Capitalizing on Value: Towards a Sociological Understanding of Kidnapping

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ABSTRACT
Kidnapping is a crime that has not received due attention in sociological literature. Policy and risk assessment milieux discursively construct it as a ‘threat to society’, and administrative studies have focused on classifications that describe the phenomenon. The most widespread typology of kidnapping incidents takes as a starting point criminal motivation, producing a bipolar analysis of the crime as economic or political. This article re-examines classificatory and discursive approaches, placing emphasis on the social logic of kidnapping. It is argued that kidnapping presents all the characteristics of a rationalized system of exchange, based on rules and regulations reminiscent of legitimate business. The way that these regulations are described by state authorities or private agents alike allow us an in-depth analysis of the crime itself.

KEY WORDS
exchange / kidnapping / organized crime / symbolic capital / terrorism / violence

Introduction
On 14 September 2003, the UK Foreign Office confirmed that two Britons, among a group of eight tourists, were kidnapped by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a Marxist guerrilla group held responsible for many kidnappings. Such news was commonplace in a country that has been declared the ‘undisputed world champion in kidnapping’ – although in Brazil and Mexico incidents increased between 1997 (ERRI, 30 April 1997) and 2003 (ECA, 1 April 2003). In 2000 Secure Transport International (STI), a company that specializes in surveillance and travel
security for business personnel, estimated the number of Colombian cases at nearly 4000 per annum. Although kidnapping is more frequent in Latin America, the crime is on the rise everywhere, as the UK’s Foreign Policy Centre reports (ECA, 1 April 2003). United Nations (UN) records also indicate that in the last 10 years countries such as India reported a 23 percent increase in such incidents (UN, 2003c). Increase in the number of kidnapping cases over the last 10 years was reported to the UN by countries such as Barbados, the Czech Republic, Germany, Japan, Kuwait, the Philippines and many more. The UN’s Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) also expressed concern about the blooming ‘kidnapping industry’ that has claimed victims even among UNOMIG personnel (UN, 2003b).

Security companies, crime prevention organizations and state agents provide us with documents rich in statistics – but how much do we understand of the phenomenon that they record? What are the rationales and functions of kidnapping? It is strange that such a complex crime has, thus far, almost gone unnoticed in sociological literature. Journalism highlights the limitations of current approaches. *The Guardian* (15 September 2003) reported the disappearance of British tourists in Colombia in rather ambiguous terms. FARC, we were told, has a political agenda: at the time of the incident it was holding US military contractors and Colombian politicians. FARC is, unofficially, the communist party’s military army whose aim is to depose the Bogotá regime and install a communist system in the Cuban fashion (Sater, 1985: 114–5). But *The Guardian* went on to explain that the guerrillas’ ultimate aim always remained the payment of ransom. The pursuit of money was the end and the ‘political agenda’ an excuse that served the group’s interests.

This bipolar approach to kidnapping informs policy planning. To be sure, journalistic approaches often derive their power from the very political sources that this article sets out to question. Of course, what is published is a fraction of the actual cases. But still I do not argue that the press provides us with material for a ‘realist’ understanding of crime (Young, 1986, 1992). On the one hand, crime is not simply ‘out there’, immediately available for measuring and recording ‘as it is’. One the other hand, press documentation contributes to discursive networks and imageries that overdetermine social constructions of crime. Contemporary market societies facilitate crime, in so far as violence can become a commercial product (Schmid, 1998; Taylor, 1999). The ways in which exciting crime ‘messages’ and kidnapping news are mediated in press reports depend on the regime in which the incident is born, the political pressures exercised on reporting by the ‘centre’ and the manipulation of these messages by the ‘criminals’ themselves – a point I discuss later. Here I would like to highlight that some of these press representations of crime are echoed in political science literature. In all these fields kidnapping is attributed either to economic or political motives. This article re-examines the focus on classifications of criminal motivation (on ‘who’ commits the crime, not the global socio-political environment in which it occurs). I argue that for a sociological understanding of kidnapping we should turn our attention to
patterns of interaction between the negotiating parties. The nature of the discursive wars that policy agents wage against the ‘criminals’ may facilitate an analysis of the driving forces behind kidnapping, not simply as a form of crime but also as a form of transaction rooted in contemporary socio-economic and political structures.

The article falls into two parts. The first begins with an overview of the existing literature on kidnapping and the politics of violence. Thereafter, I suggest that we should shift our understanding of ‘political’ and ‘economic’ kidnapping as constitutive of the formula of rational exchange that we encounter in our late modern world. This formula is not confined to money transactions, but understands the ‘economic’ in broader, social, terms. Emphasis is placed on policy representations of kidnapping as ‘organized crime’, because it sheds light on the political construction of crime as an economic enterprise. The second part further analyses the interactive rationale of kidnapping, shedding light on the modern nature of kidnapper–negotiator exchange. By placing kidnapping within the context of organized crime and its networks, it examines the strategies that kidnappers use to secure the ransom, and their social meanings.

**State Terror, Violence and Kidnapping: A Sociological Trajectory**

It has been noted (Gallagher, 1985; Schiller, 1985: 46; Warren, 1985) that kidnapping is not a new crime. The term dates back to 17th-century Britain where infants (‘kids’) of rich families would be ‘napped’ (caught in the sleep) for ransom. *Encyclopaedia Americana* makes reference to the notorious kidnapping in 1874 of a four-year-old boy in Pennsylvania that matches this earlier pattern (Clutterbuck, 1978: 19). But such genealogies do not comprise a socially oriented appreciation of the phenomenon. The problem is compounded by the use of classificatory apparatuses by risk assessment and political science that simply describe kidnapping: first a distinction was introduced between kidnapping (in which hostages are taken to secret hideouts) and barricade–hostage situations in which abductors barricade themselves, ‘including their own escape as part of any subsequent bargain’ (Jenkins et al., 1977: 9) – a distinction that would be of use only for administrative purposes. The UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice uses a similar definition (UN, 2003a), proposing a complex cataloguing of incidents. A useful observation on these UN categories is a recurring, almost definitional, element of kidnapping: the idea of seizing someone and demanding something as a return for their release.

Recent typologies of kidnapping, whether they originate in social science or business milieux, focus on criminal motivation. Let us give some examples that belong to the sophisticated end of the analytical spectrum: criminologist and risk evaluator Elio Zannoni proposes a distinction between criminal (with economic motivation) and political (with political motivation) kidnapping (2003: 1), suggesting that ‘in many instances ‘kidnapping is a “business” involving a
demand for ransom which may vary considerably [...] depending on the type of
criminals involved and the victim's personal status' (2003: 1, emphasis mine).

Two claims are important here: (a) that in every kidnapping a form of eco-
nomics is involved, and (b) that the status of the hostage is of significance in the
payment of ransom. Even though Mark Turner, Professor of Administration at
Canberra repeats the argument (1998: 146–7), he is not convinced that the
boundaries between the economic and the political are rigid. Because cases are
variable in their typification he warns the reader that the economic and the
political cross and interact all the time, as ‘politics is potentially a part of any
kidnapping, whatever the motivation of the kidnappers’ (1998: 159). Putting
this comment alongside Zannoni’s observations the outcome turns ironic. Both
arguments reproduce a bipolar analysis of kidnapping that describes this crime
in behaviourist, motivational terms. Yet, the conclusive remarks are diametri-
cally opposite, supporting the prevalence of the economic over the political or
vice versa.

We gain more insight if we examine other arguments that place kidnapping
within wider socio-historical processes, especially in historical and anthropo-
logical works, which view kidnapping for ransom by brigands-bandits in rela-
tion to modernization. The seminal studies by Eric Hobsbawm (Bandits, 1972,
2000 and Primitive Rebels, 1959) recognized in banditry a symptom of transi-
tion from social formations regulated by kinship and tribalism to modern soci-
eties characterized by internal stratification and central power. A declared
Marxist, Hobsbawm coined in theory the term ‘social banditry’ to describe a
form of pre-capitalist rebellion within peasant societies. The mythical figure of
Robin Hood, who ‘stole from the rich to give to the poor’ was for him the
archetypal primitive rebel – a chain in the redistribution of wealth in feudal
societies. At the same time, however, Hobsbawm stressed that ‘moderation in
the use of violence’ and rational choice in stealing and kidnapping have always
been essential for the bandit image, because they blurred the boundaries of
legitimate and illegitimate violence. Hobsbawm’s remark that successful
brigand chiefs are ‘closely in touch with the market and the wider economic
universe’ (Hobsbawm, 2000: 94) was also developed by historical anthro-
pologists (Gallant, 1999), who regarded banditry as ‘military entrepreneurship’
that made possible the exchange of goods between centre and periphery.

There is a burgeoning literature that links kidnapping to the process of
state-formation and the state’s struggle for a monopoly of violence (see for
example Blinkhorn, 2000; Dickie, 1993, 1999; Herzfeld, 1987). Especially in
the Mediterranean region, where nation and state-formation are more recent
phenomena, state agents and officials would often represent brigand-
 kidnappers as enemies of the state, the ‘nation’ and ‘civilization’. In reality,
however, the practice of brigand crime had contributed to the institution of
nation-states and the establishment of political networking through extortion
and intimidation of electors. The brigands’ silent passage from the illegitimate
to the legitimate camp (and vice versa) was a feature of political life in Europe
from the early modern years (Thompson, 1994). Charles Tilly has termed
brigands *violence specialists* (2003: 35), special types of ‘political entrepreneurs’ who work for legitimate power but can also operate outside it (2003: 233). Not only does this stress both the economic and political identity of banditry, but it intertwines them: violence is a profession and an economic enterprise essential for the consolidation of the state.

We can trace this argument back to classical sociology; this magical relationship was examined by Max Weber who saw the control of violence as a foundational principle for modern states (Gerth and Mills, 1948: 78–9). Norbert Elias recast Weber’s argument in his work, arguing that political order is maintained through rationalized exercise of violence by the centre-state. Elias explained that the states’ right to monopolize violence led to the ‘depersonalization’ (1982: 237) of physical threat: the creation of legislative bodies, police and judicial authorities assisted in the consolidation of such monopolies, but never eliminated threats to the system. Recently, Tilly was echoing Weber when he noted how ‘the precise boundary of legitimate force remains a matter of dispute in all political systems’ (2003: 27). So, even the state has to exercise violence in order to protect itself from those who threaten its monopoly: to kill, repress and behave like a ‘gang’. However, the use of such contested means occurs in ways that could transcend the material expression of state power. Pierre Bourdieu has argued that forms of physical violence could be substituted by invisible and less direct types of what he termed ‘symbolic violence’ (1977: 196). Power monopolies are not defended only through binary oppositions (civilized–uncivilized, legitimate–illegitimate) that proclaim the state as the champion of order and personal protection. The ‘state’ is present in all types of social ‘nomination’, as it institutionalizes social divisions through the ways in which we are collectively trained to think and act (Bourdieu, 1994).

State violence manifests itself in policy-making milieux, where kidnapping is discursively likened to ‘organized crime’ with no apparent evidence to support associations. The reference to ‘organized crime’ is prevalent in the examination by the UN and the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS) (UK) of kidnapping alongside other ‘transnational criminal business’, such as human trafficking, drug dealing and gun trading (NCIS, 12–15, 8 August 2001). The same idea was supported by John Battle, Head of the UK Counter-Terrorism Policy Department, who considers kidnapping as a fund-raising ‘business’ and ‘organized crime’ (Battle, 10 April 2001). I reserve the examination of kidnapping as a business-like activity for later. For the moment, the reference to ‘organized crime’ should not go unnoticed, because it points to violence monopolies in contemporary political environments. Let us bear in mind that early criminological literature challenged the rhetoric of ‘organized crime’ by shedding light on the relationship of crime with legitimate institutions: as Sutherland (1949) claimed, organized criminal activity is not a ‘threat’ but a component of the respectable in modern societies. More recently Woodiwiss (1988) examined the process through which American organized crime (especially mafia-related crime) was socially constructed in the Cold War.
as an ‘alien’, non-American, element that had to be eliminated by state apparatuses, and not as constitutive of them.

Constant use of the universally palatable rhetoric of ‘terrorism’ in relation to kidnapping also presents terrorism and the crime in question as a malicious ethnic enemy of state order, ‘forgetting’ thus that ‘the state’ is responsible for the ‘enemy’s’ existence. The invocation of terrorism in many cases may be contingent, serving interests of the moment. More often than not, however, it attributes a transnational dimension to kidnapping violence that deserves attention. There is a significant connection between terrorism, which ‘grew out of the failure of some national liberation movements to […] achieve sufficient political potency’ (Miller, 1980: 1; see also Tilly, 2003: 32), and kidnapping (Baumann, 1973; Jenkins, 1974; Marshall, 1974; Means, 1970; Stechel, 1972). Terrorism invites the creation of boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate ‘camps’ (Greisman, 1977; Soulier, 1978: 30), pointing to the existence of ‘ever-larger political units with an internal monopolization of the legitimate coercive force’ (Hess, 2003: 351) – only this time, crime is not recurring on a national, but a global, scale, threatening state and transnational political interests at the same time. The American experience is instructive, because in US political agendas we encounter an implication of state interests in the game of global domination. It is not surprising that as early as 1975 the US State Department commissioned the RAND (‘Research and Development’) Corporation to prepare a ‘Chronology of International Terrorism’ in which kidnappings were included under the label of global ‘social threat’ (Jenkins and Johnson, 1975). The formation of RAND in 1948 can be traced to the Second World War and the initiative of the US War Department, the office for Scientific Research and Development and the heavy (aircraft) industry. The aim was the creation of a non-profit organization that, as the RAND website claims (RAND, n.d.), would commit ‘to furthering and promoting scientific, educational, and charitable purposes for the public welfare and security of the United States’. In short, RAND was reproducing the official political line in its reports. The post 9/11 response to kidnapping is, perhaps, an even more up-to-date case: the discourse of the ‘American enemies’ always excludes the possibility of discussing the US government’s involvement in their creation because of its continuous military interventions in the Balkans and the Middle East. Just to emphasize the point further: recently, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) placed several kidnappings of American children in the Middle East under the category of ‘terrorism’, claiming that their abductors would use them to negotiate a deal to flee their war-torn countries (Insight, 27 November 2001) and organize their terrorist networks abroad.

In conclusion, the invocation of an ‘organized crime threat’ by policy and state apparatuses conceals, rather than illuminates, the problem. We ought to shift our focus from the ‘criminal’ group itself to criminogenic practices of institutions (Jamieson, 2000; Robinson, 2002) to put kidnapping in perspective. Henceforth I suggest that if we regard kidnapping as a structural problem in contemporary polities and economies, then perhaps we should consider that it
emulates social codes that are already in place and make socio-economic life function the way it does. Indeed, I proceed to argue that the logic of kidnap-
ing is the illegitimate counterpart of a legitimate exploitation system that has
been around for centuries: that of capitalist exchange.

Equating ‘Goods’ with Values

Throughout the article I mainly refer to kidnapping situations in which the
captors hold someone of political/economic significance (i.e. persons who have
the ability to negotiate their way back to freedom). I begin by pointing out that
economic/political kidnappings are crimes characterized by exchange of differ-
ent things (money, political concessions), which asserts the power of the
recipient over that of the giver. Exchange transforms kidnapping into a social
act regulated by rules and obligations, often present exclusively on the part of
the ‘giver’ (the victim’s family, business, or the host country in which the kid-
napping takes place). When I describe kidnapping as a ‘social act’, I draw atten-
tion to its symbolic interactive nature which is present in all types of human
exchange: as Erving Goffman (1967) has explained, the public ‘self’ is regulated
by the expectations of other ‘players’ in the social field and assumes the quality
of performance. Max Weber had also explained that human contact has a social
character ‘when the actor’s behaviour is meaningfully oriented to that of others’
(2002: 184–5). An idiosyncratic form of interaction is essential in kidnappings,
as interaction enables a negotiating process to take place (Briggs, 2001).

The idea of ‘exchange’ of different ‘goods’ resembles Bourdieu’s analysis of
symbolic violence through the mobilization of symbolic capital. According to
Bourdieu, economic is one of many forms of capital that circulate in the regimes
of the social. For example, to hold cultural capital (‘taste’, education) grants
one with power equivalent to that of someone who possesses economic capital.
This equation is made possible by the idea that, in principle, one can convert
(but never reduce) cultural into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1998: 34). Indeed,
this is the modus operandi of kidnappings: they encompass a process of con-
verting one thing (the victim) into another (money). All these different types of
conversion and equation require a single factor: the victim himself/herself, and
the political, economic or social value that they possess. Two elements are nec-
essary in any kidnapping then: human life and the hostage as carrier of sym-
thetic capital. Human life is the stable denominator in kidnapping calculations.
The kidnappers threaten to take lives and the negotiating authorities or the
family of the hostage are trying to save them. Human life, a universal value and
inviolable right, is a precondition for any kidnapping to take place. Symbolic
capital is what the kidnappers aspire to raise through the crime. Kidnappers’
demands may include money, social goods (e.g. provision of education to a
region) or political privileges (e.g. the release of terrorists in custody, or the
broadcasting of their demands). All these constitute types of ‘ransom’ and
the fact that they are demanded by force indicates that a game of power circulation is at play in the exchange.

But it is the hostage, as carrier of economic (money), social (networks) or political (political position) status that becomes in the course of negotiations synonymous with symbolic capital. In the case of terrorist kidnappings, we find this observation in *The Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla* by the Brazilian terrorist Carlos Mariguella. In his instructions to future terrorists Mariguella introduced a number of ‘action models’, recommending the capturing of police agents or political personalities as a practice that would enable the liberation or exchange of imprisoned revolutionaries (Mariguella in Baumann, 1985: 23; Najmuddin, 1973). In kidnappings that appear to have economic motives, the status of the ‘target’ can be socially constructed in other ways (for example, through extensive media reporting). It is somehow paradoxical that in this instance both negotiating parties (kidnappers and negotiators) simply misrecognize the value of the hostage for capital (Beasley-Murray, 2000). By misrecognition I allude to the Marxist distinction between use and exchange value – who the hostage is, and what their status can be translated into. Unlike Marxist misrecognition that becomes an axiomatic feature of economic life in capitalist contexts, its equivalent in kidnapping is based on a conscious (albeit forced for ransom-payers) decision, an almost contractual agreement that activates the process of negotiation. In practice, the social or political value of the hostage is always what Marx would call ‘a value in process’ (Marx, 1973: 256) that can be translated in many different things. It is the victim’s economic/political status that produces the capital the kidnappers use in the promotion of their own cause. Unlike the Marxist conception of misrecognition (of the use for an exchange value) however, which is the foundation of social injustice, the equation of hostages with capitals ‘puts the record straight’: in both ‘terrorist’ and ‘economic’ kidnappings it signifies the forced recognition of the kidnappers’ cause by legitimate (but no less criminal) apparatuses. *Status is the driving force of kidnapping-negotiation mechanisms.*

There is then a ‘blueprint’ in kidnapping that transcends the bipolarism economic/political. Embedded in this ‘blueprint’ is the idea that at the root of all kidnappings there is exchange, the political economy of taking, demanding and giving. The argument that kidnapping belongs to the world of political economy leads to a number of new observations that I present below.

**False Dichotomies: Calculation vs Ritual?**

Although the records on kidnapping techniques and methods are growing, the way the ‘kidnapping business’ is discussed is perplexing. Those involved in the process of kidnapping and ransoming use two modes to describe its mechanisms, which appear to stand poles apart. The first encompasses a presentation of the ‘criminals’ as traders in human life, and their actions as ‘cold-blood calculations’. The second mode attributes ritualism and cruelty to the same
business-like kidnappers. It may be wrong to resort for an examination of this oscillation to contingencies and rushed decisions on the part of the 'criminals', although this should not be foreclosed. A sociological explanation of the co-existence of these two narrative modes can already be recognized within the social structures in which the crimes take place.

Studies have drawn attention to the patience, research and organization kidnappings demand. Police raids lead to the discovery of hideouts where photographs and kidnapping operation plans were hidden (Capotorto, 1985: 3; Clutterbuck, 1978: 59–60). Nothing exemplifies 'criminal organization' better than the case of a professor from a Dagestan university in Chechnya. In September 1999 he was taken hostage together with the deputy rector of his university, driven through police checkpoints and locked in a villa in a remote area. Once he was taken inside the building, a Chechen

Asked him his name and inserted a disc labelled ‘Makhachkala’ [the region] into his computer. After a brief search the [kidnapper chief] shrugged: ‘You are not in my database’ he said. ‘What can you offer for yourself?’ (Japan Today, 3 September 2001).

The identification of potential victims is similar to the risk calculation analysis that security companies use to identify potential offenders. Hence, kidnapping presents all the qualities of a well-organized trade in human life, as Harry Godfrey, managing director of global risk consulting company Kroll, commented (CNN, 12 June 2001) on the Abu Sayyaf kidnappings that take place in the overwhelmingly Catholic Philippines. These crimes are organized by separatist groups that fight for the establishment of an independent ‘Islamic nation’ in the southern part of the country (Turner, 1995). The Moro Islamic Liberation Front is the bigger group, whereas Abu Sayyaf (‘sword-bearer’) is smaller but notorious for their involvement in many recent kidnappings. Police representatives take the same line of argument when they debate the phenomenon. Supt. Leonardo Espina, the spokesperson for the Philippine police forces, noted in an interview that the victims are as much responsible for the flourishing of kidnappings as the ‘criminals’ themselves, because they comply with ransom demands:

Kidnappers are businessmen, they just happen to be on the illegal side of it. [...] If you deprive them of the demand then there's not going to be any supply. Why would I kidnap somebody who will not pay? (The Nation, 10 May 2002)

The idea that kidnapping is regulated by the laws of demand and supply is reminiscent of the Weberian Zweckrationalität (‘instrumental/goal rationality’), a type of social action that involves the calculation of the most efficient means to the desired ends (Gerth and Mills, 1948: 56–7). Max Weber related Zweckrationalität to the capitalist market and saw in it the spirit of modernity (see Weber, 1985). In criminological terms, this model of action is related to ‘rational choice theory’ (Clarke, 1992; Clarke and Felson, 1993): if there is reward for kidnappers, then the crime is worth the effort. In Tilly’s terms, this
displays the characteristics of opportunistic collective violence. Such opportunism thrives in countries characterized by a breakdown of order and social inequalities and is regulated by predation (2003: 132). It is no coincidence that Tilly uses as an example Valerie Tishkov’s (2001) ethnographic study of Chechnyan kidnappings to consolidate his argument: Chechnya is a product of the collapse of the Soviet order, and it facilitates the rise of opportunism. We can note that the extortion of capital from the victim (who is usually better off, or a foreigner, a trespasser) is equivalent to a symbolic redistribution of existing wealth and comes close to Naylor’s (2002) definition of profit-driven ‘predatory crimes’. Although Naylor’s presentation of ‘predatory crime’ characteristics is very accurate, the understanding of kidnapping exclusively as ‘profit-driven’ crime may be restrictive. So-called ‘terrorist kidnappings’ are often committed in the name of causes that go beyond capital accumulation. Although economic capital may play a significant role in the promotion of the terrorist cause, it is never the driving force behind the crime itself. We may argue then that behind the kidnapper’s instrumental approach to crime there may be value-oriented reason (Wertrationalität) (Weber, 2002: 185), a conscious belief in a system of values for its own sake. Current kidnappings of women from local political clans and kidnappings of foreigners by Islamic terrorist groups in Iraq is an excellent example of this phenomenon (Aljazeera Net, 13 April 2004; The Independent, 10 April 2004). The money may contribute to the Iraqi cause of liberation, but it is the cause that really matters, not the economic capital.

The conceptualization of crime as regulated by economic laws dominates official business policy as well: it is standard to keep coverage of kidnapping confidential, so as not to make business personnel attractive targets (Boyle, 10 July 2000; The Times, 21 August 1997). This policy is actuarialist, because it restricts the ‘criminal’s’ opportunities to commit the crime in the first instance; its main aim is to avert interest in the ‘capital’ of the insured. Physical protection and segregation operates as a ‘mark of distinction’ (Bourdieu, 1984) after all, inviting kidnappers to attack for economic profit or in the name of a social cause (Loader, 1999).

It is also believed that the kidnapper’s rational calculation extends beyond the logic of capital accumulation, into that of business organization. In 1997 Scott Nelson, Director of Latin American Operations Crisis Management Services Group of Pinkerton, explained that kidnappers consider their captives ‘a product […] whom they are ready to sell back to a market’ (ERRI, 15 May 1997). Similarly, Nick Catrantzos of the Control Risks Group, an international firm based in London, argued that Colombian kidnapping has become a form of entrepreneurship:

There are separate gangs that will actually snatch people and then sell them to the highest bidders to the larger organisations […] and from that there are separate gangs that contract different portions of the kidnapping experience. (CNN, 7 May 2001).
But ‘professionalism’, which stands here metonymically for ‘hard dealing’, can also become an ‘honourable’ attribute. The marriage of professionalism and courteous manners alludes to the co-existence of a ‘civilizing process’ (Elias, 1978) (with which even ‘criminals’ have to go along) with modern attitudes (politeness as professionalism): not only are kidnappers presented as trustworthy entrepreneurs, but they also acquire the status of the ‘noble thief’. An Abu Sayyaf hostage in 2000 had assured medical aid suppliers that they were ‘being treated correctly’ (CNN, 1 May 2000) by their abductors. ‘We were all surprised, [with] the manner in which they treated us – in a good way’ (CNN, 6 August 1999), claimed Christo Johnson, a Reuters reporter and victim of a kidnapping that took place in Sierra Leone by soldiers of the former military junta. In April 2000 a 26-year-old insurance executive and a 28-year-old commercial entrepreneur (‘Alexander’) were kidnapped by a branch of FARC in Bogotá. They were led to a FARC stronghold in the mountains in which the organization held other hostages (The New York Times, 3 May 2001). ‘Alexander’ makes a number of incisive comments regarding the ‘professionalism’ of his kidnappers:

The guerrillas were extremely respectful […] They took care of us like an investment. The commander said, ‘If you feel sick, if someone lacks respect, I’m here to help. The only thing you [must] have is patience.’ (The New York Times, 3 June 2001)

‘Alexander’s’ self-description as an ‘investment’ presents the kidnappers’ polite conduct as rationalized choice that will maximize their profit: nobody wants to buy ‘damaged goods’.

The ‘professional’, business-like representation of kidnapping in risk assessment milieux and in victims’ accounts reproduces the conventional definition of organized crime in the starkest terms (Smith, 1991). By focusing on the convergence of social patterns of (business and criminal) interaction and contractual (rather than politically accountable) relations (Loader and Sparks, 2002), businessmen and kidnappers end up mirroring each other: both exploit situations and both disregard wider social considerations in the name of profit. Perhaps we should view this convergence as the result of a globalization process that eradicates state control, gives way to private enterprise and ‘kills the social’ (Rose, 1996) as we knew it. The emergence of a ‘market society’ invites a replacement of universally recognized institutions with organizations that may not entertain universal plausibility, but which institutionalize social inequalities, providing the perfect environment for entrepreneurial (if ‘criminal’) minds (Taylor, 1999). Entrepreneurship characterizes also the institution of kidnapping insurance itself, which is provided to ever-complaining American corporations. Bearing in mind the proliferation of commercial security providers that swamp the internet, the convergence of business and criminal logics implicates us in a vicious circle, whereby kidnapping sustains and is sustained by private agents.
Only when distressing rituals begin does the mode of description of the kidnappers change. However, so-called ‘irrational’ rituals are an extension of the practices of psychological manipulation that all hostage-takers employ. These rituals replace policies of ‘active trust’ (Giddens, 1994) that are cultivated in global systems of interaction and form part of organizational/firm strategies (Hobbs, 2001). ‘Trust’ in kidnapping negotiations thus takes the form of a ‘contractual’ agreement over which only the kidnappers have control. Put bluntly: I trust that you deliver; then I am obliged to send the victim back alive. The scale of cruelty in rituals differs according to the response of the negotiating party, but one could divide them into three types: ‘threats’ and silence, exertion of physical pain/abuse on the victim, and ritualized murder of the hostage.

Threats appear in all negotiating processes. They are a symptom of instrumental rationality that comes in striking contrast to the ransom-payer’s affectual reason (which is ‘determined by the actor’s specific affects and feelings’, Weber, 2002: 185). ‘Silence’ adds new dimensions to the ‘criminal’ strategy. Kidnappers use ‘silence’ when negotiations reach a deadlock and the ‘bid’ needs to be ‘raised’. Thus they breed a climate of uncertainty, reinforcing the payers’ recognition of the value that the hostage carries. Not only does this generate the preconditions for quick ransom delivery, but it also makes a favourable deal possible. However, we should also consider the practice of cutting off communication as homologous to that of capital conversion, because it secures the transformation of actual time into symbolic time (de Certeau, 1984: 35–6). ‘Silence’ takes advantage of the physical time that elapses from the last negotiation to the next (deferred) contact, forcing ransom payers to accept the misrecognition of hostage value as economic capital.

Physical harm is an intermediary between threats and death: it is a controlled use of violence, which asserts the power of the captors. The murder of the victim serves a dual end: in non-payments cases it demonstrates that even outlaws have their own laws. It also shows that failure of exchange can only result in compensation for losses. Kidnappers who do not receive the capital they demand set in motion a mechanism of ‘self-compensation’ for their damaged ‘honour’. By ‘destroying’ the traded ‘goods’ they ‘save face’ and regain the lost infamy on which their trade is based.

Varying degrees of violence – its hierarchical application – point to one direction: violence is a means to an end, and therefore its value is strategic (Tilly, 2003: 237). We can provide a few examples of the exercise of violence as self-promotion. In Mexico, a ‘gang’ that operated in collaboration with the police was producing videotapes that showed the victims being abused and was posting them to the hostages’ families. The message that accompanied the tapes was always the same: ‘When do you want us to stop?’ (The Washington Post, 17 September 2002). Another example points in the same direction: in Ecuador, the kidnapping of 10 men from an oil-drilling site resulted in ritual murders accompanied by the message left on the bodies of the victims: ‘I am a non-payment of ransom’ (The New York Times, 30 June 2001). The same ‘message’ of non-payment was sent in another case, when the authorities did not meet
Aby Sayyaf’s demands: a priest and three teachers were found shot execution style. According to a witness, ‘at least two appeared to have been hacked on their bodies and arms’ (CNN, 6 May 2000), whereas the priest had also been tortured. The exertion of physical pain on the priest can be viewed as a symbolic action that further asserted the rebels’ ability to defy the heavenly authorities of their religious enemies. Ritual killing is a useful technique, even when payment is not realized: for example in 2000 Aby Sayyaf kidnapped a group of foreigners off the island of Jolo (CNN, 25 April 2000). When the Philippine authorities sent troops after the kidnapping gang, the rebels claimed to have beheaded two captives ‘as a “birthday present” for President Joseph Estrada’ (CNN, 29 April 2000). This kept the press and the families of the victims in turmoil and tipped the scales in favour of the rebels.

Such rituals are performative acts that bestow crime with interactive value. They are essential in the captor’s professional self-presentation – or, more correctly, they reverse the Goffmanesque paradigm of self-presentation. As Goffman explained (1969), the art of self-presentation is essential for every individual’s self-esteem and successful social interaction. In order to be accepted by others, we subject ourselves to constant self-assessment in private until a ‘public self’ emerges. Yet, instead of concealing the performative element of criminal self-presentation, threats in kidnapping negotiations exaggerate performance. Threats, murder and abuse overstate, rather than hide, the ‘deviant identity’ of the kidnappers and it is not a coincidence that they are intertwined with practices of self-promotion in the media. The kidnappers’ use of imagery reveals an awareness of the role that the media play in the social construction of crime (Levi, 2002: 879). By playing upon images of cruelty, the kidnappers raise the stakes in the same way that publicity of kidnappings may ‘raise the perceived value of the hostages’ (Auerbach, 1998: 172). As Tishkov has shown, Chechen captors may mutilate or kill their hostages to make a spectacle out of their act and attract attention (Tishkov, 2001: 341). The use of audiovisual techniques is useful in terrorist kidnappings, in which the terrorists aspire to create a ‘violent reality’ as a means of communication. This reality is constructed often with the media’s complicity: as editors have admitted, its broadcasting appeals to ‘the archaic mind-set of the audience’ (Schmid, 1992: 134). Broadcasting of kidnapping transforms violence into a staged, ritualized ‘social drama’ (Turner, 1974) that replicates past experience, is seriously performed by all participants and enjoyed by the ‘viewers’. At the same time, in terrorist kidnappings, which invite payment in political capital, violence on the screen becomes for the terrorist group a means to assert its public identity (Gerrits, 1992: 47; Larson, 1973; Miller, 1980: 33). The assertion of a powerful collective self is a rationalized act, not one that belongs to a collective tribal unconscious: a strong collective self is a form of symbolic capital, which, together with the victim’s status, secures the satisfaction of terrorist demands. Again, therefore, terror is mobilized strategically: the more of it, the more the chances for successful ‘criminal business’.
Conclusion

In this article I have argued that a classification of kidnappings into political or economic may not be helpful for sociology-oriented criminological enquiry because it is not followed by an understanding of the social logic of this crime. It was suggested that the main kidnapping mechanism is that of exchange and equation (‘misrecognition’) of various forms of capital, value and status. Although the thesis ends up privileging the economic over the political, politics remain a significant element in the economic rationale of the ‘crime’. The exchange mechanisms of kidnapping are patterns of social conduct, webs of rules and expectations that moderate non-‘criminal’ action in ‘legitimate’ business milieux and state practices. In short, the ‘economic’ that I support is not restricted to the financial domain, but presents exchange mechanisms as the modus operandi of social relations. Kidnapping is then the by-product, rather than the ‘enemy’ of social order, in our late modernity. The discursive relationship that legitimate apparatuses establish between it and ‘organized crime’ aims to consolidate their claim over the control of violence and to deprive kidnapping of its social identity. It is precisely the rationalized use of symbolic and physical forms of violence by the so-called ‘criminals’ that reinstates their identity as ‘rebels’ of the system – a system which is attacked from ‘within’, with the mobilization of its own weapons of forced and unequal redistribution of resources. To restate the title of the study, kidnappers capitalize on values at the expense of other people’s lives and fortunes in a way as dangerous as it is politically ambivalent because of its ‘entrepreneurial logic’ that defines our late modern world.

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