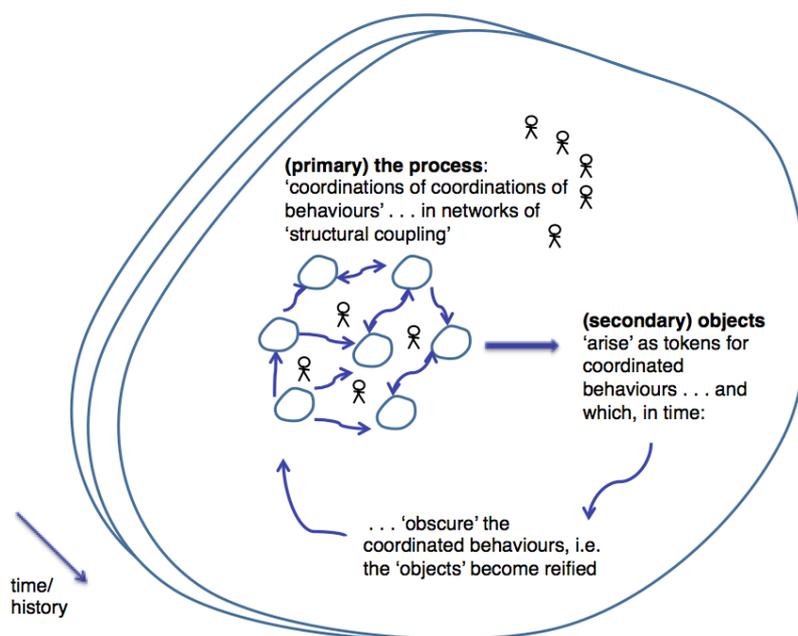
Although understanding the key philosophical and methodological distinctiveness of process thinking is important, it does not, in itself, answer the question as to what a process approach in practice might involve or why it might be so important. In order to open up theoretical space for this argument to be further developed it is necessary to say a bit more about the aforementioned ‘*journey*’ about which Hernes speaks.

One thing that (strong) process thinkers agree on is that language is critical in understanding the relationship between processes and object. Conventionally language tends to be thought of as something that we ‘*use*’ to name the various components of a pre-existing world. It is as if the world already exists and language is simply a mechanism for naming ‘*things*’ in it. For process thinkers, language is not an abstract system of communication about a pre-existing world; it is more about actions and doings and how, in dynamic social contexts, these translate into what subsequently are experienced as objects.

How this works can be explained in different ways. One description (see fig.1) involves first rendering down language, or more precisely ‘*language-ing*’ to its most basic or minimal expression (see, Maturana, 1988). For Maturana, this minimal operation involves one entity doing something on the consequences of an initial coordination of behaviour between it and another entity with which it is ‘*structurally coupled*’. Maturana refers to this as a ‘*coordination of a coordination of behaviour*’. Note however that in this context the term coordination simply refers to an interlinking of behaviours; it does imply that someone is in control of the process or directing it. From these basic behavioural coordinations, further (recursive) coordinations result in language becoming increasingly complex and sophisticated. Thus, in social contexts objects ‘*arise*’ as tokens for highly specific behavioural coordinations. To provide a very simple example: the designation ‘*taxi*’, connotes the sequenced linked actions that are involved in transporting someone from one place to another, in return for which, something is exchanged. This sequence of actions often begins with the hailing of the taxi on the street and it ends at the destination with the payment of money. These processes constitute ‘*taxi-ing*’, for which the object ‘*taxi*’ arises as a proxy. On this account a taxi is only a taxi in the *taxi-ing*. Similar coordinated processes underpin ostensibly simple designations such as ‘*desk*’, ‘*computer*’, as well as more complex ones such as ‘*the annual retreat*’, ‘*the board*’, ‘*the retirement function*’, ‘*the brand*’, ‘*the university*’,

'the family', etc. The same can be said of more abstract entities such as 'democracy', 'equity', 'integrity', 'criminality', 'ethicality' and so on. Across different social contexts these are all anchored in highly specific and recursively coordinated behaviours. As an aside, it is worth noting that the emergence of the object often occurs only after a significant time lag. For example, in the case discussed later, the various coordinated behaviours that in a particular context eventually come to know of as 'policing', occurred centuries before the introduction of the concept 'police'. Likewise administering 'justice' occurred before the introduction of judges and law courts, 'scholarship' occurred before universities, 'governing' occurred before governments, and so on.

Fig 1. A simple process theoretical framework based on Maturana's 'Theory of the Observer'



There are clear resonances between Maturana's perspective on process and that of other scholars. Weick's (1979) description of process thinking which invites us to turn "*nouns to verbs*", is written in a similar vein. His classic (1995) '*Sensemaking in Organizations*' also promulgates the idea that coordinated action is one of the key defining feature of social life (1995). Other process scholars have identified the activity/behavioural underpinnings of what come to known as objects. Veyne, for example, argues that "*an object is only the correlative of a practice*" (quoted in Carter et.al. 2008:92). And Chia (1996), claims that:

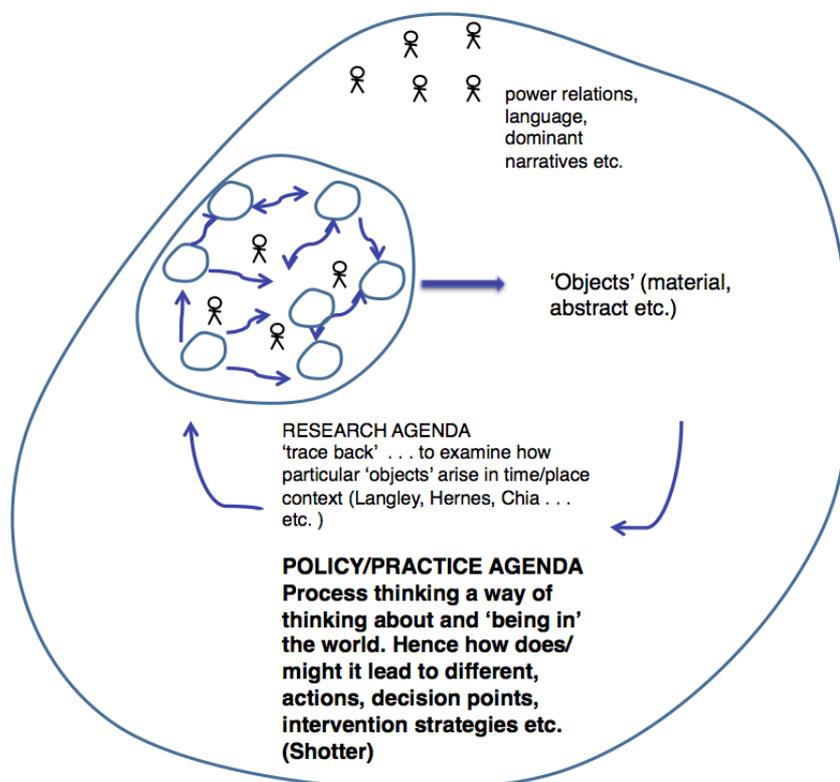
"the object we assume to observe is a reaction, a result of an assemblage of practices; only the process of objectifying and reifying these practices has led to what we think of as objects".

Maturana's view also resonates with Chia and Mackay's (2007) so-called '*post-processual*' approach that privileges '*trans-individual*' social practices as being ontologically prior to actors as the locus of analysis. On this account, even though these practices occur and are constantly transformed in social contexts, the locus of explanation is more on the behavioural coordinations, or what these authors refer to as the '*schemata of action*', than it is on the

intentions of individuals and organisations. This point, discussed later, is critically important in the crime-fighting context. It is not that agency, i.e. individuals and organisations are unimportant, because they clearly are. Rather it is that the main focus of attention is on the complex set of institutionalized practices that surround and sustain them. It is the *'trans-individual'* processes, activities and practices that are primary, not those *of* the key agents. Since a great many explanations of criminal behaviour can be traced back to conceptions of individual and social agency, and since much criminal justice and crime fighting policy is based on this conception, the point is particularly salient in the discussion pursued in the next section.

Although shifting attention away from objects, individuals and organisations and towards processes is relatively easy to talk about, it is much harder to do. Langley (2007), invites us to engage in a *'tracing back'* process, i.e. to look back to see how phenomena emerged processually. While this is what process researchers must do, this is more problematic in daily and professional life. As Maturana (1988:47 emphasis added) puts it: “. . . *objects take place as distinctions of distinctions that obscure the co-ordination of actions that these co-ordinate.*” In other words once *'objects'* arise as tokens for behavioural coordinations it is very easy to forget how they are anchored in practices. Once *something* becomes lived as an entity in-itself, reflecting on the underlying dynamics, i.e. for example on how it might have come to be through the operation of power relations and/or through some dominant narrative, can be very difficult if not entirely impossible.

Fig. 2 The 'strong' process research and policy/practice agendas



At the beginning of this section I argued that several decades ago the main message for practitioners taking on board a '*process worldview*' might simply have been to think carefully about the design of material, financial, human and informational flows within an organization with a view towards optimizing the attainment of pre-determined objectives. Today it involves operating according to a rather different and much more challenging agenda. Notwithstanding the variations and nuances, and for the sake of the argument that is being put here, first and foremost I am taking a process worldview to mandate that policy making, practical decision making and everyday managerial/professional activity is enacted with an understanding that organizational life, by definition, is always-already comprised of dynamic processes. Secondly that what arises as '*real*', '*true*', '*important*', as '*problematic*', or as '*in need of attention*' is determined as much by the social, historical and political context as it is by some situational logic. Relatedly, in framing and dealing with situations, a process worldview carries with it a need to delve beneath agency and the abstract objectifications that occupy such a central role in our experienced worlds, and instead consider the internalized social practices and the rich and complexly coordinated behaviours that underpin what we observe.

Having outlined the theoretical framework, this next section seeks to illustrate, initially in fairly general terms, the range of issues which the process perspective would have key policy makers and law enforcement agencies grapple with. Following that the discussion turns to how this was played out organisationally in practice.

3. GRAPPLING WITH PROCESS IN THE CONTEXT OF ORGANISED CRIMINALITY

the process perspective . . . is particularly salient today . . . given the increasingly complex, dispersed, dynamic, entangled, and mobile nature of current organizational phenomena. Such phenomena are not easily accounted for in traditional approaches that are premised on stability, separation, and substances"
(Orlikowski, 2010)

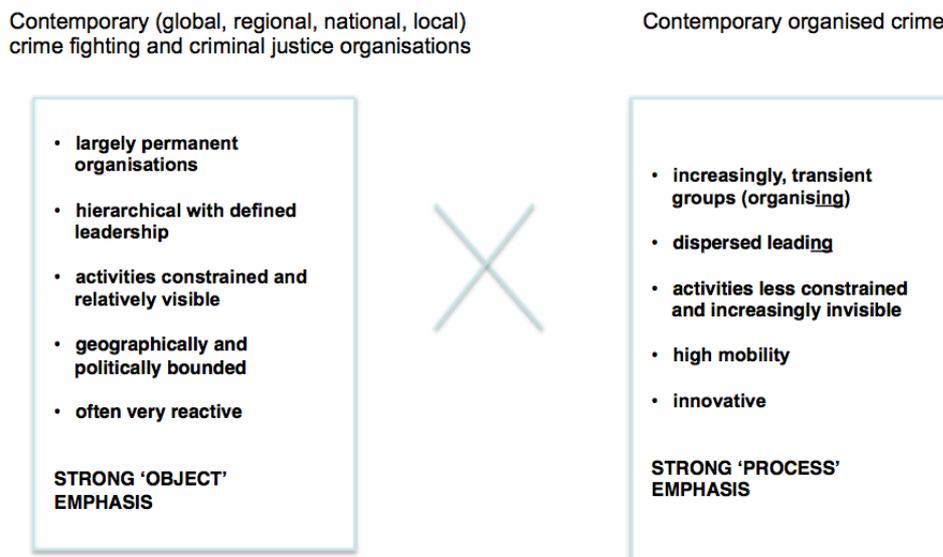
Thinking about the world somewhat more in terms of dynamic processes and somewhat less in terms of substance and agency seems to fit well with the observation that the fragmentation of hierarchically led criminal organisations and a shift towards more networked and transient arrangements has been underway for some time (see, for example King, 1991; Ruggiero and South 1995, 1997; Hobbs, 1995; Fijnaut et al, 1998; Galeotti, 2005; Klerks, 2003; Williams, 2006). It would be wrong to confuse the fragmentation of traditional social forms with their complete destruction. Historically criminal organisations were highly reliant upon the social, economic and cultural norms of working class neighbourhoods, so the erosion of these has undoubtedly presented serious challenges especially to the geographically contained and hierarchically organised '*family firm*'. Many such groups though have adapted; indeed de-industrialisation coupled with globalization and technological advances has opened up new opportunities for them (Galeotti, 2005).

Despite this, in a world where organised crime is increasingly committed by transient groups and where the identities of the key players are so diffused, traditional object-based terms such as '*firm*' and '*boss*' are much less analytically useful than they once were. Of course transient groups almost always require a degree of connectedness, organisation and leadership, but whether there is anything of substance beyond that which equates to an

organisation with an unambiguously defined leader is much less certain. Over time, following the logic outlined in the previous section, processes of criminal organising and leading can morph into something more tangible, but they do not have to. Even if they do, there is often a lengthy time-lag by which time the opportunity of dealing with the transgression will almost certainly have passed.

It seems reasonably clear that this de-organised, highly networked, mobile, and transient feature of global criminal activity poses major challenges to traditional methods of policing, as it also does to a law enforcement paradigm that in many countries continues to be based primarily on an hierarchically organised local area/regional/state command whose primary modus operandi, remains one of targeting known criminal groups, and their leadership in particular. When there is a shift to more transient organizational arrangements, when criminal leadership is dispersed or physically distant, when criminal connections and relationships are constantly been formed, disbanded and then reformed as new opportunities are presented, and when the proceeds of crime are *'spirited away'* either to distant countries or cleansed through money laundering schemes into and/or through legitimate businesses, the law enforcement task is made immeasurably more difficult. It surely reasonable to suggest that in general law enforcement agencies are very much on the back foot (see fig. 3, below)

Fig. 3 The 'capability gap' between law enforcement agencies and criminal organisations.



The ability of process thinking to draw attention to the more dynamic aspects of contemporary criminality is perhaps its most obvious contribution. We have seen however there is a more nuanced aspect that has at least as much, if not more, significance, especially to those who are involved in the development and management of crime policy, not also its grass-roots implementation. This arises out of the proposition that once objects take on reified lives of their own, they also become the building blocks through which we construct explanations of our experiences, and it these explanations that become the basis on which we decide, individually and collectively, what actions arise as legitimate and 'rational' under a particular set of circumstances. In the criminality context this translates into a crime fighting strategy that focuses primary attention on criminal agency. In contrast, if we *'trace back'*, or

'de-obscure the behavioural coordinations', as respectively Langley (2007) and Maturana (1988) speak, i.e. if we look beyond the rudimentary object-nouns descriptions and look more towards the process-verbs that underpin them, the pre-occupation with agency seems to be a dangerously one-sided approach. Certainly we need to look at who the key actors are, but we also need to look more carefully at what they do, how they do what they do it, what (knowledge, materials, relationships, technology) makes what they do possible, and what the consequences of their activities are.

Beyond this, Langley's (2007) *'listening to language'* asks that we de-naturalise the conversations, the narratives, or the *'performative language games'* (Carter et.al, 2008) that circumscribe how, in a particular context, criminality arises and how it is defined in a world of possibilities. This is important because on an object account of the world, the concept *'criminal'* is often taken to be a relatively unproblematic distinction. For crime fighting agencies such attenuation massively simplifies the whole process of crime fighting. *"show us who the criminals are"*, these agencies might reasonably claim, *" . . . and we will deal them"*. Yet it is no secret that the morals of one society and/or historical epoch do not always translate easily to another, so, at least to some extent, the concept criminality is always subject to interpretation. Witness, for example, current debates surrounding the legalization of marijuana. In some countries it is not illegal to buy and use the product; elsewhere it is strictly outlawed and can lead to a criminal conviction. The same can be said with regard to the legality of practices pertaining to alcohol use, as well as to the restrictions that are often imposed upon ethnic and sexual orientation minorities. Another case in point is the corruption and the bribery of officials to obtain business or curry political favour. In some parts of the world it is strictly outlawed, elsewhere it is little more than *'business as normal'*. As a British businessman operating in China puts it, *"nobody gets rich here by being one hundred per cent clean. If we did everything by the book, nothing would ever get done"* (quoted in Glenny: 2009:362).

Looking at the situation perhaps more from a pragmatic than moralistic view, it is also important to note that criminal groups have often been an important lubricant of economic activity and exchange within a particular locale. In some cases central to the economies and cultures of traditional working class communities, the activities of these groups were a crucial cultural prop, particularly in communities lacking the strict disciplines of industrial life (Hobbs, 2001; Winlow 1999; Samuel 1981). Even today, in many parts of the world protection, dispute resolution and insurance is to some extent a genuine commodity that small businesses willingly pay for. And while the use of organised criminals' services may be objectionable in principle, it needs to be remembered that in many cases its' purchase is not accompanied by coercion. Indeed far from being the *'innocent victims'*, the consumers of these services are often willing and grateful participants in this process and as such they do not always appreciate the intervention of law enforcement agencies who are seeking to capture and prosecute the providers. (see Gambetta, 1996; Glenny, 2009; Saviano, 2006).

Beyond engaging with the wider narratives that circumscribe definitions of criminality and which inevitably involve some of blurring of the boundaries between licit and illicit activity, thinking somewhat more process-verbs and somewhat less object-nouns creates a raft of new challenges. At the same time it generate more insight and open up alternative intervention possibilities.

On the law enforcement side, it is clear that *'policing'* never has been, and doubtless never will be, solely the prerogative of the police. Historically families and social groups have

always been involved in the '*behavioural coordinations*' that today constitute what we know of as *policing* and administering justice-*ing*. Most obviously this involves monitoring behaviour, surveillance, determining 'guilt', and historically and culturally appropriate forms of punishment. And today non-police actors are increasingly involved in the process. With, for example, '*criminal hotlines*', '*neighbourhood watches*', and the like, it has been shown that the general public can be involved to great effect (see, Laycock et.al, 1995; Yarwood and Edwards, 1995; Fleming, 2005). Likewise social media platforms provide a ready-made mechanism that allows virtually anyone to widely disseminate details of what they consider to be a criminal act within minutes of it taking place. The advantages of this are clear when a criminal offence has been committed and the offender correctly identified. The dangers, for example when a particular act is misinterpreted or when errors in identification motivate people to take the law into their own hands, circumvent due legal process, and mete out their own form of justice, are equally clear.

Beyond the general public, in many jurisdictions businesses and state agencies (eg law firms, banks, tax departments, real estate agencies, medical practices, schools) are variously required to compile '*suspicious activity reports*' to counter money laundering, to report on possible taxation fraud, physical abuse and neglect. When thought of in process terms all of these play important behavioural roles in policing.

Through acting as informants and/or through plea-bargaining, the same can be said about individual criminals. And when there is a vacuum in state provision in areas such as employment, health and housing such involvement can be highly institutionalised. Such was the case with the Russian Mafiya in the immediate post-Cold War Yeltsin era. In Japan, the Yakuza have always sought to plug gaps in social welfare and policing provision in urban neighbourhoods where it conducted much of its various businesses, as has the Camorra and Ndrangheta in the suburbs of Naples (Glenny, 2009, Saviano, 2006).

On the other side of the criminality/law enforcement ledger, the self-interested involvement of police and local and national politicians in otherwise illegal practices is widely known (see, for example Goldstein, 1975; Punch, 2000; Bowles and Garoupa, 1997; Rosoff et.al. 2002; Porter and Warrender, 2009). Beyond the pecuniary self-interest of the police and politicians, and particularly since Bittner's seminal 1967 "*Police on Skid Row*", numerous authors have demonstrated how public demand, especially in rural and traditional working class communities, has elevated the role of the police primarily to one of maintaining the peace, promoting relative harmony and fostering localized conceptions of '*justice*'. If turning a blind eye to the law becomes a pre-requisite to this then it often arises as secondary condition, if indeed it arises at all (see, for example Cain, 1973; Richardson, 1974; Stoddart, 1968). As in the case of many political crises and political coups illicit police and military activity is judged be a necessary means of maintaining order and avoiding social unrest (see, for example, Kwong, 1997; Sun, 2004). In China for example, impoverished rural workers disillusioned by staggering gaps in wealth between the major cities and country have shown that they are perfectly capable of seriously undermining regional party power. Under these circumstances the ability of regional governments and the police to prevent major social unrest at least partly hinges upon their ability to generate and maintain economic activity sometimes at any cost (Glenny, 2009; Lum, 2006; O'Brien, 2009).

Delving deeper into the institutionalized and ad hoc practices that constitute and underpin criminality it is hard to avoid drawing the conclusion that the general public is heavily implicated in all of this. Although it may not bear comparison with the work of organised and

often violent criminal groups, or with the corrupt activities of police and politicians, one cannot entirely overlook the demand-side culpability of people to support illegal industries. For example were it not for the increasingly popular 'sex tourism' activities of otherwise law abiding citizens, thousands of women, men and children would not be illegally trafficked from third world countries and coerced into working in the sex industry in virtually every city in the western world (see, for example, Anders et.al,1999; Hall et.al., 1992; Leheny, 1995). Likewise, almost as a matter of routine, today's price-conscious consumers will buy counterfeit goods through the internet and/or during overseas vacations (Eisend, and Schuchert-Güler, 2006; Philips, 2007). In the farming and food processing sectors, suppliers operate in ferociously competitive markets and in the face of severe shortages in domestic labour, will often employ illegal trafficked immigrants. Penalties can be stiff, but only if the traffickers can be caught and convicted, and this is notoriously difficult (see, Wheaton, et.al, 2010). Yet it is largely the demand side that allows this to happen. In grocery stores or at stalls on the side of the road, the use of trafficked labour means that consumers pay significantly less for fruit and vegetables (Belser, 2005; Doezema, 2002; Lerche 2007).

Consider also respectable middle class professionals who use prohibited recreation drugs. Not only are they contributing to massive criminal profits but they are also giving life-blood to the exploitation and violence that is characteristic of this industry. And finally despite professional codes of conduct and increasingly strong regulatory controls, one cannot ignore the multitude of accountants, lawyers, banks and financial institutions that provide mechanisms for the cleansing of illicit revenue. It stretches the imagination to believe that these people are always naively unaware of its origins (see, for example, Rosoff, et.al. 2002). And culpability does not just rest with individuals, it can be supported by the State. Some of what are regarded as being amongst the least corrupt countries in the world actively encourage and support export trade with countries that have known corrupt regimes (insert Transparency International data here).

Summarising this section, when, in this context, a process perspective is conceptualised as the entire 'system' of 'behavioural coordinations' among and across a range of stakeholders that result in what 'arises' as a criminal act, it forces stakeholders to reflect critically not only on what, beyond simply 'breaking the law', criminality actually means, but also on how and who should be involved in its 'policing'. Inevitably any such reflection will reveal a degree of variability in the 'degrees' or 'levels' of criminal conduct. It also highlights possible ambiguities that surround key roles – '*the criminal*', '*the police*' and '*the law abiding citizen*' in particular.

A process perspective also questions the orthodox crime-fighting doctrine of headhunting, incarcerating and seizing the assets of the '*bosses*' and the '*Mr. Bigs*' who, in a corporate or military-style context are often believed to lead relatively stable criminal organisations. Partly this is because so much contemporary crime is committed by transient ad hoc groups. It is undisputably the case that where these traditional organisations do still exist, they are often violent, they cause of great deal of misery of one form or another, and they can do massive damage to society. As such there is clearly a strong argument that they should indeed be identified and targeted. The bigger picture however, is that at least as much if not more emphasis should be placed on the complex institutionalized and ad hoc practices that make criminality possible and which sustain it. Since there is insufficient space here to outline how this might work, figures 3-8 which are reasonably self-explanatory, outline the main thrust of how this might work. These figures aim to identify, admittedly in relatively simple terms, some of the key advantages and challenges that are associated with particular 'ideal type'

policing strategies i.e. 'object' strategies that mainly target the key players and their organisations, and 'process' strategies that target the coordinated behaviours that constitute criminality. In reality it is mostly a case of emphasis and not one or the other. Given the nature of contemporary organised crime, as described earlier, the overall picture presented is that a process-informed crime-fighting strategy is potentially much more rewarding than an object-informed one. However the figures aim to suggest that this kind of emphasis is much more challenging, and that it raises some critical issues not just within the law enforcement community, but also within the justice and legal systems, government, and not least, since beyond the somewhat narrow definition provided by the law, what actually constitutes crime and importantly who is, and/or should be involved in policing it. These issues will be picked up in the conclusion section of the paper.

Fig. 4 - A simple representation of crime fighting policy/practice in 'object' and 'process terms'

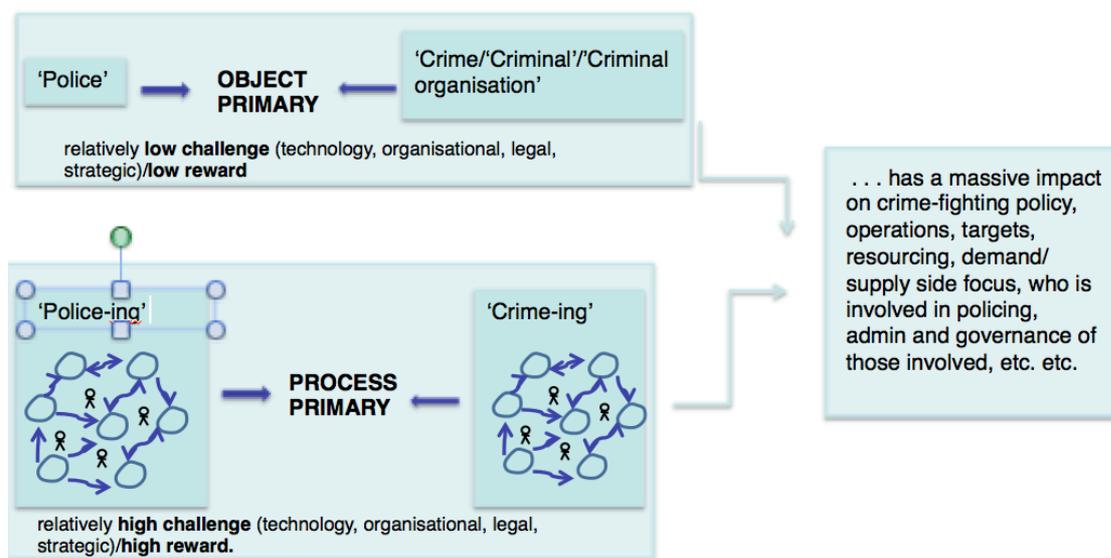


Fig. 5 - 'Object' strategy for crime-fighting - primary focus on the key players and their organisations

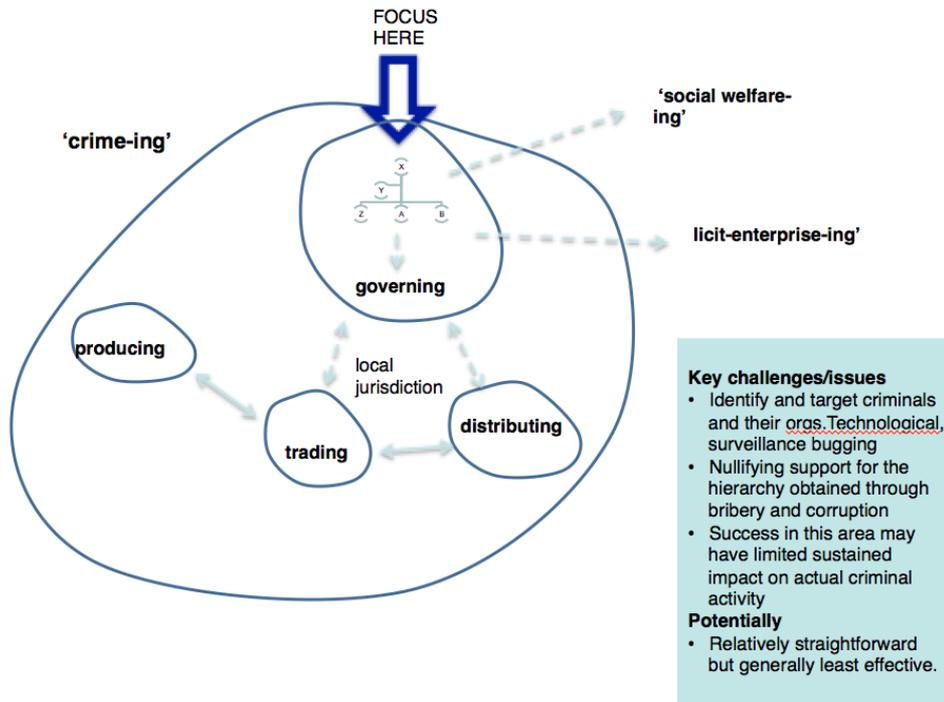


Fig. 6 - Object/process strategy: focus on who are the key nodes in the network (object), and/or what they do (process); can include ostensibly licit support activities beyond the network

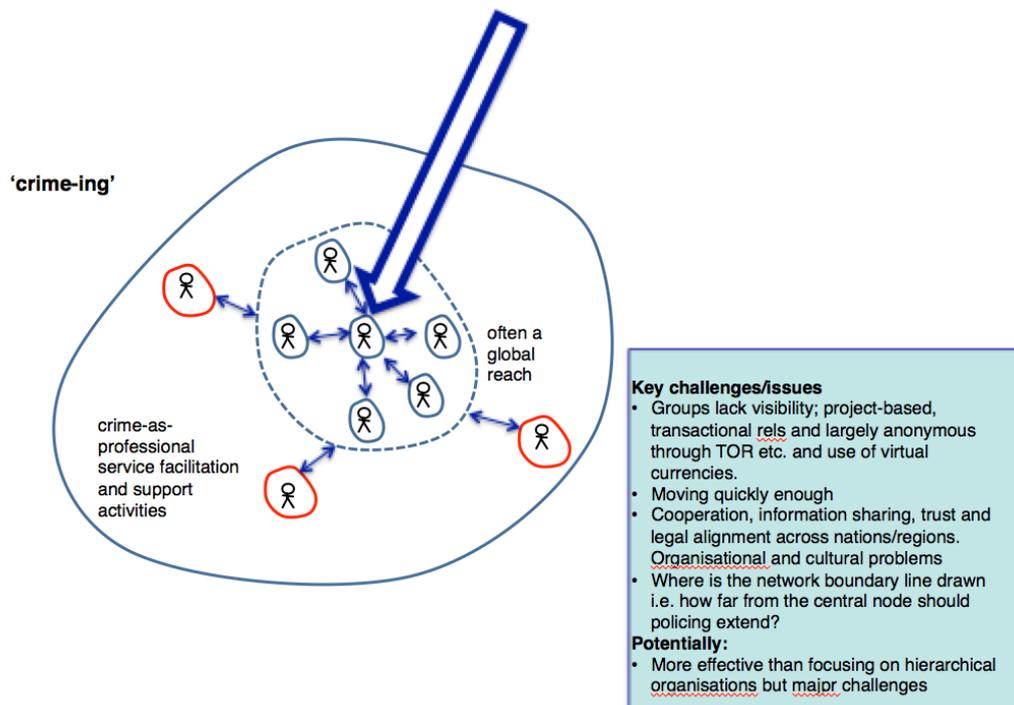


Fig. 7 - Process strategy: interfere with the sequence of coordinated behaviours in order to prevent, remove, frustrate 'crime-ing'. May involve de-emphasising the 'who' and the 'what'.

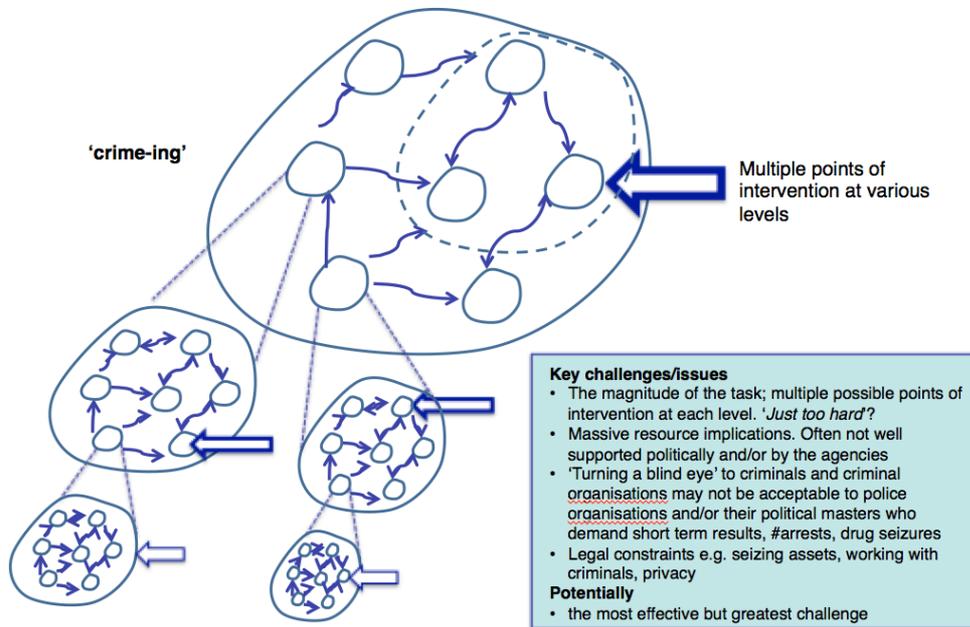


Fig. 8 Process strategy for police-ing

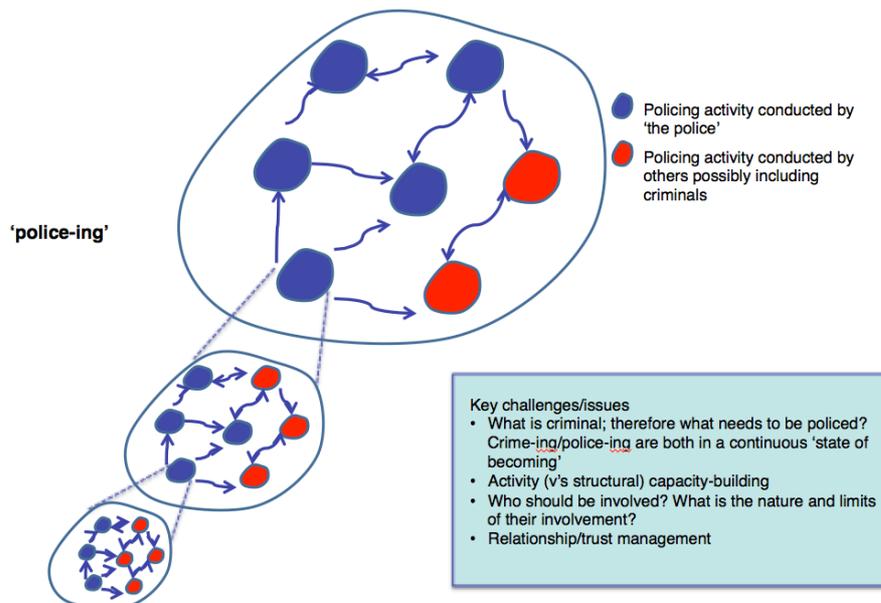


Fig. 9 Object and process perspectives in relation to organised criminal 'types'

	KEY UNIT OF ANALYSIS		
	The established criminal group	The transient criminal network	Emergent criminal and non-criminal activities that constitute and sustain
Object/process focus	Object	Object/Process	Process
Contemporary relevance	low	med	high
Main policing question	Who is leading group	Who is dependent on whom, and for what reason-key nodes	What are the key activities/circumstances that lead crime to occur
Key activities/Resources \$	Surveillance. Arrest and prosecute leaders	Surveillance; international collaboration	Curtail activities that encourage/support crime incl demand side. and reducing 'attractiveness' of regions to global criminals
Key limitation	Outdated model of crime May have zero impact on criminal activity	More relevant model	Criminals may not be pursued and/or prosecuted

4. THE UK's SERIOUS ORGANISED CRIME AGENCY 2006-2014

As we have seen, in examining the practical ramifications of process thinking the theoretical shift that is required involves moving away from focussing exclusively on the aggregation of objects that constitute the domain of interest, towards a perspective that also embraces institutionalized practices as well as the wider social, cultural, political contexts within which these occur. As has been said, object and process thinking are not mutually exclusive, and even though an object-based perspective often seems to hold sway, in many policy making and management situations it is possible to discern aspects of both. Moving from the general to the specific, and using the experience of the UK's Serious Organised Crime Agency between 2006 and 2014, this next section takes a brief look at how the to-ing and fro-ing between these two approaches can play out.

At the outset it can be said that police management and its successive political masters have recognised and responded to the limitations of the traditional law enforcement model when it comes to dealing with organised crime. Prior to 2006, policing in the UK was mainly a local affair with organised crime being fought mainly by area commands with assistance provided by various national intelligence agencies and regional crime squads (Hobbs and Dunnighan, 1999; John and Maguire, 2004; Levi, 2004). Traditionally the general opinion seems to be that while the area command has dealt well with crime that is both organised and committed in its own region, it has been found wanting when it comes to responding to often more serious criminal activity conducted in its region but planned and managed elsewhere. Moreover critics point to inadequate intelligence flowing down to the area command from higher sources; that it was ill-equipped in terms of surveillance and bugging technology; that

it had limited expertise in fraud, customs and immigration; and ultimately that it had very limited formal powers in working with criminals (see, for example, Dunnighan and Hobbs, 1996; Levi, 2004). In addition to this, critics have argued that at the higher national level, agencies were restricted in their actions due to bureaucratic struggles between them, that they have not always been predisposed to share information and intelligence, and that inordinate amounts of time have often been taken to implement any actions or changes. There was also a perceived duplication of work across these agencies and lack of accountability (Harfield, 2006; Segell, 2007; Wright, 2006).

In 2005, and recognising issues of this sort, the UK Government decided that there was a need to replace the individual agencies with a single body focusing its combined resources on a single strategy designed to operate more effectively in a less organisationally fragmented manner. The broad aim was to create an organization that could move quickly and collaboratively in dealing with criminals that cleverly interweave and conceal criminal activity within legitimate business structures; and who are able to operationalize highly flexible and fleet-footed networks that allow them to respond quickly to environmental threats and opportunities. Cross agency investigation teams and ad hoc task forces that previously had sought to mimic transient criminal networks were seen as generally failing in that regard.

Against this background, the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA hereafter) was introduced in 2006. From the outset it is possible to discern the influence of process thinking in the design, if not necessarily in the operation, of the organisation. To understand this aspect it is worth reminding ourselves how, on a process account, 'objects' such as a criminal act arise. Recall that objects arise, in social networks, as proxies for coordinated behaviours. Theoretically then, the key is to first understand and then to disrupt or interfere with the essential elements and relationships that allow and are necessary in order for a criminal act to occur.

This approach towards dealing with serious criminality fits well with the intent of the following emphasised aspects of SOCA's first mission statement, i.e. *"to reduce the opportunities for organised criminals to make money, to disrupt and dismantle their enterprises, and to raise the risks they run by more successful and targeted prosecutions of key figures"*. The same process element can be said of the legislative and operational changes that were simultaneously introduced with the new organisation. For example, bringing together within a single organisational framework expertise in policing, immigration, customs, taxation and fraud makes it more difficult for international criminals to operate and carry out financial transactions in the UK; enhancing the ability of key authorities to seize the assets of criminals goes some way towards nullifying the impact of greed and the lust for money and material possessions which one might reasonably claim is at the heart of much criminal activity. At the same time there is little evidence that the organisation saw itself dealing with other key coordinated behaviours that, as we have seen, are an essential aspect in the process of serious criminality. These might include: formulating, or working with other agencies to formulate strategies to deal with the demand-side of criminal activity in areas such as drug use, human trafficking, and counterfeit goods, and targeting facilitators, middle men, and other clandestine service providers who perform key elements in the networks that allow others to perform their criminal acts.

In addition to, this SOCA's early history seems to have strongly portrayed and even reinforce prevailing object-based thinking that serious crime mainly results from the activities of semi-

permanent pyramid-like, hierarchical structures operating independently or through formal arrangements in conjunction with other groups. Thus identifying target groups such as known Class A drugs suppliers and ethnic gangs became a key strand in the annual planning cycle. In addition, the newly established SOCA was empowered with a range of legal and operational provisions that were expressly designed to assist it in targeting these organisations and dismantling them by arresting the key actors. ‘Intelligence-led’ policing became an important catch-cry of an organisation that was provided with enhanced surveillance (i.e. ‘bugging’) technology, given greater legal powers to work with so-called “supergrasses”, and provided with much stronger international presence to further intelligence gathering in many countries.

Since, as has been said, object and process thinking are not mutually exclusively, the key is to find an appropriate balance between the two. Subsequent events indicates a de facto recognition that the shift from object-type strategies to more process informed ones had not gone far enough and creating serious pressures for further reform. Indeed although SOCA itself pointed to evidence of changes occurring in criminal markets that might indicate that criminals were beginning to find the UK a more hostile environment in which to operate than was the case previously (SOCA 2009), within a few years it was attracting much criticism. The main line of attack was that the organisation had become too focussed on the gathering and processing of evidence, building up a so-called “*never ending criminal intelligence picture*”, and, in spite of having more than 4000 officers and an annual budget of 400m pounds criminal acts were being described as ‘*out of control*’, and SOCA having failed miserably, for example, “*to stem the flow of drugs into the country*” (Laville 2009). While the response was vociferous critics stopped short of accusing SOCA officers of having gone so far as Dutch colleagues who, in a major 1996 policing scandal, were found to have deliberately turned a blind eye to the importation and sale of enormous quantities of drugs under their surveillance in an attempt to build a targeted gang informer’s credibility among his co-conspirators (Klerks, 1996).

Towards the end of its reign (it was replaced by the new *National Crime Agency* in 2016), SOCA began to introduce a range of new approaches in dealing with serious criminality that resonated more strongly with a process approach. Some of the earlier innovations were strengthened, including the requirement that every SOCA investigation involves a financial investigation that can include cash as well as asset seizure. The aim of was to target criminal profits thereby reducing the incentive to commit crime in the first place. In addition to this a range of new tools and techniques were introduced that in simple terms represented a significant resource and strategy shift away from that of investigating and arresting criminals and towards crime prevention. Since these initiatives focus on some of the key coordinated activities that allow a criminal act to occur, these are clearly more consistent with process thinking. For example, where there is deemed to be an unequivocally clear threat these new preventative approaches include seeking orders from the courts, amongst other things, to exclude individuals from the UK, to revoke citizenship, to mandate regular financial reporting, and to issue ‘Serious Crime Prevention Orders’ that impose ‘reasonable and proportionate’ restrictions on individuals and/or companies in areas such as travel, disqualification from driving, and, at the point of criminal sentencing in the case of corporate crime, disqualification from directing a company.

5. CONCLUSION

Given the amount of attention that it has attracted recently, there is little doubt that process thinking is firmly back on the organization studies agenda. This is a good thing; process thinking, even in its 'weak' variant, does offer a distinctively different and more dynamic way for academics to think about and research organizational phenomena. As many others have said, it much better equips researchers to get closer to the actual 'goings on' of organizational life, than does 'variance-type' research that is preoccupied with measuring how some key variable interacts with another.

It has been argued here that a dynamic process-informed law enforcement strategy is conceptually and practically quite different to a more static object-informed one. Yet we have argued that this is not an either/or situation, and that in virtually all law enforcement jurisdictions it is possible to discern aspects of both perspectives; indeed if one accepts the logic of 'strong' process thinkers, 'objects' are still very much part of the equation (see fig. 1), even if they are deemed to be secondary, and process primary. So the argument has been that while the two approaches are distinctly different, in practice it is more a matter of emphasis, and that there are advantages and disadvantages attached to both.

At this point it is worth noting that the paper has deliberately avoided the deeper philosophical question of whether there is an inevitable incommensurability between seeing the world materialistically i.e. as being comprised of pre-existing tangible phenomena, or as something in which phenomena represent deeper processes and are in perpetual state 'of becoming'. While some might want to question the legitimacy of attempts to integrate the two as is intimated in the previous paragraph, I would simply say that this issue has been widely traversed over the years in organisation studies (see, for example, Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Willmot, 1993 Gioia and Pitre, 1990; Hassard, 1991) and despite this, it is probably fair to say that the 'jury is still out' on the question. More importantly, I contend that this is not a matter that is likely to be of great concern to the policy makers, strategists and managers who are grappling with the problem that we have been discussing here.

While I have argued that object and process strategies can and do co-exist, the paper has sought to demonstrate that when one looks at today's transient, highly mobile, dispersely-led and relatively invisible criminal organisations, a process informed perspective has much to commend it, if only because it is clearly impossible for criminal investigators to identify and target those who they cannot see and who are very often 'here today, gone tomorrow' which as we have seen is the classic object-based approach. At the same time critics might want to argue that the argument presented here is an unnecessary over-complication and that fundamentally the issue can be boiled down to a relatively simple policy decision; that is whether to focus mainly on targeted known criminals and put them before the courts, or whether to concentrate efforts on prevention. While there is some truth to this, it is by no means that straightforward. It is all very well speaking of the need for prevention, it is another thing entirely knowing how to go about doing this, appreciating the many and varied challenges, obstacles and issues that arise along the way.

Take for example, what is perhaps the key aspect of prevention that is to intervene to prevent, frustrate or remove activities that lead to, or support, a criminal act. This may sound quite straightforward; but what should that intervention be? And how, where and when should it occur? Answers to these questions such as these may be somewhat less complicated on the demand side; for example the education and health systems are well-positioned to reduce demand through campaigns to warn young people of the dangers involved in drug taking; laws can be strengthened to increase penalties for purchasing counterfeit goods or artifacts

from threatened species, and so on. But on the supply side, when there is a multiplicity of points of intervention at multiple levels, as figure 7 in the main body of the paper shows, knowing what, how, where and when to do this is very often a stab in the dark. If one thinks about criminality as an emergent property that arises out of a multiplicity of coordinated behaviours involving a range of different actors both directly and indirectly, then the magnitude of the task becomes crystal clear. Even if the optimum point of leverage can somehow be identified, when criminal actors are directing the process from beyond the geographical location where the criminal act is committed, any impactful intervention will almost always require national, regional and even global cooperation. And this immediately raises questions about resourcing, about the legal constraints that operate across different jurisdictions, about the nature of the relationship between agencies and so on. Under these kinds of circumstances one might be forgiven for offering a degree of sympathy to, for example, the head of the local police command who concludes that there is much more to be gained by targeting a local criminal in a local context with a view towards bringing him/her before the courts, and at least *'getting another run on the board to keep the beancounters happy'*, than striving mightily in the face of perceived insurmountable obstacles to prevent something from happening that may just have never happened on the local 'patch' in the first place.

Beyond that, and delving deeper into the realms of process thinking there are a whole range of questions that need to be asked not only about law enforcement but also about criminality itself. There are very often matters that require substantive debate not only within the law enforcement system but also in criminal justice and amongst society at large. However they are also matters that operational police forces and even individual police officers grapple with 'outside the system' so to speak. Many of these are boundary drawing and prioritisation conundrums. For example, in some cases it may be the case that the pivotal role in the sequence of complex coordinations that eventuates in a criminal act to occur is occupied not by a 'criminal' but by someone within an ostensibly licit business who is operating in some kind of supporting role. Given the often opaqueness of the law knowing what the agencies should do in that circumstance is by no means clear, witness for example unresolved cases brought against those who provide digital platforms for the sharing of copyrighted material, or for the sale of stolen goods. On the policing side, even though it is generally accepted that actors other than sworn police officers can and are involved in policing, where does one draw the line between who should be involved and who should not. And when there is such involvement what should the limits of it be, and how should it be managed? These are big questions that the process way of thinking raises.

In conclusion the paper is arguing: (a) that process thinking can translate into a distinctive form of law enforcement practice in the fight against organised crime; although (b), this can and does co-exist with practices that are grounded in more static object-based thinking; (c) that the process approach is potentially much more effective than the traditional 'identify, target, and arrest' approach in dealing with today's often transient, geographically mobile and relatively invisible networks; (d) Despite this, process thinking brings into focus a wide range of operational, strategic, legal, political, and social challenges. Within the law enforcement system these are primarily strategic and operational; beyond it, important questions are raised about the nature and boundaries of criminality and its policing that are very much the prerogative of law makers, politicians, and society at large.

As a final comment, it is worth noting that even though the case for process thinking might be compelling, making the personal socio-cognitive transition that this involves is not always going to be easy. As we noted earlier in the theoretical section of the paper, once having

'arisen' in socio-historic settings, objects can 'obscure' (i.e. draw attention away from) the coordinated behaviours that constituted them in the first place. Indeed, even dyed-in-the-wool process thinkers such as Weick (1979, 1995) and Hernes (2008, 2015), admit that object-based thinking is our '*natural*' way of thinking about and navigating our way through the world. As such it can be deeply ingrained and heavily institutionalized. Inevitably in any context the meaning attached to 'noun/object' concepts such as crime, criminal, organisation, the law, justice, police and so on, will undoubtedly change spontaneously over time. However for those who can make the ontological transition from thinking about objects '*and their processes*', to thinking about objects '*as process*', and are willing to engage in deeper process-based thinking, they at least open up the possibility that the massive capability gap that currently exists between law enforcement agencies on the one hand and many criminal organisations on the other, might just be reduced from what it currently is.

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