

ATLANTIS

Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies

42.1 (June 2020): 57-75

e-ISSN 1989-6840

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.28914/Atlantis-2020-42.1.04>

© The Author(s)

Content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial ShareAlike 4.0 International Licence

## Of Godfathers and Markets: The Politics of (the) *American Gangster*

FABIÁN ORÁN LLARENA

Universidad de La Laguna

forallar@ull.edu.es

This article closely examines the film *American Gangster* (2007) as a reinterpretation of the gangster film in light of neoliberalism. Deploying a critical framework underpinned by cultural and film genre studies, I argue the film revisits key tropes and themes of the gangster film by drawing substantially on neoliberal ideology and by addressing certain worldviews and phenomena concerning capitalist accumulation, such as Keynesianism, libertarianism and the relation between the state and private spheres. A wealth of scholarly literature has accrued that probes neoliberal capitalism as the hegemonic economic and political system of our time. However, film studies has yet to comprehensively take up the study of neoliberalism. Additionally, whether there are genre specificities in the way neoliberalism has been translated into film is a significantly underexplored area of research. *American Gangster* constitutes a particularly appropriate film to cohesively and unitarily tackle all those questions.

Keywords: gangster film; film studies; entrepreneur; neoliberalism; capitalism

...

### De padrinos y mercados: ideas políticas en *American Gangster*

Este artículo analiza en profundidad la película *American Gangster* (2007) como reinterpretación del cine de gánsteres en clave neoliberal. Desarrollando una metodología basada en estudios culturales y de género cinematográfico, sostengo que la película revisita temas e imágenes troncales del cine de gánsteres bajo la influencia de la ideología neoliberal y abordando ciertas visiones y fenómenos vinculados a la acumulación capitalista, como el Keynesianismo, el libertarismo o la relación entre las esferas estatal y privada. Existe

abundante producción académica centrada en el capitalismo neoliberal y su afianzamiento como el sistema político y económico hegemónico de nuestro tiempo. Sin embargo, los estudios de cine aún no han abordado exhaustivamente la representación del neoliberalismo en el cine. Es más, se observa una importante escasez de investigación sobre la posible plasmación cinematográfica del neoliberalismo con atención a especificidades de género. *American Gangster* se presenta como una película particularmente idónea para tratar todas esas cuestiones de manera unificada y cohesiva.

Palabras clave: cine de gánsteres; estudios fílmicos; emprendedor; neoliberalismo; capitalismo

## I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since short films like *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (Griffith 1912) first featured images of sordid urban milieus and organized pillage, gangsters have consistently populated US screens, attracting general audiences, renowned filmmakers and scholars, and founding an imagery often shared with fiction writers such as Raymond Chandler, James Ellroy, Dashiell Hammett, and Jim Thompson.<sup>1</sup> A recent A-list Hollywood production tapping into this tradition is *American Gangster* (Scott 2007), the story of Harlem drug lord Frank Lucas (Denzel Washington) and the detective who chased him down, Richie Roberts (Russell Crowe). Loosely inspired by a true story, the film chronicles Frank's success at revolutionizing the heroin trade in late 1960s-early 1970s New York City. As Frank singlehandedly ousts all potential competitors, Richie struggles to tackle drug trafficking amid entrenched corruption in his department.

Rick Altman defines film genres as ever-changing processes that produce “general identification and consecration” yet are caught up in a “constant category-splitting/category-creating dialectic” (1999, 53-65). Since genre building is intrinsically multilayered, ongoing and dialogic, it is hardly surprising that *American Gangster* invests the tropes and themes of the gangster film with relatively new meanings. However, the film's replaying of certain core elements of the gangster film is rather intricate, both politically and ideologically. I contend that *American Gangster* picks up, foregrounds and updates a discussion within the gangster film regarding capitalism. That American gangster films use their characters' illegal operations to comment on capitalism has been noted by many a scholar, going back as far as Robert Warshaw's (1948) analysis of the gangster film as “enacting the contradiction between the two fundamentally US beliefs of capitalism and democracy” (García-Mainar 2016, 2). Within this discussion, my structuring argument is that *American Gangster* is the gangster film par excellence of the neoliberal age. The film reinterprets the gangster film in light of the political and cultural hegemony of neoliberalism. My reading will hopefully show that Frank Lucas, and to a lesser extent Richie Roberts, function as placeholders for neoliberalism, while other characters and elements in the story can be seen as symbols of Fordist-Keynesian capitalism. The film also serves to probe certain historical characteristics of American capitalism from the standpoint of political economy. Although my analysis does not altogether neglect aesthetic matters, it primarily examines aspects connected to storyline and plot and how they may have been shaped by certain ideologies and political traditions.

I couple a historically grounded approach with film studies. My methodology is eminently materialist in that it locates the film within its historical coordinates and views the latter as crucial to understanding and unpacking its central discourses. The article is mainly informed by David Harvey's Marxist analysis of capitalism (1990,

---

<sup>1</sup> I have previously addressed some of the themes dealt with in this article in the paper “What Ever Happened to Vito Corleone? Neoliberalism in *American Gangster*” (Orán Llarena 2018).

2005, 2010). It is likewise indebted to authors such as Wendy Brown (2016) and Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2013), whose work has less to do with Marxist tenets than with Foucauldian governmentality. In keeping with Altman's take on genres as textual processes of never-ending formation and mutability, I also rely on scholars who have examined the gangster film by mapping its conventions as well as the sociohistorical factors shaping them (Shadoian [1977] 2013; Clarens [1980] 2007; Munby 1999; Leitch 2002; Mason 2002; Wilson 2015; García-Mainar 2016). By combining a film genre perspective with cultural studies to look at a film that concerns the imaginaries of capitalism, I attempt to address a gap in current scholarship. Despite neoliberalism having been ubiquitous in academia for over three decades, rarely does theorization on neoliberalism produce "detailed engagement with media texts," and film studies in particular "has been limited in its reach" when approaching film texts as clear-cut expressions of neoliberal politics (Cooper 2019, 266). "The discipline of film studies," continues Anna Cooper, "needs to significantly expand its understandings of neoliberalism as well as methodological approaches to its study in relation to cinema" (266). Not unlike Dan Hassler-Forest's interpretation of the superhero film as a locus for neoliberal hegemony to be enacted (2012), this article aims to offer a model to expand the study of neoliberalism as applied to film, one that is textually engaged, historically and politically informed and attentive to genre specificities. Although *American Gangster* clearly borrows from the gangster film tradition, the film also offers significant departures when it comes to portraying and valorizing entrepreneurship, individualism and the role of institutions, questions that gangster films have traditionally depicted in a substantially different fashion.

## 2. THE GANGSTER FILM AND THE CRITIQUE OF CAPITALISM

The postwar US economy was predicated upon a set of compromises between capital, labor and the nation-state, leading to a three-decade period marked by raising wages via union-protected jobs, state subsidization of key industries, high levels of taxation and consumption, large corporate monopolies and the relative inclusion of sizable sectors of society into middle-class prosperity (Harvey 1990, 132-33; Hobsbawm 1994, 270-71; Jessop 1994, 253-56; Wells 2003, 29-31; Mazzucato [2013] 2018, 183). The mass production fostered by Fordism was underwritten and encouraged by Keynesian intervention along with its concomitant processes of standardization, planning and regulation (Harvey 1990, 124; Harvey 2010, 68-69; Judt 2010, 58). Most American gangster films were made under this regime of accumulation, with the important exception of the short-lived pre-Code cycle of the early 1930s, released at the onset of the Great Depression.<sup>2</sup> In a climate of economic destitution and distrust towards

---

<sup>2</sup> The Motion Picture Production Code—better known as the Hays Code—was a set of rules established by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) to minimize sexual and violent content in

institutions, early talkies such as *The Doorway to Hell* (Mayo 1930), *Little Caesar* (LeRoy 1931), *The Public Enemy* (Wellman 1932) and *Scarface* (Hawks 1932) offer rise-and-fall stories of working-class hoodlums thriving and sometimes—as do Rico Bandelli (Edward G. Robinson) in *Little Caesar* and Tony Camonte (Paul Muni) in *Scarface*—taking over the bootlegging business through intimidation or all-out violence against their superiors (Munby 1999, 13; Leitch 2002, 24; Wilson 2015, 37). Rebellious and antihierarchical as these characters are, they bear much more of a kinship with violent outlaw individualism than with methodical entrepreneurship—as is the case in later films inspired by the 1930s gangster film, such as *White Heat* (Walsh 1949), *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond* (Boetticher 1960) and *Goodfellas* (Scorsese 1990). In *Scarface*, Tony's boss Johnny Lovo (Osgood Perkins) gives a sobering yet ultimately futile speech on the need for gangsters to approach bootlegging as a business (22:05). Such claims are extremely rare in early 1930s gangster narratives. The archetype favored in these films “often dispenses sound organizational business practices through his desire to organize and eliminate cutthroat competition” (Wilson 2015, 39). In the postwar years, the individualist edge of the 1930s is noticeably watered down. With the pervasive aesthetics and mood of film noir looming large, the so-called syndicate film tends to place gangsters in regimented structures that actively cripple characters' agency (Munby 1999, 141-42; Mason 2002, 73). *Force of Evil* (Polonsky 1948) and *The Asphalt Jungle* (Huston 1950)—as well as the lesser known *The Mob* (Parish 1951), *Hoodlum Empire* (Kane 1952), *The System* (Seiler 1953) and *Chicago Syndicate* (Sears 1955)—are representative of the syndicate film in that they zero in on corporatization, organizational principles and systematization at different scales and through diverse plot channelings (Shadoian [1977] 2013, 129; Mason 2002, 90-100; Wilson 2015, 68). I view the transition from the early 1930s gangster film to the postwar syndicate film as being marked, among other factors, by the shift from the chaos and crisis of the Depression Era to the more stable, cohesive world of Keynesian-Fordist economics. While the gangsters of the 1930s inhabit a polity in disarray, which makes rugged individualism attractive and feasible, their postwar counterparts find themselves in a far more organized and bureaucratized society, where gangsterism needs to be inserted into larger corporate structures.

The consolidation of the gangster film as a microcosm for American capitalism is made evident in *The Brotherhood* (Ritt 1968) and especially so in *The Godfather* (Coppola 1972) and *The Godfather, Part II* (Coppola 1974) (Kaminsky [1972] 2007, 55; Shadoian [1977] 2013, 268; Wilson 2015, 86). Likewise, these films drive home the connection between gangsterism and regulated forms of capitalism. Notwithstanding several readings aptly identifying the main themes of the saga—family versus business, tradition versus change or Old World versus New World (Clarens [1980] 2007, 109-10; Leitch

---

films. The Hays Code did not become mandatory until 1934, which facilitated the then unprecedented levels of violence of the early 1930s gangster film (Hayward 2006, 203-204).

2002, 120; Mason 2002, 134; Wilson 2015, 90-91)—Geoff Fordham offers valuable insights into the Corleone family and their relationship with capital: “The gangsters in *The Godfather* movies may be rebels but they are hardly freedom-fighters or radicals [...]. So far as this trilogy is concerned, we see a massive and powerful business empire created through corruption, intimidation, and murder” (2007, 177). Although in *The Godfather* Vito Corleone (Marlon Brandon) expresses unequivocal moral condemnation of drugs as a business option, Michael (Al Pacino) pays no mind to such moral qualms. Michael advances his family’s economic interests with a blend of bloodshed—sometimes strategically motivated, as in the assassination of the New York dons at the end of *The Godfather*, sometimes out of pure revenge, as exemplified by the murder of Hyman Roth (Lee Strassberg) in *The Godfather, Part II*—and use of political power. The latter requires further explaining. For instance, in the Cuban subplot in *The Godfather, Part II*, Michael and the other gangster moguls try to operate in prerevolutionary Cuba by stringently organizing the flow of capital, assigning each actor specific duties and partnering up with the subservient Cuban government. This model does not represent an environment particularly conducive to competition, but rather a form of Keynesian-Fordist capitalism turned into cronyism. Although Michael applies his business model more ruthlessly and expansively than his father ever did, their tactics are similarly rooted in deploying violence and politics in equal proportion. Managerial expertise, decision making on the basis of market indicators, competition and entrepreneurial vision do not seem to play any significant role in their business praxes.

Since the 1970s, there have been numerous rereadings of the gangster film, with a rise in self-reflexive and nostalgia crime films in the 1980s and 1990s (García-Mainar 2016, 26). However, none of the gangster films released from the 1970s onwards presents particularly business-minded or methodical gangsters, nor are the economic environments they inhabit probed in much depth. According to critics, these films place their thematic foci elsewhere—blaxploitation films such as *Across 110th Street* (Shear 1972) and *Black Caesar* (Cohen 1973) retrieve themes typical of both the 1930s gangster film and the syndicate film from the standpoint of the African-American community; atomization and solipsism in the midst of an increasingly depersonalized society underpins the nostalgia-ridden epic *Once Upon a Time in America* (Leone 1984) (Mason 2002, 143-44); *Goodfellas* and *Casino* (Scorsese 1996) reprise the unencumbered individualism of working-class hoodlums of the early 1930s gangster film, along with a documentary-inspired emphasis on the idiosyncrasies and minutiae of criminal life (Verevis 2007, 215; Wilson 2015, 96-97); *The Godfather, Part III* (Coppola 1990) simultaneously explores economic globalization and Michael Corleone’s search for atonement; Carlito Brigante (Al Pacino) in *Carlito’s Way* (De Palma 1993) reenacts the trope of the anachronistic gangster eager to give up crime as embodied by Humphrey Bogart in *High Sierra* (Walsh 1941) (Mason 2002, 157); comedic revisions of the gangster iconography have been released, such as *Prizzi’s Honor* (Huston 1985), *The Freshman* (Bergman 1990) and *Analyze This* (Ramis 1999); *Road to Perdition* (Mendes

2002) and *We Own the Night* (Gray 2007) address the tension between family loyalty and gangster life; *The Departed* (Scorsese 2007) depicts a world marked by social anomie and a sense of anxiety-driven, rootless individualism (García-Mainar 2009); hybridity and pastiche are prominent in postmodern iterations of the gangster film as diverse as *Scarface* (De Palma 1983), *Miller's Crossing* (Coen 1990), *Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead* (Fleder 1995) and *Gangster Squad* (Fleischer 2013). It is crucial to highlight here *Casino* and its protagonist Sam Rothstein (Robert de Niro), a character singularly concerned with the economic aspect of gangster life in a way not unlike Frank Lucas in *American Gangster*. Rothstein lands a position as head of the most important mafia-backed casino in Las Vegas thanks to his managerial expertise and keen organizational abilities. His success—like Frank's—stems from market knowledge, not violent takeovers or political connections.

This broad survey tries to indicate that, despite a wide-ranging variety in themes in gangster films, there is virtually no going beyond the imaginaries of Keynesian-Fordist capitalism, and nor do the protagonists show truly entrepreneurial qualities. The gangster lashes out at social norms, gets positioned in deterministic corporatized structures or appears as a patriarch shored up by violence and complicity with political power. Films within the genre do not generally engage with real specificity or thematic focus on how characters conduct their businesses. Much as energetic up-and-comers willing to upset the gangster world often play pivotal roles in the genre, these are hardly entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship, as will be explained later, entails an economic dynamism and a managerial strategizing all but absent in gangster characters. As Warshaw once indicated, the filmic gangster may embark upon a rational venture, seeking goals and ways to achieve them, and yet “his rationality is usually no more than a vague background: we know, perhaps, that the gangster sells liquor or that he operates a numbers racket; often we are not given even that much information. So his activity becomes a kind of pure criminality: he hurts people” ([1948] 2007, 14). Despite borrowing from many a film discussed above, *American Gangster* does unambiguously go beyond the imaginaries of Keynesian-Fordist capitalism and casts the gangster first and foremost as an entrepreneur, thematizing a set of elements at the heart of neoliberal ideology.

### 3. AMERICAN GANGSTER AND NEOLIBERALISM

Oftentimes a loose notion riddled with theoretical and terminological confusion, neoliberalism has become, since the mid-1970s, the hegemonic form of capitalism at the expense of the postwar Keynesian-Fordist synthesis (Harvey 1990, 141-72; Roy and Steger 2010, 8-11). Neoliberalism can be said to encourage the following elements: a populist lexicon whereby freedom is tantamount to deregulated markets and low taxation; the libertarian repackaging of the Calvinist self-reliant individual into the entrepreneur type; outspoken distrust over government-run institutions; the

emancipation of large corporations from the constraints of the nation-state and the resulting process of globalization; ever-increasing levels of flexibility and competition at the expense of labor stability and union-protected jobs; and the enshrining of innovation, investment and risk-taking (Wells 2003, 185-95; Wacquant 2008, 70; Harvey 2010, 131; Robin [2011] 2018, 149-51; Lilla 2017, 30-31, 42-43; Wartzman 2017, 220). I argue that *American Gangster* articulates these underpinnings of neoliberal politics through gangster film themes and tropes.

The first scenes introduce Frank Lucas, personal driver and bodyguard to Harlem crime kingpin Bumpy Johnson (Clarence Williams III). Bumpy dies of a heart attack a few minutes into the film. Though short lived in the story, he plays a central role as Frank's mentor—twice in the film he is referred to as Frank's role model (01:02:44, 01:24:29). Nonetheless, Frank drastically departs from Bumpy's ways. Moments before passing away, Bumpy decries the incipient rise of globalization as he is entering a retail store full of Japanese goods:

This is what's wrong with America. It's gotten so big you just can't find your way. The grocery store on the corner is now a supermarket. The candy store is a McDonald's. And this place: a super-fucking discount store. Where's the pride of ownership, huh? Where's the personal service? [Frank and Bumpy enter the store] You see what I mean? Shit. I mean, what right do they have, of cutting out the suppliers, pushing out all the middlemen, buying direct from the manufacturer? Sony this, Toshiba that. All them chinks putting Americans out of work. [...] You can't find the heart of anything to stick the knife. (02:28)

Bumpy feels the same uneasiness over a changing economic world that Vito does in *The Godfather* when the head of the Corleone family voices concerns about drugs becoming just another commodity to be traded. Bumpy's grievances, however, have different political inflections. Vito's refusal to accept drugs as legitimate reflects a worldview wary of market expansions that views individuals simply as consumers and not as citizens who may wish to establish boundaries against "the corrosive social and civic effects of self-interest" (Deneen 2018, 29). Bumpy, on the other hand, clings to a form of capital accumulation that is subjected to intelligible, regulated and compartmentalized patterns of production and distribution—one he fears is being replaced by a featureless, globalized market. Unlike the libertarian notion of deregulation as shorthand for personal autonomy typical of neoliberalism, Bumpy's worldview does not regard regulations as burdens that hinder economic liberties, but as protections, as means for organizing social life. In the shift from Fordist-Keynesian economics to neoliberal capitalism, Harvey has identified the very same disquiet voiced by Bumpy: "the more flexible motion of capital emphasizes the new, the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent in modern life, rather than the more solid values implanted under Fordism" (1990, 171). Despite Frank considering he has learned from Bumpy, his success is characterized precisely by everything Bumpy



despises: globalization, the cutting off of intermediaries and an all-out embrace of competition as the key driver in the economy.

Upon Bumpy's death, a power vacuum ensues in the Harlem underworld. Frank seizes this moment of dislocation to take over not just Harlem but the entire New York heroin trade. After striking a deal with a cousin of his stationed in Vietnam, Frank manages to circumvent the major stakeholders in the heroin business by smuggling extremely pure Vietnamese heroin concealed in the coffins of dead soldiers returning from war. What sets Frank apart genrewise is the manner in which he mounts this takeover. It is true that he exerts violence to consolidate his economic footing just like his forebears in the genre do—Frank himself kills his rival in the area, Tango (Idris Elba), after the latter refuses to service his debts (48:59). However, Frank attains success not by behaving more violently than his competitors, but by being a far more skillful businessman, just as Sam Rothstein does in *Casino*—they both acquire power by means of economic expertise and managerial ability. For much of the first act we bear witness to Frank studying and assessing market signals. There is narrative and visual emphasis on him gaining crucial insights into the heroin trade business—that heroin in Vietnam is purer and cheaper than in the US (19:37); that distribution is closed to outside competition as the market is fully controlled by traditional mafia families in league with corrupt policemen (14:39). We literally see him, calculator in hand, working out the budget for his business venture (19:21). Frank is obviously an individualist and this ethos is inscribed in the genre right down to the very last detail and gesture. Crime in the gangster film, contends Thomas Leitch, symbolically operates so as to “attack the economic principles of the establishment” (2002, 14). Thus, the protagonists in the early 1930s gangster films all mount solo attacks against their bosses; later reincarnations such as Tommy Gibbs (Fred Williamson) in *Black Caesar* or Tony Montana (Al Pacino) in *Scarface* brutally rise up against their bosses; Michael Corleone alone decides to violently revolutionize the New York underworld in the iconic montage sequence at the end *The Godfather*. None of these characters, though, are shown concocting and working out the specifics of their business plans, neither are their successes founded upon entrepreneurship and economic performance. In contrast to this, the way Frank is portrayed when setting up his business bears a strong resemblance to how founding figures of neoliberalism, like Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, have described the market: as a continuous information-gathering process whereby individuals are educated in self-government, choice and allocation of resources (Steele 2001, 26; Dardot and Laval 2013, 103-107).

In his pursuit of the Vietnamese heroin, Frank displays increasingly clearer ideological ties to neoliberalism. In his first and crucial voyage into the Vietnamese jungle, he is adamant that the heroin be purchased directly from the source without any kind of middlemen being involved. Perplexed by the sight of an unknown African-American gangster ordering one hundred kilos of heroin, the head of the heroin poppy plantation (Ric Young) keeps asking Frank who he really is. To all the questions he

jokingly answers by simply saying that he is Frank Lucas (27:27). For Dardot and Laval, in neoliberalism “the pure dimension of entrepreneurship—alertness to business opportunities—is a *relationship of self to self*, which underlies the critique of interference. We are all entrepreneurs, or, rather, we all learn to be; we train ourselves exclusively through the play of the market to govern ourselves as entrepreneurs” (2013, 112; italics in the original). In emphasizing the importance of having a productive process that is as streamlined and as free of intermediaries as possible, Frank fully adheres to that conception. Not surprisingly, the members of his family he trusts to some extent are either mere pawns inside the organization or turn out to be nuisances—during an angry rant, Frank demands to separate himself from the rest of the family as regards business matters (01:10:23). He projects himself as the only determining factor in his business venture. This is connected to what Brown calls “responsabilization,” a logic by which social phenomena are seen less as being collectively and structurally mediated than as processes where individuals are tasked with “discerning and undertaking the correct strategies of self-investment and entrepreneurship for thriving and surviving,” casting the individual as “the only relevant and wholly accountable actor” (2016, 132-33).

There is a significant and narratively potent sequence that exacerbates the entrepreneurial dimension bestowed upon Frank. An extreme long shot of the Statue of Liberty segues into a series of medium, medium long and long shots of Frank and his brothers walking down the streets of Harlem (46:30). Always occupying the central area of the shot, Frank explains how he runs his business. Although he acknowledges an important debt to Bumpy as a mentor figure, he goes on to say that “Bumpy was rich, but he wasn’t white man rich [...]. He wasn’t wealthy. He didn’t own his own company. He thought he did, but he didn’t, he just managed it. The white man owned it, so they owned him. Nobody owns me, though. That’s ’cause I own my own company, and my company sells a product that’s better than the competition, at a price that’s lower than the competition.” The market becomes, in Frank’s rhetoric, a true site for empowerment and subversion against injustice and inequality; it is only through an efficient use of market signals that individuals historically deprived of power can liberate themselves. He thus virtually channels Hayek, the latter having spoken of freely setting prices on goods and services as the key venues for fighting against elites ([1944] 2001, 100). Despite gaining access to a modicum of wealth, Bumpy—to Frank’s mind—still operated within a web of economic relationships that held him subservient to white, wealthier gangsters, never really transcending the corporatized, local and tightly regulated structures dominated by the gangster establishment. The fight for African-American emancipation from structural poverty and racism is thus articulated by means of the market rather than collective vectors like community or class, emphasizing the ability of neoliberalism to co-opt any social struggle that may be more or less linked to individual freedoms (Harvey 2005, 40-41). Frank’s market-led revolt can be seen as breaking with the imaginaries of capitalism present even in gangster blaxploitation films. In *Across 110th Street*, when tensions arise between

African-American and Italian-American gangs the economic barrier Frank subverts in *American Gangster* is brought to the fore, as exemplified in the following exchange between Harlem crime kingpin Doc Johnson (Richard Ward)—a character quite similar to Bumpy—and capo Nick Di Salvio (Anthony Franciosa):

JOHNSON: Goddamn it, Di Salvio! I've been in charge here fifteen years and nobody tells me how to run my business.

DI SALVIO: Your business is running our business. Do you understand that? You may be a big shot around here up in Harlem but below 110th Street you're nothing but a hired nigger. That's all. (21:57)

It seems logical that upon the film's release, critic Roger Ebert opined that *American Gangster* appeared to be more indebted to *Wall Street* (Stone 1987) than to *The Godfather*: "Apart from the detail that he was a heroin dealer, Frank Lucas' career would be an ideal case study for a business school. [...] he cornered the New York drug trade with admirable capitalist strategies" (2007).

This view of individualism and entrepreneurship is reinforced when circumstances lead Frank to interact with corporate structures such as the elites of the New York mafia. Clearly outperformed by Frank, the head of the Italian-American mafia Dominic Cattano (Armand Assante) sets up a meeting in order to secure some form of agreement between the gangster establishment and Frank. The conversation they strike up is worth quoting in full, as it portrays two clearly different political worldviews on how capitalism ought to function:

DOMINIC: What do you think of monopolies?

FRANK: You mean like the game?

DOMINIC: No, I just think monopolies were made illegal in the country, Frank, 'cause nobody wants to compete. Nobody wants to compete, not with a monopoly. I mean, you let the dairy farmers do that, half of them would be out of business tomorrow.

FRANK: Just trying to make a living.

DOMINIC: That's your right, I mean, it's everyone's right. It's America. We just can't do it at the unreasonable expense of others. 'Cause then it becomes un-American. That's why the price we pay for that gallon of milk could never represent the true cost of production 'cause it's got to be controlled. It's gotta be set. It's gotta be fair.

FRANK: 'Gotta be controlled by who? I set a price that I think is fair.

DOMINIC: I don't think it's fair. [...]

FRANK: I think it's fair.

DOMINIC: I mean I know your customers are happy Frank, bunch of fucking junkies that they are. But we fellow dairy farmers out here, Frank, are you thinking of us? You thinking of them?

FRANK: The dairy farmers? I'm thinking of them, Dominic, about as much as they've ever thought about me. (01:11:44)

The exchange can be read as a clash between neoliberalism—Frank—and Keynesian-Fordist economics—Dominic. Dominic concedes that Frank is entitled to his economic agency but only insofar as productive activities are conducted within certain parameters and regulations; as shown earlier, Bumpy held very similar views. To Dominic's mind, economic competition becomes dysfunctional if no preliminary mechanisms are introduced in order to have some sort of level playing field for everyone. He even deems excessive economic deregulation un-American and views the setting of prices as tantamount to fairness—a position much more attuned to the New Deal order than to common-sense narratives of Americanism embedded in distrust of government. Thus, Dominic performs two roles. On the one hand, he encapsulates the economic mindset of the syndicate gangster, relying on a system of close-knit families that, insulated from the risks involved in actual competition, tightly control the exchange of goods and services. On the other, he spells out the basics of Keynesian thought as John M. Keynes himself envisaged it, with planning, in the form of a strong central government, as an indispensable prerequisite for individual initiative to exist: "I defend [the enlargement of the functions of government] both as the only practicable means of avoiding the destruction of existing economic forms in their entirety and as the condition of the successful functioning of individual initiative" ([1936] 2018, 380).

Of course, Frank counters this framing. In stating that he sets a price he believes is fair, he locates economic activity in the realm of individual action, casting Keynesian-Fordist economics less as a balanced system than as crony capitalism—one which, as he derides, has paid him no mind. Here Frank does not simply legitimate neoliberal rationality through his rejection of regulatory frameworks and his emphasis on freedom as encoded in regulation-free markets (Brown 2016, 42). There is deeper meaning to the exchange concerning the dynamics of capitalism. Joseph A. Schumpeter studied how capitalism contains a built-in tendency for evolution. "Capitalism," he wrote, "is by nature a form or method of economic change and not only never is but never can be stationary" ([1943] 2003, 82). He famously named this phenomenon "creative destruction," a drive that "incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one [...]. It is what capitalism consists in" ([1943] 2003, 83; italics in the original). The Schumpeterian entrepreneur is someone "willing and able to convert a new idea or invention into a successful innovation. It is not just about setting up a new business (the more common definition), but doing so in a way that produces a *new* product, or a *new* process, or a *new* market for an existing product or process" (Mazzucato [2013] 2018, 64; italics in the original). This is precisely what Frank represents. He does not merely open up a new business and carve out some niche for himself. He changes the existing economic forces, producing a whole new set of relationships within the market—which now has to orbit around him. When compared to his Italian-American counterparts, Frank can be seen as the creative destruction inherent to capitalism, destroying and replacing the old guard by deploying better and more competitive techniques. In this sense, archetypes within the gangster film are not nearly as committed to competition and economic dynamism as Frank is.

Nevertheless, it would be remiss to claim that an economic activity—even Frank’s aggressive neoliberal gangsterism—can develop totally impervious to government or collective action. Karl Polanyi observed that projects bent on applying market principles and economic self-regulation need the very government intervention they allege to oppose: “Regulation and markets grew up together” ([1944] 2001, 71). The notion of a free market as a mode of economics deprived of regulative frameworks is less a natural human drive than a conscious political endeavor ultimately reliant on public support: “There was nothing natural about laissez-faire; free markets could never have come into being merely by allowing things to take their course [...]. The road to the free market was opened and kept open by an enormous increase in continuous, centrally organized and controlled interventionism. [...] The introduction of free markets, far from doing away with the need for control, regulation, and intervention, enormously increased their range” (Polanyi [1944] 2001, 145-47). There is, in other words, an embeddedness to both politics and economics that would negate projects purported to separate the two domains (Bloc 2001, xxiii-xxiv). This has posed a programmatic and policy conundrum to neoliberalism, as “neoliberals have never been able to live with, or without, the state. They are repeatedly drawn to rhetorical denigrations of the state, yet they literally do not know where to stop” (Peck 2010, 20).

Frank encapsulates the same contradiction. Much as he can be readily seen as epitomizing the entrepreneurial gangster and the neoliberal antigovernment narrative, his operation critically depends on one massive government action: the presence of the US army in Vietnam. He would have never been able to access the extremely pure, and cheap, Vietnamese heroin—the cornerstone of his business—had the US troops not been deployed in Southeast Asia. His success no doubt originates in his Hayekian view of the market, and yet his is a project simultaneously bound up with the avenues and opportunities opened up by what is a quintessentially interventionist action: a years-long military operation in a foreign country. Frank’s entrepreneurship proves Polanyi’s thesis that market economy and government intervention are barely separate entities. His venture suggests capitalism can definitely be articulated in different fashions yet no self-regulating market economy exists without government intervention—in fact, the latter provides the former with critical avenues for profit and expansion.

Frank’s eventual captor Richie Roberts, although subject to different constraints, is tested in a way not unlike Frank is in terms of the ideological and political backgrounds he is placed within. The conflict between Frank’s dynamism and the Italian-American mafia as a sclerotic establishment does not differ substantially from what Richie experiences in his job as a police officer. Portrayed as an exceptionally honest cop determined to resist his corrupt colleagues, in the course of his investigation it is Detective Trupo (Josh Brolin) and his squad who come to epitomize institutional corruption. They set up an extensive network of bribery and extortion, seizing drugs in police raids only to resell them back onto the streets. Just as the Italian-American gangster families serve in Frank’s storyline to express an anticollective subtext, in

Richie's, public institutions such as law enforcement are represented as being ripe for all sorts of cronyisms. Although the corrupt police officers are brought to justice only after a federally funded unit headed by Richie is formed, the parallelism between Frank and Richie is writ large. "Villain and cop are both outsiders," argues critic Peter Bradshaw, which "makes for a questionable moral equivalence between these two charismatic street-warriors. The real villains are obviously supposed to be the hapless Italian-Americans and one straightforwardly horrible bent copper [Trupo]" (2007). As Bradshaw contends, the film certainly warrants further inspection as regards the equating of a crime kingpin and a police officer committed to public duty.

As fascinating a character as he may be, the film does not glorify Frank. It is the ideological thrust of the film—neoliberal politics—that aligns Richie and Frank. The unifying element between the two characters is their unyielding and uncompromising individualism, which leads them both to be wary of institutions and collectivities. In the last sequences of the film, we see Frank amiably disclosing information to Richie in order to turn in large numbers of corrupt police officers (02:18:51). This is topped off by an intertitle informing us that Richie became Frank's attorney years later. Richie mirrors Frank in that they both take on sluggish and unjust establishments, which drives home the film's commitment to viewing individualism as absolutely sacrosanct. This is not to aver that the film presents the two protagonists as morally or ethically interchangeable. The film is peppered with scenes countering such a notion—we are first introduced to Frank in a scene where he brutally murders a man in cold blood (01:15); he is shown to be overtly violent to some of his family members (01:09:36, 01:32:31); a montage sequence contrasts Frank's idyllic Thanksgiving dinner with both Richie's utter personal loneliness and gritty images of people overdosing on Frank's heroin (01:26:07). "The film operates," writes Luis M. García-Mainar, "by subtly contrasting Lucas' strong personality and economic success with Roberts' average existence and modest life as a cop, and by showing how the origin of their different lives is respectively a criminal mind that thrives by selling a deadly drug and the honesty of a man who refuses to take drug money as most of his colleagues do" (2016, 123). These moral ambiguities can be further explained through Carl Plantinga's study of spectatorial attitudes towards fictional characters. Plantinga refers to the audience's moral approval of a character as "allegiance" (2010, 36). In *American Gangster*, allegiance is clearly granted to Richie because of his strong moral compass. However, Plantinga explores how spectatorial responses are rarely conditioned by conscious and purely moral factors:

The spectator's approval or disapproval of characters should not be restricted to some kind of conscious moral deliberation [...]. It is not as though, during the viewing process, viewers consciously make a list of the moral qualities of a particular character and deliberately measure that list against a preferred moral standard. The word "evaluation" suggests a kind of conscious measuring, and for this reason, I would prefer the words "approval" or "disapproval," which capture the often automatic and unconscious nature of this process. (2010, 46)

This is linked to the more univocal concept of sympathy. For Plantinga, “sympathy is not granted for moral good behavior, but rather to those who need care and concern” (2010, 41). Injustice, suffering or cruelty brought upon characters—rather than their being perceived as morally wholesome—pave the way for and sustain sympathy. Plantinga therefore concludes that “allegiance is long term [...] and more centrally depends on the viewer’s moral evaluation of a character, while sympathies may be short term and more likely to be independent of moral evaluation” (2010, 41). Allegiance and sympathy, which may or may not overlap, operate separately from simply liking characters because of their attractiveness, charisma, similarity to audiences and so forth (2010, 42). Even if allegiance is unambiguously bestowed upon Richie and denied to Frank, the latter is hardly unsympathetic or unlikable.

Affectionate towards his wife Eva (Lymari Nadal) and his mother (Ruby Dee) in his private life, discreet and prudent as a public figure, not only does Frank outsmart and topple all of his rivals but he does so with far fewer resources, simply by being a more skillful and better-prepared businessman. Furthermore, we see a corrupt policeman trying to extort him and harassing him and his wife (01:20:47, 01:53:44); he is unfairly left out of the gangster business by an establishment clique of crony capitalists; and he is on the receiving end of racial animosity, as Richie reminds him: “They [the establishment mobsters] hate what you represent [...]: a black businessman. You represent progress; the kind of progress that’s going to see them lose a lot of money” (02:16:03). “Sympathy,” notes Plantinga, “is aroused by perceived unfair treatment, the need for protection, and similar nonmoral factors” (2010, 42). Much as Frank is in no way a victim in harm’s way, he can still be seen as worthy of spectatorial sympathy since he is shown to be a hardworking and charismatic businessman who is subject to injustices and mistreatment caused by more nefarious characters, such as uncompetitive gangster patriarchs and crooked policemen.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Jack Shadoian affirms that “the politics of the [gangster] genre is a very murky area that needs precise investigation” ([1977] 2013, 10). If *American Gangster* can be said to articulate change in the context of the gangster film, it is precisely because it is deeply engaged with the politics of capitalism and some of its defining traits and underlying principles—Schumpeterian creative destruction, the potentialities of market purity as authored by Hayek, Polanyi’s insights into the relation between free markets and interventionism, Keynesianism and, above all, the mainstays of neoliberalism. So much so that, as has been argued in this article, some conventions and debates pertaining to the gangster film are given new dimensions. In discarding the cartelized business methods of Bumpy Johnson and Dominic Cattano, Frank Lucas likewise relinquishes Keynesian-Fordist capitalism. This is tantamount to moving away from the syndicate gangster, that is, from the characters we see tightly controlling economic life in

*The Godfather* trilogy, *The Brotherhood*, *Force of Evil* or any film where gangster life is portrayed as an economic ecosystem run by family networks and competition is present only through bloodshed.

Yet, the individualism Frank so adamantly channels does not adhere to the conception of individualism that is prominent in the 1930s gangster film and later rereadings such as *Black Caesar*, *Scarface* and *Goodfellas*. His brand of individualism is consistently more technocratic and business oriented, less driven by violence than by economic instincts. Frank embodies entrepreneurship to an unprecedented extent in the genre, largely avoiding violent confrontation and faithfully sticking to market knowledge and precise resource allocation as key tools to success. In this sense, it is worth pondering on the ability of neoliberalism to absorb idioms of change and revolt. Frank Lucas becomes an avatar of freedom and autonomy while espousing “the most genuinely political theory of capitalism the right has managed to produce” (Robin [2011] 2018, 133). This brings to the fore how conservative ideologies have historically succeeded in co-opting the vernaculars and trappings typically associated with their adversaries on the left—opposition to hierarchies, change or justice (Robin [2011] 2018, 40, 47). Notwithstanding clearly evinced moral differences, the ethos of virtuous neoliberal individualism is so profoundly inscribed in the film that we are led to perceive Frank and Richie as mavericks fighting the system and, therefore, equally worthy of our sympathies and liking.

The fact there are highly noticeable political and ideological disclosures in *American Gangster* does not mean the film somewhat rewrites the genre anew. As has been extensively pointed out here, the film’s (dis)continuities vis-à-vis previous gangster films render its subtexts meaningful. However, this is a film that employs the genre in a remarkably unprecedented way, that is, as a means to foreground the profound transformations capitalism has undergone since the 1970s. Hardly ever before had neoliberalism constituted the ideological and political background of an American gangster film.

#### WORKS CITED

- ALTMAN, Rick. 1999. *Film/Genre*. London: BFI.
- AMIN, Ash, ed. 1994. *Post-Fordism: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- BERGMAN, Andrew, dir. 1990. *The Freshman*. Tristar.
- BLOC, Fred. 2001. Introduction to *The Great Transformation: The Economic and Political Origins of Our Time*, by Karl Polanyi, xvii-xxxviii. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- BOETTICHER, Budd, dir. 1960. *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond*. Warner Bros.
- BRADSHAW, Peter. 2007. “Review of *American Gangster*.” *Guardian*, November 16. [Accessed online on July 22, 2019].
- BROWN, Wendy. 2016. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Zone.



- CLARENS, Carlos. (1980) 2007. "All in the Family: *The Godfather* Saga." In Silver and Ursini 2007, 107-18.
- COEN, Joel, dir. 1990. *Miller's Crossing*. Twentieth Century Fox.
- COHEN, Larry, dir. 1973. *Black Caesar*. MGM.
- COOPER, Anna. 2019. "Neoliberal Theory and Film Studies." *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 17 (3): 265-77.
- COPPOLA, Francis Ford, dir. 1972. *The Godfather*. Paramount Pictures.
- . 1974. *The Godfather, Part II*. Paramount Pictures.
- . 1990. *The Godfather, Part III*. Paramount Pictures.
- DARDOT, Pierre and Christian Laval. (2013) 2017. *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*. Translated by Gregory Elliot. New York: Verso.
- DENEEN, Patrick. 2018. *Why Liberalism Failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP.
- DE PALMA, Brian, dir. 1983. *Scarface*. Universal Pictures.
- . 1993. *Carlito's Way*. Universal Pictures.
- EBERT, Roger. 2007. "Movie Review: *American Gangster*." *RogerEbert.com*, November 1. [Accessed online on August 7, 2019].
- FLEDER, Gary, dir. 1995. *Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead*. Miramax International.
- FLEISCHER, Ruben, dir. 2013. *Gangster Squad*. Lin Pictures.
- FORDHAM, Geoff. 2007. "A Study in Ambiguity: *The Godfather* and the American Gangster Movie Tradition." In Silver and Ursini 2007, 165-80.
- GARCÍA-MAINAR, Luis M. 2009. "Contemporary Hollywood Crime Film and the New Individualism." *European Journal of American Studies* 4 (2): 1-13.
- . 2016. *The Introspective Realist Crime Film*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- GRAY, James, dir. 2007. *We Own the Night*. Columbia Pictures.
- GRIFFITH, D. W., dir. 1912. *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*. General Film Company.
- HARVEY, David. 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- . 2010. *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*. London: Profile.
- HASSLER-FORST, Dan. 2012. *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age*. Alresford: Zero.
- HAWKS, Howard, dir. 1932. *Scarface*. United Artists.
- HAYEK, Friedrich A. (1944) 2001. *The Road to Serfdom*. London and New York: Routledge.
- HAYWARD, Susan. 2006. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. 3rd ed. London and New York: Routledge.
- HOBBSAWM, Eric. 1994. *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*. London: Abacus.
- HUSTON, John, dir. 1950. *The Asphalt Jungle*. MGM.
- . 1985. *Prizzi's Honor*. ABC Motion Pictures.
- JESSOP, Bob. 1994. "Post-Fordism and the State." In Amin 1994, 251-79.

- JUDT, Tony. 2010. *Algo va mal*. Translated by Belén Urrutia. Madrid: Taurus.
- KAMINSKY, Stuart M. (1972) 2007. "Little Caesar and Its Role in the Gangster Film Genre." In Silver and Ursini 2007, 47-64.
- KANE, Joseph, dir. 1952. *Hoodlum Empire*. Republic Pictures.
- KEYNES, John M. (1936) 2018. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- LILLA, Mark. 2017. *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*. New York: Harper Collins.
- LEITCH, Thomas. 2002. *Crime Films*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- LEONE, Sergio, dir. 1984. *Once Upon a Time in America*. Warner Bros.
- LEROY, Mervyn, dir. 1931. *Little Caesar*. Warner Bros.
- MASON, Fran. 2002. *American Gangster Cinema from Little Caesar to Pulp Fiction*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- MAYO, Archie, dir. 1930. *The Doorway to Hell*. Warner Bros.
- MAZZUCATO, Mariana. (2013) 2018. *The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs. Private Sector Myths*. London: Penguin.
- MENDES, Sam, dir. 2002. *Road to Perdition*. DreamWorks.
- MUNBY, Jonathan. 1999. *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P.
- ORÁN LLARENA, Fabián. "What Ever Happened to Vito Corleone? Neoliberalism in American Gangster." Paper given at AEDEAN Annual Conference, Córdoba, November 2018.
- PARISH, Robert, dir. 1951. *The Mob*. Columbia Pictures.
- PECK, Jamie. 2010. *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- PLANTINGA, Carl. 2010. "I Followed the Rules, and They All Loved You More': Moral Judgment and Attitudes toward Fictional Characters in Film." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXXIV: 34-51.
- POLANYI, Karl. (1944) 2001. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston; MA: Beacon.
- POLONSKY, Abraham, dir. 1948. *Force of Evil*. MGM.
- RAMIS, Harold, dir. 1999. *Analyze This*. Warner Bros.
- RITT, Martin, dir. 1968. *The Brotherhood*. Paramount Pictures.
- ROBIN, Corey. (2011) 2018. *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*. New York: Oxford UP.
- ROY, Ravi K. and Manfred B. Steger. 2010. *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- SCHUMPETER, Joseph A. (1943) 2003. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London and New York: Routledge.
- SCORSESE, Martin, dir. 1990. *Goodfellas*. Warner Bros.
- . 1995. *Casino*. Universal Pictures.
- . 2007. *The Departed*. Warner Bros.

- SCOTT, Ridley, dir. 2007. *American Gangster*. Universal Pictures.
- SEARS, Fred F., dir. 1955. *Chicago Syndicate*. Columbia Pictures.
- SEILER, Lewis, dir. 1953. *The System*. Warner Bros.
- SHADOIAN, Jack. (1977) 2013. *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster Film*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- SHEAR, Barry, dir. 1972. *Across 110th Street*. United Artists.
- SILVER, Alain and James Ursini, eds. 2007. *Gangster Film Reader*. Pompton Plains, NJ: Limelight.
- STEELE, G. R. 2001. *Keynes and Hayek: The Money Economy*. London and New York: Routledge.
- STONE, Oliver, dir. 1987. *Wall Street*. Twentieth Century Fox.
- VEREVIS, Constantine. 2007. "Way of Life: *Goodfellas* and *Casino*." In Silver and Ursini 2007, 209-24.
- WACQUANT, Loïc. 2008. *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*. Cambridge: Polity.
- WALSH, Raoul, dir. 1941. *High Sierra*. Warner Bros.
- . 1949. *White Heat*. Warner Bros.
- WARSHOW, Robert. (1948) 2007. "The Gangster as Tragic Hero." In Silver and Ursini 2007, 11-18.
- WARTZMAN, Rick. 2017. *The End of Loyalty: The Rise and Fall of Good Jobs in America*. New York: Public Affairs.
- WELLMAN, William, dir. 1932. *The Public Enemy*. Warner Bros.
- WELLS, Wyatt. 2003. *American Capitalism: 1945-2000*. Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee.
- WILSON, Ron. 2015. *The Gangster Film: Fatal Success in American Cinema*. London and New York: Wallflower.

Received 3 October 2019

Revised version accepted 9 January 2020

Fabián Orán Llarena holds an MA in North American Studies (2013) and a PhD in English (2016) from the University of La Laguna. He currently works at the University of La Laguna as a full-time lecturer. He has published on contemporary American film, politics and ideology in several peer-reviewed journals in the US.