

# **UNDERSTANDING VIOLENT STREET WORLDS**

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# Abstract

The thesis is composed of two sections. The first provides a critical overview of the published work assembled in the second. This body of work is composed of journal articles, monographs, papers published in educated collections and research reports. Though these papers address a range of different subjects from street robbery, the culture of gun users to the study of urban street gangs, what unifies these papers is that they collectively help make sense of the violent street world occupied by young men, overwhelmingly from deprived backgrounds, who use weapons, collectively and individually, in street confrontations. In the critical analysis the term violent street world is defined and the body of published work which examines it is then contextualised; first, by a consideration of the external political and social forces that led to its production; second, by reference to the internal academic traditions in which and at times against which these papers were produced. Rather than approach the study of the street world by reference to the actors who inhabit it, the crimes they do or the weapons they use, the thesis makes a case for making the street world itself the object and focus of enquiry. The street world is then studied thematically in four chapters. The themes selected are: street crime in a historical context, the aetiology of street violence, the structure and organisation of the street world and the distinction between street representations and street realities. The analysis concludes with reflections on the key contributions the work assembled has made to our understanding of violent street worlds and their social analysis. The work is original in so far as it contests many current myths that have been proposed to explain street violence while producing more compelling explanations for it. These help explicate why

the violence occurs, how and why it is changing, who is involved and why people engage in it.

Key words: Gang, street culture, guns, knives, weapons

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# Section 1. Critical Analysis

# Introduction

This document introduces the published work submitted in support of this thesis. These papers, derived variously from journal articles, research reports, chapters in edited collections and sole authored monographs, were written over the last two decades. At face value they cover a diverse array of subjects from street robbery, urban street gangs to the culture of gun users. What unifies this body of work is that they collectively help make sense of what I will term the *violent street world* inhabited largely but not exclusively by young men; primarily those who derive from poor and deprived backgrounds; who confront and perpetrate violence in street settings. The environments where the violence is predominantly performed are the areas these young men inhabit and frequent; typically areas subject to multiple types of deprivation and poverty. In the case of the UK where the research for this thesis was principally conducted, this violence finds its most visceral expression in the inner city areas of its metropolitan cities.

The critical narrative has two sections. In the first (Chapter 2) I situate the published work within a consideration of the external (political and public) context that led to its production and the internal (academic) traditions, in which and, at times, against which, these papers were produced.

In relation to the external context I describe how my research broadened out from a consideration of street robbery and the study of urban street gangs, to focus more broadly on the street world itself studied as a complex whole. Underpinning this shift in focus was not only the recognition the street world needed to be studied as a totality, it was shaped by my conviction that most approaches to the study of violence in street settings was not only unduly reductive but often mobilised descriptive labels which, on inspection, were little



better than unhelpful, inaccurate reifications. Instead of studying street violence and street actors by reference to a particular street actor (such as the gang); or by focusing upon a particular category of offences (street robbery or knife crime, for example) I argue for a wider and more inclusive approach which prioritises the street world as the object of enquiry.

I then contextualise the work assembled here by reference to the academic tradition of British Critical Criminology. This was a tradition which, in its late 20<sup>th</sup> century incarnation, had largely neglected the study of street actors such as muggers and gangsters in favour of studying youth subcultures and which, when it did attend to the study of street actors (such as 'muggers'), tended to study them either by considering the visceral social response these provoked on the part of control agencies (moral panic theory), or by considering how deviants were constructed as such (social constructionism). While critical criminology in its 21<sup>st</sup> century 'Left Realist' incarnation, had discovered street violence and seemed inclined to study it, when academics reached for explanations, those supplied were often dubious and highly reductive. This is particularly evident in many current attempts to reduce and explain away contemporary street violence by reference to urban street gangs (Pitts 2008).

In the second section I explore the nature of violent street worlds thematically. The themes I have chosen reflect my research preoccupations - which also raises the possibility that the street world I want to make sense of can be approached in other ways. I acknowledge this. The themes I have chosen, however, throw light on some of the key features of the street world. My four themes are: street crime in a historical context; the aetiology of violence; the structure and organisation of the street world; and the distinction between what I call street representations and street realities.

In Chapter 3, I introduce three papers that have a historical inflection. I begin with *The Janus face of the robber in popular culture* which examines how street robbers can be constructed as both a folk hero and folk devil (Hallsworth, 2017). I then introduce a paper that mobilises an auto-ethnographic methodology, *The fists and the fury: My life in a sea of gangs*, in which I document the UK's recent history of urban street gangs by reference to my own experiences of having my head 'kicked-in' by various iterations of them from the 1960s to the 1980s (Hallsworth, 2014). I conclude with a paper, *Continuities and discontinuities in street violence*, which explores the changing face of street violence in the post war period whilst also reflecting on its causes (Hallsworth, 2014).

In chapter 4 I introduce three papers which explore the aetiology of violence in street settings. *The production of motivated offenders* (Hallsworth: 2005) examines the factors that would propel a population of young, disadvantaged, Black males to embrace street robbery. The second paper *That's life innit: A British perspective on guns, crime and social order* (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2005) describes respectively the culture of professional criminals who use guns in pursuit of criminal enterprise and contrasts this with a more disorganised lifeworld populated by volatile young men 'on road' who use guns in a less instrumental and more reckless way. The chapter concludes with *Violence and street culture* which explores why violence explodes in street settings by reference to the study of 'street imperatives.' That is, the ends to which social action in street settings is primarily directed (Hallsworth, 2014).

In chapter 5 I present two papers directed at making sense of street organisation and structure. In *Confronting London's Violent Street Worlds* I outline a typology of urban street collectives which have some stake in violence. (Hallsworth and Duffy, 2010). In *Arborealism and rhizomatics: A treatise*

(Hallsworth, 2014) I contest the idea that informal organisations such as urban street gangs can be studied as if they are formal organisations, and mobilise instead Deleuze's concept of the rhizome to develop an alternative 'nomadic' theory of street organisation.

In chapter 6 I introduce three papers which take on and contest what I term the UK Gangland thesis. A thesis which, in summary, holds that urban street gangs are a new and developing threat and which seeks to explain most manifestations of violence as 'gang related'. In *Gangland Britain: Realities, fantasies and industry* (Hallsworth, 2011) I contest the idea that gangs represent the new face of youth crime as argued by Pitts (Pitts, 2008). In the second paper '*Deciphering gang talk*', I use Wiggstein's theory of language games to understand the rules of composition that govern how 'gang talk' as a discourse is produced. The chapter concludes with '*Tilting at Windmills: In pursuit of gang truths in a British City*' which summarises what happened when I tried to find empirical support for the sensational claims that have been made about the gang situation in the UK in research conducted in an area considered 'gang afflicted'.

The concluding chapter summarises the key contributions the body of work assembled here have made to our knowledge and understanding of violent street worlds and their social analysis. The work, I contend, is original in so far as it both contests many myths that have been propounded to explain street violence; whilst producing more compelling explanations for it. In a country where weaponised street violence continue to see more young men from deprived areas killed pointlessly at each other's hands, the papers in this thesis help explain why the violence occurs, how and why it is changing, who is involved and why people engage in it.

# Context

As Jock Young observes, criminology, like any other discipline, has both an internal and external face (Young, 1990). On one hand its development is shaped by the external political, economic and cultural contexts that shape its preoccupations. This includes the wider politics of law and order, the changing face of crime and the social response to it. The internal history defines how academic players orientate themselves to the external context and in relation to each other. In this chapter I will address the external context specifically as it impacted upon the production of the work assembled here. It explores how I moved from an analysis of street robbery and urban street gangs through to a more generic examination of violent street worlds. I examine the internal context by looking at what British Critical Criminology (the area in which this work is situated) had to say about the forms of violence that concern me here. As a precursor to this discussion I will begin by defining more clearly what I mean by the expression *violent street world*, the focus of the published work.

## **Defining Violent Street Worlds**

By the term 'violent street world', I refer to a subterranean world typically (but not exclusively) populated by volatile men, predominantly (but not exclusively) young men. These are men who typically live out the round of their life in urban settings characterised by high levels of deprivation and poverty. Many live precarious, makeshift lives, in which violence and threat of violence features disproportionately; where the violence in question is predominantly played out and performed in the public theatre of the street. The violence in question may be considered normalised to the extent it constitutes a taken for granted, inescapable feature of their lives, where the violence in

question takes a number of different forms, individual but also collective in nature. It includes street robbery, interpersonal violence, territorial violence, gang related violence and, not least, violence connected to the street retail of illicit drugs.

Violent street worlds of this type can be found with variation in most urban and industrial settings. They have existed in England, the society where most of the research presented here was conducted, in the premodern medieval city and became entrenched in the poorer areas of the developing industrial city (see Hallsworth, 2005, for a short history). They typically constitute, in one sense, a perennial taken for granted feature of everyday life in most working class, urban, inner city areas. That said, they assume a far more violent and deadly form in areas in which conditions of precariousness and marginalisation, what Wacquant terms 'advanced marginality' is most heavily pronounced (Wacquant, 2009). Late modern societies under conditions of neoliberalism provide particularly conducive environments in which the expressive violence of the street world finds its most lethal expression. The empirical symptoms of this very human tragedy in the case of the UK can be found expressed in high levels of interpersonal violence (much of it weaponised), that have seen hundreds of young men killed or seriously wounded at each other's hands.

As John Pitts notes, the violence characteristic of these street worlds is thus 'symmetrical' (Pitts, 2008). Disadvantaged young men prey upon and victimise each other. The violence is thus also 'implosive', inwardly directed. Periodically, however, the violence can be dramatically externalised, no more so than in 'days of rage', during events of mass public dis-order typically labelled as 'riots' (Standing, 2011).

The violence of the street world often goes unnoticed and unreported. At times, however, the violent events and the violent lives at the centre of this

world can explode into public consciousness. This often occurs following particularly tragic events, often involving innocent bystanders; and often on the wave of a deviance amplification spiral that propels the violence up the public and political issue attention cycle. At times, it is a form of crime that brings the violence of the street world to public attention. This was certainly so in 2001 in the U.K. when street robbery surged in a society that suddenly found itself victim to a new generation of violently inclined 'muggers'. At other times, it is less the form of violence that commands attention but the groups that are allegedly responsible for perpetrating it. This has certainly been the case in the U.K. post 2002 when urban street based violence began to be blamed on urban street gangs. Today the focus appears to have shifted to the weapons they use.

Though the young men who occupy the street world adopt a fairly common style, one predominantly informed by the legacy of American hip hop culture, it would be a mistake to try and make sense of the culture of the street through an analysis of its style and aesthetics alone. It would be even more mistaken to consider the street world as governed by a common or coherent subculture at least as subcultures were defined by the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies who saw in youth subcultures, creative and adaptive responses to key problems posed in their parent culture (Hall et al, 1976). As will become clear in the analysis of street actors presented here, the street world has no underlying, integrated culture. Even though its participants are often marginalised and excluded from mainstream society, they are, for the most part, wholly incorporated into the culture of ornamental, compulsory consumption around which late modern societies are organised. The street world as such has no coherent subculture. As Bourgeois notes, it's culture is best grasped as 'a conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction of values and ideologies' (Bourgeois, 2003)

### **The External Context**

My initial contact with the street world began when I first took post as a sociology lecturer in London Guildhall University. The university was located in London's East End, notorious for its gangsters, poverty and crime. In 1998 I was commissioned to produce a crime audit for Tower Hamlets Crime and Community Safety Board. I applied an inclusive framework to my brief and profiled police crime and disposal data. I also interviewed practitioners and young people from different ethnic groups in the area. I also profiled – to the horror of the police – their stop and search data. In my final report (resisted bitterly by the police who tried to suppress it) I highlighted a number of issues. These included ethnic disproportionality in stop and search, intra-ethnic violence and street robbery. I also drew attention to urban street gangs in the area. No one at this time was talking about urban street gangs.

This research prompted the Head of Government Office for London to make money available to Lambeth Community Safety Partnership on the condition that they commission me to conduct research into escalating levels of street crime in the borough. Though national crime rates were plateauing out by 1998, after rising sharply in the post war era, street crime (meaning street robbery) was bucking the trend and had risen dramatically (Hallsworth, 2005). I was asked to explain this rise in an area of the UK where escalating street robbery was most dramatically evident, Lambeth, a multiply deprived area in London. Using a heavily modified form of routine activity theory I examined the forces that worked to propel a population of young, predominantly Black males to become street robbers; I explored why a predominantly White and more affluent demographic became their victims and considered these factors in relation to deficits in the control effort. This research formed the evidential basis

for my book *Street Crime* published in 2005, chapters from which are profiled here (Hallsworth, 2005).

In 2002 I was invited by the Head of the Serious Crime Directorate at Scotland Yard to become the first academic adviser to the Metropolitan Police on urban street gangs. This meant advising their strategic working group, Operation Cruise. When I was appointed public fears about Street Crime were beginning to fade. The issue attention cycle had shifted and the gang quickly came to replace the mugger as folk devil incarnate, a role it has continued to perform to this day (see Hallsworth, 2014).

This point is worth noting because prior to 2005 urban street gangs were not an object of public, let alone academic interest. Criminologists didn't consider them worthy of investigation; there were no gang specialists in the country offering bespoke gang intervention initiatives; the gang issue was not considered serious enough to warrant punitive legislation to suppress them; nor did the media feel concerned enough to sensationalise them. This all changed and very quickly to the extent that by 2003-7 Britain was experiencing something approximating a full blown moral panic about urban street gangs (Hallsworth, 2013).

The urban street gang first came to prominence following a spate of highly publicised murders that were defined as 'gang related'. The first and most notorious was the fatal stabbing of a 12 year old boy, Damilola Taylor in Peckham in 2000 in what was widely reported as a gang land killing<sup>1</sup>. The idea that gangs were on the rise would subsequently be confirmed when two sisters, Charlene Ellis and Letisha Shakespeare were murdered in drive by shootings in

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically, though Damilola's death was used to buttress the Gangland UK thesis, he was in point of fact killed by two brothers. It was not a gangland murder.



Birmingham in 2003. A continual procession of violent deaths in cities like London, Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham, often involving young Black males, also identified as 'gang related' began to confirm to many a stark truth, namely that the urban street gang was no longer an American problem alone but a British one.

The Metropolitan Police's position on urban street gangs (then at least) was admirable; they had no idea what gangs were (there was no agreed definition), no idea how many of them there might be and no real sense of the risks they posed. They wanted an evidential base from which to derive policy and I was commissioned to provide the answers. I initiated a literature review, and went on to develop with my colleague Tara Young a definition of the urban street gang produced as part of a wider typology of street based collectives (Hallsworth and Young, 2004). A further development of this typology, produced for London Councils is profiled in chapter 4.

In 2008 John Pitts produced his work on 'reluctant gangsters', based on research in Walthamstow in London, subsequently expanded into a book where he identified gangs as the 'new face of youth crime' (Pitts, 2007, 2008). His work chimed with a perception, increasingly common in the mass media and among policy makers, that gangs were new and posed a serious threat. In this guise, as folk devil incarnate, the gang began to be blamed for just about every manifestation of urban violence: They were, allegedly, responsible for the control of the drugs trade, most weapon related fatalities, an outbreak of dangerous dogs and the force responsible for orchestrating the English riots of 2011<sup>2</sup>. According to various reports, the gang had taken control of the playgrounds of British Schools and was making inroads in the penal estate

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<sup>2</sup> This perspective was universally held by the mass media and the political establishment. For a critique see the opening chapter of *The Gang and Beyond* (Hallsworth, 2014).

(Ofsted, 2005). Gang members were apparently getting younger and girl gangs were apparently on the rise (Bracchi, 2008). Indeed, the gang posed such an immanent existential threat to the wellbeing of British Society that government minister Ian Duncan Smith felt able to blame it in 2011 for 'Breaking Britain' (Wintour, 2011).

While not doubting that gangs existed, I was by no means convinced by the evidence being assembled to support the thesis that gangs represented the 'new face of youth crime'. I responded with a paper published in *Crime Media and Culture* with Tara Young, entitled *Gang Talk and Gang Talkers: A critique* (Hallsworth and Young, 2008); and subsequently *Gangland Britain: Realities, fantasy and industry* (Hallsworth: 2011) which is collated here. My concerns eventually provoked me to write *The gang and beyond: Interpreting violent street worlds* (Hallsworth, 2014). In these papers I sought to show that groups that had all the hallmark of gangs constituted a perennial feature of life in working class areas throughout the twentieth century and beyond. They were not, in other words new. Nor did I accept that the gang was responsible for the many violent excesses blamed on it. Youth crime in its various incarnations had causes that were typically not gang related.

Two days after the English riots of 2011 ceased, I was called in to Scotland Yard by the ACPO (Association of Chief Police Officers) lead on organised crime. He had a question he wanted me to answer: Were the riots caused by gangs? I told him unequivocally no. This, he told me, was also the position of the police but not that of the Government who were determined to blame gangs

for the riots and make gang control their preferred policy response to them<sup>3</sup>. He wanted me to meet the ACPO lead on urban street gangs. We subsequently met in what was then a very austere and depopulated Home Office. He was on his way to brief the Home Secretary. He told me I came highly commended but was seen as 'controversial'. He was interested in my take on the gang situation.

We also discussed what would eventually translate into a research project conducted in Birmingham, initiated to explore the gang situation there, while also seeking to ascertain how far the sensational claims being made about gangs corresponded with street realities. Rather than initiate research into gangs where the available knowledge base was slight, I sought to study 'gang truths' by examining areas where urban street gangs in the city were understood by the police to be a major problem and where the police would (at least I thought) have amassed considerable evidence about their excesses. The research was conducted in 2013 in Birmingham. I published the findings of this research in a paper entitled *Tilting at windmills: In pursuit of gang truths in a British City* (Hallsworth and Dixon: 2016). I profile this work in chapter 6.

In summary, the body of work presented here was predominantly driven by the research I was commissioned to do by a range of commissioning bodies. The projects commissioned, while different, are nevertheless unified in so far as they have a common focus. They concern violence predominantly perpetrated in public space; where males from overwhelmingly deprived backgrounds are the perpetrators. The 'mugger', the gang member, the knife and gun user, they

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<sup>3</sup> This was exactly what the government then went onto do – even though compelling evidence began to surface very quickly that gangs were not the orchestrating force responsible for the worst outbreak of urban disorder that the UK had witnessed in the post war era (Hallsworth 2013).

all herald from the same population. They are all a part of the violent street world this thesis aspires to make sense of.

### **The internal context**

The work assembled here sits within British critical criminology. This comprises by no means a homogenous field of enquiry and like other academic areas is prone to bouts of tribalism and, not least, internecine war between opposing factions within it and between it and the more conventional, administrative wing of criminology. Indeed, as I began to undertake the research profiled here a virulent rift had opened up within critical criminology following the rise of Left Realism and its critique of what Jock Young termed 'left idealism' (Young, 1979). His critique centred on what he claimed was the failure of Critical Criminologists to take working class crime seriously with the consequence that the task of explaining it had been ceded, by default, to the underclass theorists of the right such as Charles Murray (Murray, 1990). In the short profile I will now undertake, which summarises what critical criminology had to say about violent street worlds, as we shall see, Jock's critique has some salience. Indeed, it would not be amiss to suggest that Critical Criminology's interest in phenomena such as street robbers and gang members didn't command much interest at all, at least in the closing two decades of the twentieth century. It pays to reflect on why this is the case.

Though gang research is now one of the fastest developing fields of study in contemporary British criminology, it could be noted that this interest is very recent and only occurred following the wider social discovery of the gang in the twenty first century (see above). After early and pioneering work by David Downes in the 1960s (Downes, 1966) who sought to apply American subcultural theory to his study of delinquent groups in London's East End, interest in urban

street gangs never took off in a UK criminological tradition that became increasingly fascinated with youth subculture and, not unrelated to this, the often violent and disproportionate social response subcultures provoked on the part of the agencies of social control.

Downes' research did not discover urban street gangs so much as 'street corner societies'. What this finding demonstrated was that if gangs were an issue they remained an American problem not an English one. Though Downes acknowledged that his street corner societies could be violent, the violence in which they engaged he understood less as symptoms of pathological delinquency associated with group dynamics but as a form of violent leisure engaged in by young working class men escaping, at least temporarily, the mundane disciplines of the factory and the school yard. Though a couple of studies over the twentieth century did draw attention to the fact that gangs might just be a British issue as well (see, for example, research on gangs in Glasgow (Patrick, 1973), such studies were conducted in the margins of a criminological tradition whose centre of gravity lay elsewhere.

When group based delinquency was studied in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century it was not through a gang lens that the groups in question were studied. In two notable ethnographic studies, Paul Willis's, *Learning to labour* (Willis, 1977) and Ken Pryce, *Endless pressure* (Pryce, 1979), group offending is described but in each case the authors refrain from evoking the term 'gang'. The authors describe violent lives; and each explore the violence their male research subjects engaged in as an adaptive strategy to the contradictions and struggles they confront in a class and ethnically divided capitalist society. Paul Willis, for example, documents how his white working class subjects come to embrace a hard masculine and racist identity as an adaptive response to a middle class school system established to fail them. Ken Pryse's study of young Black men

in Bristol explored a hustling culture embraced by young men living precarious lives, unprepared to do what they considered 'shit work' for the white man. None of the authors here believe that their subjects are part of some quasi organised criminal entity such as a gang. Each eschew such a criminalising gaze in favour of exploring the cultural dynamics of the groups in question.

This cultural turn in many ways came to define the evolving centre of gravity in a British criminological tradition that, specifically with the rise of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, lost interest in American gang research and began to focus upon the range of flamboyant subcultures that emerged in Britain in the late twentieth century. These were not studied as criminological entities but as highly creative and adaptive subcultures and, not least, 'cultures of resistance' (see Hall et al, 1977). It was not their criminality that attracted attention but their style, anti-establishment credentials and counter-cultural politics. It would not be until the opening decade of the 21st century that the gang began to reappear as an object of analysis and gang research subsequently began to expand in British Criminology. I will return to this point below.

If British criminology exhibited little interest in urban street gangs in many respects the same can be said of its approach to another pronounced aspect of street life in urban areas and that is street robbery. As the failure to address such violence is moot to this thesis it bears to consider why.

The first reason that may be cited to explain the hesitation on the part of critical criminologists to engage with street robbery can be attributed to the fact that it did not constitute an offence that it could portray at all sympathetically. It was and remains an offence disproportionately perpetrated by poor people and, by and large, the population of victims are also poor. Unlike the subcultures that emerged in post-war Britain - examined by the Birmingham school as exemplifying resistance to a deeply inequitable ethnic and class-

divided society, it is difficult to categorise street crime in quite the same way. For a tradition whose political standpoint was forged through an attempt to resist the criminalising tendencies of the state, the modern street robber would not provide much that would sanction any meaningful politics of recognition. Indeed, for a tradition that had traditionally sought to 'humanise the deviant' (Cohen, 1981) the street robber did not constitute a deviant many found worthy of humanising.

The reluctance to study street robbery, I would argue, was also compounded by another factor. At stake here is the contentious issue of race, and, in particular, the way the political right have seized upon what they claim amounts to Black over-representation in acts like street robbery. A trope implicitly stated in the work of underclass theorists of the political right such as Charles Murray (Murray: 1990). Though critical criminologists have never denied that minority ethnic groups have been involved in crime, many remained convinced that the coverage given to their involvement remains vastly disproportionate to the threat allegedly identified. Indeed, far from engaging in an objective reporting of 'facts', what really underlies such reporting, Gilroy argued, was a thinly veiled racist agenda set upon proving that the Black population is inherently criminogenic and poses by its presence an existential threat to the white population and the British way of life (Gilroy, 1987).

As critical criminology emerged to resist the racialising agenda of the state it was, from the beginning, unprepared to endorse a research agenda that would appear to concede legitimacy to what Gilroy called 'the myth of Black criminality' (Gilroy, 1987). To study Black involvement in crime would inevitably reproduce the dangerous reification 'Black crime', while marking out the Black population as a suspect community for yet more coercive regulation and control.

For critical criminologists who had the temerity to suggest that Black male involvement in crime was a serious issue that required study – as John Lea and Jock Young did in their Left Realist text *'What is to be done about Law and order'* (Lea and Young: 1984), their fate was to be accused by Gilroy of 'capitulating to the weight of white racism'. To study street crime and even worse to take the money of the state to study it, was considered tantamount to becoming complicit in the ideological agenda of an authoritarian state. In a paper published by Hilliard et al in 2004, directed at the constituency of those who might be tempted, criminologists were starkly warned to avoid 'feeding' at what the authors starkly termed 'the state's trough' (Hillyard, Sim, Tombs and Whyte, 2004).

In the face of this critique, most critical criminologists in the UK simply left the study of Black involvement in acts like street crime off the research agenda in the closing decades of the twentieth century; studying instead the way in which Black involvement in crime was discursively constructed as a problem; and by paying attention to the disproportionate social response it provoked (see, for example, Bowling and Philips: 2002).

When critical criminologists did enquire into street robbery, it could be observed the focus of analysis was less on the act itself but on the social response robbery has provoked. This approach is particularly apparent in *'Policing the Crisis, Mugging, the State, Law and Order'* written in 1978 by Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts (Hall et al 1978). The text was composed against a back drop of growing concerns in the UK during the 1970s over what was being reported as a sharp increase in street robbery, perpetrated by what the media identified as a population of young Black male 'muggers'. The book profiles what the authors, following Cohen, term 'the moral panic; that arose around 'mugging'' and they explain this by reference to what they identify as



the 'organic crisis of the capitalist state,' during this period. Though the text concludes with some reflections on street robbers, it could be noted that no street robbers are actually spoken to.

Rising street crime in the early twentieth first century, and closely allied to this, rising weapon use, certainly provoked renewed academic interest (mine included (Hallsworth 2005)); it was, however, the subsequent discovery of the urban street gang that began to ignite growing academic interest in the violent excessive violence of the street world. From a tradition that had largely ignored gang members, criminologists began to study them in earnest.

Nick Tilly produced one the first studies into gangland Britain in a report that focussed specifically on the situation in Manchester which was then witnessing a spike in gun related fatalities considered 'gang related' (Tilly, 2004) , The Youth Justice Board commissioned a report on urban street gangs in which I was involved (Young et al, 2007); while Pitts began his study on gangs in Waltham Forest (Pitts, 2007). The ESRC commissioned research by Medina and Aldridge in street gangs in a large English metropolitan city (Aldridge, J. and J. Medina-Ariza, 2005); while the Metropolitan Police commissioned me to develop a working definition of the gang as part of a wider study on street collectives (Hallsworth and Young 2006). Just as the UK was in the process of discovering urban street gangs, so to were criminologists from across Europe. To help Europeans make sense of them a group of professional gang experts from the USA established the Eurogang Network to study the phenomenon (Decker and Weerman, 2005). Gang research began to burgeon.

If the gang constituted the general object of analysis, it was nevertheless comprehended in very different ways. In the UK two opposing poles in the debate began to open up between those who considered the gang a new and

developing threat. A position staked out by authors such as Pitts and more recently Harding (Pitts, 2008; Harding, 2016) and those, myself included, who were more sceptical about the threats gangs allegedly posed as well as the novelty of the phenomenon. The Eurogang researchers, meanwhile, pursuing a largely numbers driven, positivistic research agenda, sought to establish that gangs were indeed a potent and present threat to European societies otherwise in denial of the gangs within them.

The papers I present in this thesis were written against a back drop framed by this changing intellectual tradition and its legacy. Against a critical criminological tradition that had largely lost sight of street based violence, I have consciously sought to reinstate its analysis into critical criminology's frame of reference. To this extent the work profiled here adopts a left realist orientation. I consider the street world to be self-destructive and treat it as such. My research has always been initiated with the aim of trying to understand such violence and helping develop an evidence base from which just policy responses can be derived. At the same time, my research has also been directed at contesting what I consider to be flawed interpretations of the street. In particular, recent attempts to subsume the study of street violence into the study of urban street gangs. The papers assembled here reflect these preoccupations. They attempt to make sense of violent street worlds while also contesting what, I argue, are deeply flawed and reductive attempts to make sense of them.

# Historical Perspectives

In this chapter I will discuss three papers that approach the study of violent street worlds, and the actors who inhabit them, within a historical framework of analysis. The first paper examines the representation of the outlaw in popular culture. It examines what I term its Janus face by considering how street robbers can find themselves positioned paradoxically within the same culture as both folk devils and folk heroes. The second paper adopts an auto-ethnographic methodology and applies this method to contest the conjecture that gangs today constitute the 'new face of youth crime' as argued by Pitts (Pitts, 2008) By using my own biography as an evidential resource, specifically my experience of having my head 'kicked in' by groups that have all the hallmarks of urban street gangs in our immediate past, I not only seek to show how fecund a research method auto-ethnography can be in the context of a discipline that has never meaningfully adopted it, I categorically refute Pitt's claims. The final paper explores continuities and discontinuities in youth violence in the post-World War 2 period leading us through to the present. In the paper I outline what I term the Fordist approach to stabilising young men with violent inclinations in the post Second World War era; and consider what happens under contemporary conditions of neo-liberalism, when this approach begins to fail.

The robber, I argue, is an ambiguous figure who appears in most societies under a variety of different names. Though a predatory figure whose living is made by the violent seizure of people's goods in public spaces, this is a figure which nevertheless can find itself propelled to folk hero status. A fact

exemplified in the founding national myths of societies such as England, the United States and Australia, all of whom have venerated robbers. Think here, for example about the myths and legends that surround Robin Hood, Jessie James and Ned Kelly. Given that street robbery is an offence predominantly perpetrated by poor people against other poor people (Hallsworth, 2005); where the criminal harvest is typically low, it might appear counterfactual to imagine the robber as a folk devil posing an existential threat to society and its values. Yet robbers can be positioned as such. A representation brilliantly explored by Hall et al in their seminal text 'Policing the Crisis' which examines the moral panic that surfaced around 'Black muggers' in the 1970s (Hall et al, 1978).

In the paper I explore these starkly opposing representations and seek to locate them within a historical frame of reference. The paper begins by exploring the factors that allow robbers to be constructed as folk heroes. I trace this history through from early myths of Robin Hood in the 15th century to the heroic representation of the outlaw highwaymen of the eighteenth century. In so doing I trace why this figure could become socially acceptable. In a deeply inequitable society governed by an oppressive ruling class the robber/outlaw possessed many heroic traits that would permit a certain vicarious identification on the part of the public. Not least, was their ability to heroically outwit the forces of the ruling regime, and who, when caught, would die with dignity when executed. Drawing on Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm, 1959) I also acknowledge the quasi political role these figures posed to a public which, prior to the industrial revolution, had no political representation.

The paper then examines how an intersection of distinctly modern social forces unleashed in the industrial 19<sup>th</sup> century worked to reconstruct the figure of the robber as a folk devil. The paper draws attention to the dehumanising role played by scientific criminology with its fascination for atavistic monsters,

the advent of the prison, the concomitant withdrawal of punishment as a public spectacle, and the advent of the mass media. From a figure that could be identified with, these distinctly modern forces worked in tandem to position the outlaw/robber, as a faceless public enemy.

The paper concludes with a reflection on whether it is possible today to imagine the outlaw as anything other than a 'suitable enemy' to evoke Christie's terminology (Christie, 2001). My conclusion is that in the context of societies where the public fear of crime is high, the robber will invariably continue to be constructed as a folk devil. That said, many of the heroic traits associated with the highwayman of the past still carry popular currency. Many members of the public remain fascinated by men of daring, who, owned by nobody, traverse a liminal interzone situated between the licit and the illicit. Lawless men who live by their wits in a violent world where life is cheap and where the possibility of death remains high. These 'outlaw' traits continue to fascinate. They lie at the heart of the appeal that rappers such as Tupac possess. It is a mythic reality played out in series such as *Breaking Bad*. Ironically, the self-same traits that define the heroic outlaw also reappear in the world of contemporary policemen paid to suppress them. A trait evident in films such as *Dirty Harry* in the 1970s and *True Detective* today.

The second paper adopts an auto-ethnographical approach to the study of our recent history and is taken from my book *'The Gang and beyond: Interpreting violent street worlds'*. In it I draw upon my own experience of (quite literally) having my head 'kicked in' by groups of violently inclined young men over a twenty year period in order to contest John Pitt's conjecture that urban street gangs today constitute what he calls the 'new face of youth crime' (Pitts, 2008).

The paper begins with my life as a young boy growing up in Bristol in the 1960s and 1970s and concludes as I enter adulthood in Peterborough in England in the 1980s. Though the paper is written in a jocular manner my ambitions in writing it are serious. In it I document, from painful experience, a truth directed at the constituency of 'gang talkers' who seriously believe that the urban street gang is something new the like of which we have not seen before. My point, to demonstrate that whatever definition of gang they may elect to embrace, such groups have always existed in working class areas and throughout our recent history. The names by which these groups are known certainly changes; nevertheless violently inclined groups which have all the hallmarks of urban street gangs constitute a perennial, taken for granted, feature of working class life in urban settings. The gang, in other words, is not a new or novel entity, it has always been around.

In the paper I reinforce this point by describing my experiences as a young man navigating a treacherous world populated by a cacophony of violently inclined groups with names like Grebo's, Skinheads, Hells Angels, Squaddies and Boot-boys. All of them were violent and violence and a proclivity to engage in it were what these groups were essentially about.

In writing this paper my other aim was to introduce auto-ethnography as a methodology into Criminology, a discipline which has pretty much ignored it. My aim in writing the chapter was to demonstrate that auto-ethnography is potentially a viable and fruitful method and one with potentially productive applications. What is unique about auto-ethnography is the idea that a researcher's own biography and history can be used as a self-reflective evidential field from which wider research claims can be generated. This reverses wholesale the usual methodological approach applied in social science (and criminology) which involves researchers generating an evidence base by

studying the lives of others. In auto-ethnography the researcher studies and interrogates their own history, biography and experience and use this to formulate research propositions. They themselves, in this process, become the research subject (Ronai, 1992; Chang: 2008; Ellis, 2010).

While the approach has certainly proved popular it has also been criticised for its subjectivism, lacking academic rigour and navel gazing (see Madison, 2006). I sought to deploy it because these criticisms appeared to me less grounds to refute the method as a whole but as tendencies which researchers who deploy auto-ethnography need to acknowledge and avoid – a point well acknowledged by Chang in his reflections on applying auto-ethnography in practice (Chang, 2008).

Though I would, by no means, overstate the importance of the method, or ever suggest that it should replace existing methods directed at studying the lives of others, I would argue it constitutes an approach that has its uses. Crime, after all, also impacts on criminologists. Our experience is something we ought to reflect on, perhaps more so than we do. In my case, my experiences as a young man provided me with the insights I required as a criminologist to contest the claim that gangs have become ‘the new face of youth crime’ (Pitts, 2008). The groups I describe weren’t entities I had to go out and study, I had compelling experience of what they were capable of having lived my life growing up with them as I vividly describe in the paper.

In deploying an auto-ethnographic approach, my aim is also to try and accomplish one of the key aims of Cultural Criminology and that is to provide something of the sensual feel of what deviance is all about. In the chapter I try and attend to this by providing thick descriptions about what it is actually like to be caught by a group of boot-boys in turf they claim as theirs. Or what happens when you meet a group of drunken skinheads. In this sense, the auto-

ethnographic method, provides precisely what the numbers driven research typically conducted on groups such as urban street gangs by more administrative criminology, invariably lacks, and that is any feel for human reality as this is lived and experienced. Auto-ethnography, in this sense, does pose an alternative and stark challenge to the desiccated, de-naturalised 'voodoo statistics', to use Jock Young's term, of mainstream criminological positivism (Young, 2004). It brings, in other words, the deviant to life.

The final paper I present in this section *Continuities and discontinuities in street violence*. explores the phenomena of street violence and documents its changing history from the post war period to the present. This is very much a sociological history and one directed at understanding continuities and discontinuities in the violence of the street world under consideration here. I stress the word 'continuities' because the violence typically found in the violent street worlds I examine in post war Britain, displays far stronger continuities than discontinuities over time.

Looking for continuities as opposed to looking for stark discontinuities in street violence is not, I accept, as exciting as reaching for the conclusion that things have changed alarmingly and always for the worst (the gang as 'the new face of youth crime', for example) but, as I establish, this is the truth of the matter. Young people, particularly young men, always congregate together and for the simple and obvious fact that they are social beings. It is also as social beings that they break rules, edge-work and as Goffman neatly puts it, put themselves 'where the action is' (Goffman, 1982). As commentators such as Downes and Willis observed long ago, the violence in which they engage is typically no more than an extension of leisure – albeit of a lethal and painful variety (Downes, 1966; Willis, 1977). In a Katzian sense they 'walk the ways of the bad ass' because deviance is fun, seductive and 'cool' (Katz, 1988). Such



violence is also reinforced culturally in a world where being 'hard' and being able to handle yourself are traits deeply engrained in working class, masculine culture. Such traits also find reinforcement and encouragement in wider dominant evocations of heterosexual masculinity; no more powerfully expressed than in the figure of the violently inclined male hero reproduced in various movies: Rambo, The Man with no Name, John Wick, and so on.

The violence in the five decades following the end of the Second World War was nevertheless constrained and delimited by cultural codes and young men, by and large, grew out of street violence as they navigated an orderly transition from childhood to adulthood. As this model of male stabilisation, developed and embedded in the era of Fordism (organised, welfare state capitalism) became the predominant means mobilised to ensure the social production of stable, pacified, male workers, the transitional process from childhood to adulthood embodied in the Fordist model needs some elaboration.

In short, the transition read something like this: First, the family, the site of primary socialisation; then the school for secondary socialisation and some education. Then the factory for paid work and ideally – and not too much later – possession of a wife whose subordination to her mate was assured by the male worker being repositioned as 'bread winner' for his nuclear family. The orderly transition side lay in the successful navigation of this process from inception through to its conclusion. Sure enough, along the way, young men would 'wild out' in opposition to the constraints of the school and the factory but eventually the 'mould' society (to use Deleuze's construct of the Foucauldian disciplinary order (Deleuze, 1992) and, not least, the patriarchal dividend delivered to the paid Fordist worker, would work its disciplinary magic and produce a relatively pacified, domesticated citizen. Yes, he might hit his wife and kids around a bit but, all told, the expressive public violence of his

youth would be significantly curtailed. The model, it could be noted, worked for most, but this was by no means assured for those areas subject to concentrated disadvantage (those areas of its inner cities and estates into which the welfare state had only ever made minor inroads). However even these area of blight, it was hoped, would eventually disappear as the welfare state evolved and full employment for all, at least in principle, became the norm.

The paper concludes by examining discontinuities. It locates these within an analysis of the wider shift from the welfare to the post welfare, neo-liberal society that is the UK today. While not suggesting that the basic features of the Fordist model of youth transition have been dismantled wholesale, I begin with the proposition that a number of young men today are not completing an orderly transition from childhood to adulthood but a fractured transition. That is, a transition that not only fails to produce an orderly stable and pacified adult, but one which leaves the subject suspended or subject to street socialisation and its violent codes.

This process is particularly the case for the young men studied in this thesis, the majority of whom live in areas subject to precarious living and near permanent recession. Precisely the population that have come to public attention recently through their implosive, self-destructive violence. My argument is this: Rather than drift into street life and through the process of maturation (the orderly Fordist transition), 'drift out'; by default, a number of young men become differentially associated in street culture and its imperatives. Confronting an economic market that delivers low wage, episodic work and caught within what has mutated to become a harsh workfare regime characterised by welfare retrenchment and punitive sanctions (see Bond and Hallsworth, 2017), a number of young men do not transition from education into the stable world of paid work, not least because stable work is no longer on

offer to this population of young men; members of what Guy Standing terms the 'new precariat' (Standing, 2011). The street and its violent codes meanwhile await them. The next chapter examines more closely the lifeworld of those who experience fractured transitions and the violent adaptations that result.

# The aetiology of street violence

This chapter introduces three papers each of which is directed at helping make sense of the violence perpetrated in a street context. It also considers the constellation of forces that leads young men to become participants in it. The first paper explores the motivations that lead young men to become street robbers. The second paper examines gun related violence by describing the street culture of those who use them. The final paper examines why violence occurs in street contexts and it explores this by attending to 'street imperatives'; that is the ends to which social action in a street context is predominantly directed.

The first paper '*The production of motivated offenders*' derives from a research project funded by Government Office for London in 2000, the aim of which was to help explain why street robbery was burgeoning in Lambeth, a multiply deprived area of London, during a period when crime rates more generally were beginning to decline after surging in the post-World War Two period.

In the paper I explain why a constituency populated predominantly by young Black males, most of whom lived in and adjacent to Lambeth in London, came to engage in robbery. The project was initiated against what can be considered an unprecedented leap in Street Crime offences across the U.K. during the period 1999-2003. What made Lambeth interesting as a case study was the fact that this borough was producing far higher levels of street crime than any other area. Indeed at the time the research commenced, it produced 18% of all street crime offences in London (Hallsworth, 2005).

My remit was to explain why street robbery had escalated. Why were young Black men overrepresented in the population of offenders; why was the population of victims predominantly white and why was this happening in Lambeth? Having studied the available police data; having interviewed over 20 street robbers; and having studied Lambeth's socio-economic profile and history; I applied a heavily modified form of Routine Activity Theory (RAT) to help address these questions (for an overview see Cohen and Felson: 1979). According to RAT crime occurs when a motivated offender comes into contact with a suitable victim in a context where suitable guardians cannot prevent them from offending. Reconstructed into the methodology I applied in the Lambeth case, I sought explanations to the following three questions: What constellation of forces led some Black men to engage in street robbery; what dispositions made others 'suitable victims'; and why had the forces of the law failed to prevent motivated offenders from offending. Whereas RAT is usually associated with theories of rational choice and studied predominantly using quantitative research methods, I elected to innovate and adopt a different approach. I stripped the rational choice elements out of the approach and adopted a far more critically informed, qualitative approach to the questions I sought to address.

My overall conjecture was that street crime rose in Lambeth because of a series of interlocking factors. Despite attempts to regenerate Lambeth in the wake of the Brixton riots, not least, by developing Brixton's night time economy, the plight of its poorest constituency, overwhelmingly populated by its Afro Caribbean community, had not improved but had stagnated. Coupled with a legacy of racism, unemployment among its young men was high and their precarious situation was coupled by an absence of work opportunities. Though economically and materially marginalised, nevertheless these young men, as the

chapter presented here shows, were wholly incorporated in to the rituals of ornamental consumption. They were products of a capitalist society in which the production of a successful identity was determined quite literally by their ability to consume, purchase and display key branded commodities. If materially disadvantaged, this population was nevertheless, as such, culturally included. Street Crime offered some an opportunity to mitigate the consequences of material exclusion and poverty whilst also gratifying deeply internalised desires to construct a viable identity as capable consumers in a society where what you wore and how you wore it now constituted the talisman of a successful being.

Though regeneration initiatives had not worked to raise the social-economic profile of this demographic, it had worked to make areas like Brixton very attractive to a largely white and more affluent demographic that enjoyed visiting an area with a 'cool' cache and the proliferating bars and restaurants that populated its rapidly gentrifying centre. This population constituted suitable victims for a number of reasons. They were now carrying mobile phones which constituted the object of choice for motivated street robbers. Given that the producers of them had (at that time the research was undertaken) taken no steps to immobilise them when they were stolen, they could easily be sold on and Lambeth possessed a well-developed industry of fences / middlemen who did so. This population was relatively easy to target and by visiting areas like Brixton they came directly into contact with motivated offenders from the local estates.

Street robbery became their crime of choice because they didn't have access to or the skills required to perpetrate more lucrative crime. By default they used the resources they did have available: a proclivity for violence and the will to mobilise it, in order to separate victims from their possessions. At the

same time other crime alternatives that might once have been attractive to this population such as shop theft or car theft were becoming less popular due to successful crime reduction initiatives such as situational crime prevention. When street crime began to surge the police were hopelessly ill-prepared and did not have in place any successful street crime reduction strategy. Given racial tensions in areas like Lambeth were fraught, the police in the borough were also unable to use the more robust tactics that other forces were utilising. Though CCTV was being used, the quality of the data they provided was of limited value due to poor analogue, video quality. Robbers were aware of this.

In many respects my research findings do overlap with the study of street robbery provided by Pryce, undertaken, as we saw, in the 1970s (Pryce, 1979). However the findings also depart considerably in others. Refracted through a Marxist lens, the population of street robbers I studied in Lambeth, like the street robbers studied by Pryce in the 1970s, could certainly be considered to belong to the lowest sector of the working class, the social residuum. This is a population living precarious lives in a capitalist society which provided little by way of life chances that would enable them to transcend their marginal status in the labour market. Their engagement in street crime, however, could not easily be explained as an adaptive political strategy, defined by a refusal to do 'shit work' for the white man, as argued by Pryce (Pryce, 1979). What came across in my research was just how powerfully the identities and desires of the young men I studied were forged by their exposure to the compulsory logic of hyper consumption. Politics, or even an awareness of it, did not meaningfully feature in the depoliticised existence of this demographic. These were, as Bauman argued, 'flawed consumers' of late modernity; pressured to consume but unable to consume through legitimate channels.

The second paper entitled *That's Life Innit: A British approach to guns, crime and social order*, was co-authored with Dan Silverstone. The factors that led to its production bear noting. Both of us had been invited to an international colloquium on gun related violence in Toronto. Both of us were talking about weaponised violence in a street context and both of us sought to make sense of it by reference to the term 'on road'. This was an expression we had separately come across in our respective analysis of what others were terming 'gang culture'. 'On road' is a street term, one deployed by street actors to designate the way of life of the street, adopted by some as a destination of choice, but for others a space to which their precarious existence drove them.

The paper was written against a back drop of growing public and political concern about the number of young men who were being killed by other young men using guns. As this chapter is being written, similar concerns are still evident. The paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of such violence by describing the conditions of life 'on road'.

The paper adopts a cultural criminological perspective, one that attends closely to the lifeworld of gun users. It explores two interrelated worlds; first, the world of professional criminals who use firearms as part of their business, where that business is crime. This world is populated by those who mobilise considerable criminal capital. This is a world populated by men who understand the weapons they use, are trained in their use but who use them rarely and only in pursuit of business objectives. This world is populated by professional criminals; men who occupy the centre of the criminal underworld.

We then contrast this world with what we term in the paper the street periphery, a world populated by young men whose life unfolds 'on road'. These young men inhabit a far more volatile and unpredictable terrain. They



have access to weapons, including guns, but are not skilled in their use. Whereas professional criminals use weapons rarely and in pursuit of business objectives, 'on road' weapons are deployed for both personal and business motives. A gun may be carried for defensive purposes but in the face of an honour slight (someone looking at someone else the 'wrong' way, for example) it may be deployed offensively. Often violence is less pre-planned but situationally determined. Most deaths, we argue, especially those of an Afro Caribbean heritage, can be traced back to the street retail of illegal drugs such as crack cocaine. A section of the drug market in which this population is over-represented; that part of the economy where violence is most likely to explode. The paper concludes by seeking to contextualise the implosive violence of the street with wider transitions in the capitalist economy. Drawing on the work of Mezaros (Mezaros, 2001), specifically, his concept of destructive self-reproduction, we argue that just as capitalism destructively self-reproduces itself from above; think here, for example, of the destruction wrought to the world economy in the wake of a financial crisis unleashed by finance capital; so the self-same forces help provoke a parallel adaptive response among the new precariat, what we term destructive reproduction from below. This, in short is our description of what life 'on road' is all about. A world populated by young angry men who live an outlaw existence. Young men who carry a legacy of deeply internalised anger but have nowhere to sublimate it except against each other.

The final paper introduced in this chapter again returns to the vexed question of why violence enters the lifeworld of those who inhabit the street world to the extent it becomes a taken for granted, normalised part of their everyday reality. Rather than seek to account for it by trying to find a single

cause, for example, by examining the rise of a new gang menace, my explanation focuses instead on identifying the ends to which social action in street culture is predominantly directed, then considering why violence inevitably enters into the repertoire of social action by and through which these ends are socially realised by street actors.

There are, I argue, three ends or goals that people who dwell on the street aspire to gain through their participation in street culture. These are respectively pleasure, respect and money. These I term *street imperatives*. Some may pursue one or another and sometimes all three together. Sometimes accomplishing success in one will also translate into success in another. Fighting, for example, may on one hand be fun and thus pleasurable but at the same time it can also be deployed to build reputation and gain street capital.

These imperatives are by no means deviant, they are also pursued by most people in late modern, capitalist societies such as the UK. What makes street life so lethal for its participants however, is that violence invariably enters into the repertoire of social action street actors draw upon to realise these imperatives. Generating pleasure in a street context often means searching out excitement, it means edge working, it means 'being where the action is' to evoke Goffman's expression. (Goffman, 1982) It might entail trespassing into territory claimed by others, and violence invariably enter, I argue, into the way pleasure is often generated.

Middle class males establish a respectable identity by holding down high status jobs, or jobs that generate significant income. They can generate respect through the power they marshal in undertaking such positions. They control the resources of the world, they tell others what do, subordinates follow their instructions. Though street actors also search for and desire respect, the same options rarely present themselves in street life. Here respect has to be generated

and to generate respect street actors also have to demonstrate that they are, as it were, 'real men'. And it is not enough to simply make the claim that you are, because in a street context, claims will be tested. Violence, I show, invariably enters into the business of respect building. Finally, in the informal criminal economy of the street, an economy, that is, unregulated by the force of law, violence invariably becomes the de facto regulating force within it. Making money in a street context is once again connected to violence.

Violence then enters invariably into the way street life proceeds. It arises not because street actors pursue deviant goals or have different sets of aspirations to those who belong to mainstream society. Their goals, to have pleasure, be respected and to make money are no different to those of most other people. It is how these goals are realised in a street context, this is what makes the street world so lethal.

# Street Organisation and Structure

Understanding the nature of formal organisations such as bureaucracies and corporations has traditionally fallen within the remit of the sociology of organisations. This tradition, in turn, can be traced back to the preoccupations of sociology's grand forefathers who, like Marx and particularly Weber, were interested in making sense of the distinguishing features and organisational structure of the rational bureaucracies that were remaking the modern industrial order in their image. They were particularly interested in studying the distinctive features of the new modern order and in so doing distinguishing distinctly modern social formations with those typical of the premodern.

Weber's study of bureaucracy constituted the classic defining text articulating what was specific about modern organisations (Weber, 2009). His ideal type in many ways remains the most compelling account of how and why modern bureaucracies were efficient and successful in ways premodern could never be when it came to the task of solving problems and achieving the ends they established for themselves. He paid particular attention to their instrumental rational orientation and studied how rational processes and the application of a rational means to end logic played its way through the way modern organisations were structured. Modern bureaucracies were distinctive and efficient because they possessed organised hierarchies with a complex division of labour. They promote on the basis of merit and everyone within the organisation follow clearly articulated (rational) policies and procedures. Though mindful of their limitations (for example a bureaucracy's own tendency to reproduce itself) such organisations were successful because within them means are rationally allocated to ensure that clearly articulated objectives are met in the most effective and cost efficient manner.

While this tradition certainly provides a compelling account of the properties of modern formal organisations, questions can legitimately be raised as to whether the formal study of formal organisations can unquestionably be applied as a template to make sense of the kind of organisations and organisational form of the street world under investigation here and the radically informal organisations that inhabit it. Can we, for example, study informal organisations such as urban street gangs as if they are rational bureaucracies and, if not, what kind of sociology of organisations do we require to do so? This is the key question I seek to answer in the first paper introduced here '*Arborealism and Rhizomatics: A Treatise on Street Organisation*'.

The second question I pose and seek to address in the next paper introduced in this chapter, also addresses a question routinely posed in the sociology of organisations and this concerns less discerning the properties and orientation of modern organisations per se but discerning instead the different kind of organisations that might be found in a particular environment. This form of analysis often involves producing different organisational typologies. Atkinson's study of the difference between, for example, modern corporate organisations and late or post-modern flexible firms is indicative of one way that this question has been addressed in recent decades (Atkinson, 1984). The shift from more centralised Fordist business organisations into distributed Post-Fordist networks constitutes another. In terms of the paper presented here, my aim is to try and understand the nature of and difference between the kind of organisations that populate the informal world of the street. How might we label these organisations and what are their distinguishing features?

In addressing these questions my aim has not only been to provide answers to interesting sociological / criminological questions, my aim has also been directed at taking issue precisely with the way these questions have

typically been addressed by a number of contemporary criminologists who appear to believe that informal street organisations such as street gangs can be studied as if they are mirror images of modern organisations. This approach is certainly that used by academics such as Pitts and Harding (Pitts 2008; Harding 2016) who argue that the street world is populated by hierarchical urban street gangs who possess corporate features and behave in a corporate way. Control agents such as the police invariably concur to this corporatised model of the street as well.

In my paper I explicitly reject this approach. My conjecture is that if we are to understand informal organisations such as street gangs we have to embrace a completely different sociology of organisations. One grounded, moreover, on completely different ontological and epistemological assumptions. I articulate the principles around which this alternative sociology might be based by exploring the work of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, drawing specifically on his distinction between what he terms arboreal (or tree like) approaches to the study of organisation and the study of rhizomatic (or grass like) forms of structure as an alternative (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977; 1988). The former, explicated brilliantly in the work of Weber are precisely tree like; they have pyramid features and within them control moves downward from a commanding point. Deleuze contrasts these fixed, sedentary and territorialised formations with the de-territorialised and radically de-territorialising nomadic formations of the Eastern Steppes. These are not hierarchical, they are not sedentary, and they mutate in wholly unpredictable ways. Deleuze uses the image of the rhizome to capture their inherently nomadic form.

The point I make in the paper is that organisations such as street gangs are not corporate, arboreal formations but are, precisely, nomadic. To understand them we cannot therefore apply the categories of arboreal thought

and treat them as if they are. To study nomadic formations we require instead a nomodology and to understand this we need a different sociology. The paper concludes by trying to articulate what this alternative sociology might look like when applied to informal organisations which, like gangs, exhibit few of the properties of formal organisations – even when they try to appropriate them.

The second paper also takes issue with the way street organisations are studied and profiled. Against a criminological tradition that believes that the gang is the key street organisation and which then studies street organisation through the mechanism of producing gang typologies (see, for example, the Eurogang gang typology developed by Klein, 2001; 1995), I treat the gang as one street collective which sits alongside and often in close proximity to others which must be distinguished from it. The typology I present here I developed initially with Tara Young for the Metropolitan Police Service (Hallsworth and Young, 2005). I subsequently developed the typology presented here in a report for the Government for London, where it was written as a heuristic for practitioners.

In it I treat the gang as one form of street collective with its own distinctive properties and distinguish this collective from what we term the Peer Group, and Organised Crime Groups. What distinguishes each group from the other is their relationship to crime and violence. Peer groups are the basic building block of the street, composed of individuals who come together because they are, at heart, friendship groups. In a street context such groups can encounter ‘beef’ and have to be prepared to address it. Some competence in violence might be required. But these groups do not come together for the business of engaging in violence or crime. This is what distinguishes them from urban street gangs whose defining feature, we argue, is precisely that their identify as a collective is built around violence and engagement in crime. These

properties are, we argue, integral to their identity and purpose. This property defines, if you like, their 'gangness'. What separates the gang from what we term an Organised Crime Group, is that the latter, populated by men for whom involvement in crime is again integral to their identity, is the way they address this business imperative through a more instrumental rational orientation towards criminal enterprise. Gangs, we argue, are often volatile and violence in which they engage is often motivated by personal more than business imperatives.

These groups, I contend, can often be found together and rather than seek to encompass the study of different groups within some reified gang typology, more can be gained by looking at the street ecology within any environment in its totality and through such analysis decipher what kind of grouping exists within it and study how these groups intersect together in distributed networks. The paper is also directed at driving home an important truth for practitioners: Be careful about the labels you apply because most street groups are not gangs and need to be treated very differently. Each street collective poses a different form and level of risk and these need to be addressed in any control effort. Peer groups are not systematically criminal organisations and should not be treated as if they are. Gangs are different than organised crime groups and need to be treated as such.



# Street Representations and Street Realities

The street world is an insular world and as such difficult to apprehend in thought. To an extent this is because the people who, like journalists and academics, want to explain street life, live lives very different and often very distant from those whose lives they want to make sense of. They also occupy an arboreal and sedentary order which is radically different from the informal rhizome of the street. The street world is difficult to comprehend as well because the motives of those who use knives and guns on each other are never clear and apparent to those who do not and the problem is exacerbated as well because the denizens of the street have many good reasons not to disclose their world to those of the outsider looking in.

To deploy a metaphor, the street world often appears to outsiders like a dark lake with subterranean depths that cannot be seen. Bystanders look and see amorphous shapes shifting in the depths of this lake, sometimes they even break the surface. And periodically, like flotsam washed up on the beach, dead creatures are found. When humans encounter things they cannot readily apprehend in thought, one compensation mechanism they often deploy to compensate for knowledge deficits is to engage in fantasy production. They project onto the lake fears and phobias in order to make comprehensible a world that appears otherwise incomprehensible. The result, they find monsters.

It is my contention that much of the 'knowledge' that has and continues to be produced and passed on as 'objective truths' about the street world and its denizens represents less the truth of the street but what I propose to term 'representations of the street'; that is, a representation of the street produced through the mechanism of fantasy production. In the process of fantasy

construction street reality is not only evicted wholesale, it is repopulated by a weird and, at times, bizarre and monstrous fantasy life. This idea, that these 'representations of the street' reflect more the fantasy life of their producers than the truth of the street world, constitutes the kernel of the arguments developed in the three papers introduced in this chapter, each of which challenge in different ways a particular and powerful representation, namely that the UK in recent years is being over-run by a new folk devil, the urban street gang.

In the first paper, *'Gangland Britain: Realities, fantasy and industry'* I explore and critique what I term the 'gang talk' produced by a growing proliferation of what I call 'gang talkers' who seriously believe that the UK is being overrun by a plenitude of large, organised, corporate gangs that pose, allegedly, an existential threat to society and the British way of life. In the second paper *Deciphering Gang Talk*, my aim is directed less at exposing and critiquing the fantasies around which gang talk is structured, so much as trying to make sense of its underlying rules of composition. In the final paper, *'Tilting at windmills: In pursuit of gang truths in a British city'*, I summarise what happened when we went in search of 'gang truths' in a British City apparently 'gang afflicted'.

Each paper then, in its own way, seeks to challenge the prominent idea that the UK is being overrun by gangs. My aim in these chapters is both to expose fantasies for what they are; explore how and why they take the form they have assumed; while trying to contrast these fantasies with what I hope constitutes a more sober, realistic and plausible account of street realities.

In the first paper, *Gangland Britain: Realities, fantasy and industry* I take on and challenge the gangland UK thesis which, in short, holds that the UK is being overtaken by a plenitude of large, corporate gangs. A position, staked out, not least in the work of John Pitts (Pitts, 2008). Underpinning this conjecture is the assumption that contemporary gangs are novel, proliferating, becoming

more organised and are responsible for most manifestations of urban violence from gun related fatalities, the control of the drugs trade, the abuse of women and not least, orchestrating the British riots of 2011. In this paper I subject these claims to critical interrogation and explore just how far these conjectures about gangs depart from a street reality that is elsewhere. Drawing upon my own research I contest the idea that gangs are new or that the social problems blamed on gangs are actually gang related. Applying, in my own way, a principle of theoretical parsimony, I surmise that there is always an excess to the violence blamed on gangs that is simply not gang related. If this is so, the conjecture that gangs are new is flawed and should be discarded. Gang talk, I conclude, represents less the truth of the street so much as the interests of a burgeoning gang industry that has emerged in the UK in recent decades. One that exists ostensibly to liquidate gangs but which, at the point of practice, has to maintain the fiction of the gang as a credible enemy to sustain government funding.

While the gang talk produced by gang talkers possesses little truth and no explanatory value, it has nevertheless become established as a plausible thesis to many. In the second paper I explore why this is so by studying the rules of composition that govern how gang talk is produced as a discourse. Rather than reach for moral panic theory order to explain why groups like gangs become demonised and othered - the default criminological approach to making sense of truth distortion and fantasy life creation; I turn instead to the work of the philosopher Wittgenstein and his theory of language games.

In so doing, my aim was to uncover the rules of composition through and by which gang talk produced and reproduced itself. My conjecture is that gang talk has a structure predicated upon an escalation narrative that gang talkers have to intuitively follow in the gang talk they produce. In effect, to play the gang-talking game, they have to follow pre-established rules of composition if

they are to be heard. In practice, they have to build their gang talking narratives around one or more themes of gang escalation. For example, they can talk of gangs growing larger and becoming more organised. They can associate the gang with more weapons of choice (rape, guns, dangerous dogs and so on). Different forms of gang can be discovered and the terrible inroads gangs are making in society can be disclosed (the invasions of schools, prisons and so on). Developing gang talk around these themes is permissible and this constitutes the rule of the game.

Those who play the game well are heard not only because they drive the gang-as-invader narrative forward, but because the narrative of escalation appears plausible. Nor does compelling empirical evidence need to be marshalled to sustain gang talk because one of the fascinating things about its construction is that, unlike science, it does not trade in concepts of refutation but the eternal confirmation of seemingly self-evident gang truths (of course gangs rape mothers, of course they are responsible for riots). The destiny of those who do not play the gang game is not to be heard. I conclude by examining why gang talk is so persuasive. On one hand it is performative, it helps make sense of messy, difficult chunks of reality by articulating truths about the street world that appear plausible by locating them in a discourse that appeals directly to wider ontological insecurities about outsiders invading which are deeply embedded in our collective psychology. Gang talk is also a very easy discourse to master and you don't have to have met any gangs to be able to play the game.

The final paper introduced here draws upon the findings of a research project I was commissioned to conduct for ACPO in the wake of the English Riots of 2011, riots then being blamed by the government and mass media on gangs. The project was initiated with the aim of seeing whether many of the sensational claims being made about gangs in the wake of the riots had any

basis in reality at all and in order to test these truth claims, we conducted research in an area of Birmingham which had both an established reputation for gang violence and where the police claimed to have collated considerable intelligence about gang activity. In other words, I went looking for gang truths in an area in which confirmation of gang excesses ought to most plausibly be discovered. I detailed one researcher to talk to young men considered to be 'gang affiliated'; another to see whether gangs were taking over the local prison; another to talk to practitioners about the seriousness of the local gang problem and another to study police intelligence about the gang situation. Each researcher conducted their research independently of each other and like a puppet master I retrospectively assembled their narratives together. Far from coalescing into an integrated narrative, each constituency we studied, perceived the gang situation in radically different ways. From this I could only conclude there was no one gang reality but different gang realities.

In summary, we did find groups of young men who engaged in forms of violent territorialism, who lived violent lives in which weapons clearly figure. Some confirmation then that group based violence was serious in the UK. However, the groups to which they the young men belonged did not have leaders, or much by way of any formal organisation. They did not meet the criteria required to be classified as gangs and could more plausibly be defined as peer groups. Interestingly, while the young people we studied did not consider themselves to be in gangs (though they were well aware that this is how they were perceived), and did not identify gang violence as a serious issue, the perspective of the front line police officers echoed closely the claims being articulated in the gang talking inventory. They saw organised gangs everywhere and blamed most of the problems of crime and violence in the area on gangs.

In these papers I have drawn a sharp distinction between what I have termed gangland claims and gangland realities. And in these papers I have been pretty scathing about the representations of the street that gang talkers have produced. In response, I have been accused of being a 'gang denier', and, not least, 'left idealist' (Pitts 2008; Harding 2014). In one critique I have been accused of being a Leninist who feels obliged to pursue a dogma which is to explicitly deny the reality of gangs (Pitts 2008). With this in mind let me conclude here by critically reflecting upon my own representations. Do I capture something of street realities in my writing (the thing in itself) or, like my adversaries, am I simply constructing yet another simulacra of the street. In short, am I guilty of hubris?

Let me articulate some points in my defence.

First, I have never sought to deny the reality of the violent street worlds under consideration here. I accept the Left Realist mantra: Street violence is real, not a myth or chimera of the control imaginary and I treat it as such. What I reject are attempts to simplistically encapsulate and explain away such violence by reference to reifications which are unhelpful and limited. This is why I am hostile to the attempt to reduce urban street based violence to questions of urban street gangs on the rise; or which trade in dubious expressions like 'gun crime' or 'knife crime'. These expressions obscure more than they reveal about the street world.

Rather than being a 'left idealist'<sup>4</sup> who denies the reality of groups like gangs I consider myself a critical realist. Somebody, in other words, as much concerned with questions of structure as well as with how structure intersects with agency and culture in any attempt to explain the very real violence of the street. Applied to the study of the street world my approach is not to try to encapsulate its totality into one overarching narrative, but to try and find different ways of comprehending what I understand to be a complex social field. As I hope would have become clear in the narrative presented here, the research findings are based upon over 20 years of empirical research. My findings, in other words, are evidence led.

But is what I have produced yet another street fantasy? Yet another representation of the street, despite my critical realist pretensions? Let me end here with an anecdote contesting this. When writing the '*that's life innit*' paper, I was asked to reflect by my editors on the methodological implications of our analysis. I responded in the paper by observing that while the term 'on road' was a term we had taken from the street actors who deployed it to describe their lives, our interpretation of their life 'on road' was ours and ours alone. I concluded by reflecting that it would be an interesting project to see whether our interpretation of someone else's reality was itself recognised by the very people whose way of life we were speaking about.

At the time of writing the paper, Professor Alison Liebling at Cambridge University was conducting research in British prisons, then being exponentially expanded by a growing number of young men convicted for gun use. Having read our paper she took up my suggestion and sought to see whether those who

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of 'left idealism' is never a term I have found useful or compelling. Rather like the term 'gang' this is one label typically imposed by one group on another. Criminologists would do well to dispense of it

used guns would recognise their world in our writing. So she gave copies of *'That's life Innit'*, to men who used guns. The feedback she received was overwhelmingly positive. They saw the world they lived in in the world we described. Given the fact we made no attempt to romanticise or sensationalise their reality, I take this as indicative of the fact that whilst we can never be sure how accurate our science is, I was nevertheless getting close to the street realities I wanted to understand.



## Conclusion: On originality and contribution

As this thesis was being completed, weapon related violence has once again made news headlines across the UK on the back of figures released by the Home Office which show sharp rises in violent crime and the use of weapons including guns and knives. 285 knife related homicides were recorded in the UK in the year March ending 2018. This figure is the highest recorded by the Home Office Homicide Index in 70 years. Those aged 18-24 were predominantly affected, though there has also been a 77% increase in knife related homicides by under 18s<sup>5</sup>.

Once again explanations are being sought for the violence and various felons and causes are being identified. According to the Home Office rising knife crime and shootings are linked to the rise of new 'county lines, drug dealing gangs', who allegedly 'exploit' and 'groom' young people (Deardon, 2018a). While according to the current Conservative government's Serious Violence Strategy, young people are being 'radicalised' into 'gang culture' by drill music bands, a genre which, according to one gang expert, has become 'weaponised' and which, according to the Home Office, 'glamorise gang and drug dealing life, taunt rivals and normalise knife carrying' (Deardon, 2018b).

In summary, if we were to believe such commentary, it's the urban street gang that's to blame, and, of course, the devil music gangsters listen to. Or, to put this another way, 'gang talk', as I term it, is once again being mobilised to frame and explain the violence of the street world. If the papers I have collated here make any contribution at all, it is that they collectively present a more

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<sup>5</sup> For a summary of the statistics see Knife crime: Causes and solutions, The Conversation, March 11, 2019, [theconversation.com](http://theconversation.com)

complex and plausible set of explanations for the violence all too easily explained away by that talismanic and enigmatic term 'gang'; while also demonstrating why reducing the problems of violence back to gangs or the weapons gangs use, is a mistaken endeavour.

Rather than approach the study of the violence by reference to a particular actor (such as the street gang); by reference to the weapons used (knife or gun crime for example); or by reference to a particular offence (such as street robbery), my work makes the street world the key focus of enquiry. This is one of the key contributions the work aspires to make.

What is original about these papers is the theoretical and methodological innovations I have adopted to make sense of the street world, the motivations of those who inhabit it and the violence they do. In terms of innovation, I have drawn on the work of philosophers who barely get mentioned in criminology. I have innovated in the way I apply old theories to new problems and I have introduced methods which, like auto-ethnography, have never been meaningfully applied to criminological issues.

In mobilising new theories and methods my aim is not only to develop better and more appropriate ways of making sense of difficult chunks of reality but enriching a discipline that only ever improves by reaching out beyond its existing ontological and epistemological horizons. This innovation is evident in the way, for example, I mobilise Wittgenstein's theory of language games to make sense of gang talk; Deleuze's distinction between the arboreal and the rhizome to understand street organisation; and auto-ethnography to refute the conjecture that gangs are new.

Looking more generally at my contribution to critical criminology, I would note one broad contribution to the field. As I observed in the introduction, critical criminology along with cultural criminology has been

loath to study the kinds of street based violence considered here. The predominant focus of enquiry from Subcultural Theory of the 1970s through to Cultural Criminology today has been on the less lethal and more flamboyant aspects of youth subculture and has, for reasons documented in the introduction, studiously avoided studying street based violence with the same degree of passion and theoretical sophistication. When it has considered street related violence, the location of effort has been predominantly directed at its social construction, less its reality. Adopting a critical realist approach, the body of work presented here confronts head on this lacuna in critical criminology.

While Left realism made a good case for examining the forms of violence that concern me, it could be noted that the tradition has not produced that much by way of a detailed analysis of the street world and its violence. In other words it did not really deliver on its promise. The same also applies to Cultural Criminology today. It too has been loath to investigate street worlds which are simply self-destructive. The published work I have assembled here does this. It explains why weaponised violence occurs in street settings, it helps us understand the motives of perpetrators and helps explicate these by situating street action within a historically informed analysis of the intersection between structure and agency.

## Section 2. Published Work

# A summary of the papers submitted

## Street crime in a historical context

Hallsworth, S. (2017) Folk heroes and folk devils: The Janus face of the street robber in popular culture; The Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Criminology, Oxford University Press

S. Hallsworth (2013), The fists and the fury: My life in a sea of gangs, Chapter 3, The gang and beyond: Interpreting violent street worlds, p 43-63 Palgrave Macmillan

S. Hallsworth (2013) Continuities and discontinuities in urban violence, Chapter 7, The gang and beyond: Interpreting violent street worlds, p 161-180, Palgrave Macmillan, London

## The aetiology of street violence

S. Hallsworth (2005) The production of motivated offenders, Chapter 6, Street Crime, Willan publishers, Collumpton

S. Hallsworth, S. & Silverstone, D. (2009)'That's life innit' A British perspective on guns, crime and social order'. Criminology and Criminal Justice, Vol. 9, No. 3, 359-377.

S. Hallsworth (2013) Back to the street, Chapter 6, The gang and beyond: Interpreting violent street worlds, p 138-160; Palgrave Macmillan

### Street organisation and street collectives

S. Hallsworth and K. Duffy (2010) Confronting London's violent street world: The gang and beyond, Report for London Councils.

Arborealism and Rhizomatics: A treatise on street organisation, Chapter 5, The gang and beyond: Interpreting violent Street Worlds, Palgrave, Macmillan, London

### Street realities and street representations

Hallsworth, S (2011) Gangland Britain: Realities Fantasies and Industry, in, B. Goldson (ed.) Youth in Crisis: Gangs, Territory and violence, London, Routledge.

Hallsworth, S. (2013) Deciphering gang talk, Chapter 3, The gang and beyond: Interpreting violent street worlds, p 67-86, Palgrave, Macmillan, London

Hallsworth, S. and Dixon L. (2016) Tilting at Windmills: In pursuit of gang truths in a British City, in, Tijdschrift over Cultuur & Criminaliteit, V6

# Street Violence in a Historical Perspective

# Folk Heroes and Folk Devils: The Janus face of the robber in popular culture

## Introduction

Let me begin with some basic facts. Over time and in most societies, robbers<sup>6</sup> of various kinds have plied their trade. The business in which they trade, predominantly robbery, is violent and in a sense mundane and banal (Bloc, 2001). Its modus operandi does not change significantly over time (even if the name of the robber does). Usually a victim's possessions are removed through the threat or application of violence in a street context (Hallsworth, 2005). Victims come from all walks of life and the proceeds of this crime are minimal when compared to more sophisticated and lucrative forms of crime. Given that the offences robbers commit rarely extend beyond removing wallets from their victims, street crime does not appear at first sight to be the kind of offence that might justify constructing the robber as a 'folk devil' positioned as a key public enemy. Yet periodically, the robber has found himself positioned as such. Given that street crime at face value lacks anything that appears remotely romantic or praiseworthy, it is difficult to imagine how robbers could ever be constructed as folk heroes, yet paradoxically, they have been considered in this light as well and in many societies. Indeed, the very folk myths out of which

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<sup>6</sup> I will use the generic term 'robber' for the purpose of this paper but with the recognition that the term bandit or outlaw could just as well have been deployed. It could also be noted that bandits/robbers have also amassed a considerable number of other names over the centuries and in different societies. In the UK they have also been known as outlaws, highwaymen, rampsmen, muggers and most recently jackers (see Hallsworth 2005).



societies like the UK or the USA are founded around with romantic stories of robbers and their deeds.

In this paper I want to consider this strange paradox about robbers and robbery and do so by attending to what I will term its Janus face. On one hand, I want to explore how low level predatory criminals can find themselves elevated to the status of what, following Cohen, we might term 'folk devils'; that is evil outsiders positioned as posing an existential threat to society (Cohen 1980). On the other, I will also examine how the self-same public enemy can also be reconstructed as folk heroes .

To dissect the strange and ambivalent relationship between robbers and the citizens that they prey upon however, requires recognising very clearly and from the outset that what robbers do and the way they are discursively represented in popular culture are two very different things. It also entails understanding why unwanted and predatory acts like robbery perpetrated by predatory beings like robbers, can be read in diametrically opposing terms. In both cases, as we shall see, we find the robber and the act of robbery constructed in ways that exaggerate certain qualities of the person and the act, while simultaneously avoiding or negating other traits. On one hand the robber positioned as villain incarnate can be made to epitomise everything that is wrong with the society they prey upon; on the other they can be periodically elevated as heroes that embody the very qualities a society values.

### **On robbery**

Before we look at how the robber has historically and indeed contemporaneously been constructed in popular culture, however, it pays to reflect for a moment on what it is that they actually do. As an offence robbery involves the forcible acquisition of goods from victims in a public setting.

Perpetrators either individually - but often in groups use violence or the threat of violence to separate victims from the things they possess (Deakin et al 2007; Hallsworth, 2005; Wright et al; 2006) . They may verbally threaten them, they may outnumber the victim and robbers are often armed. It is the threat of overwhelming force that invariably leaves most victims with little option but to hand over their goods. That said, other tactics could also on occasion be deployed. Pickpockets remove goods from victims without the victims recognising they have been robbed; while other robbers may snatch goods from victims and run off. Traditionally robbers would rob people for their money, but other possessions such as cloths and shoes could also be taken. Today, mobile phones are often the object of choice for many street robbers.

In many respects street robbery falls into the category of primitive accumulation because that defines the type of crime it is. It does not require elaborate skills to threaten someone, or run off with their goods, though pickpocketing does require a modicum of ability. The returns are not significant when compared, for example, with various forms of fraud or white collar crime. True enough, it is not a risk free act and you have to demonstrate a certain degree of courage to undertake it successfully. And to succeed, it is not just enough to be able to simply threaten someone with overwhelming force; you have to demonstrate an ability to use force if required. Societies like the UK and the USA, like most other societies, take a pretty dim view of robbery and the robbers who perpetrate it and the punishments meted out to them can be severe.

Though, as we will have cause to note, victims might include the population of the rich, the glamorous and the well to do, the truth of the matter is that most victims will almost certainly derive from the same social class as the

perpetrators. In robbery overwhelmingly poor people victimise other poor working class people. As Jock Young notes:

Street crime is the only form of serious crime where the victim is in the same social category as the offender. It is lower working class against lower working class, Black against Black and neighbour against neighbour. Much of it represents the ultimate in anti-social behaviour and unites all sections of the population against a common enemy (Young 1979).

It is worth noting the phenomenological aspects of robbery as well before we start to look at how and why this act and those who perpetrate it can be elevated to become something more heroic than they arguably are. Its impact on a victim can be traumatic. It is not only about having your goods stolen, it is an act based upon a profound violation of the self. If violence is mobilised, serious injuries can be caused. Robbery however also leaves its victims frightened and anxious. The effects also last for a long time after the event.

One obvious conclusion that can be drawn out from this brief interrogation into the reality of street robbery is that it is not a glamorous act or one that possess any romantic elements at all. Indeed, it is an act that appears to be nothing but a violent exercise in predatory machismo perpetrated by very unpleasant people.

Construed this way it might appear obvious why good citizens might well experience a longstanding, deep seated revulsion towards robbers. The reality of robbery might well explain at least one side of the Janus face of the bandit positioned as, in Cohen's terms a 'folk devil' or in Nils Christie's terms 'a suitable enemy', an enemy, that is, the construction of which, no reasonable person could disagree with (Christie 2001). Only even here, things are by no

means as clear cut as they might otherwise appear to be. As we shall now see, the fears and anxieties street robbers induce are not simply mirror images of a mundane if brutal street reality reproduced in street settings. Public fears about robbers, as we shall establish, can at times exceed the threats bandits realistically pose. To get to this however we have to move away from street realities and attend instead to how robbers and robbery becomes discursively reconstructed as folk devils to understand why.

### **The robber as folk devil.**

As we have seen above, there are good empirical reasons why robbers might be feared by the public. In areas where street crime is high, it is also evident why fear of crime over their activities might occasion significant police and media attention. At times however the social response to robbery is not a direct reflection of the reality of the crime but takes on a far more disproportionate response. In cases like this, as we shall now see, the robber can be attributed with a range of monstrous qualities in which the threats they pose are amplified and where they take on the trappings of a folk devil positioned as an existential threat to the wellbeing of society itself.

To consider the historical record and using England as a case study, we are presented with a society in which the robber in his (and very rarely her) various incarnations have always posed a perennial threat to honest citizens. During the medieval period 'outlaws' (as they were then known) preyed upon those that travelled between the medieval towns (Seal, 1996; Spraggs, 2002). indeed the reasons why Chaucer's medieval pilgrims band together and are armed occurred because of real threats they faced upon the road (Chaucer, 1997). William Harisson, a commentator on travel in early 16<sup>th</sup> century England,

describes the extensive preparations that the travelling public had to take during this period to avoid robbery.

. . .the honest traveller is now inforced to ride with a case of dags at his sadle bow, or with some pretie short snapper, whereby he may deale with them further off in his owne defense, before he come within the danger of these weapons. Finallie, no man trauelleth by the waie without his sword, or some such weapon, with us except the minister, who commonlie weareth none at all, vnlesse it be a dagger or hanger at his side ( Harrison quoted in Spraggs, 2001)

By the eightieth century the roads linking the developing industrial cities had certainly become more peaceful (Porter, 1982). The growth of the urban industrial city with its squalor and concentrated poverty however provided new opportunities for new classes of urban robber. And if England always had an ambivalent relationship with its robbers, it is really from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards that we begin to see the robber appear in ways in which they begin to take on the trappings of a fully-fledged folk devil. A monster devoid of any quality that the public can identify with and associated with qualities every right thinking person should fear.

The figure of Bill Sykes in Dicken's novel *Oliver Twist* establishes the mould for the representation of the robber as an inhuman villain (Dickens, 1994). In this novel Dickens presents Sykes in ways that do not allow any room for empathy at all. He is simply a vicious, violent, predatory man utterly devoid of morality. And this is what separates Sykes from, for example, the Artful Dodger who in his own way exemplifies many of the traits of robber as hero (which we will return to consider below). Dickens was of course writing at

a time of profound industrial change. The London he describes in the novel was a deeply segregated city. And poverty within it was concentrated into 'no go' zones, or 'rookeries as they were then popularly known. Edward Walton a contemporary commentator catches well the fear that such areas induced in the mind of bourgeoisie in his melodramatic description of life in St Giles.

'None else have any business here and if they had they would find it to their interest to get out of it as soon as possible (Walton quoted in Ackroyd, 2001).

A sentiment that would be widely reported by a growing army of urban missionaries who, by the Victorian age, found themselves drawn towards yet repelled by the squalor of life in London's poorest areas.

Though the brutal reality of street crime in the industrial city was certainly a powerful motive that can help explain the demonization of the robber, the way the figure of the robber began to be mediated in the wider mass media by a growing army of domestic missionaries also worked to amplify these fears. If we look at representations of the industrial city produced during this period, one gains a sense that, as far as the bourgeoisie were concerned, there were dark satanic forces at play in urban development. This perception was articulated in various evocations of the metropolis as a space of corruption in which crime and vice in all its forms would thrive. Henry Fielding, for example, believed that the urban fabric itself was in some ominous respect deeply criminogenic.

Who so ever indeed considers the cities of London and Westminster, with the late vast Addition of their suburbs, the great Irregularity of their Buildings, the immense number of Lanes, Alleys, Courts, and Bye-places

must think that, had they been intended for the very Purpose of Concealment, they could *scarce* have been better contrived. Upon such a View, the whole appears as a vast Wood or Forest, in which a Thief may harbour with as great Security, as Wild Beasts do in the Deserts of Africa or Arabia (Fielding [1791] 1988)

Not only could the evolving metropolis be considered a jungle in which dark forces could gather and disappear with ease, it was also a space in which the possibility of redemption was subverted by the ease with which evil habits could be so readily disseminated among the 'undeserving' and feckless poor. A fact testified by urban commentators who found themselves staring into the very abyss of human nature

There is a youthful population in the Metropolis devoted to crime, trained to it from infancy, adhering to it from Education and Circumstances, whose connections prevent the possibility of reformation, and whom no Punishment can deter; a race '*sui generis*', different from the rest of Society, not only in thoughts, habits and manners, but even in appearance (Miles 1839; cited in Shore 1999)

A sentiment also expressed by Thomas Begg who, writing in 1849, found himself observing a race of people who were in every shape and form made essentially different by virtue of the depraved conditions in which they lived

A large part of the population were found to be grovelling in the veriest debasement, yielding obedience only to the animal instincts; brooding in spiritual darkness in a day of gospel light, and much shut off from

participation in the blessings of Christian privilege as if they had been the inhabitants of another hemisphere (Beggs 1849)cited in (Shore 1999).

The positivism of academics such as Lombroso whose enquiries led to him to the conclusion that the criminal was simply an atavistic throwback to a pre-evolutionary period, dignified these widely distributed gothic fantasies about sub humans existing in the dark heart of the industrial metropolis with the gloss of scientific respectability (Horn, 2003; Knepper and Ystehede, 2012). What these representations accomplish, particularly when mediated by an expanding popular press, was a representation of the bandit as faceless product of a depraved class of sub-human individuals, devoid of morality, untouched by civilisation and driven to crime by primitive instincts. From this representation of the robber, it would take little to persuade the Victorian audience that the bandits in their midst posed a real and developing threat to public order. A phenomenon explored by Davis in her examination of what she identified as a moral panic that surfaced in the 1840s to 1860s in London as a response to a perceived epidemic of 'garrotting' (Davis 1980)

'Garotting' referred to a mode of attack perpetrated by certain 'Rampsmen'. It involved literally grabbing a victim by the neck prior to separating them from their goods. By the 1840s in the face of sustained media coverage, the public were presented with a representation of what was presented as a new form crime running quite literally out of control. In the Cornhill Magazine in 1863 an editorial read 'Once more the streets of London



are unsafe by day or by night. The public dread has become almost a panic'. In the ensuing crackdown those found guilty were either flogged or hung<sup>7</sup>.

In many respects the Victorian demonization of the robber would establish the template by and through which they would continue to be mediated in popular culture through the twentieth century: Namely as a faceless predator, devoid of moral sentiment, an enemy of the people.

Like other folk devils, the fascination that the robber performs in relation to the public they prey upon often moves through phases. For the most part robbery continues as a taken for granted but unremarked phenomenon, rarely reported in the mass media. In effect a perennial reality in poor areas. Periodically, however, as with the case of garrotting in Victorian England, robbery is rediscovered and the perpetrators can find themselves elevated to the status of a public enemy. And during periods like this, the robber comes to embody and personify quite literally an existential threat to the well-being of society.

In *'Policing the Crisis, Mugging, the State, Law and Order'* written by Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies provides the single most detailed account exemplifying this in their analysis of the social reaction to what the media were describing as an escalating street crime pandemic in England during the period 1970 to 1972 (Hall et al 1978).

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<sup>7</sup> For an examination of other Victorian moral panics around street crime see Pearson, G. (1983). Hooligan: a History of Respectable Fears. London, Routledge. Pearson (1983). For a consideration of an 18<sup>th</sup> century predecessor in Chelmsford see King, P. (1987). "Newspaper reporting, prosecution practice and perceptions of urban crime: the Colchester crime wave of 1765." Continuity and change 2: 423-454.

The text begins with an examination and then a critical demolition of the evidential basis that the media deployed to justify the selective and sensational attention they gave to street crime during this period. The newsworthiness of street crime, Hall et al argued, could not be explained in terms of a sharp and unexpected rise in this category of crime because the empirical evidence simply did not support this interpretation. Street crime, they argued, was an old offence whose rate and incidence had not changed significantly over time during the twentieth century. Nor could media and political interest in street crime be explained in terms of an old crime now being perpetrated in new ways. The expression 'Mugging' which the media quickly latched upon to describe street crime during this period was not, Hall et al argued, a statutory offence; and far from describing a new offence or offender (Phillips 2003) appeared simply to be new label imposed to classify an existing array of offences. The public and in particular, the medias response to street crime did not, as a consequence, appear warranted by the reality.

In their attempt to make sense of the sensational reporting street robbery received at the hands of the media, Hall et al drew upon a concept first developed by Stan Cohen in his influential study of the social response to Mods and Rockers in the 1960s (Cohen 1980). What the media had generated they argued was a 'moral panic'.

When the official reaction to a person, groups of persons or series of events is out of all proportion to the actual threat offered, when 'experts' in the form of police chiefs, the judiciary, politicians and editors perceive the threat in all but identical terms and appear to talk with one voice of rates, diagnosis, prognosis and solutions, when the media representations universally stress 'sudden and dramatic increases (in

numbers involved or events) and 'novelty' above and beyond what a sober, realistic appraisal could sustain, then we believe it appropriate to speak of the beginnings of a moral panic (Hall et al 1978).

What they then sought to explain was how and why this moral panic around 'mugging' had appeared when the facts about 'mugging' did not by 'sober realistic appraisal' justify the attention it had received. As empirical facts about street robbery could not provide them with an answer to this question, their focus shifted towards accounting for the social response itself. Instead of looking at the deviant act - the conventional focus of criminological enquiry, they focused instead upon studying '*the relation between the deviant act and the reaction of the public and control agencies to the act*' (Hall et al 1978).

To accomplish this task they began by assiduously studying the genesis of the moral panic, paying particular attention to the way in which the mugging label came into popular usage during this period. As their research demonstrated, prior to the 1970s, the term mugging had no history of use in the UK. It was however a term routinely deployed by commentators in the US to describe street robbery. What the British media had done, Hall et al argued, was to adopt this term and import it wholesale to describe what they then claimed was in the process of happening on Britain's inner city streets.

What was imported, however, was far more than a new description of an old offence. For in this American import what was being appropriated was a label to which an assemblage of already existing references and associations were attached. The mugging label thus already came contextualised and 'racialised' when the British media began to apply it in a 'scene setting' manner to help explain events in the British context. As Hall et al note:

'Mugging' comes to Britain first as an American phenomenon, but fully thematised and contextualised. It is embedded in a number of linked frames: the race conflict, the urban crisis, rising crime, the breakdown of law and order; the liberal conspiracy and the white backlash'. It is no mere fact about crime that is reported. It connotes a whole historical construction about the nature and dilemmas of American society (Hall et al 1978).

When the British media began to deploy the term mugging to define what they claimed was happening on the streets of Britain, they did so against a background characterised by economic decline, and not least the breakdown of the post-war welfare state settlement. It was at this moment that the Black community, already one of the poorest and most economically marginalised populations in British society, found itself singled out for special treatment. This revealed itself, Hall et al argue, in a movement that would see Black communities in general and young Black males in particular subject to an undeclared urban war by the police; the active agents of a deeply repressive and racist state.

By the time the moral panic over rising street crime had begun, Hall et al argued, this urban war was already well under way. Young Black males were already finding themselves subject to racialised targeting by the police; while the areas in which they lived were subject to highly intensive and coercive policing. It is in this context that an articulation between police activity, media coverage and street crime activity on the streets began to be forged. Robbers provided the facts; well-reported police arrests confirmed them; and both street crime and the response towards it provided a context the media then began to interpret by reference to the mugging label it had imported from the US.

In this process of *othering*, the street robber came to connote something beyond itself. By magnifying the threat from one posed to innocent victims in a street context, to a malignant alien threat that threatened not only the innocent white society but the British way of life, the mugger became reconstructed as a folk devil. In effect a monster epitomising everything the white victimised society lived in fear of: alien invasions, a deepening urban crisis, the decline of British civilisation. The reality of street crime and not least young Black young men's participation confirmed the plausibility of this narrative. This reconstruction would also justify what would become a draconian judicial crack down on the part of the government and enforcement agencies mandated exceptional powers to suppress this violent assault on the good society.

### **The Robber as Folk Hero**

Given that robbery is a violent predatory act and given that bandits of various forms can, as we have seen above, lend themselves well to become reconstructed as public enemies, at face value, it would appear very odd to imagine that from such problematic material a hero can be constructed. But over time and in many societies it is as a public hero that they often appear. Let us now consider how and why this occurs.

Consider three contemporary societies: England, Australia and the United States. Taken at face value these are societies that define themselves by reference to the fact that they are freedom loving societies in which the rule of law prevails. These are, by and large, societies which also expend considerable resource on their enforcement agencies. Interestingly, however, the founding myths out of which each of these societies are built are replete with heroic myths of bandits however they are named: outlaws, robbers or gangsters. As we shall also observe, this fascination with robbers has been longstanding and even

today, the figure of the outlaw as hero still remains a potent and powerful motif in popular culture. Before we establish why a predatory figure could paradoxically assume such heroic status, let's briefly look at the historical record, beginning with England before briefly considering how the myth of the heroic robber would migrate to societies such as Australia and the USA

Everyone knows about Robin Hood and most people, I imagine, will know something about his band of merry men and the heroic tales that surround them. Leaving aside the many books that have been written, this particular myth in which a robber plays the role of folk hero has long provided the staple diet upon which Hollywood has fed. What we know of Robin Hood begins in the romances of the eleventh and twelfth centuries where he appears as a heroic freeman whose status as hero was built around the audacious robberies that he allegedly committed. It wasn't until the 15<sup>th</sup> century that he was appropriated to the aristocracy (historically he was a yeoman) which was also a period during which he became celebrated for fighting injustice by robbing from the rich to give to the poor (see, Spaggs, 2001). Nor was his legend an altogether original one, but appeared to draw for inspiration on a range of other myths about notorious robbers and bandits including the Anglo-Norman romance of Fouke le Fitz Waryn, and the Tale of Gamelyn (Hallsworth 2005).

Nor does England's fascination with the heroic outlaw end with Robin Hood. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century an entire genre of 'cony catching' literature was being published feeding off and playing to the public's fascination with rogues, vagabonds and other violent, masterless men. In 1552, for example, Gilbert Walker wrote the pamphlet '*A manifest detection of dice play*' and in 1561 John Audrey wrote '*The Fraternity of vagabonds*'. In this genre the public were served up with a representation of what was presented as an organised underworld

populated by an exotic gallery of rogues whose lives the authors claimed to have some intimate knowledge and understanding of (Twying, 2000). This popular literature continued in the eighteenth century in publications such as the *Newgate Calendar* (Birkett, 1992) along with a range of other pamphlets produced and circulated about notorious highwaymen in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. These insured that, despite the real dangers posed by them, they nevertheless retained, as we shall now see, a more heroic, as opposed to demonic, face.

By the time we reach the 16<sup>th</sup> century if the term 'outlaw' (meaning literally those who live beyond the reach of the law) might well have fallen into disuse but public fascination with the robber would continue in a range of myths and legends that arose around the figure of the heroic highwayman.

While Dick Turpin remains far and away the most famous of the highwaymen of the eighteenth century, his fame was largely derived from the exploits of other memorable highwaymen who preceded him and who engaged in the very acts for which he would subsequently be remembered. This would be a cast that would include figures as Gamaliel Ratsey, Captain James Hind, and Claude De Vall (Seal, 1996).

The highwayman did not, of course, suddenly appear out of nowhere, perpetrating new crimes or old crimes in new ways. The term simply marks a change in semantic fashion: an attempt to rethink an old villain in a way that would appeal to whoever the contemporary audience happened to be. The term was also only one among many others that we could also observe in popular parlance between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this sense the highwayman could also appear as a 'High Toby', or a 'Knight of the Road'. What appears to have cemented the term Highwayman into our historical consciousness was the fact that it was an expression that became synonymous

with the activities of a procession of famous robbers whose notoriety derived both from their exploits and from the way these were subsequently mediated in literary form.

While it is difficult to identify any one person responsible for setting in motion the cult of the highwayman, it is with Gamaliel Ratsey a gentleman soldier of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and Captain James Hind, that the myths of the highwayman begin to assume the form that would then persist for the next 200 years (Spraggs 2001).

Hanged in 1605, having committed a number of notorious robberies, Ratsey's life became the subject of a number of popular stories. These, as Spraggs observes, would come to assume the status of models around which later stories, subsequently attributed to other highwaymen, would coalesce.

If we consider these highwayman narratives in the round then they appear to condense around a few common themes which also help explain why the robber could also be construed in a more heroic light. In the first instance these narratives converge on the figure of a man (and very occasionally a women) who is forced to make their living by robbery, often as a consequence of an injustice perpetrated against them. Having taken to a life of robbery, however, it is trade which is then undertaken with honour, decency and not least, with a sense of good humour. Though capable of using violence, it is the highwayman's capacity to avoid using it and indeed their repugnance at using it unnecessarily that renders them both folk heroes as well as gentlemen. While many of their victims are indeed innocent, it is also the case that some are not and by virtue of this their victimisation is implicitly justified. They are invariably generous to the poor and chivalrous to women. What gives their stories a sense of pathos is that a tragic moral destiny invariably awaits them. The highwayman can avoid the forces of law and order for a time (and their



notorious capacity to avoid capture remains a core feature of the highwayman legend) but the law cannot be circumvented forever. The king's justice will be done and, importantly, must be seen to be done. Inevitably the hero is caught, found guilty and sentenced to death. The myths invariably conclude with the hero facing execution with equanimity and dignity, to leave his mortal coil well respected and loved by all (Hallsworth, 2005).

The life of Claude Duval, a French highwayman who plied his trade in England during the 17<sup>th</sup> century exemplifies the narrative (Sugden, 2015, 2017). His most famous exploit, immortalised by Walter Pope in 1670 centred upon an occasion where he was alleged to have held up a coach containing a nobleman and his lady. Knowing that escape was impossible but not wishing to appear frightened, the lady began to play upon a flageolet. According to legend Duval took out his own and began to accompany her. Having concluded their duet Duval is then said to have complimented the nobleman on his wife's ability and then observed that he suspected she could no doubt dance as well as she played. Having danced with her on the heath Duval then escorted her back to the carriage where he then remarked to the noble that he had failed to pay for his entertainment. In recompense the highwayman stole four hundred pounds.

While the story is perhaps unlikely, what we do know about Duval is that when he was eventually caught and tried at Newgate. King Charles the Second made an attempt to save him, but to no avail. He was executed at Tyburn on 21 June 1670 in front of a sympathetic crowd. He was subsequently buried at St Giles where his epitaph read

Here lies Du Vall, Reader, if male thou art,  
Look to thy purse. If female, to thy heart.

Much havoc has he made of both; for all  
Men he made to stand, and women he made to fall  
(Pope 1670), cited in Spraggs, 2001)

In his study of the historical role played by the Robber/ Bandit, Hobsbawn, drew attention to the quasi political role they played in pre-modern societies (Hobsbawn, 2000; See also Linebaugh, P (2006). In such societies poverty was the lived reality for the overwhelming majority of the people. Class divisions were sharply exposed, exploitation and injustice were clearly evident and the rule of law was applied savagely in the interests of the ruling class. The figure of the robber as hero, Hobsbawn argued, grew from the fact that they not only took on the forces of law and order which they would heroically outwit, they challenged in so doing the manifest injustice of the societies in which they operated. Robbery perpetrated against the wealthy, in effect, was part of a class war and recognised as such by the poor. This constituted their political role and it was one that the wider public could empathise with. With the coming of the modern industrial age Hobsbawn argued that this perception changed. With the formation of an urban proletariat and, not least, working class political parties and unions, the historic and not least quasi political role the bandit had played as hero would end. Increasingly, it would be as predatory enemy that the bandit would be construed, in effect an enemy of his class of origin.

As we have seen, the robber, throughout the ages, has been constructed in very different ways. On one hand we have a longstanding history of popular representations in which the robber appears as folk hero, a champion of the poor and a figure whose audacious exploits become the stuff of legend. In the English Case study presented here we can trace this genealogy from the myths

of Robin Hood through to the legends of the highwayman of the eighteenth century popularised in cony catching literature. We can take this journey further by looking outside of England to see how the myth of noble robber through imperialism leaves England's green and pleasant land and becomes transplanted to places like America and Australia where it becomes part of the founding myths of these frontier and outback societies. This history would include the myths and legends that surrounded the Australian bushranger Ned Kelly, who together with his gang was eventually shot by the British Colonialists in 1880 (Terry,2012; Meradeth and Scott, 1980; Maloney, 2001); and the myths that surrounded outlaws such as Jesse James (Dyer, 1994; Koblas, 2001; Welman, 1986)and Bonnie and Clyde in the USA, also executed (eventually) by American Law enforcement agencies (Burrough, 2004; Knight and Davis, 2003).

In all these cases we once again are presented with people whose lives are typically nasty, brutish and short but which are redeemed because they represent, or perhaps, more accurately, are represented in popular culture as embodying traits that allow for vicarious identification by a mass public. At the most general what we are presented with in the literary representations are outlaw figures with anti-establishment credentials, who kick back at the system that oppresses them, who live precarious lives on the edge. Like all heroic robbers they are free, masterless men who live beyond the reach of the law until, that is, it finds them where they end up paying the ultimate price.

Is it possible today as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century is it possible to imagine that there is still room for robbers to be constructed as anything other than a faceless enemy? Is Hobsbawn correct in arguing that the days of the heroic bandit robber have now passed?

## **Robbery and popular culture today**

In 2002 England found itself reeling from yet another instalment of street robbery fever. The mugger during this period had returned (renamed as 'Jacker') and commanded headline news for a period of around 2 years. This had some trappings of a moral panic with the tropes of exaggeration and distortion that typically accompany them ( see Ben Yehuda, 2009) but attention was also high because street crime was indeed rising at the very period when many other forms of crime (like auto theft) were in decline (Hallsworth 2005). Fuelling this crime wave was an epidemic of mobile phone thefts which more and more young people began to carry during this period, thus creating a population of suitable victims upon which a growing constituency of young disadvantaged young men began to pray. As with the moral panic of the 1970s the mugger during this period was presented as a folk devil incarnate, an existential threat to the British way of life. By 2005 this folk devil had disappeared as an object of public interest. The press stopped talking about them and street robbery slipped out of the issue attention cycle even though quite a lot of it continued. As with the moral panic documented by Hall et al, during this period the robber was represented simply as a faceless menace, an enemy of society, shorn of anything that made them or their acts appear human let alone justified.

When robbery next appeared on the British media spectrum it was in 2011 following the worst outbreak of riots in post war British history. Far from being seen as an act of resistance on the part of the excluded (the traditional left take (see Hobsbawn, 1959) these riots were understood and pretty much written off by the left (and everyone else) as events characterised by the mass looting that accompanied them (see Tredwell et al 2012; Žižek, S. 2011). Looting perpetrated by what the eminent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman would go on to

identify as the 'flawed consumers' of late modernity; a precariat totally colonised by the cult of compulsory consumption around which contemporary neo-liberal capitalism is organised. A precariat whose complete immersion into this cultural imperative left them with nowhere left to take their grievances but to the shopping malls which they then looted (Bauman, 2012).

As with the mugging fears of 2002 it would appear that in the face of such a negative reception there is little discursive space in popular culture for understanding robbery or robbers as anything other than the sad miserable acts of predatory criminals or 'flawed' consumers. All of which begs the question as to whether it is possible to imagine popular culture today positioning robbers in any other terms in late modern 21<sup>st</sup> century times?

It is, I suspect, rather difficult to imagine the act of robbery being presented in anything other than negative terms today. It remains predominantly perceived and with good reason as predatory act perpetrated by a faceless underclass we are not invited to sympathise with but condemn unreservedly. Yet in many respects I would suggest the personality traits that would once have led the robber to be elevated to heroic status arguably still appeal. The public like and remain attracted to the outlaw. They like masterless men. They sympathise with people who 'kick back' and who mobilise violence as a currency, just as they sympathise with those who bend rules and live life on the edge in order to get what they want.

Consider, for example, the wider public reception of American Hip-hop and the pivotal role that the figure of the urban street gangster plays within it (Krim, 2001). This has become quite literally the outlaw culture par excellence of late modern times with a worldwide reach. A figure perhaps best epitomised by Tupac along with other rappers such as the Notorious B.I.G., Dr Dre, Snoop Dog and Easy E. Like the highwayman of old, within the Hip-Hop tradition we

find lawless outlaws who in the bars they spit, the clothing they wear and the violent aesthetics they adopt, are perceived to kick back at the system which oppresses them.

At the same time and paradoxically rappers like Tupac also embody traits widely celebrated in American society more generally (Price, 2003). These are sovereign individuals owned by no man who also make fortunes in what they do. Like the earlier myths that surrounded Jesse James and Billy the Kid, rappers like Tupac also embody the spirit of the frontier. Here we find men who live on their wits, operating at the edge of the law and at odds with it; who operate across a lawless and lethal terrain in which life is cheap and survival no means certain.

The series 'Breaking Bad' whose hero is a downtrodden school teacher who turns to producing and selling crystal meth, also trades unreservedly on the iconography associated with heroic robber. Rather like the highwayman of old, the hero Walter White fights the injustice of an American society that commits his family to penury, who lives by his wits outing the ever encroaching forces of law and order. He might not give anything to the poor (except he drugs he sells) but he is a true family man who will dare everything for their wellbeing.

Another constituency who has come to embody the heroic traits once associated with the heroic robber is the category of detectives who confront them – at least as these appear in fictive form. From the world of Clint Eastwood's hard bitten detective Dirty Harry in the 1970s to contemporary series such as True Detective we are presented with hero's who are at the same time outsiders; who struggle with unjust regimes which they heroically outwit (the criminal justice system, corrupt politicians), whilst not being adverse to a bit of ultra-violence along the way. If the days of the heroic robber are dead, the

spirit of the heroic robber, it appears, still lives on, a timeless archetype whose appeal never fades.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen the crimes in which robbers typically perpetrate is relatively mundane and banal. As noted earlier their craft rarely extends further than separating a victim from their possessions through the use or threat of force. Despite the fact that there is little that is remotely heroic about this, once mediated through the prism of popular culture (as this is constituted in any age ) the robber can find his or her exploits celebrated for their daring and audacity and the robber made to embody heroic traits: a masterless man who kicks back against injustice. As we have also seen despite the banal nature of their crimes the robber can find themselves represented as a public enemy incarnate, a folk devil positioned as posing an existential threat to society itself. While the robber as folk devil remains perhaps the most powerful representation we find in popular culture today, it is nevertheless the case that many of the virtues once associated with the heroic outlaw robber are still celebrated even if not necessarily associated with the figure of the robber

# The fists and the fury: My life in a sea of gangs

*"Where have all the boot boys gone" (Slaughter and the Dogs, 1978)*

It was not the first time I had been mugged but it was the worst. The crime location: a small back alley running off the Columbia Road in Shoreditch, London. Time: around 9pm in the evening of a brisk autumn night in September 2008. I was returning to my flat and the alley constituted a short cut. I didn't stand a chance. There were about ten of them, the oldest aged around 16-18 - but I recall seeing younger faces as well. Who were they? Bangladeshi boys, I suspect, from a local council estate.

"Give me your phone", demanded one of the older ones as they surrounded me. I remonstrated but to no avail. They weren't in the mood for talking. They had violence on their minds. Things happened quickly after that. I felt blows to my back and a fist in my face. I dropped to the ground and curled up, experience told me that this wouldn't last long. Kicks rained in but it was over quickly enough. They ripped my coat pocket open and stole my phone, my wallet, and in a spirit of pure malfeasance, the keys to my house. Then they ran off.

I stumbled to my feet shaken, more in shock than pain, but bleeding quite heavily from my nose. I made my way to a nearby newsagent and the shopkeeper called the emergency services. A paramedic eventually arrived, looked at me and concluded what I already guessed; my nose was indeed broken and would need treatment. The police arrived but there was not much I could tell them. As they left to look for the culprits, one confided to me that



when they caught up with the 'scumbags', they would leave them looking like me. I found myself smiling at the thought, which was reassuring because it told me my sense of humour was still intact - even if grinning was painful. I was subsequently taken to the local A and E at Whitechapel Hospital to be deposited in a room full of other victims of London's brutal street world, many in a state far worse than mine. I waited for about three hours before a doctor found the time to tell me that, yes, my nose was indeed broken and would need reconstructive surgery at a later date. I was then told to leave. Would they at least help clean the blood off of me (I was covered in the stuff)? He agreed and a pleasant nurse turned up to help. I was then evicted on to the streets of the East End at around 2am in the morning, with no house keys and in a considerable state of shock. But I was no longer their problem so my problems were no longer their concern<sup>8</sup>.

I looked terrible. I had bloodshot eyes; heavy bruising around them and my nose was pointing in altogether the wrong direction. Truth to tell, I resembled a street fighter, only not a particularly successful one. By a strange coincidence it was Halloween and in celebration young people across the city were dressing up in ghoulish apparel to mark the occasion. I didn't need to do anything I looked quite scary enough. Indeed, so scary, that people actively moved out of my way as I approached them.

How you might wonder did I react to this. Did I feel vengeful? Had my liberal sensibilities evaporated in the face of this brutal, unprovoked assault? I knew from the moment I regained my feet dripping blood that I would need to

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<sup>8</sup> This is an issue that requires some investigation. The hospital staff were basically patching up people, many of whom were evidently in a state of considerable trauma and in no condition to be thrown onto the streets of the East End in the early hours of the morning. This was not victim support.

make an existential choice. Either I would let anger and rage consume me in which case, I reasoned, my assailants would have won. Or I wouldn't. I wasn't prepared to let them get to me and nor did I, so I let it go and got on with my life. My friends, I found, expressed instead the anger and indignation I was not prepared to allow myself to feel. I was touched.

Taken at face value this incident would certainly appear to provide pretty conclusive proof that urban street gangs exist today and more than that pose a serious risk and not only to themselves. Some may also find in this sad incident stark confirmation that gangs are indeed the 'new face of youth crime' as argued by John Pitts (Pitts 2008). My victimisation, taken together with that of many others today would certainly confirm that group based violence is a real and potent threat and needs to be taken seriously.

But just how novel and just how new is the gang threat? Was I confronting something new or have we been here before? As the work of Geoffrey Pearson reminds us, the British have a wonderful capacity for historical amnesia (Pearson 1983). A capacity, that is, for forgetting that the bad things we experience as novel today often have a long and established prehistory behind them. That the dystopian reveries that shape our representations of the present, are also present in a past that is never quite as peaceful and pacific as fugitive memory discerns. Caught in the 'infinite novelty' of the present so wider continuities with the past are too often lost. And so it is, I will suggest, with the Gangland Britain thesis today.

One entirely legitimate way of demonstrating this would be to embark on a Pearsonesque journey of enquiry. To revisit the past and show how journalistic accounts of group deviance and delinquency in the post war period were often explained as 'gang related' at the time; or, alternatively, showing

how group related deviance in the past was experienced as presaging the arrival of terrible outbreaks of gangland violence the like of which British society had never witnessed before. This, for example, was certainly the case with the arrival of the teddy boys in the 1950s, as headlines from the newspapers of the time will confirm. The arrival of the Rasta's in the 1970s was also interpreted the same way.

But this is not the approach I intend to adopt here. Instead, my aim will be to present an auto-ethnography detailing my experience of growing up as a young man negotiating his way through environments where not only are 'gangs' a perennial part of the street furniture but where the risks of being beaten up by them constituted a very real on-going risk.

Before we get to this, however, a brief preamble on auto-ethnography, a method by and large absent from criminological enquiry but which commands a growing body of supporters elsewhere in the social sciences and humanities. Auto-ethnographies can be understood as a qualitative research method that aspires to combine the characteristic features of ethnography with that of autobiography. In conducting ethnography, researchers observe the lives of others in order to study their meanings, values and practices; and through this, their culture (Geertz 1973). Methodologically, this process involves taking detailed field notes, listing observations and conducting interviews with their research subjects. In an autobiography authors instead:

'retroactively and selectively write about their past experiences. Usually the author does not live through these experiences to make them part of a published document ; rather these experiences are assembled using hindsight.[....] Most often auto biographers write about "epiphanies" – remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person's life (Ellis 2010).

In an auto-ethnography the practices of autobiography and ethnography are combined in so much as auto-ethnographers 'retrospectively and selectively write about the epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible, being part of a culture and/or by emphasising a particular cultural identity'(Ellis 2010). As in an autobiography the researcher assembles elements of their past but with the proviso that, as with an ethnography, the elements assembled are subject to the rigour of social scientific conventions to ensure that when subjective experience is documented it is examined analytically (Ronai 1992).

As with any other historical survey auto ethnographies provide a record of past events, only, whereas traditional historical approaches are written from the perspective of an outsider looking in, an auto ethnography presents a similar narrative but with the addition that this is written from the perspective of the insider - the subject who experiences them. If we accept - as we should, cultural criminology's injunction that crime is a dramatic lived experience that requires deep phenomenological excavation (Ferrell 2004), the auto-ethnographic method, I contend, is a viable way of producing thick accounts of crime and deviance that foreground and recognise precisely this fact.

It could, of course, be objected here that a whole genre of crime writing exists that is wholly biographical but which remains of dubious provenance given that its authors are often ex gangsters. What makes their work interesting but questionable is that such accounts are typically written in ways that invariably sensationalise their subject matter and, not least, the lives of their narrators. There is also a tendency in such biographical accounts for the narrator (invariably the hero of his or her testimony) to reconstruct their biographies in order to narrate a redemption narrative. In such accounts the heroes past life is invariably saturated with violence and sin before some life-

transforming event propels them towards a future state of redemption. Could not the same problem reproduce itself in the case of auto-ethnographies such as the one I propose to conduct here?

While this is a relevant critique and one that needs to be addressed, the answer is no. As will become clear in the narrative that follows, the testimony I provide is not that of a hero but predominantly a (suitable) victim<sup>9</sup>. Nor is this a redemption narrative or, indeed, a narrative that has any sense of a beginning, middle and end. I appear in the text as a spectator and participant in the events I describe, but most certainly was not an author of the violence that emanates from the groups that constitute the key focus of analysis. When I appear, it is rather like the tumbleweed that rolls across the desert, blown here and there by the winds of chance. My narrative simply records my contact with groups that have the hallmarks of gangs (as they are defined today) as I encountered them on my journey from childhood to adulthood beginning in a village and then widening out to a number of different cities. I begin aged nine, growing up in a West Country village in England in the late 1960s. The narrative ends as I enter adulthood in Peterborough, a relatively small New town in Cambridgeshire in 1980. It is not my aim to sensationalise the world of gangs I describe, or in any way to claim that my experiences are somehow unique and exceptional. Far from it. My account, I will hazard, will resonate with many young men, particularly those who derive from or live close to working class areas and schools and who, in all probability, have also had to navigate their way through the same treacherous and often hazardous landscape that I will try and describe below. It is precisely in the mundane nature of my experiences, that the validity of my narrative and its criminological relevance will be revealed. Memory also

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<sup>9</sup> In retrospect and as will become apparent in my discussion of punk, for much of the period under discussion here, I was, in many peoples estimation, a walking provocation to violence.

plays tricks but my recall of the events, I would contend, is accurate. A good sociologist is invariably a voyeur by nature and inclination. I was always an avid spectator on the madness of the world and this preceded my formal training as a sociologist.

### **In the beginning**

I first became aware of gangs having been formally 'groomed' and then 'recruited' at the tender age of nine into the MMM, a self-defined street gang that had formed under the auspices of Monkey, its self-styled leader. I was at primary school at the time and the year would be 1969. The MMM claimed as its territory a patch of wasteland on the edge of Wick, a small village situated midway between Bristol and Bath. At the centre of its territory could be found a large corrugated steel barn upon whose roof we would periodically assemble.

Well this is how my entry into the world of gangs would read if I were to adopt the vernacular of contemporary control speak (to adopt Cohen's expression (Cohen 1984)). The reality was somewhat different. A school friend of mine suggested one day that I might like to meet up with him and his mates near the barn where I could become a member of the MMM (or Monkey's Mighty Marauders, to give it its full title). I duly arrived to find several youngsters from the village milling around, most of whom were about my age, Monkey a few years older. The term 'Monkey', by the way, was a nickname accumulated on the basis that that its owner had vaguely simian features. He did not appear to mind. My nickname at the time, for what it's worth, was 'Boz' or 'Bozzle' and this was ascribed on the basis that a consensus had been reached that I read too many books (Bozzle Bookworm, (obviously)). What exactly did this gang do? As I recall events, the answer to the question was very little. We

hung around the barn pondering deeply on what the destiny of the MMM might be and what its initials stood for. 'Monkey's Mad Men', I recall, was another alternative.

The life and times of the MMM however were short lived. As I went to school one day I was approached by a local lad who lived in a Council House at the end of our road which was otherwise dominated by small privately owned bungalows one of which I knew as home. He wanted to know if the MMM were prepared to do battle with the Mendip Hill Boys, so called, because they inhabited another council estate nearby on a road called, unsurprisingly, Mendip Hill. I can't remember the details of the conversation but it seems I somehow agreed to the challenge which I then subsequently forgot all about and which, to my everlasting shame, I never mentioned to the rest of the MMM. The Mendip Hill boys duly arrived that evening and duly trashed the MMM who put up no struggle. We were the soft products of the petty bourgeoisie, while the Mendip Hill Boys were tough working class lads. In the melee that ensued (dominated by a lot of running away on my part) Monkey was kidnapped and beaten (but not too seriously). And that was the end of the MMM.

I was, I have to admit, a gouache, provincial child with absolutely no street awareness at all. And this innocence, I think, helps explain what happened when next I encountered the world of gangs. There was a disco at the local village hall and my friend Dave suggested I went along. The year is now 1970. When I arrived I found myself confronted by a group of young men who would not let me enter the Hall until I divulged my gang allegiance. Was I a supporter, they demanded to know, of the Skinheads or Grebo's. I was, I have to admit, flummoxed, as I had no idea what a Skinhead or a Grebo was. Boxing

clever (or so I thought) I asked them which group they were affiliated to. 'We're Skinheads' they replied. Unsurprisingly and very quickly I also found myself to be an avid supporter of the Skinheads. Only this was the wrong answer. 'Were not skinheads, we're Grebo's, they replied. I duly received a kicking and a lesson I would never forget into the mendacity of the Grebo. Nor had the Grebo's quite finished with me. But before we get to this instalment in my life I must digress here and describe my entry into secondary education because it is entirely relevant to this narrative.

### **The Joys of adolescence**

I had the dubious honour of being a member of the first generation sent to what was known as a Comprehensive School. The school in question had previously been known as *Oldland Common Secondary Modern* but had now been rebadged *Sir Bernard Lovell Comprehensive* (after the famous astrologer who had lived in the area but had not attended the local school); given a new set of buildings and high hopes for the future were had by all. But as the American expression goes 'you can take a child out of the ghetto but you can't take the ghetto out of the child', so the same applied to the school. As a Secondary Modern its mission was less the pursuit of academic excellence so much as providing a holding pen for the local working class youth who lived on the huge councils estates adjacent to the area; until, that was, they were old enough to be claimed by the local factories. Though the ethos was supposed to change now that we were part of the brave new world of Comprehensive's, this tradition still endured in what was at heart a tough working class school.

The scene still remains engrained in my mind today, the vision I encountered in my first walk into the playground of my new school. Where,



there, in the very middle of it, a group of Boot Boys adorned with Bristol Rovers scarves, stood singing with gusto, popular terrace anthems of the period, including the following, relayed in a broad Bristol accent:

When the red, red, robin comes bob, bob, bobbing around

Shoot the bastard, shoot the bastard

And

We hate Bristol City and we hate T Rex

We love Bristol Rovers and we all love sex

Walk with a wiggle and wiggle and a walk

Doin' the Tote End, Boot Walk . . .

Concluded by way of a glorious finale (accompanied by clapping)

'Your goin' to get yer fuckin heads kicked in.

your goin' to get yer fuckin heads kicked in'.

This group, which varied in composition on a day to day basis, were variously part of the youthful cohort of the Tote End Boot Boys (the football hooligan element of Bristol Rovers); simultaneously, the younger element of the Banjo Island Boys, so named because at the heart of the local council estate from which the school predominantly drew its pupils, could be found a park shaped like a banjo. But their territorial affiliation could also extend to the school itself, which was in an eternal state of conflict with another local comprehensive known as the Grange (and every other local school come to think of it). A perennial state of conflict also existed between the boys and the teachers whose

tragic destiny it was to contain their innate propensity for violence to, at least, within manageable proportions.

This group, aged between 12-14, were aspiring to be mirror images of the older Banjo Island Boys who had built up quite a notorious reputation in the local area and beyond. They were the idols whose defiant pose they emulated and whose exploits they exalted. My first glimpse of this group, or part of it, also occurred shortly after I joined the school. I remember seeing a group of elder lads walking menacingly across the playing fields, two swinging bog chains in their hands; what in contemporary gang talk, would be considered their 'weapon of choice'. For the uninitiated, the 'bog chain' was so named because most public toilets then had cisterns high above the toilet and to flush them you pulled a chain. Given they often had weighty handles attached they also made excellent weapons for self-styled bootboys<sup>10</sup>.

I also had a chance to witness the elders at our school in action, the context being away trips to various schools in order to play Rugby. We were, to be frank, absolutely hopeless and lost miserably each time. But sport, I was given to understand, was not where the fun was to be had. On one occasion I remember standing outside one local school after yet another summary pulverising, when a group of our elder boys arrived having left the changing rooms. We were briefly free from adult supervision and they took immediate advantage of the opportunity gifted to them by trashing the neatly planted flower beds nearby while heartedly singing 'tip toe through the tulips'. I can't recall the lyrics but they had been changed.

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<sup>10</sup> The Banjo Island Boys would approximate what Klein and Maxim would today terms a traditional extended gang Klein, M. W. (1995). The American street gang : its nature, prevalence, and control. New York, Oxford University Press.

It was around this time (1972) that the Banjo Island Boys elected to invade my village in ostensive pursuit of the Mendip Hill Boys. I remember coming across them in the vicinity of the local village pub. Fortunately for me a number of the younger people who had come along with them were from my school and vouched for me - which was a relief ('he be alright, Boz is a good un'). They had arrived in cars which indicates that the age range extended beyond 18. I clearly recall seeing one guy sitting in a car with a shotgun in his hands, the epitome of a 1970s gangster. Others hung around nearby, some carrying chains, some clubs. Violence had been anticipated and they were ready for it. Fortunately, the Mendip Hill Boys had melted into the ether, so nothing subsequently happened.

By way of phenomenological detail these young men were dressed in the height of 1970s boot boy fashion. Longish tangled hair and thick side burns (for those that could grow them). Wide lapelled shirts with strange designs; baggy leather jackets with wide lapels, large baggy trousers with side pockets with four and sometimes five button waist bands; and invariably Doc Martin or Chelsea boots. This really was 'life on Mars'. I know because I lived it.

Life then as it is today was nothing if not territorially grounded. You were known by reference to the area you came from and being from the wrong area, or alternatively, in an area claimed by someone else, could entail violent repercussions. On one occasion, my friend Mark and I, whilst returning from a Rover's football game, were jumped by a group of young men from the St Georges area of Bristol. Our error was simply to have strayed into their turf. More amusing was the time I received a good kicking from a group of bootboys who cornered me after I left a nightclub in Keynsham Centre, an area adjacent

to Cadbury Heath where my school was based. I would have been sixteen at the time.

I found myself in the unfortunate position of being surrounded by a group of about six young men who again had violence on their minds. 'Where was I from', they demanded to know. I told them 'Cadbury Heath' to which one responded the Banjo Island Boys had beaten him up. This was clearly said with the implication that I was going to be made to pay. Sensing that someone from the moon would have beaten him up if that had been my home, I challenged him. 'Come on', I said (bravely), 'I'll take any one of you on in a one to one fight'. Without even pausing to consider my entirely reasonable offer, one immediately responded: 'We fight as a team'. Then they pounced. I received a good kicking and one that left me with two black eyes.

Summer and Easter holidays were times when people travelled, a few to hot and distant climes, while most stayed in their locality or went to nearby holiday resorts such as Western Super Mare. My mother instead took us to stay with our cousins in Birmingham. The city was then an industrial one and its core business was making cars. To signify its status as an Important Metropolis its city centre had been reconstructed in the spirit of post war modernist brutalism and in the shadow of the 'Bull Ring' (as it was called) strange tribes proliferated.

One day (we are now in 1973) I found myself playing by the side of a canal with my cousin Martin and several of his friends. We could have been no more than 12 or 13 years old at the time. Out of nowhere a young man appeared breathless and in a wonderful Midlands accent relayed the dreadful news:

'Better Run, the Grebos are comin'.

Exhibiting what I would like to think of as a fledging interest in the sociology of deviance, instead of running away (as everyone else was) I moved towards

where he had told us the threat was coming from. There in all their glory, sure enough, was that tribe now lost to memory; a gang of Grebo's. There were about twelve in number, walking towards me in a single flat extended line. They also had violence on their minds. They wore a very distinctive uniform. Blue flared jeans; long greasy hair, white tea shirts, black biker jackets and biker boots. As soon as they saw me the chase was on. They were about three or four years older and I was quickly captured. They also grabbed my cousin. We were knocked around a bit but not too badly. Then they made off looking for more victims. They also took my cousin's bike, which we found a little later having been partially dismantled and well and truly trashed. This upset Martin who had recently been given it brand new as a birthday present. I was beginning to hate Grebo's.

Jock Young has recently argued that one of the problems with criminology is that it paints an unduly dark picture of the lives of young working class men who are often its object of analysis (Young 2011). Where, he demands, is the recognition of youthful pleasure; recognition of the humour and fun that saturates the lives of deviants who are never quite as miserable and excluded as much criminology suggests. So let me set the record straight here. The boys whose lives I describe were not desperate, nor, for the most part, was their violence driven forward by psychological defects. Yes, they could be violent and clearly many sought to accomplish proficiency in its exercise. Their masculinity demanded it; working class culture meanwhile excused, reproduced and legitimated it. But there was generally a good-humoured rumbustious aspect to the violence they inflicted. Yes, they would give you a good kicking, but there was typically a sense of humour attached as well. Their violence was not so much wilful crime, it was a leisure pursuit, a space where they found a welcome break from the mundane disciplines imposed within

institutions such as the school and the factory through which their lives predominantly unfolded. In their violence a liminal space was created where they could spectacularly break free from the routine monotony of everyday life, here they could embrace and excel in what Jack Katz's terms, 'the ways of the bad-ass'(Katz 1988). And by and large their violence was contained. Established codes of the street typically precluded the idea that you would continue to kick someone when they were down; hitting girls was frowned upon; fists were used more than the weapons they sometimes sported and 'beef' was largely contained to each other.

### **Get Pissed, Destroy**

We are now in 1977, Punk had arrived and within its extended family I have finally found myself a home. Punk was not some movement I joined, nor was it ever something I was 'recruited' too. I experienced my participation from the beginning as a vacation. Its aggression and anarchic impulses resonated immediately with my own sense of alienation from a society whose authority structures and pointless rituals I was already beginning to detest. Johnny Rotten's enigmatic sign off line at the end of 'Anarchy in the UK' just about said it all:

'Get Pissed. Destroy'.

It was a liberating mantra. It distinguished us totally from the wreckage of the 1960s 'summer of love' along with all the 'hippy shit' that surrounded it; it also put us head to head with the strange, weird, fucked up place I knew as England. And it was pretty fucked up, at least to my way of reasoning. A pointless queen was going to celebrate a pointless jubilee, and a nation of pointless people wanted to celebrate it with her. The British, I came to reason, were born to be

slaves and this active complicity in their own subjugation just about summed them up. I hated it all. I hated them all.

Trouble was, where to live and how to avoid the threat of violence that being part of a subculture whose *raison de etre* was to piss everyone else off left as its legacy. Straight society would ban us from its pubs and clubs, gangs of bootboys, teds, skinheads and squaddie's meanwhile (true to their calling), would attack us on sight, and not least try and disrupt gigs, a number of which would terminate in horrendous violence. I can vividly remember seeing a sign posted on the side of local clubhouse called the 'Slab' then used by the local Hells Angels chapter. It carried an uncompromising message: 'Any punk found on these premises will be shot'. I also recall a pitched battle between the proto feminist punk band the Slits and a group of bootboys who had invaded their gig.

Strange as it might seem, it would be the Hells Angels who would resolve the question of where I was going to live (at least for a while), while also providing me with the opportunity to reflect on the structure of drug dealing gangs of the 1970s. But let me give a bit of background here to explain how things came to this strange impasse.

My dad had been made redundant in 1977 and in pursuit of work had taken up a position in Peterborough, a small provincial town I had never heard of, and, to be honest, didn't want anything to do with. I, meanwhile, had just enrolled on a course of A levels at my local school. Given that relations with my parents were already pretty tense, they agreed to let me stay at the home of *aged distant relatives* in Bristol while I completed my studies. Retrospectively, it might not have been one of their best decisions. Testosterone was kicking in and punk

had arrived. My life was changing and new priorities beckoned. Ian Dury would encapsulate them superbly in his classic 1977 anthem:

Sex and drugs and rock and roll  
It's all your brain and body need  
Sex and drugs and Rock and Roll  
It's very good indeed (Ian Dury , 1977)

The immediate problem I faced was not that of recognising how necessary these infinitely desirable goods were but – more pressingly - how to gain access to them. Sex was never quite the readily available resource my adolescent self desperately aspired to gain access to and disappointment haunted my fumbling endeavours far more than the occasional success that came my way. Rock and roll was fine only I never had any money to afford the records. Drugs certainly appealed but where to get hold of them in a cultural milieu where drug use was by no means normalised?

Step forward my wonderful bohemian friend Melissa and her friends the Hells Angels. The background context, my being evicted from the home of aged distant relatives for indescribable behaviour that need not detain us further. This situation had the unfortunate knock on consequence of rendering me homeless in Bristol. So there I found myself one evening one day in a local hostelry musing tragically on my future (or lack of it) when out of nowhere appeared Melissa. She suggested I came to stay with her. She was then living with an older ex Hells Angel. Having no other option available to me, I readily agreed.

I subsequently met her partner, who appeared (strange as it might seem), well disposed to me; as indeed did the tribe of Biker boys and Hells Angels who



variously lived in his house (there were comings and goings all the time in what was a very mobile and shifting population). Though they were very much a group of outsiders (in Becker's sense of the word (Becker 1964)), by and large the truth of the matter was that this was a group that had fallen on hard times. Their lives as glorious outlaws riding stripped back Harley Davidson's across the highways and byways of England was by and large over; only the myth of the good times remained. Middle age was beckoning and none of them had jobs or wanted them. They lived off benefits and exploited the welfare system to the limit. In a low wage economy they supplemented their meagre income through hustling and engaging in various scams. One involved selling household goods to bored housewives on the basis that the disabled had produced the goods. I was quite good at this. But far and away their greatest source of extra income came through drug dealing. They also consumed a great deal of the produce that they traded with which, I suspect, diminished their profit margins considerably.

One direct consequence of this entrepreneurialism was that I, a seventeen year old punk, found myself spending the best part of two months totally stoned and permanently high wired. It was a hell of an education but not quite of the kind that would see me through my A levels. It was also an education in the art of drug dealing. First off, these were not high-level dealers. They sat somewhere in the lower middle tier. Marijuana was the key drug of choice though at times they also dealt LSD and Speed. Though I think it fair to say that Mellissa's partner commanded the most authority, he was not in any real sense an active leader. It was more a cooperative affair. Though much is made today of new corporate style gangs (with elders running youngers, running 'tiny's') (Pitts 2008), the group I was living with had no corporate structure at all. Nor, looking back, can I imagine why they would need one. As is the case today,

they were a loose network plugged into a larger distributed network that defined Britain's then developing drug economy.

Though at the groups edges people came and went, there did appear to be core group present most of the time and this group spent a lot of time trying to identify where next to score. They did not rely on one source but potentially many. Issues of availability and cost were key factors in the decision to pool money together to purchase a weight of dope. This was then cut and sold on down the drug chain mostly to known users in what remained at heart a closed, as opposed to open, market place. Though dealing was regular and brought in an income, it most certainly was not enough to raise the standard of living of this group beyond their bohemian roots.

This all occurred in the days before skunk had been invented along with the hydroponic revolution that made it all possible. Dope in the 1970s by and large came in three forms. At the bottom of the tree could be found Moroccan hash. The best of this was known as 'Sputnik'. In the middle was Red Lebanese, so called because of its red hue. It was more pliable than Moroccan, which tended to be quite hard. Top of the tree was Afghan Black which was black and very pliable. Together with Jamaican Semsimilla and Asian opiated Tie Sticks (which occasionally appeared), this stuff at its best could induce something quite close to a hallucinogenic trip. Today Afghan Black and Red Lebanese no longer figure in the UK drug market. The Israelis destroyed the dope industry when they invaded the Lebanon<sup>11</sup>. Thereafter the Bekka valley where the dope had been produced harvested opium. The same went for Afghanistan, now a net exporter of heroin to the western markets.

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<sup>11</sup> I recall meeting Israeli's at the time who told me how they smuggled Lebanese dope back into Israel in their rifles.

## **Into the eighties**

Not long afterwards, devoid of money, A Levels, and any sense of what I was going to do in life, I made my way to Peterborough. Eventually I found a job and rented a flat prior to an eventual move to Brixton in London. Peterborough then was a small provincial market town that was reinventing itself as a New Town. To signify its new status, its enlightened planners literally ripped the heart out of its old city and build a huge new shopping mall in its place. This would provoke the local punk band, the Now, to release their superb 1977 signal 'Development Corporation' ("they're changing the face of the nation"). As with Birmingham, strange tribes proliferated in the shadow of its regenerated centre. A walk on Saturday morning in 1978, for example, would bring any would be flaneur directly into contact with a spectacular array of British subcultures and these veered from the ornate and flamboyant to far more dangerous and lethal varieties.

Occupying the city square were the biker boys (with Motor Bikes) and their Grebo cousins (without bikes). Long hair, leather biker jackets and jeans, this was their uniform. Not too far away, standing in the vicinity of the Eight Bells pub (and within it) you would find the local skinheads. They came shaven headed and wore the ubiquitous uniform of rolled up straight jeans, Ben Sherman shirts, Doctor Marten boots, braces and Harington jackets. Both of these subcultures had a capacity for violence, the skins a highly developed capacity as we shall see. Enveloped by the new mall was another of Peterborough's pubs, known as the Still. It had a number of bars. Hippies and various survivors of the 1960s generation occupied one of the bars and the punks another. The punks were far and away the most creative and flamboyant of the various tribes and their local music scene was, to say the least, vibrant.

Various new romantics could also be found in the vicinity, many heavily influenced by David Bowie. Walking through the city centre, clutching Adidas bags and wearing outrageously baggy pants were the Soul Boys, preparing to head north to Wigan where, strung out on amphetamine, they would dance the night away. The year is now 1980 and the sheer bio diversity of subcultures was startling.

Another group also needs to be added to the mix here only this is not a subculture but it deserves a mention given the focus of the paper which is on gangs. Again resident in a number of the local pubs could be found groups of squaddies home on leave. They also sported short haircuts. They also moved in groups. They were also trained in violence and in my experience were prepared to mobilise it against anyone and everyone who looked remotely different.

It is important not to overstate the number of young people involved in these subcultures, they certainly stood out, but the numbers involved were generally small. They lived out the round of their lives in vicinity to the straight world of 'normal' people, who strangely enough looked pretty strange given that they were also adorned in the height of seventies fashion. Flared trousers, wide lapelled shirts and jackets, to list only some of the abominations in this, the decade that style forgot. Against them, the punks, despite the spikey haircuts and bondage gear they sported, were an altogether more stylish outfit; and it would be their penchant for straight or drain pipe trousers and thin lapelled jackets that would set the style scene for the next decade.

At this point some might well be wondering why I am describing subcultures here when the subject of this paper are gangs but there is a reason for this. If by 'gangs' we mean discernible groups known to themselves and to

others and for whom crime and or violence is, in some crucial sense, intrinsic to their identity and practice, then in my mind there is no doubt at all that many of the groups I have tried to describe here fit this definition very clearly - even if they did not see themselves and were not at the time formally defined as gangs.

Take the Skinheads as a case study. They congregated in groups and these groups were at heart, street-fighting units. They certainly affiliated to the far right (some more than others) and holocaust denial came as part of the package as indeed did a pronounced animosity to migrants. But violence was the crucial currency in which they traded and they valorised it. Their very social presentation of self was cultivated in a way that left you in no doubt at all that these were people you did not want to mess around with. And their violence could be explosive.

My first real encounter with Skinhead violence took place at one of the many Anti -Apartheid Festivals in London in the late 1970s. I was still in Bristol at the time and had travelled up in one of many coaches to take part. I remember finding myself standing near a group of Chelsea Skinheads when the Tom Robinson Band took to the stage and sang what remains one the great protest songs of the age 'Glad to be Gay'. The skinheads went berserk, attacking the people around them while aiming a barrage of beer cans and bottles at the stage. Later in Peterborough I watched them attack the fans of another new wave band called the 'Lurkers'. There was nothing political about it, violence is what they did and they enjoyed doing it. It was their currency, their stock in trade.

Their propensity for violence was brought powerfully home at an event I was also instrumental in organising entitled 'An Alternative Evening', which we convened at the local Theatre in Peterborough. We sought to bring together

avant-garde, new wave bands of the time such as Sudden Sway and Ersatz, with Art House cinema and if I recall matters, poetry. The event was very successful and attracted an audience primarily drawn from the cities more flamboyant subcultures. The local drug squad also put in an appearance but unfortunately their attempt at anonymity was rather spoiled given the fact that they stood out like a sore thumb given they were anything but alternative. Unfortunately, the skins also put in an appearance and brought the event to a halt when they initiated their own riot having taken offence at some of the shop mannequins we had assembled. They were black.

Later that year, together with some of my friends we went into the Eight Bells Pub in the city centre as part of a wider pub crawl in celebration of Christmas. I was standing at the bar waiting to be served and found myself next to a skinhead. He was half-cut but friendly. 'Come on', he said, 'have a drink'. I said no but he took it personally. He was, he said "only being friendly". I accepted. He wanted me to join his friends. It was Christmas, after all. Grippped by the weirdness of the situation I relented thinking 'whatever'. His friends were also skinheads, by no means people I would ever willingly elect to have anything to do with. There were five of them and they were well on the road to inebriation. They were also friendly, albeit in a way very peculiar to the skinhead.

I drank my whiskey, thanked them and got up to leave. I was told I needed another drink. I remonstrated, but one of the skins sitting next to me put his arm around my shoulders and sat me down. 'We're all friends here', he said, but with a vague tone of menace. So there I sat while another skin went to bar and came back with another round. The same thing happened when I tried to leave again with the consequence that I felt compelled to sit through three

more rounds bound to this band of brothers by the implicit threat that leaving their company just might be read as an honour slight. I began to feel desperate and somewhat concerned for my safety. How in the name of hell was I going to escape the clutches of this bunch of psychopaths who were now trying to explain to me (now a dear friend and supporter of the Skinhead movement worldwide) how I could access men with guns in London. As we were drinking neat spirits the rate of inebriation escalated. Eventually they brought a final round, then, at a signal ran drunkenly for the exit lacking the money necessary to pay for it. I escaped in the melee that ensued. Johnny Rotten once famously observed, 'never trust a hippy', to which I would also add 'never take a drink with a skinhead'.

As I observed above, the biker boys were not averse to a bit of the old ultra-violence. Shortly after I moved to Peterborough, I helped organise a series of discos at a local village Hall. This enterprise came to a dramatic halt when a group of bikers turned up in a van which they then parked across the door of the entrance (so nobody could leave). They then invaded the hall kicking all and everyone that opposed them. They had come in search of someone who had crossed them. They kicked him unconscious with the result that an ambulance was required to take him to hospital. The place was, I recall, covered in blood.

Finally in the context of a country that appears to be witnessing an unpleasant surge in militarism as this paper is being written, let me conclude this narrative by saying something very briefly about the squaddies and my contact with them. In many respects they were not that different to the skinheads. They also sported short haircuts, they banded together in groups, they were innately reactionary and like the skinheads also valorised violence.

And like the skins you didn't need to do anything ostensibly wrong to provoke it.

I had a rather unpleasant experience with squaddies at another gig in Peterborough when my friend and I were threatened by three of them. They had, they explained, just arrived back from Northern Ireland. They had taken offence to the fact that we were wearing American style combat trousers. We were lucky, things didn't kick off, but it was a close run thing. The New Wave band that was playing at the time was not so lucky. The squaddies subsequently attacked them and two of its members were hospitalised. I subsequently ran into one of the thugs responsible. He was, he said, "sorry", but in justification claimed that he and his friends were upset because two of their army colleagues had recently been shot dead by the IRA. As a technique of neutralisation, it didn't really wash<sup>12</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

What then is the criminological significance of this exercise in gonzo criminology? Do my impressionistic reminiscences count for anything? Can this subjectivist account even be trusted? Let me deal with the last point first.

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<sup>12</sup> And here I feel I must digress but I can't help myself. The idea, currently being mooted by New Labour that men like this, schooled to violence and scarred by it, should be held up as exemplary role models, strikes me as absurd. As to the idea currently being mooted by New Labour that men like this should be extensively involved in schools in poor areas, the very idea strikes me as utterly ludicrous. This is surely something that only strange, deluded and deranged fantasists could possibly contemplate. But this is New Labour, so why am I surprised.



There is, I would contend, no reason not to trust them. I have not tried to narrate anything other than events I personally witnessed and experienced. I have not tried to sensationalise these events nor am I making any claim at all that in any sense they were exceptional. As I hope would have become clear, I am not a hero. For the most part I am a victim or a witness to other people being victimised by groups of young men for whom collective violence constituted part of their everyday reality. And I must emphasise here that there is nothing glamorous or exciting about the violence I witnessed. The perpetrators may well be experiencing some of the 'seductions of evil', but as victims of it we, by and large, were not.

Auto-ethnographic accounts have gained respectability in areas such as the performing arts and humanities. It has gathered a momentum in sociology more generally but remains very much a minority pursuit and a contested one; often rejected as soft, subjective and as lacking rigour and objectivity by positivists and by some ethnographers as little better than a lazy exercise in navel gazing (Madison 2006).

Criminology, however, has much to gain by engaging with it. It would certainly expand the methodological repertoire available to cultural criminologists who, despite their vindication of ethnography as a privileged mode of enquiry, never mention auto-ethnography (Young 2011, Ferrell et al 2008). Its use would certainly help some criminologists of the present think more carefully about the uniqueness of present events, before advancing claims to the effect that gangs represent the 'new face of youth crime'.

While Pearson has recently sought to challenge this thesis on the grounds that we are looking today at little more than a contemporary reiteration of fears about gangs that echo 'respectable fears' that have a long pre-history (Pearson

2011); and while historians have pointed to the presence in the past of large organised gangs that appear to resemble contemporary gangs in crucial respects; this has not been the approach I have sought to adopt here. By adopting instead an auto-ethnographic method, I have sought to show that, far from being a unique product of our present, the kinds of group based violence today being identified as gang related, constitutes a longstanding, perennial, deeply embedded feature of street life in British society. Its contemporary novelty, as such, is significantly overstated.

In this respect, at least, Malcolm Klein is right when he argues that European societies are in denial of a gang problem that has always been around (Klein 2001). Yes, indeed, they have always been present, as my endemic exposure to and experience of territorially affiliated street fighting groups over the space of two decades, signify. Nor are the groups I have tried to describe here rare. As I have tried to show, by relaying my experiences of them in three cities over two decades, such groups constitute an intrinsic part of working class culture and working class street life in England. There are, in other words, far more continuities as opposed to discontinuities in urban street life.

If we take the various facets of gang life and culture currently identified as novel, then for the most part it is not. Take violent territorialism. This is reported today as new and disturbing phenomena. It even has a new label to describe it: 'postcode wars'. As I have documented above, however, variations of this have always been around. The language used to denote it might have changed but that is all. As my experience of living with the bikers also demonstrates, drug dealing was also a commodity that was traded in by groups that today would, without doubt, be described as gangs. As to the idea that gangs are now targeting schools in new and sinister ways, then again as my

experience of growing up in a working class school testifies, groups of street fighting kids with violence on their mind were always already there. Finally, are the groups described as gangs today more violent than their historical predecessors? The issue of weapons I will touch upon below. In relation to issues of prevalence and inclination I would suggest that the gangs of skinheads I encountered were every bit as violent as the violent urban street gangs that rove the streets of our inner cities today.

So what explains this culture of denial? A number of reasons need to be posed to address this. First off, we are living through a moral panic about gangs which we will subsequently explore in chapter 4 (Hallsworth, 2011) In such times a sense of proportion is evicted in a world where gang-talking fantasies prevail while the reality principle gets lost (Cohen 1972; Hall, Critcher et al. 1978). It could also be the case however, that the sheer ubiquity of the groups and the violence they did paradoxically helps render them invisible. As Alfred Schulz observed long ago, we tend not to notice and easily overlook what is always present in our everyday life world (Shultz and Luckmann 1973). Taken together with the fact that many of the groups I have described, were not described as gangs, nor for the most part saw themselves as gangs, this helps explain in part the historical amnesia British society is currently experiencing.

None of this is to suggest that the gang situation as we experience it today is not in some respects different. Between the 1970 and 1980s the groups I describe wore highly distinctive uniforms, and ones that clearly distinguished one subculture from another (Hall, Jefferson et al. 1976). Today, The aesthetics and styles of Black ghetto culture predominantly shape and define the uniform and style of urban street gangs today. While the groups I have described were certainly capable of ultra-violence, by and large their violence was delimited by

established street codes with longstanding histories in what remained, until recently, stable working class communities. My suspicion (based on significant research) is that today, this situation has changed and is changing.

As working class communities have fragmented and as the new precariat has grown (Wacquant 2008), the moral force of established street codes has withered to the extent that violence is no longer delimited to the same extent. As one young man in Hackney explained 'the thing about violence rules is that there aren't any'(Hallsworth and Silverstone 2009). More weapons such as guns are also making their way into the hands of volatile, immature, gang affiliated young men, and this coupled with their engagement in the ultra-violent retail end of the heroin and crack economy, has created I would suggest, the preconditions for a surge in lethal violence that was not routinely seen in the past (Hallsworth and Silverstone 2009).

Finally, whereas the group based violence for the young men whose lives I have tried to document here, constituted an extension of leisure in a world where their will to violence would be contained and end as they entered the world of work, I am not sure the same applies today in a post full employment society where such orderly transitions of adulthood are no longer assured for the burgeoning precariat (Standing 2011). For some young men, there might not be an orderly transition into adulthood; more a prolonged drift between adolescence and adulthood in a low wage, low skills economy, where the presence of stabilising forces such as stable working class jobs are notable by their absence (Hall, Winlow et al. 2008). In such a context the violence I predict will become more volatile and potentially lethal. In a world where more people than ever before carry valuable goods like smart phones I will also predict that

violent street robbery will be the form through which much of the violence is channelled. Gangs will invariably be blamed.

By contesting the alleged 'novelty' of the gang situation today through the vehicle of an auto-ethnography, my aim has both been to introduce a new method into a discipline which could, I will suggest, gain much by embracing it. At the same time, in reflecting on my personal experiences of growing up and around groups that have all the hallmarks of being gangs, my aim has been to contest in a new way, the current debate about the alleged novelty of gangs today.

# Continuities and discontinuities in street violence

Much has been made recently about the alleged novelty of urban violence today and gangs as we have seen have found themselves singled out as in part 'the new face of youth crime'. Though, for reasons already discussed, I view this conjecture as one devoid of sense and meaning, this does not in and of itself mean that nothing has changed. Things, after all, do not remain the same. Given society more generally has changed and changed considerably it would appear sensible to suppose that urban violence and street culture might be as well. With that in mind, in what follows, I want to examine street violence in the post war period using the UK as my case study. Are we looking today at an economy of violence that is distinctly new and if so what is new or novel about it; or alternatively, are there far more continuities that shape contemporary violence. Continuities that we tend to overlook, caught up as we so often are, in the 'infinite novelty' of the present (Pearson 2011).

In relation to the question of establishing continuities, I begin by providing a brief overview of street based violence in the post-world war 2 era; a violence regime I will associate with the developing welfare state. I then use this as the basis for comparing the violence I described in Chapter 6. As we shall observe, if there are many dissimilarities between the two violence regimes I describe, there are many continuities as well. In the final part of the paper I return to consider the question of what might have changed or is changing. I conclude that while continuities remain, neo liberal state-crafting is beginning to

change the contemporary economy of violence; and the direction of travel is not for the better.

### **Street violence in the post war period**

Mindful of Pearson's injunction that we ignore the lessons of the past at our peril (Pearson 2011), let us begin this enquiry by examining the forms of street based violence that prevailed in the UK as Britain developed under the aegis of the Keynesian welfare state in the era of organised capitalism.

So who were the violent young men of our immediate past and how best are we to understand the day-to-day violence in which they engaged? We can begin with social class as a precursor because class matters. By and large the violence of the street then, as it is today, was an activity predominantly engaged in by young, working class men. Though this generalisation does not rule out the engagement in street violence of the middle classes or the scion of the ruling classes, the overwhelming evidence we have tells us that the gentle art of kicking someone's head in, has overwhelmingly been a working class pursuit. The overwhelming weight of evidence would also appear to suggest that this violence was overwhelmingly perpetrated by young men, even though young women were, then as today, also involved. To a large extent this disparity can be read as the direct consequence of dominant (patriarchal) gender codes that allowed males to dominate public spaces and which worked simultaneously to confine young women to the private realm of the home and household.

Before we consider more closely the violence these young men engaged in and their motives for engaging in it, it pays to situate their parent class within the wider social context of which it was a part. Though some young working class men inhabited multiply deprived, perennially high crime areas, most lived

out the round of their lives in more stable, if by no means affluent, working class areas. The population of young men, as such, contained the social residuum, the sub-proletariat that welfare capitalism had never included; as well as the male offspring of far more stable and more affluent working class communities. It what became at times close to a de facto ghettoisation policy, it could also be observed that the population of the residuum had a distinctive ethnic profile in so far as many migrants from Asia and the Caribbean were spatially located into already poor areas of British cities such as Handsworth in Birmingham, Tower Hamlets and Brixton in London and Toxteth in Liverpool (Rex, 1988; Pryce, 1979)

Though there is a pronounced tendency on the part of the powerful to imagine that street violence is a the product of some strange and dysfunctional subculture, driven forward by deranged individuals, characterised by strange deficits; more can be gained by viewing the violence that most young men engaged in in the post war period as simply an extension of values and norms already long established and deeply embedded in working class culture. From this perspective toughness and forms of violent machismo that accompany it, were not exceptions to working class norms and values but by and large an extension of them. Within working class culture, as Walter Millar argued long ago, toughness coupled with an ability to handle yourself have always been valorised and, within limits, excused (Miller 1975). Not only does a certain competence in physical violence find tacit endorsement and cultural acceptance (it's what boys do) this culture has also traditionally stigmatised and censured forms of masculinity that depart from this mould. Being 'soft', a 'sissy' or a 'nancy boy' I recall, from my own experience growing up in a working class school in the 1960s and 1970s, were terms of abuse applied to young men who fell short of this ideal.



If we consider why this validation of physical prowess finds such cultural endorsement then this follows directly through from the uncompromising tough, harsh and adverse conditions that the working class historically had to confront. In other words, toughness and being able to handle yourself are values that came to be valued because they were integral to physical survival. In a culture grounded on harsh, uncompromising manual labour, physical hardness expressed resilience of the class itself.

If violence could be tacitly legitimated in working class culture, it was also regulated by informal street codes that placed determinate limits to the violence. In a patriarchal culture dominated by an aristocracy of labour (shop stewards, foreman, sergeants), the activities of the young were also policed internally by the working class community itself (Lea, 2002). In Lea and Stenson's terms, governance was regulated from below far more than it was achieved by formal policing agencies from above - despite their intermittently and by no means successful attempts to 'police the working class city' (Lea and Stenson, 2007). This worked to keep violence by and large within bounded limits in a world where strong cohesive communities were able to exercise authority over young men who by and large, would grudgingly consent to it.

If the intergenerational cultural reproduction of norms that validated violence helped explain why some young men might mobilise it, this alone does not explain the contexts where they would predominantly deploy it. Violence then, as it is today, was a de-facto response to interpersonal disputes, to honour slights, to group rivalries, to the search for respect that acquiring a reputation as a hard man can accomplish. The means of violence after all are ready to hand, and violence exists as one plausible (in the right context) response to a range of problematic situations.

To this we also need to factor in a range of non-instrumental motivations. Among these, we need in particular to factor in the quest for excitement and pleasure. The key characteristic of the violence that falls under this category is that it is predominantly non instrumental, non-utilitarian and is often engaged in as a hedonistic leisure pursuit by men who, in Jack Katz's terms get their kicks from 'walking the ways of the bad ass' (Katz 1988). For young working class men in particular, whose destiny in life was almost always going to be the factory, violence constituted the means by and through which they could seek to escape, at least temporarily, from the tedium of manual labour. Violence, in this sense, was an extension of leisure in a world otherwise organised around structured repetitive work disciplines.

It could be observed that this is precisely the world that David Downes discovered in his seminal work 'The Delinquent Solution' (Downes 1966). Based on an attempt to apply American Subcultural Theory to make sense of male street cultures in London's East End, he discovered less gangs adopting a 'delinquent solution' (Cohen 1955) but 'street corner societies' populated by young men who engaged in violence along with various other forms of wilding out (including hard drinking) as a leisure pursuit.

This hedonistic and violent aspect of working class culture is wonderfully exemplified in the gritty realism of Alan Sillitoe, nowhere more eloquently expressed than in the opening pages *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Sillitoe 1958), a novel set in an industrial town in the 1950s, and which follows the day to day exploits of its hero Arthur Seaton, a machinist in a local factory. The opening page is a wonderful reminder to everybody that the hedonistic, violent pleasures of life in the night-time economy are not new. Like so much of our present, continuities as opposed to discontinuities figure:

For it was Saturday night, the best and bingiest glad-time of the week, one of the fifty two holidays in the slow turning Big Wheel of the year, a violent preamble to a prostate Sabbath. Piled up passions were exploded on Saturday night, and the effect of the week's monotonous graft in the factory were swilled out of your system in a burst of goodwill. You followed the motto of 'be drunk and be happy, kept your crafty arms around female waists, and felt the beer going down into the elastic capacity of your guts (Sillitoe, 1958: 1).

Nor is violence far away from Arthur's life either. Having been discovered sleeping with another man's wife he finds himself violently assaulted. Interestingly, his assailants are Squaddies.

Why though did some young men become more proficient in violence than others during this period? Paul Willis provides perhaps the most compelling explanation for this in his work *'Learning to Labour'*, an account of why working class men often tend to find themselves confined to low status, manual working class jobs (Willis 1977). Based on ethnographic research conducted on a group of unruly working class young men in a school in Wolverhampton in the 1970s, he shows how they effectively rebel against a middle class school system whose value system they quickly discover was established to fail them. Instead of engaging in what they came to view as effeminising intellectual endeavour, they reasserted instead more traditional working class verities. They celebrated physical toughness and embraced misogynist not to say racist standpoints. In so doing they explicitly rejected the middle class gateway to success through intellectual assertion and deferred gratification. The unintended consequence of their youthful rebellion however

is that far from rebelling successfully against the system, their adaptive response simply prepared them for work in the low wage, low status sector of the economy which was always going to be their destiny anyway.

Was this violence predominantly group based and were gangs present? If we return to the late 1950s and the appearance of the Teddy boys, it is clear that as far as the media were concerned, gangs were certainly part of the problem. I would, however, suggest that most the violence that occurred in this period was group related. In fact, going further, I would suggest that to Miller's core 'focal concerns' I would also like to add another: 'violent territorialism'. This is not new it has always been a core and distinctive feature of male working class culture in working class communities; a trait I have tried to elaborate in my own history of growing up in the post war period.

For the most part, the violence I have sought to describe here was enacted not by people with psychological deficits and with proliferations of 'risk factors', but as an intrinsic property of the cultures of masculinity associated with particular strains in working class culture. This gendered order produced men shaped by gender norms that valorised toughness as a virtue, where being able to handle yourself was in part what men (as opposed to women) were supposed to be. Given that the means of violence were always ready to hand (your fists or boots) violence could, as we have seen, be deployed for the purpose of leisure, as edgework, or for defensive and offensive purposes. In an adolescent world where the police have always been distrusted and the apparatus of the criminal justice is rarely seen as a vehicle by and through which justice is achieved, violence has also been used as a regulating force in its own right.

As Matza (Matza 1990) rightly argues, for the most part, young people tend to drift into crime and violence. For the overwhelming majority it is not a life vocation or career. For most young people it is something they would have encountered at a stage of their lives. It will be first experienced in their neighbourhood then in the schoolyard. Participation for some might become more prevalent as they enter adolescence. It is quite likely that more serious forms and prolonged exposure to it will take place in poorer areas but, by and large, for most it is something that will end as they mature. By navigating an orderly transition from childhood to adulthood, violence, at least for most, is something that will be left behind. Paid work and family life traditionally stabilised most adult male personality structures in the direction of law-abiding behaviour. In a society where the wider violence rules are that adults should not engage in violence, engagement in it is actively discouraged and sanctions applied to those who fail to heed the injunction. While violence still remains valorised in the wider culture, where it appears is in the form of entertainment, by adulthood it is not something most adults are expected to engage in.

This account, I recognise, is very general, and before I conclude this section I want to reflect here for a moment on what we might colloquially refer to as the high crime areas that persisted in the post war period into which welfare capitalism had made but modest inroads. Many of these areas had always been poor and within them poverty and deprivation was always high and crime in its various forms, constituted an invidious feature of social life in them. While it is important that we do not lose sight of the accomplishments of the welfare state, not least in the expansion of affordable social housing coupled with welfare benefits, it could be argued that post war planning also helped exacerbate as oppose to reduce the spaces for crime and violence. Soulless estates often appeared perfectly designed for encouraging crime and not least

fear of it. Though the council house movement was initially informed by the benevolent vision of providing decent housing for the working class, by the late 1960s many estates were being used as little more than social refuse sites into which various 'problem families' (as they were called) were being decanted. Unsurprisingly, in some of these areas, deeply entrenched subcultures of violence became embedded or simply reproduced themselves.

In the post war period, the poorer areas of Britain's inner cities were also becoming ethnically reconfigured as new generations of migrants, both from Asia and the African Caribbean began to settle in the UK, drawn here by the promise of work in what was becoming a dynamic post war boom economy. The welcome many experienced however was by no means hospitable. Many ended up working in the low status work in low paid jobs despite being qualified for better work. Though migrant groups often tend to migrate to areas fellow migrants also inhabit, Britain was also running its very own de-facto ghettoisation policy (Rex 1988)

For the offspring of these migrants, life was shaped by the cruel intersection of harsh economic marginalisation coupled with overt racism deeply inscribed in the social fabric. Racism could also manifest itself in highly violent forms and in response to it young migrants had no option but to organise to defend themselves. Though texts such as *Policing the Crisis* tend to paint a benevolent and rosy picture of life in these communities, where crime and criminality is explained away as little more than the acts perpetrated by well-meaning spivs (Hall, Jefferson et al. 1976); as Ken Pryce's ethnographical account of a West Indian community brings home an array of adaptive responses that are by no means benevolent or positive (Pryce 1979). He examines a world populated by some men who make their money living off

women as pimps. He examines, as well, the world of younger 'rude boys' who were not prepared to do 'shit work' for the white man in a low wage economy and who drifted into a life of low level crime and hustling. His work is also sensitive to the wider cultural and political currents that were also shaping social life in the ghetto he was studying. He examines the rise and political impact of Reggae which he reads as both a subculture and political movement. He identifies in the figure of the Dreadlock Warrior an oppositional culture locked into a pan African vision predicated on a messianic return to a promised land, and an escape from Babylon. A cultural current that was profoundly influential and which influenced far more than the Rastaman. I will return to this issue.

### **A question of continuities**

So what has changed and what has not? Prior to looking at the latter it pays to study the former because there are a lot of continuities. We can begin on a Durkhemian note by noting that the street level violence I have described here is a social fact that will reproduce itself at a certain level. It will do so because wider social arrangements will always produce the preconditions that will work to produce young working class men who will draw upon violence as a social resource and mobilise it for an array of different ends. Which means as well recognising the absurdity and impossibility of empty political slogans with grandiose titles such as 'ending gang and youth violence'; or which promise to deliver 'within the lifetime of this parliament' as one prominent Labour MP once stated 'an end to anti-social behaviour'. Durkheim was always right, crime is a social fact, and as Nils Christie reminds us in his recent work the

question should be less about how much there is but about how much people want and what constitutes a suitable amount (Christie 2004).

With that in mind, until such times as we build a very different kind of society, street level violence will recur because the preconditions that justify it persist then as they do today. Let us look at the continuities. We can begin with gender norms. Today, as in our immediate past, forms of masculinity are produced and receive validation which validate hardness and toughness as a social virtue and as a means by and through which status can be achieved. Despite living with a society whose key violence rule is that there should be no violence, we also live in a contradictory space where violence is everywhere vicariously reinforced through a culture industry that elevates and valorises it.

In deeply inequitable societies where hegemonic masculinity continues to be predominantly associated with the exercise of power and control over power resources (things as well as women) (Connell 2005), some young men, particularly from multiply disadvantaged communities, will resolve the predicament of a power deficit, by mobilising violence as a vehicle by and through which they can exercise power and become 'proper' men in so doing. As Willis and the British subcultural theorists also showed and long ago, in a world whose institutions continue to be organised around middle class goals, some young working class men will adopt the long standing subcultural solution of falling back on versions of a hard purified masculinity, always already an essence intrinsic to working class culture as we have seen. And the resilience we find ingrained in working class culture and the culture of resistance simultaneously inscribed within some ethnic communities will also work to ensure that violence and violent assertion remains a potent currency.



In a street world populated by social beings as opposed to social isolates, it could also be observed that the violence will predominantly be group based precisely because group based delinquency is what young men do. They will, as they have always, 'hang around' street corners and they will always hang around them in peer groups. As I have tried to make clear it is not that the gang today reflects the 'new face of youth violence' in so far as group based delinquency has always been with us. As indeed has violent territorialism as we saw in chapter 2. What has changed is the way we now tend to focus on the group qua group (the gang has arrived) as opposed to particular categories of group offenders such as street muggers. More than that, in a society in a panic over gangs and, as such, addicted to gang talk, the idea that street crime can be explained any other way, seems to have been lost to history, such is the power of social amnesia.

While much is made of the sensational discovery of gang girls and shemale gangs it could be noted that while it has always been the case that young women were capable of and have committed the same forms of crime and violence as their male counterparts; they have never done as much, nor is their involvement as significant as males, as the work of Susan Bachelor and Tara-Young tellingly show (Bachelor 2001; Young 2011).

Prior, then, to accepting the populist mantra that everything today has changed along with versions of '*we have never seen anything like what we experience to day*', it is worth bearing in mind that strong continuities with our immediate past remain.

But not everything is the same, I am by no means sanguine about current social arrangements and their trajectory of change. So, in addition to thinking through what remains perennial to the regime of violence I have described, it is

also as important to consider discontinuities as well and a few can be noted because they are beginning to make a difference. Life 'on road' as I described the volatile habitus of our present, while profoundly shaped by many of the same forces that have always worked to mould street culture, is also being shaped by other forces as well.

### **Discontinuities: Neoliberalism and its consequences**

We can begin by noting the stark changes that have occurred in British society in the last three decades, changes that have profoundly transformed the economic, cultural and political landscape. These have been summarised in different ways: as the shift from a Fordist to a Post-Fordist society (Amin 1994), or as a shift from modernity to late modernity (Bauman 1997; Young 2007). I would, however agree with Wacquant and suggest that the direction of change can best be read as the shift from welfare state capitalism to that of free market neoliberalism (Wacquant 2009). To put this in another way, until recently we lived within the aegis of a liberal welfare state and a managed capitalist economy. Today that state no longer exists, nor does the economic order it supported. What was a welfare state has been replaced by a neoliberal state, while what was once a managed capitalist economy has mutated into a harsh, deregulated free market.

What has this to do with the wider ecology of violence? As we shall now establish the answer to this is quite a lot. Let's begin with the issue of social class because the class structure has changed and is changing. Within the welfare state the social order resembled a diamond. At its apex could be found what Marxists would describe as the ruling class, those who owned and controlled the means of production. Beneath them, but still in the upper

echelons of the diamond could be found a more or less affluent middle class; beneath them, in the bottom segment of the diamond, the working class. In the post war period the most successful sections of this class were becoming more affluent, many enjoying wages that paralleled those of the middle classes. This was both an accomplishment of welfare state managed capitalism and not least political struggle on the part of an organised labour movement. This class had been born in the fulcrum of the industrial age, and had settled over the twentieth century into large cohesive urban based communities, patriarchal to an extent, by and large self-governing and self-policing. Beneath this section of the working class, occupying the areas of perennial poverty and deprivation could be found the sub-proletariat, or the social residuum; a class which, despite the integrative programmes of welfare state capitalism, had not been meaningfully integrated into the dream of prosperous material progress that the 'white heat of technology' was supposed to deliver. It could be noted that in the welfare state material progress was supposed to compress the diamond, flattening it at the bottom as the poor became more affluent, merging eventually (or so it was hoped) with the middle class.

It is within this social formation that the ecology of violence I have attempted to map above can be located. Within it, violence occurred but as we have seen more as an extension of working class norms into the world of leisure, in a world where the promise of factory labour would stabilise adult personalities and bring an end to the drift into crime and violence.

Only the class structure of the welfare state has changed and the change has been such as to justify Guy Standings argument that sociologically we need to recognise that traditional class typologies no longer map easily onto our present (Standing 2011). Instead of a diamond shaped society we move instead

into a neoliberal present that can best be grasped through the metaphor of an hourglass. The image, not least allows us to capture the reality of neoliberal policies and their impact. Realities that have led to escalating inequalities coupled with declining social mobility for everyone but a nomadic, socially disconnected, feral over class, the winners in a winner takes all economy (Harvey 2010). Also successful but a long way below the overclass, can be found a qualified professional elite, the 'salariat' as Standing terms them. In the centre we find what is often referred to as the 'squeezed middle'. This is occupied by the middle classes. While the more successful elements of this class still lead prosperous and secure lives, their children are by no means likely to be as prosperous or secure. Nor will they be likely to enjoy the kinds of security taken for granted by their parents. This class, as a whole, is best defined by its sense of insecurity and by the fact that is very security conscious. Nor does it feel connected to, or indeed inspired to support the classes located beneath it (Garland 2001; Lea 2002).

In the bottom section of the hourglass we find a working class that is no longer upwardly mobile and which is fragmented and fragmenting. Decades of deindustrialisation, the rise of an increasingly atomised and individualistic society; coupled with a ferocious class war waged against organised labour by successive neoliberal governments, have eroded both its affluence, its cohesiveness and its consciousness. While sections of this class continue to live out the round of their lives in stable jobs and stable work, this is progressively becoming less a norm in what has become a deregulated free market society. Instead of facing upwards migration into the diamond, under conditions of free market neoliberal accumulation, many sections of this fragmenting class are drifting down into the bottom section of the hour-glass.

This section is predominantly occupied by the precariat, so called because precariousness now defines the social conditions in which it exists. This is not, as Standing argues, a class in itself, in the Marxist sense of the word. This is a class in the making. Nor is it the unfortunate by-product of neoliberal policy, on the contrary it is a calculated product of neo liberal state-crafting. As the violent street culture described in the previous chapter is intimately connected with the growth of the contemporary precariat, it pays to reflect upon its constitution and the conditions of its existence.

We can begin by examining its membership. While it contains what would once have been considered the sub-precariat of the welfare state, the social residuum it never got around to including, its ranks have been supplemented by the downward mobility of many sections of the fragmenting working class. In a world where the ethnic composition of poor urban areas has been ethnically reconfigured following successive waves of inward migration, minority ethnic groups are also significantly represented. In what has become a post full employment society and one where 'the spectre of uselessness' as Richard Sennett defines it (Sennett 2006), confronts many more people than the already poor, many other social groups are being decanted into the precariat and into precarious living. Ageing members of the middle classes, working in companies that no longer feel compelled to invest in their staff, represent one constituency. Students now forced to hike up huge debts in order to get degrees for entry-level jobs which until recently did not require them, represent another one. Young people are significantly overrepresented more generally in a world where the working class jobs that would once have been available to them have noticeably declined. So what, then, is distinctive about precarious life. We can return to Guy Standing.

The precariat has not yet come into focus. Many millions of people are experiencing a precarious existence, in temporary jobs, doing short-time labour, linked strangely to employment agencies, and so on, most without any assurance of state benefits or the perks being received by the salariat or core. Most lack any sense of career, for they have no secure social and economic identity in occupational terms. The precariat is not 'socially excluded', and that term is misleading. And the precariat is not adequately appreciated if we focus on income poverty alone. The precariat is socially and economically vulnerable, subject to anomic attitudes and without any social memory on which to draw to give them a sense of existential security. Those drifting into the precariat encompass what some see as urban nomads (Standing 2009).

Surplus to production; or only allowed onto the lowest rungs of production in a flexible labour market comprising low paid, low status and insecure work; this population has been socially abandoned in an economic world where wealth has shifted upwards into the hands of already wealthy, while older social support systems such as welfare have been dismantled or reconstructed into coercive workfare (Wacquant 2009). This is population that has been deliberately dispossessed and disenfranchised in equal measure. This is a population that no longer can expect the economic prosperity and stable work the welfare state promised; this population exist instead in an insecure world where the forms of security that the welfare state sought to provide have been abandoned or privatized. The world of the precariat is one characterized by chronic job insecurity, work insecurity and employment insecurity. This is the world where temporary jobs remain temporary and rarely become full time, not least for young people (Standing, 2011).

If this population is materially excluded they are also, as Standing observes, socially included as well. And this aspect of their contradictory standing in our

society also needs to be recognised if we are to understand certain aspects of the violence under consideration here. For while evicted from meaningful work, the precariat is nevertheless included into the narcissistic culture of compulsory ornamental consumption around which free market society is organised (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008; Young 1999). Shaped by ruthless marketing to desire branded goods, the possession of which is now worn as a necessary talisman of belonging; the precariat are remorselessly forged to become consumers and to define success in life through engaging in successful conspicuous consumption rituals (Hallsworth 2005). Jock Young uses the metaphor of bulimia to capture this feature of late modern life. Free market society, on one hand, materially excludes the precariat but culturally includes it as well. Unfortunately, these are consumers who cannot always consume legitimately given their material exclusion and the exploitation that is their lot. For Bauman, they are, as such, the 'flawed consumers' of late modernity (Bauman 2000).

Social bulimia is a powerful metaphor with its intimations of a pathology organised around ingestion and vomiting. But let me offer a more overtly Marxist reading of the paradox we are describing here. What neo-liberalism does is both colonise the soul of the individual while at the very same time it profoundly alienates them. It colonises them to the extent that it aspires to shape every appetite and every desire in the image of consumption and the market; but at the same time the political logic of neo-liberalism is to alienate them from any and all vestiges of tradition and ritual beyond those demanded by the market place. Seabrook draws out well the implications dwelling in this hyper-real world and captures in so doing a key attribute of a class which has 'no historical memory. 'To grow up under the domination of consumer capitalism is', he argues:

. . . 'to see that part of us which used to belong to society to be colonised, torn away from traditional allegiances, and to be hurtled, alone and isolated into the prison of an individuals senses. The child tends to be stripped of all social influences but that of the market-place; all sense of place, function and class are weakened, the characteristics of region or clan, neighbourhood or kindred are attenuated. The individual is denuded of everything but appetites, desires and tastes, wrenched from any context of human obligation or commitment. It is a process of mutilation; and once this has been achieved we are offered the consolation of reconstructing the abbreviated humanity out of the things and the goods around us, and the fantasies and vapours which they emit (Seabrook 1978).

The process of 'stripping away', must itself be read as a productive strategy, a mechanism by and through which the new precariat is being produced. It functions through atomisation and individualisation where the individual self and its desires are now made a measure of all things. It functions through eliminating older social collectives and the organic ties that would once have bound them to place and community. To grow up in neoliberal capitalist culture is to find yourself in an anomic space, where historical memories and any connection to a past history of struggle have been utterly attenuated. It is to inhabit a present wholly disconnected from a past that determined it. It is to dwell within the context of a depthless hyper-real culture that is fundamentally depoliticised.

Whereas the logic of welfare capitalism was predicated, in principle at least, on a class compromise based on the assumption that to negate class conflict, it was necessary to deliver material benefits to the working class, neo-liberalism no longer operates to a similar mantra. Instead it functions by deliberately reversing and hollowing out the very gains that the working class had struggled to achieve. To grow up in the UK today is to grow up into a society where



welfare has mutated into a coercive form of workfare. It is to grow up in the context of a society where wages are relentlessly reduced and where work conditions for the burgeoning precariat only ever worsen. In the context of de-industrialised areas, it is to grow up in a world where regeneration no longer means investing in poor communities but subjecting them to forms of coercive management and control (Atkinson 2007).

The symptoms of this are described well by Mike Davis in his dissection of what he terms 'the ecology of fear'(Davis 1992). Such 'regeneration' can be seen in the relentless target hardening of the urban environment; in the installation of now pervasive CCTV; in the development of an ever more extending police family, mobilising an ever more coercive battery of powers against young people. As Roy Coleman's work tellingly shows, while regeneration in the developing entrepreneurial city supports the socially included, such inclusion is invariably exclusionary in so far as it functions by coercively excluding the urban poor and not least its young from the citadels of regeneration and not least from access to new housing developments that have been deliberately engineered to exclude them (Coleman 2004, Hancock 2003; Scraton, 2004; Burney 2009).

Not only is the new precariat materially disadvantaged it is also systematically demonised and stigmatised. In neoliberal society, poverty has the status of a disease that is self-authorized and this version of underclass thinking saturates political and media discourse on deprivation and poverty. It can be seen graphically in the government's response to the urban disorder of 2011, blamed variously on criminal gangs, mindless criminality, dysfunctional families and dysfunctional culture. It is evident in the demonisation of the

working class as a population of 'chavs', a term that quite literally translates as stupid and ignorant people (Hayward and Yar 2006).

Jock Young is right to remind us in his recent work that life for the urban poor is by no means as miserable as catastrophe criminology often intimates, just as life for the affluent is by no means a bed of roses. Beware, he argues, the dangers of liberal othering (Young 2011). It is a fair point, but if we are to understand certain characteristics of the violence under consideration here, finding rays of sunshine in ghetto cosmopolitanism, isn't really the answer. What we need to do instead is reflect specifically upon the affective states that living life under the conditions described above actually induce, not least among the young men whose violence we are trying to make sense of.

My point is this, these processes, what we might generically define as the cultural logic of neoliberalism, are not abstract forces that bear down distantly on the precariat. Alienation is not an abstract quality of life but something phenomenologically experienced and confirmed on a day-to-day basis in the precarious lives people are forced to lead. Alienation is induced in the feelings that young people experience as a consequence of the stigmatisation they are subject to. 'We're seen as just lost' was one response given to us by a young man we interviewed in Hackney, who was talking about how he thought he and his friends were viewed. Alienation best describes what it is like to have job application after job application turned down, a regular experience for many of the young people we have interviewed. Anger and despondency coupled with a deep sense of lingering resentment are predictable and entirely rational responses to a world where the relations young people from multiply deprived areas have to formal organisations and their representatives are often relentlessly negative and hostile. Moreover, these affective states are actively

confirmed in the direct relations young people and their families have with ever more distant and disinterested authorities. Confirmed, explicitly, for example, in the negative experience of being stopped and searched. Confirmed as well in the invariably negative experiences young people and not least their families have, with benefit agencies that function to criminalise them (Rodger 2008).

Whereas the working class of the welfare state were bound to an economic order that aspired to secure their consent by embedding them into welfare state and welfare citizenship, the Achilles heel of neo-liberalism is that in creating a precariat subject to deteriorating life chances, it has not created a stable mode of regulation and one where generalised consent can be easily secured. While the logic of neoliberalism functions to maintain and produce a class that is internally divided and for the most part passive, there are good reasons to suggest that the adaptive response of some sections of the new precariat to its conditions of existence may adopt socially destructive forms. My conjecture is that the socially destructive way of life I categorised as 'on road' constitutes one such adaptation. So, in what way then does precariousness shape new patterns of urban violence?

Precariousness, in the first instance, erodes the older patriarchal dividend that would once have worked to secure viable working class male identities. Violence and violent self-assertion under such conditions, may become an alternative vehicle for securing a viable masculine identity among some sections of the precariat. This will particularly be the case for young males who are being produced as literally surplus to production in a post full employment society (Messerschmidt 1993). While there is a sense in which violence as masculinity has always been an issue among males, in a world where more of

them are consigned to structural powerlessness, this *de facto* fall-back position might become more as opposed to less likely.

As Bea Cambell's work in the de-industrialised estates of the north following the wave of 'white riots' in the 1980s demonstrated (Cambell 1993), when the local state is 'rolled back'; when its welfare structures become attenuated and 'hollowed out', in a world where the formal economy no longer offers the prospect of meaningful employment, violent men operating within an expanding illegal economy will fill the void . In such spaces it is also quite likely that socially disconnected young men, will assume positions in the lower rungs of the criminal economy, many operating in its most violent and lethal arenas, in particular, in the street retail section of the drug economy. This is certainly the situation now in the post-industrial, de-industrialised inner cities in England.

In a world where once stable and cohesive working class communities are fragmenting, a case can be made for suggesting that the internal controls that such communities would once have been able to exercise over the activities of their young have themselves been eroded in what has become an ever more atomising society. The adult world fears its young and sometimes such fears are justified. To an extent, this breakdown in informal social control, also helps explain the creation under New Labour of what would become its anti-social behaviour agenda (Burney 2009). While by no means suggesting here that the 'solutions' it pioneered, such as the derided ASBO, were justified, it was responding in its own way to the destructive consequences of neoliberal policies on working class communities it was also otherwise pursuing.

All of these factors combine in a mutually self-reinforcing way to create the preconditions for what may well be regarded as the socially self-destructive

way of life I classified as on road. In its most developed form it constitutes a parallel subterranean society organised around norms and values which at time both overlap with those of the wider mainstream order and which embrace as well norms and values that are peculiar to itself. While gang talkers fantasise that at the heart of this culture stand corporate gangs ruthlessly plotting to take over the wider society the truth is altogether different. This is a self-enclosed world populated by people who watch out for and who deal principally with each other. The wider public can and do service this community in various ways, as victims of street robbery, as purchasers of the illegal goods in which it trades. Sometimes innocent people are also caught in the cross fire. But by and large this subterranean world proceeds according to its own sui generis logic. Gangs are certainly part of this world as we have seen but they do not control this world nor does the term accurately diagnose its inherently rhizomatic character.

This world becomes the destination for young men both as a consequence of the magnetic forces that make it superficially attractive, and it is also a destination in to which the losers in a winner takes all economy are themselves decanted. In opposition to the insecure uncertainties of life lived precariously, life on road proffers in its own way, clear certainties. These are found in the collegiate fraternity of your group, your 'man-dem', or 'brethren'. Certainty can be found as well in the space you claim, your 'ends'. Clarity is to be found in the beef you have and which you carry. The legacy of past conflict and struggle constitutes for many the basis of the memories they carry (Winlow and Hall 2006). In a world where formal agencies are widely distrusted, this is a world where street justice is practiced in fast time and ruthlessly. This too provides its own certainty. Finally in a world where work is insecure, mundane and low status life, life 'on road' hold out the illusory promise of fast cash and possibly of access to riches beyond their wildest dreams. For the overwhelming

majority this will never come true. But the fact that some get rich and display their wealth openly, also works to confirm this ghetto dream.

While rap culture with its violent aesthetics provides the vocabulary and establishes the choreography for the violent performances in which the participants of this street trade, it by no means a determining factor in shaping the violence these men are capable of. It certainly becomes the means by and through which they dramatise their relations with each other and not least the wider excluding society. And this culture is as contradictory as the street world it expresses. Within it violent machismo is valorised; the excesses of ornamental materialistic brand driven consumption are elevated, while women are reduced to sexual objects. If there is a wider politics or political message being dramatised and reproduce in the cultural productions of this subterranean world, not least by the MCs that produce it, then the message mediated is that of politics as violent nihilism.

If we return to Ken Pryce and his ethnography conducted in the 1970s, we can note that there has been a cultural shift of some magnitude here. Reggae was as much a political movement as a cultural one. It not least intersected with and cannot be disaggregated from the wider radical political currents of its time. Today the dream of a mythical return to Africa no longer figures in the world of the street, while the oppositional culture that Black radical politics once embraced appears attenuated in a world where all that appears left is the neo liberal market place.

Most young men, it must be emphasised, exist on the edges of the subterranean street world I have tried to describe. Most will eventually drift out as they mature, age or become more productively entwined with the rituals of mainstream society. Having jobs and families, will end for most their

immersion into street existence. Only whereas in the welfare state young men would drift into deviance and then drift out as they matured and obtained working class jobs, in a neoliberal order that does not provide such work, or work of any meaningful status, this drift in is not necessarily matched by a corresponding process of drifting out. Instead of navigating an orderly transition to adulthood, neo-liberalism makes available instead only the possibility of fractured transitions. My point is this. For many young men, their destiny will not be that of drifting out of this subterranean world, instead they will become more embedded within it. As they do, they will become more brutalised by the violence that defines it, and the longer they remain, the more likely they will experience differential association with other people also deeply immersed. While this world is adept at creating hard men adept at violence, this world does not produce people who can easily intersect with mainstream society on its preferred terms.

For the most part the deeply internalised anger and resentment these men carry with them will be expressed in the form of implosive, inwardly directed violence. And it is this violence that has and continues to produce the litany of fatal stabbings and shootings we witness in the UK's poorest and most deprived areas. However as the riots of 2011 remind us, deeply internalised anger and resentment can also be externalised and in the wave of destruction and looting and violence that accompanied the disorder, so this class dramatised in the form of violent performance their relationship to the wider excluding society. While the critical left appear to view such disorder as little better than the depoliticised acts of the deluded, 'flawed' consumers with the mindset of a 'rabble' (Bauman 2011; Žižek 2011), I think we need to be more charitable. In a riot what is being dramatised is a fundamental repudiation of the very principles around which rule based societies are constructed, namely that within them, people normally

obey rules. And this is mediated in the form of a dramatic, improvised performance in which the normal rules that govern everyday life are quite literally turned on their head in a carnivalesque manner<sup>13</sup>. Instead of respecting property rights, property is burnt or destroyed, instead of respecting the forces of law and order they are attacked. In consumer driven society you are expected to pay high prices for your designer goods. In a riot you loot them. In my reading, therefore acts like 'violent shopping' are intensely political. By and through its inversion of normal rules, so the rioters are dramatising their relationship to their objective conditions. Given that the precariat are a class in the making, I also fail to see why they would as yet have evolved a clear class-consciousness. They are not as yet, a class in themselves. Brutal tutelage under conditions of neo-liberalism however might be changing this. What the left decry I find myself instead celebrating.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion then, there remain many continuities between the violence I described in the last chapter as life 'on road', and the violent regime that characterised life in welfare state capitalism. In both regimes violence finds tacit endorsement; it is embedded within and reproduced in working class culture; it is intrinsic to hegemonic versions of masculinity. Only whereas in the welfare state era, young men typically drifted in and then out of deviance, where the violence they engaged in represented more a leisure pursuit than a criminal

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<sup>13</sup> This reading of riots is decidedly Bakhtinian in so far as riots are also carnivalesque occasions. Which also explains why so many of the rioters expressed such elation despite the many reasons they have to feel angry at their lot. See Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). Rabelais and his world. Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press.



vocation, this is now beginning to change. The class structure of neo-liberalism and the low wage, flexible market place it has created have removed the material foundations out of which the drift out of crime would be accomplished. For the new precariat, the promise of stable and worthwhile jobs for many have been withdrawn. Meanwhile the other gains that the working class had made in the welfare era are being attenuated and rolled back. Welfare transforms into workfare, while poverty itself becomes criminalised. While the new precariat are relentlessly colonised by the logic of the market, the attack on the very conditions of their existence create the preconditions in which deeply alienated men (and sometimes women) carrying deeply internalised anger and resentment, turn inwards upon each other. For the most part the violence will be inwards directed and will take the form of a slow festering riot. But periodically it will be externalised as it was in the urban disorder we witnessed in England in 2011.

Neo liberalism then is changing the ecology of street violence and the direction of change is not for the better. While it would be amiss to suggest that the welfare state was a paragon of virtue, at least it provided, in its own contradictory way, a regime of regulation that worked to maintain the ecology of street violence within broad regulated limits. The problem with neo-liberalism, its Achilles heel, is that it cannot sustain, nor is it capable of producing a stable made of regulation. The problem here is that as neo-liberalism destructively reproduces itself from above, lurching as it does from crisis to crisis, it has the unfortunate consequence of creating the preconditions for what we might read as social destruction from below. And this is what life on road ultimately represents. A socially destructive world in which young men dramatise their alienation in displays of violence directed at other people no different from themselves.

# The aetiology of street violence

# The Production of Motivated Offenders

In examining how and why young people become involved in street robbery a number of questions need to be addressed. First, we need to establish where the will to consume the objects they wish to appropriate through robbery comes from. Second, we need to consider why they appropriate these objects of desire through the medium of street robbery as opposed to appropriating desirable goods through more legitimate avenues. Third, we must then explain why only some young people as opposed to all come to engage in street robbery as the chosen strategy of appropriation. This as we shall see will also mean examining the characteristics of the outlaw cultures where street crime is practised and, not least, attending to the seductions and pleasures attendant on the act of street robbery itself.

To investigate the reasons that impel young people and in particular young men to engage in street crime we must as a precursor to our investigation, understand the reasons that lead them to engage in offending behaviour to begin with. To do this we must understand why they wish to acquire the kind of goods suitable victims regularly carry; and explore why they seek to acquire these objects through the medium of offences such as street crime. To examine this we must begin by looking not at issues of faulty socialisation (the focus of underclass thinking as we saw in chapter 4) but at the *forms of successful socialisation* young people are subject to in free market societies.

To interpret this we must examine why young people who engage in street robbery desire so intensely the commodities street crime provides illegal access to. Why, we must ask, do they come to covet these objects of desire so

intensely that some will embark upon illegal acts in order to possess them? While one answer to this question might be to suggest that such desires represent aberrant personality traits on the part of those who hold them, this I suggest is the wrong way of looking at this issue. A more productive line of enquiry involves seeing such desires not as deviant but as a common trait evident in most young people. More to the point, it is my contention that if we want to understand where the will to possess desirable objects derives, then its proximate cause is exposure to and socialisation into capitalist consumption norms stimulated by capitalist culture industries.

Let us consider this in more detail. What I am proposing is that young offenders are products of a society in which the consumption of material goods is an integral aspect of their lives. As such, it is a universally distributed desire. It is something acquired moreover via a range of different sources. It is a message they see mediated through the medium of advertising which targets them directly; it is something they learn to acquire through direct involvement in consumption rituals either as observers or as active consumers themselves. As we shall now see, the impact of being produced as consuming beings in free market societies has important implications for how young people live and conceive the world around them.

In their exposure to the consumer society young people learn from a very early age that well-being and success in life is contingent upon the possession of desirable goods. In particular branded goods marketed to them by the culture industries. They are also taught and from a very early age are given to understand that, in the possession of these desirable objects – the right trousers, trainers, and accessories such as mobile phones – other desirable things follow including self-respect and the respect of others. In and through mass consumption identities are produced and reproduced. In consumption a

lifestyle is simultaneously lived and constructed. To 'be' is literally to be in a world defined by the possession of these desirable goods. Possession defines their bearer, not only as a possessor of what everyone desires, but as a viable and sovereign agent in their own right.

In the possession of desired goods things are not simply appropriated, identities are also produced and reproduced. By and through processes of cultural appropriation so a sense of who and what you are is constructed while, in the competitive order of the young, a sense of distinction relative to other people is forged. The consequences of this process are stark. Your status relative to others is marked out and defined by the kind of phone you possess, the trousers you wear, and the way you wear them. Possession of desired goods in this sense also provides a visible marker that defines where you stand relative to others in the world around you. Non possession conversely entails an absence of these values. It is a world of non-being, of not being part of the in-group. You stand by virtue of non-consumption or ineffective consumption as a non-person. Someone to whom respect is not conceded in a world in which respect is everything. In the words of one young man it meant 'not being on the level'. As he then put it 'you're like a no one'. This, translated literally, meant being outside the circle of being and belonging. It rendered you someone to whom no status in the world could be conceded; it could define you - as we saw in the last chapter - as a victim

The culture industries consciously accentuate these trends through the way they brand and market their goods. Maintaining high prices stimulates the market for exclusive goods that confer high status among young people. At the same time, the corporations, by drawing heavily and parasitically upon street culture (the hip-hop gangster look for example) reproduce it a commodified form. This is then sold back as a lifestyle option other young people are invited

to emulate. The rise and fall of various consumer fads, the advent of new technologies and the constant succession of new models accentuate these trends further. Excessive profiteering by the corporations promoting desirable branded goods also exacerbates the problem because it makes the very brands most desired impossible to obtain within financial constraints poor populations face. The in-built obsolescence of desirable consumer goods also feeds this problem because it forges an incessant desire among the young people for next year's model; which means socially generated needs can never be finally realised anyway. In effect, the consumer society produces a world of always unrealised and ultimately unrealisable desires. The trousers you are obligated to want this year are obsolete in fashion terms by the next, while this mobile phone will be replaced by the next variety and so on. At the dark heart of this consumption revolution can be found a process with sinister implications: As Cote and Allahar aptly describe it 'What lies at the heart of this activity, however, is the fact that the media can sell young people some element of an identity they have been taught to crave (Cote 1996)'

Though the transformation of young people into effective consumers has always been important to capitalist societies – at least since young people were first identified as conspicuous consumers in the post war period (Miles 2000) - the nature of youth consumption in contemporary world has changed significantly in recent decades. From an exercise directed at purchasing the good life in the context of rising affluence under conditions of welfare state capitalism of the post war period, it has become by the 1990s a rite of passage into everyday 'normal' life in the world of free market, neo-liberal society. As Miles explains: 'by the 1980s it was almost as if consumerism had emerged as a way of life for young people. Not only did it represent a valuable means of self-expression, but it provided a resource for the construction of their

everyday life' (Miles 2000). What he means by this is that they represent the vanguard of a social movement that has witnessed not only the decline of a society where identities were constructed through solidarity with other peer groups (such as your class of origin); but the advent of an era where identity is now forged in and through consumption alone.

Not only has the social meaning of consumption changed for young people, it also changed in relation to the growing intensity of their exposure to it. They are now not only engaged in the rites of consumption from an early age, they are subject to an advertising industry that ruthlessly targets them in ever more sophisticated ways (Klein 2001) At the heart of the crime problem as it unfolds across the UK we consequently find an extreme form of commodity fetishism at play. My thesis is that this particular form of fetishism brings with it the desires that stimulate the insatiable demand for objects that are subsequently apprehended in the act of street robbery.

While the will to consume is a universal disposition into which all young people are socialised, the free market society is not an economic order that universalises the means necessary to ensure that all young people can appropriate the social goods that they have been taught to desire legitimately. In a free market capitalist society that both produces and tolerates wide and growing inequalities, what we find is a socio-economic reality in which certain populations are accorded the means to gratify their consumption desires, while others are located in socio-economic conditions that effectively prohibit effective consumption. What distinguishes these two populations is their differential access to life chances. These include labour market opportunities and established wealth that allows consumption desires to be socially realised in legitimate ways.

The differential distribution of life chances can be starkly observed if we consider once again the case of Lambeth, studying as we do, the socio-economic characteristics of the area. While the borough is home, as we have seen, to a predominately white affluent population, well equipped with the resources that will allow it to consume easily and legitimately, the same cannot be said for more deprived communities, including Lambeth's Black population which also produce the majority of its offenders. For while Lambeth has witnessed a significant process of economic and social regeneration over the last two decades, the effects of regeneration have been very uneven and not everyone can be considered winners in the process. The socio-economic position of young working class people - particularly young Black people on the estates - remains desperately poor, as deprivation indicators for the area testify. Unemployment, for example, remains at around 40% on the estates in the area. This is far higher than average unemployment rates are for London and the UK as a whole. To this must be added a range of further factors which enhance deprivation and social exclusion more generally. This would include the impact of institutional and overt discrimination on the Black community, particularly young Black males that limit entry into the labour market. One young man explained graphically why robbery became for him and his friends a career choice:

Some of them do it, yes, for the money, but most of them can't get money from their parents most times. And then most don't work. And some of my friends don't have homes so they have to be hustling. They have to make money somehow.'

Benefits for poorer populations are also harder to obtain given the governmental response to what has been represented as a 'culture of



dependency'. For the same reasons, young people under 18 are now unable to claim any benefits at all. If we consider the impact of receiving low rates of benefit in conjunction with living in the most expensive city in the UK, it is evident that poor populations in Lambeth find it extraordinary hard to sustain a minimal lifestyle, let alone gratify overt consumption desires they have been taught to regard as normal.. As one young man expressed this

'I don't want to blame it all on Britain...but living in Brixton is hard .

Significant patterns of change in the post war economy have also reinforced the entrenched deprivation. In particular, the decline of the manufacturing sector in the last three decades has had the effect of removing labour market opportunities from many working class areas. This has two knock on effects: first it acts to sustain mass unemployment among young people and thus their exclusion from participating in legitimate consumption. Secondly, exclusion from the labour market also prolongs the state of adolescence and disrupts an orderly transition into adulthood on the part of young people in this situation. It does this by removing from them the rituals, interdependencies and security that secure jobs once provided, and which in their possession would once have confirmed an adult identity. One consequence of these changes has been to spatially compress young men together for large parts of their day to day lives on local streets. Another, as noted by Rutherford., has been increase pressure on already highly pressurised families many of whom are also welfare dependant (Rutherford 1997) This in turn produces a pattern of routine activity that creates the space where street robbery becomes a distinct possibility. To escape from overcrowded and often highly pressurised family units young men congregate in the streets. There the

conditions are created both for meeting and having to deal with outlaw cultures that practice street robbery; while also placing young men in proximity with populations of assessable and suitable victims. In other words into conjunction with more affluent populations who, as we have seen, carry the very goods poorer sections of the community cannot readily appropriate legitimately. Economic change then itself helps to sustain an environment that is highly conducive to crime.

The situation in poor inner cities areas like Lambeth, is consequently characterised both by patterns of real deprivation and poverty among certain sections of its population. Like the affluent society around it however, these populations also share the dream of a good life defined in material terms. This is thus a population characterised not only by real deprivation, but also intensifying levels of relative deprivation as well. Together these factors have created what criminologists such as Lea and Young (Young 1984) would consider to be a highly criminogenic environment. In effect, it is my premise that by failing to universalise the conditions by which desirable goods may be universally appropriated, the free market society has created a situation in which some young people have 'innovated' in their consumption. They do so by becoming involved in cultures that sanction rule breaking. Unable to consume legitimately many have come to develop innovative consumption strategies and one of these is street crime.

The turn towards street crime then can be viewed as a practical and rational resolution to the contradiction of being socialised into a world which shapes you to aspire to the consistent consumption of material goods and being located in a socio-economic reality that does not universalise the legitimate avenues by which such goods can be appropriated. In making this statement it must be emphasised that such a resolution is by no means inevitable. Only a

few young people respond to the predicament of unrealised and unrealisable consumption in the same way. Many poor people struggle through legitimate avenues such as education to accumulate the life chances that will allow them to become, as it were, 'normal consumers'. There are also other patterns of adaptation available to young people faced with this contradiction. Drug taking and radical political mobilisation for example represent other life opportunities that might not necessitate participation in street crime.

So far we have studied why young people wish to consume and we have examined why alternative and illegal consumption strategies might be pursued. What we now need to consider is why some young people, and, indeed growing numbers have chosen to drift in the direction of a consumption strategy that resolves itself into street crime. Why, we must ask have they chosen to become flawed consumers. To accomplish this we must now move from a consideration of structure towards an examination of process. In particular the diverse processes characteristic of what terms 'differential association' (Sutherland and Cressay 1979) We need to attend, in particular, to the social process by which allegiance to norms stressing adherence to rule abiding behaviour become abandoned in favour of an alternative value system which encourages rule breaking that embraces street crime.

In what follows I will argue that there are five factors we need to examine to explain how this process works.

- Though aware of condemnatory messages stigmatising street crime the messages young people receive are not consistent and can readily be ignored or circumvented

- ❑ Proximity to and engagement with those who already break rules not only encourages this behaviour it sanctions participation in an outlaw culture that can actively celebrate and justify deviant values as a way of life
- ❑ Street crime as an activity carries with it an array of seductions and benefits;
- ❑ Once engaged in street crime young people can find it difficult to exit;
- ❑ There is a readily available stock of legitimations that permit rule breaking to be excused or validated by bystanders and by participants

Young people in Lambeth, like young people in British society, are products of an order that not only stigmatises forms of rule breaking such as street crime, it also imposes harsh penalties for those caught engaging in it. In the case of street crime, for example, a custodial sentence is a likely occurrence and this can last for up to and around three years or more. Life is the maximum permitted tariff. Condemnation certainly exists and condemnation is supported by an array of sanctions. And these, it can be emphasised are almost always deployed to perpetrators apprehended through law enforcement activity.

To understand why some young people turn to street crime as an adaptive strategy, we need to examine why they refuse to heed, or choose to ignore wider messages of condemnation attached to this activity. To examine this issue young offenders interviewed were asked an array of questions directed at ascertaining whether in fact they were aware of these condemnatory messages and which also explored their moral perceptions more generally. In asking these questions a number of subsidiary themes were also pursued. These related to the consistency of the messages of condemnation young people

received; the appropriateness of the means by which they were mediated, how this message was appropriated by its target audience and how such messages relate to the weight of non-condemnation they may receive from other bystanders.

While the young people evidently knew that street crime was wrong and was morally reprehensible, it was also evident that the messages they had received about crime were mixed and variable. The issue of street crime was rarely raised and discussed by parents many of whom were entirely surprised and upset when they subsequently found that their child had become involved as perpetrators. All the young people interviewed, claimed that schools did not provide much if anything in the way of any information about street crime. Indeed, upon subsequent investigation, there was and remains no credible policy in schools regarding this issue<sup>14</sup>. Most of the young offenders had never been told much about how the criminal justice system worked, nor about what it would do to them if they were subsequently to be processed by it. Indeed the only information about street crime they heard in the course of their schooling was that often provided by a single visit by a police officer. Time and again the words 'not knowing the consequences' or 'not thinking through the consequences' of one's acts were noted as a primary cause for involvement in robbery.

Though local community safety providers had embarked upon a media campaign part of which was directed at warning young offenders about the consequences of offending, it was clearly lost upon its target audience. To a point this occurred because the message was not tested before hand upon those

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<sup>14</sup> Which was strangely ironic because in the meetings I convened with them, the Head teachers were adamant that the environments they provided for young people were bastions of morality and good citizenship

who were subsequently supposed to consume it. There was also a problem evident that no clear and consistent message was being delivered by anyone. What this vacuum has created I will suggest is a space in which other messages, specifically those that can come to sanction rule breaking, can and have prospered.

With regard to the exposure of young people to messages that would both act to encourage rule abiding, as opposed to rule breaking behaviour, it was by no means evident that there was too much of this around. The role of organisations such as churches was entirely limited given the secular and materialistic character of the world in which young people tend to live. While the free market can certainly encourage the will to consume – itself as we have seen part of the problem - it must be emphasised that it offers no alternative morality or vision of the good life beyond the will to consume more. It is, in effect, an amoral entity. As regards the pronouncement of other self-professed moral entrepreneurs such as politicians then their utterances had no impact on the lives of these young men. They were perceived to embody a world that was distant and irrelevant to their lives. Nor could what they said be trusted. As with many forces of authority in their lives, such figures could easily be viewed as the enemy. Nor did political ideologies have much if any impact upon the conduct of these young men. To this extent they were certainly products of a postmodern de-politicised culture that had well and truly separated itself from older and more benevolent meta narratives of progress. Nor, could it be observed, were there many remnants left of older working class patterns of solidarity that might have induced their young into evincing more respect for older traditional verities. Capitalism's triumph at the 'end of history' as Fukuyama characterised the process, had successfully eliminated even these (Fukuyama, 1992). In the era of unfettered competitive individualism,

celebrated as a virtue in the free market, belt and braces socialism was well and truly starved of the oxygen that might once of nurtured it.

While much has been made by the media about the need for appropriate role models in young people's lives, what the interviews with young offenders revealed was that these young men tended to have none. If they did then it was often their parents and in particular their mothers - which was itself an interesting insight because it clearly demonstrated how attached they were to traditional notions of family life. Leaving aside the arrogant assumption on the part of the adult world that youth should respect it more, it could also be remarked here that even if a positive role model could be identified so too could plenty of others that the wider society would not view in such terms. Among these, as we shall see, could also be those who were successful practitioners of street crime and crime more generally.

For young people to become involved in street crime it is not enough that the voices that might condemn such behaviour go unheeded. Involvement in such activity was also contingent on being in contact with or in close proximity to what I will generically term outlaw groups who not only engage in rule breaking but who inhabit a culture that justifies such activity and actively encourages it. As was indicated above, while all young people are socialised to become active consumers of material goods, not all resolve problems of thwarted consumption by engagement in street crime. If we now attend to the career pathways of those who do traverse this path then it would appear that at the very least they must:

- ❑ Have witnessed street crime practised successfully by others around them;
- ❑ Live in proximity to or actively socialise with those who practice it

- Have over time become active and confirmed members of these groups
- Have come to appreciate, as a consequence of successful engagement in street crime, the benefits such activity can deliver to their lives.

To engage in offences such as street crime, a person typically has to have come into contact with those who already have some experience in its practice. It is not an activity that just occurs or simply happens. Like any other social activity it requires skill and dexterity to practice well. It is an activity which is, I would argue in most cases, socially learnt. It also requires a certain social presentation of self; a certain amount of planning and teamwork to accomplish. Successful practitioners must be competent in their capacity to demonstrate aggression and violence. They must be able to use violence if violence is required. Speed and agility are also prerequisites for initiating a successful robbery; as must be the ability to plan escape routes and identify suitable target areas. In addition to the above, those who practice it must be able to inhabit a world where they can live easily with such acts in themselves.

The way in which contact with already offending groups was established however differed in terms of its intensity. For some young people it could be that they had witnessed others successfully prosecuting street crime, lived within the context of a culture whose values excused it, and who consequently sought to emulate such activity. Given the sheer volume of street crime in areas like Lambeth, it could be surmised that its prevalence was such that most young people were placed in this situation. For the same reason most would also be aware of successful street robbers around them; not least given that many would openly flaunt the rewards of their enterprise and initiative. Most would also be familiar with and live in proximity to a cultural order in which street



crime was perceived as an inescapable feature of social life. As one man expressed the matter

‘yes I’ve seen people getting robbed. I’ve seen my friends being robbed’. There is lots of bad stuff around here’.

In conjunction with boredom (a regularly cited feature of some young people’s lives) unrequited consumption desires, and living with poverty, this conjunction of circumstance could on occasion provoke street crime as an adaptive opportunist strategy. One man explained how he became attracted to street robbery

When I was young I would say to my mum something like ‘can I have a pair of trainers’ and because my mum didn’t work and was like on social security she could hardly put food on the table. And when I was young I would look at that and I would see other people making money, driving around in the latest cars and I would think ‘there must be an easier way.

As interviews with young offenders showed, the most likely gateway into street robbery lay not only in being part of a group that had observed it or living in a cultural milieu that excused it; participation rather occurred through intensive exposure to outlaw groups in the areas that practised it. Just as Oliver Twist became an apprentice to Fagin and his gang, so to do street robbers of today require access to those who already possess the skills, craft and experience necessary to accomplish it. Not only is the proximity to actual offenders a necessary condition for this reason, such proximity also functions as an alternative space in which deviant values and necessary criminal skills can be learnt, internalised and developed.

Again, the route-way into contact with such outlaw cultures could differ. It could occur because you grew up with people who belonged to outlaw groups such as neighbours, friends or family members. It could occur because you moved into an area where members of such groups congregated or lived. It could also occur because you became friends with group members or wished to become accepted by them in a relation of friendship in order to achieve respect in their eyes or - and this could be important - to avoid the possibility of victimisation at their hands. Contact then could also arise as a consequence of a defensive strategy. Whilst it might be tempting to view the decision to become involved with such groups in terms of an active choice made consciously, this would be to overstate a reality where the choices available are highly constrained. Spatially compressed into estates from which there were no realistic exit strategies available, proximity and contact were, for most young offenders, inescapable features of their life. As such, an important question many young people tended to face was not how to avoid contact with such groups. More important in their eyes was doing the kind of things that would earn you their respect. As we shall see, this could involve street crime.

One of the young men explained how he was initiated. He had, he explained, recently moved to Brixton where he found himself something of a stranger on the local estate and in the proximity of an older group of boys who did street robbery and who put pressure on him to become involved. I asked him about the kind of pressure they placed on him.

'like they would say 'are you coming out there' and if you like said no, then they say 'you going to come along with us' and I would say 'no' so they say 'you a pussy', you going to have to come with us'.

Another young man also cited his exposure to a gang of older men (aged around 19-21) all of whom were involved in illegal activity, specifically robbery and selling drugs. In his words

I started hanging round with some people in Brixton. I would see them every day. I was with my friend and his older brother used to always do crime. And I would hang out with my friend and he would always try and be like his older brother and we would hang out with the gang as well and do stuff. And that's when we thought we would try it (robbery).

The element of peer pressure to engage in robbery was intense as the young man explained in relation to his first street robbery committed against an older man in Clapham.

They (the older gang) were gerrying me on like to make sure I did it. Then after I did do it like they said 'he's one of us now' and after that they didn't say so much'

Where the analogy with Fagin ends is that the groups of offenders who inhabit these outlaw cultures do not approximate the Fagin model of an organised criminal gang. What we often looking at here are looser associations, specifically composed of young men, all of whom will have offended and who consider offending behaviour to be an obligation. At the heart of these associations will be certain people who are more proficient and more motivated to offend than others. They are often likely to be older than the young people around them, and many will have had their criminal status conferred by having been 'successfully' processed at some time or other by the criminal justice system. In the words of the young offenders interviewed for the purpose of this

research, these were the 'bad-boys': an already existing population of highly motivated offenders many of whom would already have served custodial sentences. There was, said one young man 'no leadership thing'. These men are those who have already been labelled criminal by the wider society, and who have, as designated criminals, consequently internalised the label and accorded to it a number of positive connotations. In effect, as a consequence of successful labelling processes conferred by the criminal justice system, there now exist a number of young men who quite happily accept and celebrate their outlaw status. They live the life, they walk the walk and they talk the talk. This came through powerfully in a conversation with a young man in his early 20s who had recently been released after serving a prison sentence for robbery. In response to how he felt he was perceived by those around him, he characterised their response as

'yes it's a kind of respect in a way. Now, no matter what I do, even if I choose not to do crime they respect me because I earned their respect by doing crime.'

When I asked him about the friends he grew up with on the street he laughed and admitted, 'yes, most are in jail'.

Though quantifying precise numbers remains inherently difficult, it could be surmised that these outlaw associations are widespread, and are specifically active when legitimate employment avenues are blocked. As my research in Lambeth suggested many were well established on many estates. Group membership is often conferred by point of origin or proximity to a particular territory and by virtue of the fact that most of those who are involved in such associations have grown up together. They would have gone to the same schools and have the same friends. Interviews also indicated that the more confirmed members of these groups were also those who were the oldest and

who also were also involved with a range of other illegal activities. In particular, they were likely to be connected with grey and illegal markets. They would know, for example, where to buy drugs to deal and who to market them to. They would also know whom to fence stolen goods to and were often in contact with those who would commission them to appropriate certain objects: 20 mobile phones, for example, with this particular specification. When I asked one young man about these networks he argued that

Yes there are a lot of people who do stuff. It's like you with a friend and you met people and they maybe sell heroin and your with someone else who knows someone else who knows someone else whose selling something'

The most accomplished of the 'bad boys' also knew precisely what make to take and were very selective about what they chose to target. As one young man commented

'he don't steal anything less than a 32-10. He wouldn't steal that. It's the newer phones. You don't steal anything less than you can sell for £200.

What acted to reinforce the involvement of young men who found themselves in proximity to such associations was the fatal way in which the focal concerns of the group often came to predominate over other more legal and legitimate attachments young people might have such as their families. As one man explained

'All you know about is your friends. You forget your family. Friends are all that matter'.

And another

'its like your friends are all there is and you don't think of the consequences'

And another

When you got a set of friends and someone fights, you got to fight with them.

And when, for example, they find themselves together – for example at a youth club –

'there you meet people and...someone suggests 'let's do this', and that's how things (crime) begin'. (Koyo, 18)

With group membership other positive benefits could also be accumulated specifically security in a dangerous world

When I'm with them no one like tries to trouble you. But when I am by myself then they would try and trouble me.

In terms of the values celebrated within these outlaw groups then what we can observe is a hybrid subculture which is forged out of a symbioses between activities celebrated in the wider society as well as those condemned by it. Where it joins with the wider order is in its celebration of conspicuous consumption, and the equation of acquisitive materialism with notions of status and standing, distinction and respect. Where it departs is in its pursuit of socially sanctioned consumption norms by illicit means that sanction violence and rule-breaking as a way of life. This orientation also goes hand in hand with a celebration of a world that is specifically gendered in its form. Typically, what we can observe here is a world in which a particular vision of masculinity is celebrated. This is one in which the capacity to practice violence is validated

and where being tough commands respect. This is also a cultural order in which the capacity to physically assert self is celebrated as a valid marker of being a man. It is a social currency that commands respect and begets for its holder social distinction and honour. For the young men I interviewed fighting was a recurrent feature of life in a world considered itself violent and dangerous. 'Yes, you have to fight all the time' said one young man, whilst another noted ruefully that even though he knew many people in Brixton, 'there are still people out there you got to be careful of'. This vision of masculinity moreover reaches into the detail of life. It is there in the physical presentation of self to the world: it is evident in the clothes, in the language and in the walk and in speech itself. It is evident in acts and deeds, in what is spoken about, and what is celebrated in speech.

The gendered character of this worldview is evident not only in what it selects as worthy of celebration, but in what it has to deny in the process of its own becoming. The vision of purified masculinity that it celebrates is often bought about at a cost of disavowing much of what the wider society has chosen to endorse. This can include the idea that worldly success can be established through hard work at school, or that self-respect can be accomplished through entry into the legitimate job market. Often the way in which this disavowal is socially demonstrated is by coding such activity as explicitly feminised behaviour. Working hard at school or demonstrating intellectual effort is perceived in these terms as unmanly, as something that is real men do not do. This could lead some young men to actively preclude themselves from mainstream society and work in the formal economy (Willis 1977). As one young man observed:

They don't want it (work). They ain't looking for it.

This gendered perception is also associated with a disavowal of what society itself codes as feminine: this can include being overtly emotional, intimating care and evincing compassion for others. Unsurprisingly the kind of culture this produces and the kind of individual it sanctions is not well equipped to interact with society on its preferred terms. What it sanctions is a form of 'lawless masculinity' (Cambell 1993), evident in males unable to resolve conflict without recourse to aggression, and who are, in turn, often homophobic and sexist in their behaviour. This kind of individual is however well equipped and motivated to practice street crime and engage in criminal behaviour more generally. Such individuals once confirmed within the rituals of outlaw culture not only reproduce it, they can actively induct other young people into it as well.

The culture of aggressive masculinity discussed above is not unique to Lambeth or indeed to any specific ethnic group. Criminologists have explored variations of it in different countries and between different groups (Willis 1977; Cambell 1993). In content it remains quite consistent over time and between states. It does however manifest itself via a number of stylistic variations which distinguish various outlaw cultures from each other. The social rituals it practices may vary, as might its stylistic expression: the style of clothes, music etc.

In the case of its instantiation in Lambeth, social conditions described above have created an ideal environment in which such outlaw cultures can thrive. In terms of the way it is grounded in the culture of street criminals, particularly among certain young Black males, it is evident in the social presentation to the world that borrows heavily from the hip-hop, gangsta rap culture of the United States. This influence is particularly evident in their physical presentation of self to the world. It is evident in the aggressive



assertion of self that can often be observed in the way young men move. It is there in the loose fitting trousers worn as if hanging off the crotch; it is there in the way express themselves in their body language and through the sign language they use to communicate. Unsurprisingly, many of these stylistic features also had their origin in the penitentiary culture associated with the US punitive mass incarceration policy. Baggy trousers and unlaced shoes, for example, derive from prison uniforms, while the sign language evolved as a mode of communication among inmates in an institutional context in which silence was often policy<sup>15</sup>.

As subcultural theorists observe, the social rituals attached to outlaw cultures are both complex and highly creative (Hebdige 1979) (Hall and Jefferson, 1976). In effect they produce and reproduce a culture that consciously aspires to define itself away from a dominant order which it faces and confronts in a relation of hostility and often aggression. Such cultures work however precisely because they confer many benefits to their members. Against a society which provides them with little in the way of life chances, it provides an alternative and parallel set of opportunities to appropriate what the wider society holds out as desirable but simultaneously denies. Against an order that provides little by way of market opportunity, it offers the possibility of work – though of an illegal kind. Like the formal economy it also offers you on-site training. Against an emerging economy where the work provided is often menial, low paid and of a nine-to-five variety, it offers instead work opportunities which can command you peer respect, while providing you with the means to gratify material desires in a much quicker time frame the formal job market allows. As a number of young men pointed out, in an economy that

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<sup>15</sup> The relation between the gangster hip hop look and US penitentiary culture was explained to the author by D. Brotherton

paid only £3.50 per hour, street crime was an entirely rational career move. It could generate over £150 for less than an hour's work. As one man put it

'when you is young and you realise that you can make over a thousand and ten pounds in half an hour, you going to do the half hour.

And another

It's easy money'

Finally if in the low wage 'mac-economy' where the only work available was likely to be dull, repetitious, monotonous and boring, that provided by the alternative counter-culture stressed values celebrated by many young people including the possibility of risk, thrills and danger.

What also sustained these cultures as viable enterprises is that they can individually and collectively help sustain alternative economies in areas characterised by high levels of deprivation and poverty. In effect, street crime can be viewed as an economic enterprise that is itself part of a large Black market economy (Sutton, 1995). In the case of Lambeth this market included a range of goods including drugs, people and, not least, the proceeds of street crime. Like all successful economies this economy possesses a complex division of labour. Some participated within it as primary suppliers of goods and services that other consumers (such as drug users, or those looking to make cheap purchase off the back of the proverbial lorry) would then buy. There are also a lot of middlemen engaged in this industry including those who would help purchase stolen goods and provide retail outlets through which these goods could be moved on. According to the testimony of offenders, a number of shops and stores in Lambeth performed this role. Offenders also mentioned shadowy figures that would commission illegal acts. The more confirmed

young people became in various outlaw cultures, the more knowledge they would accumulate about how the illegal market economy operated. With this in mind I would suggest that if we want to offer another reason why Lambeth has such a high crime rate then this can in part be explained by reference to the size, strength and market vitality of this economy. Street crime it might be said not only flourishes because the formal economy cannot universalise the means to consume legally, it also rises because there is already an alternative economy to sustain it.

If we now attend to what Katz (Katz 1988) refers to as the 'seductions of being evil' then the pleasures attendant on being involved in street crime and the subculture that sanctions it become more obvious. In the act of street robbery a power relation is forged between the violent aggressor and the victim. In the assertion of power through violence a form of pleasure can also be accessed on the part of the perpetrator: specifically, the pleasure in power. For those who typically inhabit a social order that confers little of this, this is by no means a minor issue. If we attend to the phenomenology of street crime more closely other pleasures can also be observed. Though for the wider society the act might well look like a form of cowardice, from the standpoint of perpetrators the act can have other connotations. To knowingly break rules that command severe penalties if caught can take courage. Not least, a certain existential abyss has to be crossed. Can you make the grade? Do you have what it takes? Then there is the status and respect that you can accrue in participating in the act. The respect that will be accorded to you by others, specifically, those already engaged in street crime and other offences themselves: your direct peer group. This fact came through recurrently in the way involvement in street robbery was often represented in interview as a kind of initiation ceremony; a right of passage into the outlaw culture wherein you become a (mostly) man of

respect in a world where respect is everything and where being 'a pussy' as one man put it was unthinkable..

As contact with victims was often very fleeting, the act of street crime was characterised by a social distance between victim and perpetrator which meant that the latter would have little opportunity to think of the victim in anything approaching human terms. Street crime, it could be observed, is a very dehumanising act. Finally, having successfully prosecuted street crime, you could then openly display to others the results of your labour. Many apparently do. Given a cultural order of street values beholden to a norm that holds you never inform to the police, it is easy to see how this tendency can flourish. The active threat of violence that would invariably be directed at those who violate this principle also reinforced it.

As a number of young offenders interviewed for this project testified, the peer pressure they faced to commit street crime was intense. In effect, it became a rite of passage for many into the order of the outlaw culture on whose fringes they may have found themselves for reasons explained earlier. In participation you received the respect of your peers and also - and this was also significant - you lowered the likelihood of being coded as a victim: as someone that is, who could be judged as a target either of robbery or of violence. In the act your status as a man was in effect socially demonstrated and also validated in action. In street crime there was also a sense expressed that you were getting one over on 'them', the wider society, and no least the police whose effort to catch you, you were able to avoid. This fact was attested to a number of times in the interviews. Often the terms of this discussion were polarised in terms of the perceived fitness, agility and cunning of the street robber and the unfit, pondering and dull reflexes of law enforcement officers. That young men who had actually been caught, were responsible for this testimony was rather ironic,

not least, because it was clear that their thesis had been disconfirmed in the act of their arrest.

In street crime young men were also accorded the means to achieve an autonomy and self-reliance they otherwise found it difficult to obtain given their limited capacity to enter the formal labour market. Often acutely aware that their families could not afford to provide them with the material goods they had been taught to covet, a number considered such activity in cold instrumental terms as a viable means by which they could provide for themselves. In a state of prolonged adolescence provided by limited market opportunities and mass youth unemployment, such independence also could be viewed as providing a gateway into adulthood more generally.

Finally, in street crime another benefit can also be observed which raised it above participating in other forms of offence such as burglary. For those who had acquired the right skills, it was easy to commit and the risk of being apprehended was slight. In relation to other possible illegal activities, street crime also conferred more advantages which have cumulatively acted to make it the most favoured form of crime. To commit financial 'scams' required equipment and expertise most young people did not have access to. For similar reasons the gateway to more lucrative forms of white collar crime were also denied to these predominately young working class men. Exclusions in the formal labour market it could be observed are also reproduced in the illegal. Given that most developments in 'community crime control' in the last two decades have concentrated on situational prevention measures evident in target hardening of fixed targets such as shops, homes and cars (Clarke 1980), the cumulative effect of this has been to render such targets harder to attack. Such enhanced defences also make detection more likely. The turn to street crime can thus be seen as an entirely rational response to an overall reduction in target

availability more generally. If we now connect this observation with the rise of populations of suitable victims, then it self-evident why street crime has provided such a growth industry.

An important phase in the process of differential association lay in the difficulties that people who have become engaged as perpetrators in street crime face in returning to a law-abiding existence. First, in acquiring the skills to commit street crime – not least the capacity to demonstrate physical aggression – young men, in particular, further confirm the drift towards a form of aggressive masculinity that can further confirm their participation in an outlaw culture. The problem here is in becoming such a male they have to purify themselves through disavowal of other qualities that permit alternative and positive associations with the wider society. They can also assume a fully outlaw status and this can become integral to their identity.

If they get caught and are processed by the criminal justice system, then though this might well be the preferred vehicle through which societal displeasure is evidenced, the process can also have the effect of confirming their criminal status by formally conferring to them a criminal label. Being processed in this way it might be added has a number of further consequences. One, being processed through custodial institutions does not carry a street stigma on the part of those who have been processed this way. It can and often is worn as a marker of respect. Second, it is also a process in which young men can and do acquire an enhanced set of criminal skills. Third, when young men are released back into society their life chances are so reduced that participation in crime becomes their only viable option. As a research project conducted by the local probation service in Lambeth found, the living conditions for many offenders could only be described as chaotic.

The final factor that is important in sustaining a culture conducive to the production of motivated offenders ready and willing to commit street crime, is that the desire to break rules in this way can easily be sanctioned. This can happen both by those who break them and by other onlookers as well. As the work of Sykes (1957) and more recently Cohen (Cohen 2001) has shown, one reason why people come to break rules and continue to do so is that they can deploy various techniques of neutralisation to justify what it is they do. These techniques can take a number of forms and involve the creation of plausible narratives that can act to justify rule breaking or inaction in confronting it. In Lambeth, one such narrative was that young people were engaged in a kind of Robin Hood existence: stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. Another was that in street crime young Black people were engaged in 'resistance' to white racist culture.

In conclusion, in our consideration of the production of motivated offenders we have examined the background structural factors that create the underlying causes that produce the will to offend. In exploring this issue we have examined why young people have come to covet and desire the goods that are stolen. We have also examine why general socio-economic conditions conspire to produce a situation in which a number of young people will come to choose illegal as opposed to legal consumption strategies. Finally we have traced through a number of more proximate factors whose conjunction favours a drift into an outlaw existence in which street crime can be sanctioned as legitimate.

# 'That's Life Innit': A British perspective on Guns, Crime and Social Order

Simon Hallsworth and Daniel Silverstone

## Abstract

*Recent years have witnessed an escalation in the number of young men involved in lethal gun related violence in the UK. Within the last two years these have resulted in over 80 deaths. Lacking any overarching explanation some have attributed such violence to a burgeoning 'gun culture', others to the (alleged) arrival of American style gangs onto the streets of the UK.. This paper rejects these explanations as inadequate on the basis that the problem of gun related violence cannot be reduced to the problem of gangs, while terms such as 'gun culture' and 'gang culture' are too general to explain the differing contexts of gun use. The paper makes the case that to understand contemporary gun use we need to locate it within an examination of the lifeworld of gun users. There are, we suggest, two we need to consider. First, the patterned world of 'successful' violent career criminals, and second, a far more volatile street based world termed by the violent young men who inhabit it as 'on road'.*

Following a wave of fatal shootings that saw more than 80 young men lose their lives between 2007-8, gun crime is now perceived as a major threat to public order in the UK. In the absence of easy explanations policing agencies and journalists have been quick to propose the existence of a new 'gun culture' to explain the killings (NCIS, 2003,67). Other commentators have connected gun related crime to criminal gangs and 'gang culture' (Pitts 2008). The government, under pressure to act, has made confronting what it terms 'gun



knife and gang crime' a priority and an array of measures to tackle the problems posed by gangs and weapon use were revealed in its recent action plan to confront violence. These include extending stop and search operations to prevent weapons being carried and mandating dedicated policing operations designed to suppress the gangs that are believed to carry them (Hallsworth, 2008).

In this paper we argue that attempting to explain the problem of guns by reference to terms like 'gun culture' or 'gang culture' possesses limited explanatory value. A more profitable line of enquiry, would be to understand weapon use by attending to the 'life world' where weapons are used the most. In what follows we make the case for developing a cultural analysis of the violent life worlds of gun users and conclude by describing those where guns are principally used. These we describe as the occupational culture of professional criminals and the more volatile street based culture we term 'on road'.

### **From 'gun culture' and 'gang culture' to the culture of gun users**

While we accept that in common parlance 'gangs' might use guns, and whilst we recognise that, to understand the motives of gun users, we need to examine the culture of those that use them, we nevertheless find terms such as 'gang culture' or 'gun culture' theoretically weak. Nor do we accept that explaining gun use via the concept of the gang is helpful. The problem is that such terms are not rigorously defined if indeed they can be defined in any rigorous way. At their worst such terms mystify a street reality that is elsewhere.

Let us begin with the idea of an overarching 'gun culture', the evocation of which explains gun crime. The problem here is that different guns are used by different populations for an array of different purposes (Povey et al 2009).

Young people, for example, mostly use air pistols which are very different from the kind of artillery used by professional criminals. And, even within criminal circles (as we shall see) there is not one gun culture but rather different players in a segmented criminal life world who seek to profit from and exploit each other. Trying to embrace all of these disparate acts into a reified term called 'gun culture' adds little to our understanding of why certain young men come to engage in lethal violence.

Similar problems accrue when evoking the term 'gang culture' to explain the aetiology of gun related violence. What precisely a 'gang culture' is defies easy description. As with the term 'gun culture' we are dealing here with an indiscriminating blanket term with little explanatory value. Leaving aside the definitional conundrum of what constitutes a gang, and whether the UK is now witnessing their proliferation, it could be observed that there are many forms of street organisations that are not gangs but which also use weapons<sup>16</sup>. While not disputing that some self-described gangs carry guns and while we also accept that intra-gang conflict might provide the context for gun use on some occasions, as our research uncovered, many fateful situations where guns were used, had nothing to do with gangs. Guns, we found, could be used by gang members acting in an independent capacity or by violent individuals who were not in gangs. Guns may be used for a variety of reasons in a variety of contexts, including armed robberies, and enforcement in the drug market. Criminal opportunities that licence gun use, in other words, transcend the gang and invoking terms such as 'gang culture' misses this important point.

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<sup>16</sup> See Hallsworth and Young, (2008) for a wider critique of 'gang talk' and 'gang talkers'. For a discussion of street organisations which are not gangs see Hallsworth and Young (2006) and Hales, Lewis & Silverstone (2006)

This criticism however does not mean that a concern to understand the visceral and violent social milieu of offenders is not important. The question is how best to study this lifeworld? Following the lead of cultural criminology one potential way forward might be to invoke subcultural theory. The problem that arises here however is the extent to which the way of life of gun users can indeed be classified as a distinctive subculture. To begin with, it could be observed, we are not looking at a population that is wholly excluded. The world of gun users, as with young people more generally is shaped profoundly by the consumption logic of consumer capitalism and to that extent they are, as Jock Young observes, very much a culturally included population, even though manifestly excluded materially in many other ways (see Young 1999; Nightingale 1988). While it is the case that many young people who carry guns tend to adopt a particular style, typically influenced by American hip hop culture, to define this as the foundational aspect of their subculture would be to place far more emphasis on style than it deserves. Adopting the look and manner of the ghetto warrior undoubtedly remains a profoundly important reference point in some people's lives, but style and music do not define the relationship between the individual and the violence they do, or the weapons they carry. While the street world they inhabit certainly has its culture it nevertheless is as Bourgeois observes, not a coherent and unified space but rather a 'conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction of values and ideologies' (Bourgeois) page ) that defies being classified as a subculture.

Secondly, If we reject the label subculture this does not mean we reject the object lessons of subcultural theory which conceive culture as a dynamic response to the social conditions in which people live. As with the subcultures previously studied (see Hall and Jefferson, 1976), the life worlds of gun users continue to be grounded in the terrain of lived experience as it unfolds in

particular localities with particular histories, while also emerging as a (socially destructive) response to the wider social conditions in which people live; in this case, in opposition to the forces of social exclusion these predominantly working class men confront in mainstream society.

However, gun users are not a homogenous population and for this reason we distinguish between two classes of gun user in the discussion that follows. First we describe the lifeworld of what can be termed the professional criminal. This, as we shall see, is a world populated by men 'doin' the business', who undertake crime as a vocation. These are men are relatively successful at their trade, not least, because their social order is shaped by the presence of and adherence to conduct rules that licence violence rarely and primarily for business imperatives. The second way of life we discuss, often spoken of by our respondents as being 'on road' constitutes a far more violent and volatile social milieu. This is a parochial social order populated by young, often immature young men who dwell in dangerous street settings where many also strive to earn a living in the least lucrative but most violent part of the criminal economy. This is a street world where rules that might delimit violence rarely exist and where the injunction to retaliate is an obligation.

### **A note on methodology**

The empirical basis for our claims are derived from a number of research projects conducted independently by the authors.<sup>17</sup> These studies employed a variety of research methods including face to face interviews with people who had used weapons or had experienced weapon use in their area; interviews with control agents such as youth workers and police officers; examining recent

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<sup>17</sup> The research projects from which this article is derived include Hallsworth and Young (2006), Young et al (insert 2007) and (Hales & Silverstone 2005 ;Hales, Lewis & Silverstone 2006)

and relevant documents on the history and socio-economic conditions of the areas in which violence was typically concentrated and secondary analysis of police data on crime violence and weapon use. Interviews were also conducted in different cities<sup>18</sup> across the UK.

To summarise a complex picture, the lifeworld's we were studying were typically located within poor multiply deprived inner city areas within large metropolitan cities. The people we talked to are typically males aged between 16 and 34. Most had a bad experience of formal education and limited success in the legitimate labour market. Many experienced a chaotic childhood and many had been processed through various points of the criminal justice system. Most had a long and complex history of violence and violent victimisation. For example, the sample of 80 used in the Home Office study (Hales, Lewis & Silverstone 2006), 59 reported a disrupted family life, including 35 who had grown up in a single parent household. Of that sample, only fifteen reported any post-16 education, ten offenders had never worked; 49 only in unskilled or manual occupations. Overall, the ethnicity of respondents was mixed, and although males were certainly the dominant presence in the population that used weapons the testimony of young women was also taken.

We should emphasise that our empirical research was not originally commissioned with the aim of understanding the social and cultural aspects of weaponised violence. Instead, the primary focus of enquiry in two of the largest research reports, the Home Office report and the Youth Justice Board report lay in studying firearm availability and how weapon related violence was connected with the formation of street based organisations such as gangs. In the course of that research we became interested in the narratives of our many

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<sup>18</sup> The interviews were conducted with respondents from London, the West Midlands, Manchester and Merseyside, where a disproportionate amount of gun crime occurs.

respondents. These narratives, we came to recognise, shared many common features both in how they were articulated and also in the shared motivations for violence they revealed.

In what follows we identify the defining features of the two lifeworld's of violence where firearms are used. Where relevant we cite from interviewer testimony to provide empirical support for the issues we discuss. While our interviewees certainly had a clear sense of the social situations they were describing to us (including, in the case of being 'on-road', a name), it must be emphasised that the interpretation of these narratives is ours and ours alone. Whether our interpretation would be recognised by the street actors whose world we describe remains an issue to be tested.

### **The life world of the professional criminal**

"...there's these certain rules you know, and like you got in jail where you got a structure in place, you'd have certain people abide to it out there as well... We're not really a threat to anyone, unless someone threatens us." (Greater Manchester)

The first lifeworld we are interested to narrate is that of the 'gangster,' known more formally by academics as 'professional criminals'. In relation to those interviewed, the offenders who fitted into this category were drug traffickers, armed robbers and middle to upper-level drug dealers who had sustained their business over time. These were men 'doin' the business' where the business was in the illicit market. Some inhabitants of this world are men who had worked long at their craft and who, in various ways, had progressed up the criminal status hierarchy by virtue of their capacity for violence, their ability to control their violence, and deploy it with a wider set of entrepreneurial skills enabling them to maximise market position within the illegal economy.

This milieu is far from homogeneous and, as within the formal economy can be differentiated between the more and less successful protagonists (Hobbs 1998, Pearson & Hobbs, 2001).

Although there is not and can be no consensus over what constitutes professional crime, the ability to network, to mix with others and to stay in business over the longer term are obviously important features. Wide networks of criminal associates certainly have a bearing on the ability of professional criminals to source firearms (Levi, 2004; Wright 2006). What this research indicates is that criminal contacts are pre-eminent in determining the ease with which quality illegal firearms can be obtained; the better connected someone is, both in terms of numbers and seniority of contacts, the easier it is to get hold of a gun (Morselli, 2002). One implication of this is that a very well connected criminal will be able to obtain an illegal firearm even when overall supply is very low, while someone without the necessary connections may find it difficult to obtain an illegal firearm even when supply is relatively plentiful. For a well-connected criminal, this can mean having ready access to a selection of good quality firearms that can be bought relatively cheaply and yet as one respondent from the West Midlands observed:

“I know quite a lot of very high up the scale lads who won’t have anything to do with firearms, anything. And they won’t even deal to people who carry firearms.”

Though members of this group were the most skilled in handling and accessing weapons, many of the older or more well-connected criminals did not choose to carry or handle them. This was the case even though many were adept at physical violence, through having trained in martial arts and/or spent

time being a nightclub doorman (Pearson & Hobbs 2001). For example, in the Home Office sample, highly knowledgeable gun users accounted for only nine offenders in the interview sample of eighty; these were the ones who had actually practised shooting. Typically they treated the weapons as tools to be used only in set times for very specific purposes. They adopted a professional orientation to their weapons and discussed firearms in terms of the advantages and disadvantages the cautious and instrumental use of these tools brought to criminal business. For example, they demonstrated awareness of the forensic risks of the various weapons they used. Knowledgeable gun-users knew that, with relation to forensic residue, converted firearms are harder to trace but less lethal, whereas with real firearms the opposite is the case. These gun-users invariably claimed to destroy guns once used for professional purposes – crushed in a car at a scrap yard was one example of this auto-destruct principle. These were men who were also successful enough to be able to employ ‘henchmen’ to protect them, or junior criminals to carry guns on their behalf, in some cases under duress.

“...it’s more elders like, giving younger people false promises. Like, ‘You sell for me like, I’ll make you anything, you can have anything you want, if you have any trouble call me’. (London)

This puts them in an enviable position in relation to younger criminals as they avoid much of the risk associated with firearms possession while also being best equipped to use the guns they had access to. They are also well aware that their attitude towards violence is not the norm and are also therefore wary of sharing firearms with the less experienced younger generation. The quotation below is



typical of these sentiments and they disparaged the frequency firearms were used by the younger generation.

“It used to be, like the heavier lads, the heavier lads they’d use a gun, but as times gone on other people have been getting them. Still doing things in the old school way of thinking but they have sold the gun on. They’ve passed the guns on to other people and that’s when the guns have become street level, that sort of thing. That’s when things start going wrong” (London)

In the narrative of the lifeworld of the professional criminal guns are reserved for precisely those occasions when weapons are required. This might include armed robberies, confronting the risk or actuality of being threatened by other criminals, or ensuring debt payment of substantial drug debts . Finally, in this narrative when guns are used the use to which they are put is invariably justified on business grounds. These are men who are also well aware that business can suffer if weapons are used indiscriminately as invariably this brings down an enforcement response (See Desroaches 2005; Sheptycki 2009, this volume).

However, the position of these criminals in the criminal elite is never secure. It lasts only insofar as the successful presence in this criminal milieu can be upheld. Developing a drug habit or being unlucky or stupid enough to be prosecuted and incarcerated can mean that even very successful criminals find themselves propelled towards the more violent and volatile street culture, referred by them and by those within it, to being ‘on road’.

## **'On Road'**

The term 'on road' was a term used recurrently by many of our respondents. Some used 'on road' as the descriptive term for a way of life you elected to take, while for others it was perceived as a destination, a place in which you ended, specifically if you were excluded from mainstream society and its institutions. Respondents thus spoke of having lived 'on road', or of having met others who were 'on road' along the way. For some young men deeply immersed in life 'on road', it constituted a liminal space where they felt they could find a form of authentic sovereignty. Freedom from the constraints they experienced at the hands of what most viewed as a hostile society. This was a place where you could 'roll' (move) with your 'man-dem' (colleagues), a place where you became a sovereign agent. 'On road' was a place where it was possible to transcend the limits of rule based society and enjoy the fleeting sense of empowerment this can bring. On a more mundane level, it was also where you ended up in a world of high unemployment or underemployment, structural features of wider and principally poor environments from which these predominantly poor young people came.

One of my co-d's [co-defendants], he was constantly at the job centre, he was really trying to get a job. At the time we all laughed at him. He actually got a job, he was working nights packing but the wages were silly. He was really willing to work but that was the best he could get. He couldn't read or write; that was the best the job centre could offer him. It just broke him when he came round and we were counting the money [from the armed robberies], the wages that he would work for a year. It's not a contest there." (London)

Yet all respondents saw life 'on road' as a space in which violence and its threat were everywhere. Surviving 'on road', as such, requires a certain mastery of violence, it comes with an obligation to be able to do violence or, at least, mobilise it in ways that might ward it off. 'On road' the choices are stark: survive or become a victim. If the orientation towards violence on the part of professional criminals can be typified as a cold instrumentalism, weaponisation 'on road' is far more visceral and emotional and extends beyond business imperatives. Violence can emerge over perceived honour slights, territorial disputes between gangs, and is endemic within the retail sector of the illegal drug market which is where many young men on 'road' sought a living.

While the possession of a firearm can certainly be explained by reference to the criminal intent of the gunmen: for example, involvement in drug dealing or gang violence this we found may have nothing to do with the context in which guns and other weapons are eventually used. This is because in the minds of those 'on road', issues regarding drug deals, petty interpersonal disputes, jealousy and internal group status competition are rarely treated as individual events that require separate solutions. Often they merge in thought and action where they become reduced to the ubiquitous but vague street term "beef".

"...when you're in a group of people you get yourself involved in their arguments. You know what I mean? You stick together like. I back certain people up and they back me up at the end of the day... They know if you're moving with a certain crew, it's not only one person you got to worry about is it? It's everybody." (London)

Possession of a gun holds multiple meanings for criminals in this predominantly street based life world. Interviewees indicated that it was acceptable under some circumstances to carry an illegal firearm, not surprisingly, when engaged in illegal activities that exposed them to the risk of violence, or when directly threatened and fearful for personal safety. Several drew a distinction between acceptability and need. Yet in reality, this distinction can quickly disappear. As one respondent observed in interview “the thing about ‘violence rules’ is that there are none”. “The gun”, as another street respondent observed, “is a great leveller”.

“If your life was in danger... You know the police are not on your side and there’s nothing you can do... That’s self-defence, right? Then you have to protect yourself, any way you know of.” (London)

Criminal entrepreneurs ‘on road’ use all the weapons available, including converted imitation firearms loaded with home-made ammunition and, not least, knives. Most do not have the opportunity to practice using the firearms they carry. They seldom know the provenance of their weapons, they are not able to use them very efficiently and are frequently purchasers of guns used in previous crimes. . Gun-use ‘on road’ is much less instrumental and planned and far more erratic and situational.

For once you’ve robbed a drug dealer they ain’t gonna go and say give my money back, you are either going to die or they will beat the shit out of you. I mean seeing this guy get hit like this and that, with a bat over his head, I mean fucking hell man, I didn’t know what to do, I

mean you need to see, like teeth coming out of a guy's mouth.  
(London)

The lingering psychic implications of past trauma accumulated through often chaotic family backgrounds and endemic exposure to violence create the preconditions for a self that is capable of ultra-violence in the face of the slightest provocation. This makes many of these young men very dangerous and this proclivity for violence produces in its wake a world of enemies. We have been repeatedly struck not just by the degree of violence those 'on road' are capable of but also by their frequent experience of violent victimisation. For example, from the Home office sample of 80, "40 had previously been threatened with guns, 29 shot at and eight had been shot; 28 had been stabbed, 17 injured with other weapons, 34 had been robbed and three had been kidnapped. Additionally, 26 reported friends or family members shot and injured and another 26 reported friends or family shot dead" (Hales, Lewis & Silverstone, 2006; ix).

What life 'on road' also encourages is a hyper-aggressive form of masculinity (Cf. Campbell, 1993). This is a vision of purified masculinity where being 'hard' is the master status. This is a masculinity where backing down in the face of honour and status threat is difficult and where the onus to retaliate to provocation is an imperative. This is a very patriarchal form of masculinity, and homophobia and misogyny run through it. Those defined or hailed in its terms may well be successful street predators, but these are not young men who can easily intersect with society on its preferred terms.

In a world where problematic situations proliferate that cannot be resolved through legal channels in the civil courts and certainly not by a criminal justice system widely distrusted. Instead, they are resolved in 'fast time' (as opposed to

slow bureaucratic time) through violent extra-judicial means directed at those who cause offence or at proxies for them, such as friends or family members. The emotional intensity and enmity 'on road' is all the more exaggerated because of the extreme parochialism of those who live the life. Within this world, small-scale disagreements, feuds and rivalries take on huge significance; a significance that would appear difficult to grasp for those who live outside of the claustrophobic world in which life 'on-road' unfolds.

If we look more closely at the flash points that provoke weaponised violence, then four themes typically recurred in the testimony of our respondents. Violence is often associated with issues of territoriality, it was often provoked in the context of clubs and other leisure venues. It is certainly feature of life within the retail sector of the drug market and could be provoked by a range of interpersonal disputes over honour.

"They see it [as], you can't come into my territory and you can't go into their territory. That's within the drugs, because they'd get robbed and whatever else. Everyone seems to stick to their own patch." (West Midlands)

Though those on road often inhabit bleak rundown estates they would nevertheless manifest a strong attachment to their estate and those who inhabit it. These spaces are colloquially referred to by them as their 'ends'.

"No not a gang, I wouldn't say a gang... it is just a group of friends...in London. I don't know any gang that exists really and truly, it is just a bunch of friends...just local people who went to the same school and things like that... It was a group not a gang, like ten of your friends for example, and you all live close by." (London)

At its most elemental your 'ends' constitute your territory. Within your 'ends' you associate with others like you, you share a common history and biography. Importantly, your end will come to define you in the eyes of others located in different 'ends'. For the minority who become immersed in life on road, your end is not simply a place you inhabit, it is a place you may be called to defend, specifically from outsiders who physically resemble you, who enter from different places<sup>19</sup>. 'Reppin ends' is the street parlance that defines the practice of defending your territory from those who are caught 'slippin' or entering it. These conflicts include long running feuds with other groups from other 'ends' and these can provide a broad context for firearms violence although the original cause of these disputes are often not understood by the younger protagonists.

The 'ends' also provide the social geographic context for the earning of criminal wealth, the cultivation of a criminal reputation and finally and importantly the immediate backdrop for the display of criminal wealth. Firearms used to defend these spaces from the predatory advances of other groups will also be carried when the groups leave their 'ends' and move into what for them are uncharted spaces. As such 'the ends' are confining and several offenders expressed fear in relation to leaving their territory and were aware that their geographical ambit did not extend very far. It is also noticeable that offenders often have an informed view of who controlled their local street

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<sup>19</sup> Though issues of postcode wars have recently commanded considerable media attention, the affiliation of young people 'on road' and indeed those who otherwise dwell within these areas to their ends has a longstanding tradition in working class areas. So have territorial conflicts between certain of the residents who live there.

drug market and orientated themselves in relation to their counterparts in other 'ends', but had a limited view of what went on above them in the world of the professional criminals they idolised. Within specified areas there could be several different networks operating including professional criminals or on occasion they could be notionally controlled by one gang or 'crew'.

“No-one wants to look stupid. Everyone wants the big chain, everyone wants the big watch, everyone wants a nice car, all the girls, that's how it is.” (London)

Though life typically unfolded within their 'ends', nightclubs and parties (including 'pay parties') represented a key focus of leisure in the lives of many. These venues were significantly associated with constructing and defending a public identity, displaying conspicuous material wealth and responding vigorously to social challenges, notably including disrespect and masculine honour issues concerning girlfriends and peers. Although different ethnicities have different preferences in music, venues and drugs of choice (see Hales et al 2005 & Silverstone 2006 for a more detailed discussion), night-clubs are especially important in relation to understanding firearms disputes as this is one of the few times offenders leave their locals and interact with other people like themselves. Few offenders admitted to carrying firearms regularly, but most talked of taking them to these venues (although not necessarily bringing them inside). Almost all of the interviewees had experienced or witnessed violence in and around night clubs; half reported having seen guns, including guns being carried, brandished, fired into the ceiling and fired at people.



“I went to a club in slough, and a geezer's got shot dead in there. I seen the geezer on the floor. I seen the geezer shot dead in the club in Leicester as well”.

Nottingham

While violent territorialism could itself provoke gun related violence the use of guns is significantly more likely for those involved in the street level drug market. Here guns could be used for the purpose of robbing drug dealers, debt enforcement, sanctioning informers and protecting drug markets from external predators. (Jacobs, 1999 and 2000; Lupton et al., 2002; Wilson et al., 2002). To give an example of how violent life can be within the retail drug sector one individual who had worked in a crack (dealing) house had been kidnapped, seriously assaulted and dumped in woodland, seen shots fired in the crack house during several robberies, been shot at and seen a man shot. He had also been robbed at gunpoint in public on several occasions. None of these attacks were reported to the police.

“Everybody is selling drugs, and there is not enough money. So people start robbing drug dealers cos they get the drugs and the money.” (London)

Our research echoes the conclusions of other studies conducted in America which show that it is within illegal drugs markets, (particularly the street level dealing of crack and heroin), that guns are most often used. The reasons why such violence proliferates may be attributed to the fact that drug markets remain a significant economic generator within the street criminal economy in the marginalised areas from which those ‘on road’ hail, and this is

an economy in which different and invariably armed players compete for drug profits. Because these markets are both competitive and illegal and operate, outside of formal regulation, violence becomes the defacto regulating force within them. (Hales, Lewis & Silverstone, 2005).

“If you are robbing drug dealers they are not exactly going to call the police. I can deal with being shot at. But I can’t deal with 15 or 20 years behind the door and that.” (London)

When violence occurs it is typically found in the street retail market. This is where the relationship between buyers and sellers is more numerous and ephemeral and where dealing activities are more visible. The dealers at this level are also young (May et al 2006) and are at a physical disadvantage compared to their often older clients. It is possible that firearms compensate for this. As more professional criminals tend to avoid the street and mobilise their resources and acumen to subcontract out the street retail end of the business, it is typically those who live ‘on road’ that find themselves targets. It could be observed here that the over-representation of young Black males in the population of victims and perpetrators of gun related crime could well be explained because this population is more actively involved precisely in this sector of the drug market.

That said, it is important to recognise that the kind of violent street worlds we are describing here is not an issue for the Black community alone but defines the way of life for marginalised males drawn from many ethnic groups. A point too often lost by selective media coverage has contributed to it being identified as a Black community issue.

While 'on-road' culture described here constitutes the destination for young poor people drawn from a range of different ethnicities, its stylistic features are however profoundly shaped by media images of a Black urban ghetto culture as this has evolved in the United States. This influence is evident in the street uniform adopted, the social presentation of self, musical preferences and not least the language. Much has been made of the causal role rap music, often preferred by those 'on road', in driving urban violence forward, but this argument was not accepted by interviewees.

"Some people put it down to rap music; it's nothing to do with the music. You [the interviewer] listen to that. Every generation looks to the last generation and even if they don't think they are being influenced they are being influenced. They don't realise it: look at that guy who's made it big, I can be that guy. And that's it, you are there and you are into crime and gun crime and that's it." (London)

Instead both argot and music are best viewed as providing a cultural reference point and providing much of the language and a mode of expression which those 'on road' can relate to and excel at. The street argot is comparable to that found in African American communities as described by Elijah Anderson (1999). The terminology employed by firearms offenders is replete with terms such as 'elders' and 'youngers' applying to older criminals and their young protégées. Police are routinely referred to as the 'five o' or the 'feds' echoing American street slang. The reference to a firearm previously used in murder is also identical, described by Anderson and our offenders as having "a body on it" (1999;119) while those killed are described as having been 'smoked'. While urban music (hip-hop, garage, R&B) – certainly provides an

important cultural reference point for the majority of the offenders interviewed, be they Black, White or Asian, its relationship to crime and violence appears peripheral.

Power man, powerful, that is the addictive side of it. It is like, you know, the control, the power you have got when you have got that [gun] in your hand. And the way people react to it, that is a buzz in itself. You know, it is like, 'I am the fucking man. You are not going to say nothing to me, no-one is going to say anything to me, because if you die I will put one [a bullet] in you. It's just crazy powerful"

(London)

Though the volatility of the violence that those on road are capable of can in part be related to psychological damage and the hard purified masculinity that street life encourages, it is also in part a product of the conduct norms to which those on road subscribe. To a certain degree the conduct norms that prevail in criminal fraternities, what Anderson terms the 'codes of the street,' are shaped by the demands of the trade itself, thus a street level drug dealer or street robber needs to be physically strong or intimidating and there is a 'business logic' to punishing those who steal from you. But these street codes also embody notions of honour, obligations and patterns of action that are required in the face of particular events. These norms include the imperatives "never inform the police", "one must always be loyal to one's area and associates". They also stress the imperative of "righting physical attacks or verbal attacks with equivalent or superior force". But such is the power of these conduct norms that they might be better seen as myths. These myths, like other

myths, (Eliade, 1955; Levi-Strauss 1968) are supremely sacred and for many young men they shape the honour codes by which they live. Indeed such is their commitment to these street codes that those who are beholden to them will persist in seeking to right a perceived honour slight, even though doing so often licences their own violent victimisation, or indeed arrest and prosecution. On this point it can be observed that one of the key differences between professional criminals and their 'on road' counterparts is the realisation that these are indeed myths. That, in fact, cooperation with the police or the avoidance of violent confrontation and the ability to transcend their locale is critical in remaining out of prison and generating illicit wealth. Thus, one of the key differences between organised criminals and those 'on road' is that whereas the latter remain locked within the mythic order, the former, more beholden to the reality principle, do not.

Just as control agents have a tendency to produce their own mythology about the street and its organisation and develop policies to confront the street on that basis, this tendency to live in the imaginary is also reflected in the narratives told by those who live 'on road'. Their life world is also populated by stories woven about the local criminal pantheon of infamous role models and of actual or imagined injustices which provide the pretext for using a firearm. In a hothouse world where rumours abound and where the violence rules licence violent escalation, slights, (real or imagined) can quickly licence retribution and weapons can and are used to settle them.

### **Guns and social order**

Both of the weaponised social worlds we have sought to describe here are unified in so far as protagonists in both carry weapons and are prepared to use them, but there are important differences between them. For the

professional criminal, doing the business of crime entails holding a professional orientation with regard to the weapons carried. Ideally it does not entail carrying weapons at all, or it involves delegating their use to younger individuals 'on road' who then used them. It could be observed that, while certainly ruthless, the people who inhabit the world of professional crime conform to conduct norms shaped by the pragmatics of the trade in which they are involved. These carefully delimit the spaces where violence could be mobilised and guns used. Violence, in other words, is regulated.

Such a pragmatic orientation however scarcely defines the world of those 'on road'. This is a far more volatile milieu where gun use can be justified for uses that extend beyond business imperatives to include a range of personal disputes and disputes over territory. This is a world that is volatile because the violence rules that exist within it licence escalation while precluding the breaking mechanisms that would delimit the possibility of violence from erupting and spreading. Because of this, conflict situations abound, vendettas proliferate and young men tragically shoot at each with fatal consequences.

What makes this social order so self-destructive is that it is socially disorganised in significant ways. The violence within it is anomic as opposed to ritualised making it difficult to predict and thus control. The unpredictability of life 'on road' is shaped by the fact that life unfolds in unpredictable ways. This is a world where 'beef' happens because people look at you the wrong way, because you are not where you are supposed to be, because someone did something to your friend and as a consequence someone else has to be hurt. Life here is unpredictable because many of those who inhabit it are psychologically unpredictable as well. 'On road' is not a place where instrumental reason prospers and pragmatic resolutions occur. It is an intense hothouse of emotions that find expression in deeply internalised anger and rage felt by these unstable

young men. While, what we term 'on road' certainly constitutes a way of life, this is a violent life world which, to quote Bourgois, 'is predicated precisely upon the social destruction of the population that inhabit it. (Bourgois: 1995)

If we were to reach for a general explanation that might help explain and understand the social production of life 'on road' then this might best be grasped through attending to what John Lea drawing upon the work of Mouzarios terms the *destructive self-reproductive* logic of capitalist development. Underpinning this Marxist thesis is the idea that capitalism reproduces itself, but in ever more socially destructive ways. As Castells remind us, we live in socially polarised cities where wealth inequalities proliferate and where spatial segregation has become ever more entrenched (Castells:1996). These are cities whose poorest populations have become, under conditions of globalisation, increasingly surplus to production. Dwelling in deracinated estates, trapped in areas characterised by permanent recession, bare life unfolds here for many in the context of structural long term unemployment and underemployment.

The problem here is that just as capitalism destructively reproduces itself from above by marginalising and excluding its poorest citizens, it creates as its concomitant effect, patterns of destructive self-reproduction from below and this is what life 'on-road' ultimately represents. Here the socially marginalised respond to their predicament destructively in what becomes, at times, close to what Thomas Hobbes described as 'a state of nature', what he termed a 'war of all against all'. Life 'on road', is not a world where the social contract has much salience or purchase. This is the zone of the outlaw. This is a zone where deeply internalised anger and rage among depoliticised and deeply alienated young men finds violent expression. The tragedy here is that the rage and anger they feel is not directed outwards and towards the world that marginalises

them. Instead it is directed inward and against each other. Guns have become a part of this logic of self-destruction as young men pointlessly die at each other's hands.

## **Conclusion**

The use of firearms in the United Kingdom is to be understood within the confines of criminal cultures of gun users. The most obvious criminal culture with access to firearms is professional crime. These seasoned criminals have the ability to access firearms and an understanding of how to use them and how to get rid of them. Yet our research indicates they use their firearms sparingly and instrumentally. They are disparaging of the 'on road' subculture round them. They are also able and willing to manipulate young criminals who refer to them as their 'elders' into carrying and using firearms on their behalf thus passing on the risk.

Conversely, the more frequent (and often more tragic) deaths which also include the killing of the wrong person by firearms in the UK is a product of the prevailing culture known amongst offenders as being 'on road'. This overwhelmingly consists of young men from excluded backgrounds who have opted into a street level criminal economy within the areas where they live. They are committed to making money illicitly and to following a code of the street which eulogises but also reinforces their lowly criminal position. This culture is extremely violent and it is highly likely that those who ultimately resort to firearms have been subject to serious violence themselves, including being shot.

Firearms are not routinely carried by this group but they will be principally used to tackle other offenders similar to themselves. This could be due to variety of reasons; one is financial gain or ongoing disputes between



rival street criminals over control of territory. Yet due to the very local, internecine and closed environment with offenders often sharing girlfriends, family and criminal contacts the origin of a potentially fatal dispute may be social rather than strictly criminal. In this claustrophobic environment, firearms for this group represent both power and the ability to inflict deadly violence on young people who are not necessarily physically strong.

The structural preconditions for the volatile weaponised street world we have tried to describe here must be sought in the escalating inequalities at play in our society, and the formation of a sub-proletariat surplus to production in our polarised and segregated cities. But just as capitalism reproduces itself self-destructively from above, its concomitant effect is to reproduce itself self-destructively from below. In this respect what we have termed 'on-road' may also be legitimately conceived as a self-destructive response to the conditions which late capitalism has created.

## Violence and Street Culture

It was late in the evening of a winter's day in 2009 and I was travelling home on a bus that was winding its way along the Old Kent Road in south London. The bus stopped and four young men boarded. They were, I'd say, between 16 and 17 years of age, they were Black and dressed in the de facto uniform of the urban street warrior: hoodies, baggy jeans and trainers. They were noticeably aggressive as they pushed their way through the bus. One, I recall, punching a fist into the cup of his other hand, muttering as he passed me: 'I've got a fucking rage.' As a calculated performance in what Jack Katz (1988) terms 'the seduction of evil', these young men were quite successful. Everyone, myself included, felt suitably intimidated.

At the rear of the bus sat a young woman of Asian appearance. She was slender and could have been no older, I guess, than 23. The young men settled noisily in the seats around her. One sat next to her. A couple of stops further along some people vacated the bus and the young Asian woman, evidently intimidated by these would-be gangsters, gingerly stood up and made her way forward and sat down on a seat next to one of the exit doors. At no point in time did she say anything to the young men or even look at them. I can say this with absolute certainty because I was watching them with intense criminological interest. A stop later, the young men left the bus. However, just before the door closed behind them, one boarded the bus and smashed his fist hard into the young woman's face. Then he left. The violence was as shocking as it was unprecedented. She had, from the beginning made very clear she was intimidated by them and they, in turn, had gone out of their way to intimidate everyone else. Like everyone else, I found myself literally paralysed by what I

had just witnessed. Hitting women, was, by and large precluded in the street culture I grew up in (at least publicly) – it was not the kind of thing men were supposed to do.

In this instance, at least, other weapons were not used. However, in cities like London today, street violence is weaponised with the result that a number of young men have lost their lives at each other's hands, pointless casualties of Britain's street wars. I came across one of the victims in the vicinity of my house in New Cross Gate in 2008. He was a young Black man, no older than 17. He had been shot and was about to be placed in an ambulance by paramedics. One of his neighbours (whom I knew) asked him how he felt. His response was deeply philosophical: 'That's life, innit', he replied. Unfortunately, innocent victims have also been caught in the cross re, as was a young Polish nurse who was walking home through a local park where I regularly walked my dog. On this occasion two men decided to have a gun fight and a stray round killed her in the cross fire. In the same park I often met and spoke with a 14-year-old boy. He was the proud owner of a Staffordshire bull terrier that liked to play with my pit bull terrier. The police subsequently raided his house and retrieved a haul of weapons including a semi-automatic pistol. He is currently in prison.

These cases have been blamed by many on what has been defined as Britain's 'gang wars', itself the outgrowth of a new ominous 'gang' and 'gun culture', now apparently rampant in Britain's inner cities. In this chapter, rather than contest the novelty of the violence, or the sensational ways in which it is reported, I will reflect on how best we might make sense of it.

While by no means losing sight of the fact that some of the violence and a number of the fatalities can indeed be laid at the door of the urban street gang, my aim in what follows will be to contest the reductive logic at play in this explanation by establishing that the violence we are looking at here cannot be

reduced simply to a problem of gangs. Nor are many of the terms currently deployed to make sense of the violence, such as 'gang culture' and 'gun culture', helpful either. To make sense of the violence, we need to examine, I will suggest, the violent culture of the street world of which gangs are a part, and to do this we need to study street culture and the imperatives around which it is organised.

In terms of structure, I will begin by examining the problems attendant on blaming gangs for the kind of violence described above. I will then examine what I will term the culture of the street world studying the three imperatives around which social life within it is structured. These I identify respectively as the search for pleasure, the search for respect and the search for money. If these identify the ends to which social action in a street context is principally directed, what is unique about street culture is not so much these ends themselves (which are widely shared) but the particular way in which they are realised in a street context. Having outlined these imperatives I return to consider how and why the way in which they are realised creates an inherently violent and unstable world, one predicated quite literally on the self-destruction of its inhabitants.

In this attempt to move beyond the gang, I have two overarching aims. First, my aim is to suggest that the social meaning of gangs, in effect, what it is they are all about, cannot be understood by examining their internal dynamics or invoking that mythical alchemy 'gangness' to make sense of them. Gangs, it is my contention, are part of the street but do not envelope or determine street culture in its entirety. To suggest they are is, quite literally, to place the cart before the horse. To understand gangs, then, we have to examine the wider culture of the street of which they are a part. Gangs, in this sense, express and articulate in their actions imperatives that already structure street life more generally. All that gangs do, at least insofar as I understand them, is embody

these principles in their self-actualisation. My second aim is to suggest that instead of reifying the gang as current fashion dictates, more can be gained by studying street culture in its entirety. Only when we grasp this can more sensible and proportionate responses be developed to confront the range of problems currently blamed on gangs. It could be observed that in adopting this orientation my aim is not only to take issue with current gang fixations but to suggest that commentators like Bourgois (1995) and Anderson (2000) exemplify better the direction of travel we need to take than the burgeoning academic gang-industry. Both, in this sense, look at the wider cultural order of the street to make sense of the problematic situations that emanate from it. To change metaphors they look at the proverbial wood and do not get lost among the trees. Where they tread we need to follow.

Instead of beginning with the gang and making this the focus of analysis, I propose instead that we need to foreground street culture and examine this instead. By this term I mean to evoke a subterranean world governed by distinctive norms, values, repertoires of action and practices that organise and define the patterns of social action that those who participate in this culture engage in. Those who participate in street culture are those who can be defined in the first instance as 'street orientated' in the sense that they find a home and meaning in the rituals of street culture and who become, over time, participants within it. The street world has both a core and a periphery. At the core, deeply immersed in it can be found those that quite literally live their life through illegal means.. This section of the street world intersects seamlessly with what is often referred to as organised crime At the periphery we find younger people, predominantly but by no means exclusively male who typically coalesce in volatile peer groups and sometimes gangs.

One way to conceive this subterranean world would be to invoke the image of a whirlpool. Those at the periphery enter the edge of this maelstrom but most will not be pulled deep within it. They circle for a while in the outer eddies and are thrown out, or leave. But then, for most, it was never their intention to seek full immersion anyway. Others become more heavily engaged (some willingly, some by accident) and are pulled more deeply into the maelstrom (pulled deeper and towards its centre). The more deeply involved they are (differentially associated), the more difficult they find it to exit.

In order to study street culture sociologically I propose to examine the various ends around which social action in a street context appears to be most directed. In suggesting we study the 'ends' as opposed to the 'end' I also mean to signify that there is not one 'end' but potentially many. We are thus looking then at more than one goal, even if, as we shall see, the ends around which street culture is organised intersect in various messy ways. These ends, in their various forms, constitute what I propose to term the governing imperatives of street life. To study these we need to identify both the ends themselves and, more specifically, study the particular means by and through which these imperatives are realised in a street setting.

Let us begin by studying the ends to which street life is directed. If we consider the wider literature then clearly, as Anderson's (2000) and Bourgeois' (2003) work testifies, and well, the search for respect and honour appears to be one imperative around which street life, particularly for young men, appears organised. Indeed, for Anderson and Bourgeois, it is precisely this feature of street life that they emphasise in their work. Bourgeois' study, however, is substantively about a group of men who make their money illegally through selling and dealing in crack cocaine. While it is clear that in pursuing their trade these men also seek to obtain respect, nevertheless, they are also in

search of money as well. In other words we are also looking at a separate and distinct factor here, or, in my terminology, street imperative. This gives us two. Mindful of Jock Young's (2011) insistence that we do not make the mistake of making street life appear wholly miserable all of the time and construct its inhabitants in so doing as merely sad and miserable, let me add a third imperative to the mix, and that is the search for pleasure. Street life, after all, as the work of Katz (1988) and other cultural criminologists attests, constitutes a liminal space where risk and danger exists, but where all manner of intoxicating pleasures are to be found, quite literally 'there for the taking'.

Three core imperatives therefore govern street life and by extension the range of actions and situations groups like gangs find themselves engaging in. The first imperative involves the search for pleasure; the second, the search for respect; the third, the search for money. Social life in a street context is usually, if by no means absolutely, directed at realising the means necessary to achieve these desirable ends. In making this point, I am not suggesting that each imperative is pursued equally and at the same time insofar as one or more of these imperatives may be more important at a particular time in an individual or groups existence. Having fun, for example, is quite likely to define what younger people want most of the time, while making money might well become more important as they mature.

Before we explore further how these imperatives are realised in a street setting it must be observed that there is nothing extraordinary about any of them. Humans, as Freud (2011) observed long ago, are invariably beholden to the pleasure principle, or Eros, as he defined it (he also spoke of Thanatos (the death instinct), and I will return to this later). It is not in and of itself then anything extraordinary insofar as it is an imperative that governs the lives of those who are not part of street culture as well. It involves searching for, seeking

out, or creating situations that will generate what we might colloquially refer to as 'a good time'; situations that, in various ways, will leave those engaging in the search feeling good or satisfied – sometimes happy, sometimes elated and sometimes as high as a kite. The search for pleasure, it could be observed, is, in part, stimulated for the highs it brings but is also motivated by the desire to minimise or transcend situations or events that involve un-pleasure, or which are pleasure-less. This does not entail minimising pain or avoiding danger by any means, because pain itself can be intensively pleasurable just as danger can be exiting.

The search for respect is likewise by no means an abnormal behaviour insofar as it shapes the lives of many more people than inhabit the street world. It involves engaging in acts or creating situations where admiration may be accumulated on the part of those engaged in them. It involves engaging in pursuits designed explicitly or implicitly with aim of accumulating honour or status. Becoming, in so doing, someone to whom respect is due. As we shall establish, this is also about cultivating a self that others will treat with due regard (respectfully). In part, this project is also about creating or manufacturing a persona that people will not disrespect. As an imperative, the search for respect is a process that has to be accomplished. It is something that cannot be presumed but which needs to be cultivated. Once achieved, it remains a quality that has to be retained, sometimes in the face of those who will deny it or contest it.

In a capitalist economy, making money is of course an overriding necessity. There are a variety of different ways of making it and these vary between the legitimate pursuit of wealth through the legal marketplace to less legitimate pursuit of it in the illegal economy. In a free market society organised around the logic of compulsory consumption, making money is not only about



brute survival but about being able to live life as an active consumer, the *raison d'être* of neoliberalism and the culture of compulsory consumption around which it is articulated. Not having access to money or not having enough of it to sublimate socially induced consumption desires consigns those without it into the order of non-being (Young 1999; Hallsworth 2005; Winlow and Hall 2006). The implications of this for those who dwell in an 'on-road' existence are significant.

Three imperatives then, each of which is pursued more widely than the street world under investigation here, but which still constitute the key focus of the street world and those who populate it. Before we turn to consider the unique ways in which these imperatives are realised in a street context it pays to consider how each is interrelated to the others because, as we shall now establish, these are not wholly autonomous. We can begin this exercise by noting that the pursuit of each imperative also allows other imperatives to be pursued simultaneously. Making money, for example, can be pleasurable and obtaining vast amounts of it can allow those who engage in it to accumulate status as well through accumulating cultural capital. One can be proficient and skilled in a particular craft and gain pleasure from craftsmanship. One can be respected for this as well. In a society where status is also equated with the possession of the right branded goods, the search for respect is also intrinsically bound up with the search for money. Imagine these imperatives, then, like a Venn diagram.

It is not the ends to which street life and culture are directed that are unique because the pursuit of pleasure, respect and money is a desire widely distributed. What is unique and particular to street culture is how these imperatives are realised. In what follows we will consider how they are beginning with the pursuit of pleasure.

## **The search for pleasure**

We might begin this task by engaging with the recent work of Jock Young (2011) who is scathing about a criminological tradition which he argues makes the serious error of failing to recognise that the lives of the young deviants, so often its focus of analysis, are rarely as dark and miserable as too much criminology suggests. This enterprise he terms 'liberal othering'. In line with this cultural criminological injunction let us therefore begin our analysis of these street imperatives by recognising that, in part, the lives of those who inhabit this world are orientated towards the pleasure principle. Like everyone else, having fun, seeking out pleasure, is what they are also about. Before we consider how they accomplish this it pays to reflect for a moment on the pleasures we are talking about, for there are many. We can begin by identifying what I propose to term the pleasures of everyday life; the everyday pleasures that can be found undertaking many seemingly innocuous things: enjoying a good meal, the company of friends, a sunny day – pleasures too often ignored by criminologists who are more attentive to what may be termed the pleasures of excess. Unlike the simple pleasures of everyday life, the pleasures of excess entail extreme affective states, a movement away from the natural attitude towards a state of transcendence that can in some cases be read as a state of ecstasy.

In the first instance we can note that the denizens of the street world seek out pleasures by doing many of the things that the wider population of non-gang, non-street-affiliated young men do. These certainly include playing computer games (often violent ones), watching DVDs (many about gangster life) and partying in various clubs and houses and, not least, playing the mating game. Much of the pleasure they find would fall into the category of everyday pleasures. However, they also search out pleasure in ways that are more

peculiar to the street society of which they are a part, and in part they also seek out pleasures of the more excessive not to say transgressive kind. One way they produce it is through the time-honoured strategy of 'hanging around', often in 'street corner societies' in the vicinity of the estates where they are live, or in the playgrounds of the schools they attend (Whyte 1943). This is invariably read as indicative of anti-social behaviour on the part of the adult world.

While the street constitutes a place and space young men are decanted to, not least given poor living conditions, it must be remembered that the street is a place of wonder and enchantment as well. It is a place where little happens, often for a long time. It can certainly be a boring space, not least for young people who often complain that they have nothing to do. At the same time the urban street world is a place of adventure, a seductive environment that promises excitement and pleasure, tinged with the risk of danger that makes it that much more appealing (Hayward 2002, 2004). It constitutes a liminal space where the rule-bound conventions of everyday life can be magically circumvented, or, at least for a short period, suspended. The street world thus offers the individual with a space to achieve a sense of personal authentic sovereignty, a sense that everyday life, at least as it is lived by structurally powerless young men, is often bereft of (Bataille 1988). By escaping into the nocturnal order of the street the individual and the groups to which they are affiliated leave behind the rhythms of conformity that life lived within the straight, homogeneous world of the everyday proffers as its reward and enter instead into the wonderland of a heterogeneous order where normal rules do not necessarily apply. Against a world characterised by the usual space-time disciplines, 'on-road' you live by your wits in a world where risks and dangers abound. Integral to this shift away from the mundane and boring we find two intrinsic properties of pleasure production in street culture: first, the art of

transgression and, second and by no means outside of it, rule-breaking (Katz 1988). In both activities not only is excitement generated, so too is the acquisition of power, an intoxicating medium for those who otherwise have little of it.

For the members of the peer groups and gangs who inhabit the street world, that is, groups populated by people not orientated towards living placid or pacific lives, pleasure is predominantly obtained, in Goffman's (1982) terms, by being 'where the action is'. This involves engaging in problematic situations that can have fateful consequences, where the events in question are by no means instrumentally driven and which, consequently, can have no end to them beyond themselves. Violent exertion and what Lyng (2005) terms 'edge work' are the media by and through which action is sought out. By 'edge work' we mean acts and activities that involve risk and danger to an individual where these dangers and the perils attendant on them are actively sought out. Fighting in an individual context or in a group is one way in which pleasure is generated; others include engaging in excursions into territory claimed by others; or, more recently, engaging in acts of online bravado where members boast about their daring exploits and disrespect others. Vandalism and joyriding are also pathways by and through which a good time may be had in a street context, as may drug-taking and graffiti (Fenwick and Hayward 2000); as indeed are a myriad of acts engaged in by those who, in Katz's terms, are not only attracted to the ways of the badass, but who, in their celebration of badness, take delight in offending the denizens of the straight world. While highs are certainly to be had through acts like violent exertion, the drug economy, invariably itself a key force in street life, also allows access to a range of chemically-induced highs. Pleasure, then, is a social good actively sought out but in ways that can be dangerous to the point of becoming self-destructive.

### **The search for respect**

While bound up with the pleasure principle, the search for respect also constitutes an autonomous variable in its own right and it needs to be treated as such. Like the search for pleasure, the search for respect is not in and of itself an abnormal or deviant activity, it is a social good also sought by everyone else in mainstream society including the wealthy, powerful and privileged. What distinguishes the search for respect among more marginalised groups of street-orientated young men is the means by and through which it is achieved and the nature of the hyper- masculine norms around which it is structured.

One way to visualise how respect is established is to consider the task of obtaining it, a game that, like all games, is rule-bound and where the rules that govern it are implicitly understood by the players but never formally composed or articulated. There are two parts to this game. First, you have to establish yourself as a viable player in your own right. You have to establish that you are, in street parlance, 'on the level'. To evoke a footballing metaphor, to enter the game you have to demonstrate proficiency in your craft and good enough to be selected from the bench to play. Second, and this is particularly the case in urban street worlds, you play to win out over others around you who are also playing the same game. In a practical sense this means that 'to score' you have to accumulate and retain honour, and this is accomplished in an environment populated by rivals who are playing the same game and who, as part of this, are trying to prevent you from obtaining or retaining the honour you claim.

To be seen to be, as it were, 'worthy to play' constitutes a social project in its own right. It involves cultivating and constructing a social presentation of self that is appropriate to the field. On one hand, it involves wearing the right clothes with the right brands in the right way. Street culture, it could be noted, is

wholly incorporated (at least today) into mainstream consumer culture. Indeed, the young street-affiliated men I recently studied in Birmingham certainly ensured that they looked sharp (against them we, the university researchers, looked positively poor and shabby). It certainly means ensuring that you are not caught wearing low-brand goods. Integral to this project is ensuring that you are not seen as a person to whom respect cannot or ought not to be conceded, which is also about confronting head-on those that try to intimate that you are not what you claim and who as such challenge your honour.

In part the search for respect is a project that also involves embodying in word, presentation of self and deeds the standards that embody masculinity as it is dominantly constructed in Western societies (Connell 2005). Many of these qualities stem less from gangs or gang culture but are embedded in mainstream, not to say working-class, culture. Being tough and being able to handle yourself, confronting status challenges when they arise, and not least mobilising violence if required to settle them, embody these desirable traits. To an extent, playing the game also entails embodying other codes of the street, such as not talking or 'grassing' to police, and backing your brethren if they are threatened (Anderson 2000). For men in particular, it is also about being seen to be virile. Being a virgin and celibate are qualities that have no status in the street world and will disqualify you from the ranks of the elect.

As in mainstream society, respect is also bound up with competence, being seen to be skilled at or in activities valued within the field. In the case of street life a competence for violence might well be one virtue that is recognized; many others are as well. Entrepreneurial ability, as we shall see, is itself a valued skill, as indeed is achieving a reputation for being trustworthy, which entails not just competence but not disclosing to outsiders inside business (Hobbs 1995, 1998).

The business of obtaining respect involves playing a game where the stakes being fought for are conducted in a social field that is ruthless, unforgiving and socially destructive. In this sense the struggle to affirm and retain reputation and accumulate respect is conducted in a highly competitive and, not least, sceptical street environment where men face disrespect and status challenges at every step along the way. In many respects the aim of those who enter a life 'on-road' is to successfully navigate their way through this environment; warding off status challenges as they arise while also challenging the authenticity of other participants in the street world. To win is to survive and to have accumulated along the way a reputation either for yourself or your group.

By being 'where the action is' a group and its members engage in the game through the medium of a dramatic performance where they put themselves and sometimes their lives, quite literally, on the line. As Goffman (1982) argues, they gamble with both their welfare and their reputation. In edge work, they take risks where the stakes can be very high with a consequential payoff that might well follow them into their future. They may run, for example, the risk of being caught by the police who exist to prevent the action – and prison might follow; or they may be violently assaulted by other men just like themselves. At the same time, by engaging in risky endeavours, they also have to demonstrate that as individuals they possess character; that they are capable of rising to the challenge, backing each other up, while also demonstrating in performance a range of other qualities valued in street-corner societies such as toughness, courage and integrity.

To an extent, the business of establishing respect cannot be separated away from the need to cultivate and affirm a viable masculine identity. Manliness in this world cannot simply be presumed but has to be affirmed and

demonstrated through action and in performance. To an extent the violent ways in which manliness is affirmed in this street world owes much to fact that in a society where masculinity continues to be equated with control and power over things and people (traditionally, women), for young men from predominantly poor communities violent assertion becomes for some the only power resource they can access and mobilise to produce an identity that corresponds with this patriarchal imperative (Messerschmidt 1993). To put this another way, middle-class men, by and large, do not have to assert and affirm masculinity through violence because they own and control things like people and resources. They can fall back on the power that status brings, exemplified, for example, in high office or a high-salaried job. No such presumption can be made by men who are consigned to precarious lives in a low-wage, low-status economy. Violence becomes part of the means by and through which viable male identities are constructed among subjugated groups because it is a resource that is available and ready to hand. It is also a currency that finds validation in their parent communities and, not least, in mainstream society through the medium of the culture industries that incessantly promote and celebrate it. This is a vision of purified masculinity where being 'hard' assumes a master status. This is a masculinity where backing down in the face of honour and status threat is difficult and where the onus to retaliate to provocation is an imperative (Hallsworth 2005).

What also makes the street search for respect significantly different from the ways it is established in mainstream society is that the task of establishing it has to be constructed in the context of a violent world where participants cannot take for granted that the respect they claim will necessarily be recognised by others. In his recent ethnographic account of the development of a street gang in a rustbelt city in the US, Timothy Lauger (2012) brings this aspect of the game



into stark relief. He charts how a group of urban nomads try to constitute themselves as a gang by building a reputation for themselves, and he shows just how difficult realising this ambition is in practice. What made it difficult was less their capacity to be violent (they held all the right credentials as far as this was concerned) and more their difficulty in getting other people within the local street scene to take their gang claims seriously. In other words, who they claimed to be was not accepted by an audience that was inherently sceptical of such claims and saw instead 'wannabes' rather than the gang of their dreams.

In the street world then, claims will be tested and if someone is discovered to be a fake (that is, a person whose myths do not accord with the claims they make) then brutal retribution can follow. Disqualification can also follow if public status challenges are made which are not effectively responded to. In some cases, not responding, or failing to rise to the challenge, will also be read as an indication that the person concerned falls short of the requirements necessary to be considered a viable player.

The task of warding off and confronting status challenges therefore has to be mastered as a key life-skill. As Anderson (2000) shows, it involves knowing and recognising the signs of disrespect when they manifest themselves. It involves cultivating a vigilant disposition, one that can discern disrespect in the way people look at you, let alone treat you. The ego structure that street culture encourages, it could be remarked, is hard but brittle. It looks out upon the world with suspicious eyes for signs of disrespect and responds violently when it is encountered. (To add a brief biographical note illustrating this, I found myself a few years ago in a situation that could have turned very violent very quickly. I was leaving a train at London Bridge when I tripped over and literally fell into a group of young men. Instead of behaving as most would by simply accepting my apologies, the young man I directly bumped into went into a state of war

readiness and responded aggressively as if I had consciously elected to disrespect him. I had evidently violated far more than his personal space.)

Today, the game of respect moves well beyond the simple time-honoured medium of invective conducted in a street setting. In grime music and in the stream of videos produced and uploaded by men claiming street/gang authenticity, talented MCs 'spit bars' purposely designed to big up the reputation of a particular group (and the MC himself) while also throwing down status challenges to the other enemies. Given that video formats allow the producers to visually dramatise the status challenge as well as narrate it, such formats with their violent aesthetics function perfectly as media through and by which the game of respect is played out. The bulletin boards that accompany such videos also provide other formats that also work to exacerbate the challenges being made. The use of underground radio by the participants in this world to challenge and disrespect each other constitutes yet another medium in what remains a way of life predicated on the self-destruction of its inhabitants.

Though much is made of the threats that those who occupy this street world pose to the wider society, in many respects this paranoid way of thinking ignores the fact that the search for respect occurs within the context of a subterranean street world where the overriding focus of attention on the part of the population who inhabit it is each other. They inhabit as such the interstitial spaces of society and though, at times, innocent bystanders, can become victims; the predominant enemy the participants of the street face derives from each other. The street, in other words, is the arena in which the game unfolds and is played out; the rest of the world is a distant sideshow.

### **The search for money**

Street culture is found in its most developed form in areas characterised by high indices of deprivation where local labour markets provide little by way of secure employment where the jobs on offer are of the precarious form. In such a labour market, rates of youth as well as adult unemployment are high and for the young people destined to a life of labour within them, the possibility of securing secure, decent paying jobs cannot be guaranteed. For this, the new precariat, as Guy Standing terms them (Standing 2011), finding work will be difficult, while much of the work they will find will be low paid and temporary; where temporary work becomes a permanent feature of working life. Caught in a state of constant churn moving between low paying short term jobs and a welfare system that is set up to fail them, obtaining money, their 'P's', is by no means an easy task for populations of young people destined to dwell in this precarious economy.

At the same time as they face manifest material exclusion, the denizens of the street are also culturally included to the extent that they have been successfully socialised into the consumption logic of free market capitalism (Young 1999). They as such are also seduced to believe that success in life is to be obtained by owning the right things. At the same time and as part of this lesson they will also come to recognise that failure lies in not owning the goods they have been taught to desire, goods that are invariably designed to become quickly obsolete, after which they will need to be replaced by the next model or style. Given that exclusive brand status is also bound up with the high prices needed to purchase them, the money needed to live a good life, or at least one that is consistent with the standards young people have been schooled to expect, is quite likely to exceed that which life in a precarious low-wage, low-

status market will deliver. Adaption through innovation thus becomes, in a Mertonian sense (Merton and Nisbet 1963), the rational response for many street-orientated young people as they opt away from the diminishing returns of the formal labour market, to make their Ps (money) 'on-road' in the informal economy.

Within this economy, street-orientated young people seek to make money by mobilising whatever entrepreneurial talent they possess in whatever activity will deliver it. And opportunities always exist. For street- orientated young men who lack well-connected elder criminal contacts, some may engage in the time-honoured pursuit of street robbery to accumulate money where violence is the medium they mobilise for obtaining it (Hallsworth 2005); some might develop a capacity for breaking into houses or cars, while others will innovate in different ways, exploiting whatever opportunity comes their way. Dealing and selling drugs for more established dealers is another alternative, and in inner-city areas where drug markets are well established and saturated, this is a key net employer. For most young men who take this route, this will mean selling drugs in the lower echelons of the street retail sector, often in open marketplaces. Some entrepreneurs, using hydroponics, might be engaged in growing 'skunk'. Breeding illegal dogs might be another alternative; selling fake designer clothes and jewellery, another. More entrepreneurial participants may engage in fraud. As within the formal economy, success is largely contingent on the contacts street hustlers are able to establish with already established players and the entrepreneurial flair they may innately possess (Hobbs 1989). While some young people may be very successful entrepreneurs and make considerable money, this will not be the case for most. The returns they make are generally low and certainly not likely to radically transform their lives, even though a

ghetto narrative suggests that vast riches will be accumulated beyond their wildest dreams.

In contemporary street culture, successful engagement in music might be for some the chosen way of making money, and there is no doubt that some certainly seek to do so in the street world. Talented MCs, looking to gain credibility and reputation by the authenticity of their street connections, work with street gangs producing well-crafted videos characterised by high production values, orchestrated around highly aggressive lyrics coupled with a violent street performance. Rapping your way to financial success is a potent ghetto narrative, though few performers are likely to make it big this way.

Illegal endeavour comes with noticeable risks attached. Just as the search for respect involves gambling with welfare, so too does the business of making money. Risk of arrest, and prosecution and imprisonment, is one likely outcome; becoming a victim of violence is another, and just how likely and probable the real risk of victimisation is can be adduced from the sample Hale and Silverstone studied in their research on gun crime: '40 had previously been threatened with guns, 29 shot at and eight had been shot; 28 had been stabbed, 17 injured with other weapons, 34 had been robbed and three had been kidnapped. Additionally, 26 reported friends or family members shot and injured and another 26 reported friends or family shot dead' (Hales et al. 2006). Accumulating enemies as a consequence of business endeavours such as robbing drug-sellers is also a risk (Jacobs 2000), as are rising levels of stress that living life on the line brings as its reward. For those exposed to high levels of violence there are psychological costs as well.

It is important to recognise that this level of criminal endeavour is not simply the prerogative of groups like gangs as these groups are themselves plugged into distributed networks populated by people who are not necessarily

gang members. And even within gangs, individuals are quite likely to engage in scams as individual operatives working for themselves as much as they are part of a collective group enterprise. Many members of legitimate society are also involved in these hustling networks. The public might be the purchasers of stolen goods, or desirable goods such as drugs which state criminalisation ensures cannot be obtained legally. A number of 'legitimate' businessmen might also be involved in helping to fence and sell on illegal goods as well. This, then, is not a black market with clear boundaries that separate it from the licit, but a grey one given its intersection with the wider legal economy (Hobbs 1995).

Unless street-orientated young men are well networked into the wider criminal economy, that is, have close friends or relatives with significant criminal involvement, and successful criminal careers, it is unlikely that most will migrate from the order of small-time hustling to become players in the world of what might be termed more organised crime. Most individuals lead quite parochial lives; most will not have these contacts; most are not wholly committed to crime and will pursue the task of making money in the formal economy through legitimate means; and some might choose not to exploit such links even if they had them because they lack the requisite entrepreneurial talents. But some do, and this might well change the trajectory of their criminal careers.

A group that is relatively well integrated might begin to innovate in the development of its criminal involvement. If they are able readily to mobilise violence successfully and is populated by men willing to deploy it, this might lead them to identify arenas where they can do so. At this point weapons might be carried and used. Weaponisation, however, is contingent on two factors: the existing presence of weapons in the street culture, and the arrival into an area of men who routinely use weapons. In relation to the former, once one group uses

or carries weapons then other groups will invariably tool up in response on the basis that not to do so would place them at a hopeless disadvantage to those that do. In the case of Birmingham, where we recently conducted research, guns became more commonplace because men trained in their use and who habitually used them began to arrive in the city. This population included Yardies who came from a parent society in Jamaica where weaponised violence is deeply embedded. Other groups such as Somalis also began to arrive from what was essentially a war zone.

From small-scale hustling, these street entrepreneurs become locked into wider criminal networks and gain criminal capital. They become educated in various scams, and learn how to become players in them. To begin with, this will take the form of undertaking junior and subordinate positions relative to more established criminals who, in effect, subcontract dirty work to them. From small-scale hustling and territorial conflict, these individuals and the groups to which they belong may begin to migrate into more organised crime and criminality. They may become more heavily enmeshed into the illegal drug trade, either as dealers or as groups who make a living robbing other dealers. In a world where business imperatives matter, the group and its members will learn, often from more established gangsters, to be more careful in relation to the way violence is exercised. It could be that they discover market opportunities that allow them to make significant money.

Although for some gang-talkers this transition is often spoken about in terms of the evolution of large corporate gangs with extensive divisions of labour and complex vertical command structures, we are looking here less at shadows corporations as Cressey (1969) once imagined the mafia, and more at distributed networks within which a range of actors; some individual, some in duos and some in larger collectives each play a particular role. Though much is

made of large gangs sometimes imagined to possess hundreds of members, it could be noted that, were such groups to exist, this is not a functional way of organising to make money. The group is unwieldy, too difficult to organise, too leaky, and finally it is never entirely clear who is a committed member or simply a 'wannabe' (a street term of abuse).

### **Instability, Trauma and Street Life**

One of the dominant themes that have accompanied the contemporary rediscovery of the urban street gang is the idea that the UK is confronting an organised counter-force that means it harm. Against this interpretation I would suggest instead that what we are dealing with is a street world populated by groups that certainly organise together to achieve common goals (having a good time, playing the game of respect and making money) but who do so in the context of a world that is neither corporate nor organised in the way in which bureaucracies are. The street world is a world that is radically contingent, where violence happens very quickly and where the violence in question often appears like the lightning that strikes at the door: unforeseen and unannounced. Here, business motives and more personal ones intersect in messy ways that make bureaucratic organisation near impossible.

What makes this street world so unstable is that the violence and edge work in which gangs and other occupants of this world engage penetrates into and profoundly structures the way in which each of the imperatives outlined above are realised. Having fun in the street world of gangs involves, as we have seen, violent endeavour, as this is where the action is to be found. Violence in this sense becomes a medium for transcending the routine, mundane and boring. It is through the medium of violence that street-orientated young people (in groups or as individuals) seek to play the game of respect. In so doing, they



gamble reputation and welfare in a game of high stakes where the risk of violent repercussions is a risk that has to be faced and confronted head-on. Making money in the illegal economy, or at least in, those sections of it open to street-orientated young men, can also be an endeavour fraught with dangers. Leaving aside the very real danger they face of criminal conviction, the arenas in which money is made are themselves incredibly violent; none more so than in the street retail trade in drugs which is where a number aspire to carve out a living for themselves (Jacobs 1999). In an economy devoid of formal regulation by the rule of law, regulation through violence becomes the de facto mode of regulation.

The problem escalates because weapons like knives and guns have in some quarters supplemented fists and boots. The problem becomes even more problematic when guns are no longer simply the property and prerogative of more organised elder criminals and make their way down into the street world of young, unstable, adolescent men. This is certainly now the case in the UK. It becomes worse because once your enemy has weaponised you are left with little alternative but to engage in an arms race as well.

In a street world where these imperatives are not, as it were, vacuum sealed, seepage also occurs across and between them and this also makes this world unstable and unpredictable. A drug dealer might carry a weapon in order to protect himself (and his drugs) from the risk of victimisation from those members of the street world that might want to rob him. However, someone, somewhere may also look at him the wrong way, intimating an honour slight that has to be responded to. His weapon might well in this occasion be deployed, but not for the reason it was originally intended. Far from being predictable, the street world is inherently volatile and unstable precisely because business motives for carrying and using weapons can be

overdetermined by far more personal motives. Whereas professional criminals like bank robbers mobilise violence instrumentally, in a street context violent events are often less pre-planned and more situationally determined. Here, bad stuff happens because someone, somewhere, looked at someone else the wrong way and someone somewhere else will have to be made to pay.

In a world where problematic situations proliferate, rarely resolved through legal channels in the civil courts and certainly not by a criminal justice system widely distrusted, formal means of conflict resolution are notable by their absence. Instead, they are resolved in 'fast time' (as opposed to slow, bureaucratic time) through violent extrajudicial means directed at those who cause offence or at proxies for them, such as friends or family members. The emotional intensity and enmity 'on-road' is all the more exaggerated because of the extreme parochialism of those who live the life. Within this world, small-scale disagreements, feuds and rivalries take on huge significance; a significance that would appear difficult to grasp for those who live outside of the claustrophobic world in which life 'on-road' unfolds.

Violence, then, is like the genie who refuses to enter the bottle once it has been released. It won't go back and it won't go away. More than that, it is contagious. In the street world, violence does not just provoke violent retaliation, violent acts leave in their wake brutalised, damaged individuals and a world of enemies with long memories who carry their 'beef' with them. These problematic situations in turn set in motion vendettas that continue which can be intra-generationally mediated. In fact, so lost in the midst of time can they become that the very reasons that set them in motion are often lost on those burdened with the necessity of taking them forward.

Though it would be fair to say that the logic of mutually-assured destruction that defines the grammar of this world can spill over into the world

of innocent bystanders (nowhere more graphically demonstrated than in the drive-by shooting of the Charlene Ellis and Letisha Shakespeare in Birmingham), by and large the victims of violence in the street world are the young men and, sometimes, young women who populate it. Though the motives that legitimate violence might appear insane to the outside world looking in, in the hothouse world of the street seemingly small slights take on a significance and have an intensity that can provoke often disproportionate responses.

Living life in this violent milieu carries a range of psychological costs. Seeing a friend shot and killed, or knowing a friend who has been murdered is a traumatic event. Living life on the edge carries with it high levels of stress. As one ex-gang member who had a heavy immersion into street life explained, this way of living often left him unable to sleep at night, staring at the ceiling. It left him feeling unable to use anything but public transport, so fearful was he that someone might just fire a gun into his car should he use it. It could be noted that research suggests that it is when a gang member eventually has enough of living with such risks that many elect to migrate out of gang life and seek a more benevolent alternative. Deeply internalised anger and rage are also endemic to the participants of this world, as is the absence of any clear sense of an alternative that might be different and perhaps better. Though trauma impacts at the individual level, it also impacts on the wider community itself. Self-maiming on this scale carries psychological costs that damage everyone.

One way to make sense of the horror that is being described here is to consider the fact that we are looking at a culture that violates the very meaning of the term 'culture' (let alone 'subculture') if 'culture' is meant in the simple anthropological sense of 'a way of life'. This is a way of life, certainly, but one predicated, to use Bourgeois' terms, precisely on the self-destruction of its

inhabitants; a way of life in which psychological damage, trauma, violent injuries and sometimes death are ineluctable features. A way of life which, not least, accounts for the expression I have often heard the denizens of this street world use to describe their lot on more than one occasion: 'dead men standing'. For much the same reasons, the concept of subculture is difficult to apply to this street world. Subcultures 'magically' resolve the predicaments they face through the rituals they engage in and the narratives they weave to justify them. Does this realistically apply in a way of life in which Eros appears to have been evicted and only the spirit of Thanatos appears to figure? I suggest not.

While much is made today of large organised gangs it could be noted that, were they to exist, it is quite likely that the violence in which they engage would be more predictable because leaders would be able to control and regulate more effectively the violent inclinations of their subordinates. In the street world such a situation does not prevail, with the consequence that young men (some in gangs, some not) find themselves inhabiting a life-world where, in the words of one man, 'bad stuff' happens for often no reason and where you can, as one young man we interviewed found out, simply be shot by finding yourself in the wrong place at the wrong time. Rather than see street culture, then, as a game of chess played by rational villains confronting the forces of law and order (an image exemplified in films like *Speed*), street culture best resembles a game of snakes and ladders. The inhabitants of the street dream incessantly of the good times that will happen that will take them onwards and upwards (the final deal, the perfect heist, the successful rap), but the reality is that, too often, even when things go well, the snake is there to greet you: the policeman raiding your house, retribution for a past wrong that has never been forgotten, the murder of a close friend.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have consciously sought to move beyond seeking explanations for violence by finding its cause in a new and novel folk devil, but have elected to study the causes of violence by attending to street culture and the imperatives that define it. As we have seen, the imperatives I identify are by no means unknown to those who live beyond the world of the street. What is unique about the street world is the particular way these imperatives are realised in a street context and the structuring role that violence plays as an ordering process within them. As I have tried to establish here, to engage with the many problems currently blamed on gangs, we need to forsake gang obsessions and study the street world of which gangs are a part. American researchers like Anderson and Bourgeois lead the way here, British criminology needs to catch up.

# Street Organisation and Structure

# Arborealism and Rhizomatics: A treatise on Street Organisation

How do we understand and make sense of informal organisations such as gangs? For gang talkers, this is not a question that appears to present any serious epistemological and ontological challenges. Gangs, from this standpoint, are simply considered criminal organisations with clear determinate features that can be established and measured. Considered this way, they are imagined to possess fixed essences the compilation of which provides an understanding of the whole. This tendency is wonderfully exemplified in the quantitative tendencies at play in the American administrative, gang research industry. It is particularly evident in their autistic obsession with reducing the complexities of informal street organisations to denaturalised and de-contextualised clusters of risk factors from which the truth of gangs is then discerned (Klein 2001).

The tendency to essentialise however does not stop here and is also evident in another characteristic feature of administrative gang research. It is particularly evident in the tendency to presuppose that the organisational forms and structures of gangs not only parallel those of formal organisations but can be described in the same terms. This tendency is particularly evident in various attempts to corporatise the street; to ascribe to it the hierarchical bureaucratic features typically found in armies and corporations. This way of approaching the gang has many adherents. John Pitt's in the UK established his gang credentials by discovering super organised gangs of this sort and the tendency is also reflected in the USA in the work of Jankowski (Jankowski 1991; Pitts,

2008). Indeed, looking beyond academia this trait is the dominant characteristic of gang talk everywhere.

Cultural criminologists have taken the lead in contesting the attempt to reduce the study of complex social movements into the denuded language of risk variables and in opposition to the 'voodoo statistics' of Zombie criminology have asserted the necessity of engaging with the phenomenological reality of street organisation (Ferrell and Sanders, 1995; Presdee, 2000; Ferrell, Hayward et al., 2004; Young 2011). Only through an appreciative ethnographic approach and one sensitive to the values and meanings actors give to their actions can the reality of street world ever be fully disclosed. An approach exemplified in the work of critical ethnographers such as Hagedorn (Hagedorn and Macon, 1988), Brotherton and Barrios (Brotherton and Barrios, 2004), Congourgood (Congourgood, 1994) and Vigil (Vigil, 1988). And it is in the work of critical ethnographers such as these that we also find approaches to study of informal street organisations suggesting that the organisation of informal organisations cannot be grasped through imposing upon them the bureaucratic properties of formal organisations such as corporations and armies.

All of which takes me logically to the question I want to pose and address in this chapter. How do we comprehend the structure of informal street based organisations if we accept that they are not corporate? Which is also to say, how do we move beyond gang talk and the deeply flawed representations of the street in which it trades? This is, at heart, a question of ontology as much as it is a question of epistemology and methodology. It is about the very conceptual lens by and through which we make sense of complex street worlds. A reality, whose *sui generis* properties are, I contend, wholly different to that of the world of formal organisations such as those that most gang talkers inhabit.



Evidently we need a different ontology but let me be very clear from the beginning about what this entails and what it does not. It cannot entail simply trying to fix and patch holes in orthodox gang talking narratives because this not a narrative, I contend, that can be patched up and fixed. Like any other failed paradigm, we must consign it to the dustbin of history. We recognise, of course, that its death will no doubt be painful, extended and prolonged and, as George Romero's movies remind us, even the dead have a habit of returning to haunt the lives of the living. To understand the informal organisation of the street we need instead to begin anew. We need a different sociology of organisations. Ultimately, this requires a different paradigm.

In what follows my aim will be to outline what such an alternative might look like and to do so I will draw upon the work of the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977; Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). What Deleuze's philosophy provides, I will argue, is an alternative way of comprehending the properties of informal street organisations, and in ways that mark an epistemic break with orthodox gang talking traditions. This takes me then to Deleuze, nomadology, and the study of trees and grass.

Before I go any further, a brief note on Deleuze. Though one of the towering philosophers of the twentieth century, it could be observed that his work has not captured the interest of many criminologists. Indeed, even in the field of cultural criminology (which, one might imagine, would constitute that area of the discipline where his work would have most relevance), few appear interested in it or its possible applications<sup>20</sup>. It appears, as such, relegated to the status of that obscurantist body of (continental) theory recently condemned by Jock Young as an unduly arcane, complex and irrelevant (Young, 2011). Here I will attempt to demonstrate how wrong such an assumption would be. In so

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<sup>20</sup> The work of Aas and McGuire are notable exceptions that prove the rule

doing I will also suggest ways in which cultural criminology itself could be enriched through an engagement in Deleuzian thought and thinking.

To do so however requires some prior theoretical spadework. It entails, as a precursor, engaging in what might appear an extended digression, one well away from the study of informal organisations such as gangs, which, after all, is what we are supposed to be studying. But please bear with me and stay the course, because, like a medieval round, we will return to where we began - eventually. Before we return, though, we will need to examine the fundamental features of two very different kinds of society: that of the sedentary societies of the West and that of the nomads of the East. It will entail studying two opposed models of social organisation: the arborescent, tree like systems that define western societies and thinking, and, opposing this, systems which are rhizomatic and grass like, the properties of which are exemplified in nomadic life.

Following this excursion into Deleuzian thought, I will develop an argument to suggest that the informal organisations of the street are fundamentally rhizomatic and their organisation needs to be interpreted as such. To grasp their nature we must leave behind traditional arborescent approaches to the study of street organisations (the stuff of which gang talk is constructed) and develop instead nomadic thought and thinking. I will also argue that the problems that gang talkers typically experience in interpreting the world of the street stems from the fact that their ontic and epistemological horizons, the very lens through and by which they comprehend street realities, are ineluctably saturated with arborescent categories and assumptions.

## **The sedentary and the nomadic**

For Deleuze and Guattari western societies are distinctive because they are sedentary and rooted by nature. Within them populations are settled and parcelled out in what is predominantly an urban civilisation defined by the logic of settlement (forts, villages, towns, cities, nation states) and enclosure (levees, gates, walls, channels, borders, fortifications). Citizens, within this order are beholden to regulatory regimes presided over by a sovereign territorial state and its bureaucratic apparatus (the military industrial complex). Within this social formation citizens live out their working lives moving in and between total institutions such as schools, factories, corporations and sometimes prisons and hospitals. Within the sedentary society power moves from the top downwards and this imperial pattern repeats itself in every institutional complex, including the state form itself.

In stark contrast to the patterned, ascribed, predicable logic of the sedentary order Deleuze invites us to consider the world of the nomads who traverse the vast grasslands of the steppes and the deserts. If within sedentary societies people find themselves distributed into fixed spaces which they then occupy, hold and defend, in the nomads we confront a society 'without division into shares, in a space without borders and enclosures' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). Unlike the rooted citizens of the sedentary society the nomad lives life in movement. They occupy spaces that are then left behind as they move on to new spaces in a cyclical journey without end. Nothing is wholly fixed in nomadic life. No foundations around which life turns except the rituals of the seasons and those that are established around a society in perpetual movement. In Deleuzian terminology if the logic of sedentary society is to territorialise life, that is to ascribe matter into fixed 'striated' space, nomads are by nature de-

territorialised and de-territorialising. Far from inhabiting striated space, that of the nomads is smooth.

Sedentary societies and nomadic orders are not only fundamentally different both pose real challenges to the other. Take the other great sedentary society of the East, the Imperial Chinese Empire. Despite having at its disposal a formidable bureaucracy, a great civilisation, and an army that greatly outnumbered its adversaries, it proved no match for the nomadic war machine of Genghis Khan and his sons and the nomads still returned to overrun China even after the Great Wall had been built to keep them at bay. In the face of the total liquidation of Kiev, Russia too would fall under the yoke of the Mongol hordes and for 300 years; while the assembled Knights of Europe, composing the flower of the European warrior aristocracy, were slaughtered in their thousands when they confronted the Mongols in Poland in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. To an extent the military success of the nomads could be credited to the tactical brilliance and uncompromising ruthlessness of their leaders; but it is also an issue of nomadic organisation itself and the superior advantages their speed and mobility would confer to them when they confronted the ponderous, immobile, centralised armies of the East and West.

All sedentary societies begin when their nomadic elements are suppressed. When the lands are farmed and when fixed settlements develop; when these, in turn, become consolidated under centralised systems of administration within territorially delimited borders. If the trajectory of sedentary societies is to forsake nomadic organisation, indeed, to aspire at its liquidation, nevertheless, nomadic tendencies remain and are always experienced as a threat to sedentary society and on many levels.

As we have observed, sedentary societies function by allocating people to places that have ascribed borders; they are territorialising by nature, they striate

space and people. Nomadic groups violate the terms of this order. They challenge the property rights around which sedentary regimes are organised, and pose as well an existential challenge to their grounding principles that demand that life be fixed, measurable and quantifiable. For centralised states in particular, which function by regulating flows of people, information and goods, nomadic life challenges their inherent tendency to ascribe and fix all matter in place.

This helps explain why Western societies allocate so much effort either at eliminating nomadic elements or regulating them by ascribing them to particular places. Think here, for example, of the perennial problems posed to the state in the middle ages by the class of vagabonds who occupied the outlaw spaces between the cities; the ambient fears that gypsies, travellers and migrants continue to inspire today. Think back to the terrible solutions (the pre-modern genocides as Mike Davis terms them (Davis, 2001), that nomadic tribes experienced in the age of empire by the colonial powers: the tragedy of the indigenous American tribes, the Aborigines, the Indian Tribes of the North West Frontier. The fears that subcultural groups inspire among right thinking people today also stems in part from nomadic tendencies they possess and / or are ascribed. The same holds for informal organisations such as street gangs but before we examine this further we need to look more closely at the key metaphors Deleuze mobilises to define the distinctive properties of centralised sedentary systems and the nomadic elements that oppose them. This then takes us into a consideration of two terms he borrows from the study of botany: arborealism and rhizomatics

## **Arborealism**

The tree, Deleuze observes, is a potent symbol in western cosmology. Think here, for example, of the many images in which trees figure: 'the tree of life', the 'tree of knowledge', the 'branches of government'. Western people 'put down roots' to say they have arrived and will stay; others aspire to 'find their roots' in the sense of tracing family trees back to an ancestral point of origin; a fact displayed well in the popularity of programmes such as 'Who do you think you are', in which celebrities are invited to discover their ancestors. It could well be that the hold that trees exercise on western thought derives from the fact that western societies are home to great forests and they figure heavily in our imaginary; western civilisation, in this sense, has always lived with trees in ways that nomads live with the grass of the steppes or Eskimos their snow and ice. But for Deleuze trees are not just part of western life, they express in their structure fundamental truths about the way in which western societies are organised; their structure expresses in this sense fundamental ontological truths about western ways of thought and thinking.

'It is odd' how the tree has dominated Western reality and all of western thought, from botany to biology and anatomy but also gnosiology, theology, ontology and all of philosophy" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: p20).

From branch tip to root the tree, at least as Deleuze conceives it, is a command structure. It grows from a seed that constitutes a founding point of origin. They develop with a taproot that descends vertically beneath the surface of the ground, and paralleling this, vertically ascending, a trunk that rises towards the sky. Over time radicals (the side roots) begin to develop radiating symmetrically away from the main taproot; eventually these subdivide into

smaller root systems which again subdivide and the process reproduces itself. In complete symmetry with this subterranean development, branches radiate horizontally away from the central trunk. Like the root system each branch also subdivides and the process repeats itself into the formation of smaller branches. What is also unique to the tree is that it constitutes itself as a predictable structure whose nature can be comprehended. In Deleuzian terms 'the tree plots a point'. There are common laws that defines how the structure both develops and reproduces itself; symmetry and predictability are integral to this process.

This ideal typical description of the tree provides both a metaphor and template, Deleuze suggests, for understanding key aspects of western life. As we have seen, the sedentary societies of the west are precisely of the rooted type. They are by nature and type arborescent societies. Like the tree, western peoples invest heavily in their roots. They discover and affirm their racial heritage. Here the 'imagined community' of the nation does not wander, they inhabit homelands, or, like displaced diaspora communities, they aspire to reclaim them. Western states also invest significantly in ensuring that people remain rooted. To be 'documented' in this sense is to be a rooted citizen, just as to be undocumented, as many refugees are, is a potent symbol of the rootless outsider.

Western organisations are also inherently arborescent. The structure of the state is arborescent. So too are the political parties that constitute the polis. Think here, for example, about the branches of government. So too is the military industrial complex. So too are the structure of corporations. In each, power moves relentlessly from the top down through centralized, hierarchical, command structures. Such organisations comprise sites and spaces of domination and control. Within them, those at the top look down upon those beneath them; those beneath, in turn, are expected to look up to those above

them. Within such systems status accrues to where you stand within the hierarchy. These tree like structures, in turn, aspire to territorialise the lives of those they control; subjecting them to the logic of enclosure, subjugating them as they do so. Through them flows of information, money, power seep but always vertically; everything here is organised, everything in its right place.

Western thought and science is also tree like. The modern idea of knowledge having an Archimedean founding point is a case in kind, as are various attempts to develop 'trees of knowledge'. Western science is paradigmatically arborescent and nowhere is this better exemplified than in the quest for certainty and Being expressed in western philosophy. So too are the natural sciences such as chemistry and biology. Social science is as well including, we might add, criminology (but to this we will also return).

### **Rhizomatics**

But plant systems exist which are not arborescent; and the plant life that they produce evolves in very different ways (and directions) to that of the tree. The alternative Deleuze presents us with is the rhizome. The grass that covers our lawns is a rhizome, ginger is a rhizome and so too are many of the invasive plants we classify as weeds. Unlike the tree, which is essentially, a vertical structure, the rhizome develops horizontally. The term derives from the ancient Greek 'rhizoma' where it means 'mass of roots'. These strike away from nodes in horizontal stems that also produce a profusion of offshoots that penetrate to the surface. These offshoots follow no predictable direction or pattern and constitute elaborate subterranean (and sometime surface) assemblages that may extend over large areas. Unlike trees a rhizome may be cut into pieces and each piece will form a new plant (vegetative reproduction) and this is often how they are propagated. Like the tree, the rhizome, constitutes both a sign and a signifier



that can be deployed metaphorically to designate an array of human and non-human systems. Read as a metaphor Deleuze uses the idea of rhizomatic structures as a vehicle to describe a set of organisational processes and practices that stand in opposition to and depart radically from those he associates with arborescent structures. Nomadic life in its entirety is rhizomatic but so too are many other life forms:

...Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes, plants with roots or radicals may be rhizomatic in other respects altogether: the question is whether plant life within its specificity is not entirely rhizomatic. Even some animals are in their pack form. Rats are rhizomes. Burrows are too, in all of their functions of shelter, supply, movement, evasion and breakout. The rhizome assumes very different forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion in bulbs and tubers. When rats swarm over each other. The rhizome includes the best and the worst: potato and couch grass, or the weed. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988:6)

Unlike trees, rhizomes have no clearly defined symmetrical structure

'The rhizome is an acentered, non-hierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organising memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988:21).

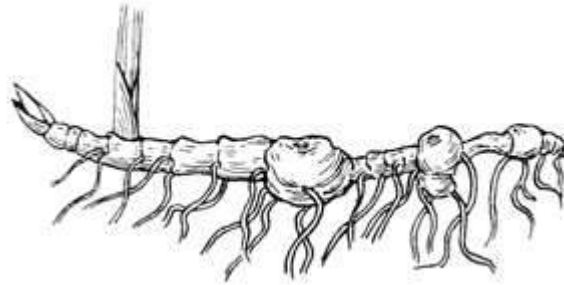


Diagram 1: Rhizome

Unlike trees whose roots and branches evolve from and reach back to a common trunk (a classifying centre) in the rhizome each node can potentially connect to any other. Rhizomes then are not centred but de-centred and distributed. If the tree represents a command structure that is vertically aligned and orchestrated from the top down, the rhizome epitomises a horizontally inclined, radically non-hierarchical system whose elements come together and intersect in different and unpredictable ways.

Whereas arborescent structures function by acts of territorialisation the rhizome is characterised simultaneously by forces of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation. The metaphor Deleuze evokes is that of a map. But this is not the kind of map most of us are used to, which designates clearly and uncompromisingly where everything is in space. On the contrary this is a map that

‘must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988).

Nor is it accurate to say that in opposition to the tree the rhizome is simply disorganised because that would be to misrepresent its nature. Rhizomes are structured but their structure

...is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows. [...] When a multiplicity of this kind changes dimension, it necessarily changes in nature as well, undergoes a metamorphosis. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988:21).

Rhizomes are composed of two elements: *domains* and the *linkages* that connect them. These domains Deleuze terms 'plateaus'. The defining characteristic of a plateau is that it is 'always in the middle not at the beginning or the end'. It constitutes itself as 'a continuous self-vibrating region of intensities; a multiplicity'. These plateaus are in turn 'connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 1988)'. A rhizome then is composed of one or more of these plateaus and these 'multiplicities' are themselves connected to others. What connects together though may be no means be read as like for like because what is linked 'are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature'. Indeed for Deleuze each connection may evoke very different regimes:

What is at question in the rhizome is a relation to sexuality—but also to the animal, the vegetal, the world, politics, the book, things natural and artificial—that is totally different from the arborescent relation: all manner of "becomings (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988)."

And it is in this term 'becomings' that we find here another key distinction with arborescent ways of thinking. Whereas in arboreal thought things are held to have necessary states of being, fixed essences that define the whole, or a state of being to which they gravitate, there is no such determinate destiny to rhizomic life. It develops but not like a book with a beginning, middle and end, but as immanent arrivals in a world where there is no predictable pattern or destination, no fixed or final state to which there is a return but simply to new becomings without end.

'It is a question of a model that is perpetually in construction or collapsing: and of a process that is perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting up again' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988).

In attempting to delineate the two systems Deleuze is not attempting to suggest that we are looking at a stark binary. Western societies might well be defined by their arboreal tendencies but the composition of the social world is fundamentally rhizomatic as indeed is the polity taken as a whole. Even in the most rooted system, rhizomatic tendencies can be found; offshoots breakout and away, extending themselves in strange and unforeseen ways. And even if the arborescent state seeks to arrest, expel or repress rhizomatic elements, they nevertheless persist:

*'the flow continues beneath the line, forever mutant' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988).*

None of this implies that arboreal features may not also form in systems that are rhizomatic, or that rhizomatic structures may begin to accumulate arboreal

features; hierarchies may develop, despotic tendencies may evolve. A general step forward. But... and this is the point, such tendencies do not define the rhizome or translate it into an arboreal formation. Rhizomes cannot be grasped in thought from within arboreal thought systems even though, as Deleuze wryly observes:

'History is always written from the sedentary point of view and in the name of a unitary State apparatus, at least a possible one, even when the topic is nomads' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 23).

Which also explains why, even when the subject of history is the nomad, the nomad discovered or narrated invariably comes to appear arboreal (but more on this soon). Why is this? Ultimately, it's about the ontological categories at play in arborescent thought and the conceptual lens through which the world is comprehended that results from this way of seeing. Within the sedentary point of view things are always seen from the top down (or from the bottom up); looking with arborescent eyes is always to gaze in a way that reduces the world to simple linear patterns (beginnings, middles and ends), closed narratives, bodies with organs (functional bureaucracies, cybernetic command structures).

To grasp the rhizome you have to engage instead with what Deleuze terms 'nomadic thought'. You need to think like grass? Deleuze has some suggestions:

Never send down roots, or plant them, however difficult it may be to avoid reverting to the old procedures. "Those things which occur to me, occur to me not from the root up but rather only from somewhere about

their middle. Let someone then attempt to seize them, let someone attempt to seize a blade of grass and hold fast to it when it begins to grow only from the middle.” Why is this so difficult? The question is directly one of perceptual semiotics. It’s not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 23)

### **Back to the Street**

Thinking from the middle, that is precisely what we need to do, but before we consider how we do so, we need to return to the object of this enquiry and that is the world of the street and the informal organisations that populate it. I have already put down enough signposts such that the following proposition can hardly come as a surprise: *Street life and street organisation, I contend, if not in its entirety, is predominantly of the rhizomatic form.* It is, as such, nomadic through and through. I will, of course, need to demonstrate why, but, for now, let’s consider the wider implications of this proposition before I do so.

In arguing that the informal world of the street is rhizomatic I mean to claim that it possesses nomadic traits that are wholly distinct from and which are irreducible too that of the formal properties of formal organisations that constitute and define the arboreal state and its constituent apparatus. I am claiming, in other words, that the world of formal bureaucracies and those that pertain to the world of the informal organisations of the street belong to two different modes of social organisation. Each, I contend has a *sui-generic* logic, which means we need a different kind of sociology to interpret each.

Let me go further. To understand the sociology of formal institutions we need a sociology capable of understanding the features of arboreal systems in a

way that reflects their own distinctive mode of organisation. Whose categories express and accurately how their distinctive features can be rendered concrete in thought. At the same time, however, we need to recognise that we need a very different sociology if we are to comprehend the world of organisations that are not arboreal but rhizomatic and nomadic. To grasp the reality of informal organisations as concrete in thought we need in other words a nomodology.

Given Western thought is in nature and substance shaped by arboreal categories and arboreal thought more generally, it is by no surprise that the sociology of formal organisations is already well developed. To find it we need look no further than Max Weber and his study of modern Bureaucracy (Weber, Gerth et al., 2009). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the Enlightenment underpinnings of this sociology of the sedentary society have also established the sociological foundations around positivistic criminology is erected. Contemporary academic gang talk, I would contend, simply accepts these arboreal categories and unthinkingly applies them to the study of street organisations and, why not, because for arborialists everywhere tree thinking is the only game in town. All of which is just fine, if only those pesky street organisations were arboreal. Only they are not and this is where it all goes so horribly wrong. From this comes 'gang talk' and the ludicrous categories in which it trades: the gang as a bureaucracy, the gang as rational actor, the gang as corporate, the gang as Being and Essence.

If the world of the street is rhizomatic then it must follow that we cannot or should not seek to interpret it from within this sedentary point of view. Why is this? Sanity demands it. Because, self-evidently, if the subject here is nomadic life, then we need a rhizomatic frame of reference to comprehend it. The trouble with gang talkers however is that they cannot comprehend this. They cannot because they have trees growing inside their heads and this leads them to find

trees everywhere even when the real subject of their gaze is grass. Sedentary thinking unfortunately possesses them like a devil. And this is why they do not see rhizomes even when they are staring at them. John Pitts, a tree thinker par excellence, to his credit did his best, he at least tried to comprehend the rhizome but failed miserably and reverted to type (Pitts 2008). But then he has always worshiped at the church of latter day arborealism, so why should we be surprised.

But let's be honest, such tendencies infect academia and all gang talk. But what the hell, let's be magnanimous. I don't want to blame anyone. The Pittite's are, after all, products of sedentary regimes. They come from sedentary orders; they inhabit sedentary organisations; they think sedentary thoughts and behave according to type. How can we ever be surprised when they do. And this is why they see the streets from a vertical perspective and corporatise them ruthlessly.

But this is also the gaze of power and this is why, in a very real sense, and despite their pretensions to be Progressive Thinkers and for some 'Left Realists', gang talkers are in fact consummate fantasists. And that is why, far from being on the side of the good people, they invariably occupy the space of the control imaginary.

So how then do we read the street rhizomatically? There are many ways to approach this question. But let's not be too obvious here, working, as they say, from the top down. Let's begin in middle somewhere by demonstrating what the street is not. A mind fuck, after all, has to begin somewhere. That whatever it is, the street cannot be grasped in a sedentary way despite the presence of arboreal features that sometimes appear within it. I will then consider, more closely, the conceptual categories by and through which we might begin to represent gang life and gangness. By drawing upon the work of



critical ethnographers, who I will contend, are intuitively nomadic thinkers (whatever else they think they are), ways of comprehending gangs can be derived that stand wholly opposed to and distinct from the sad dismal categories of arboreal gang talk. I conclude, by way of fun, by suggesting ways in which nomadic thought and thinking can and have been applied to explain how gangs evolve and develop.

### **Reading the Street as rhizome**

Inherent to arboreal gang talking traditions is the assumption that informal groups like gangs are organised, where the organisational form they aspire toward, mirrors that of formal organisations. Given this, gang talkers approach the gang with of the assumption that you can use the descriptive categories of formal organisations to make sense of them. This essentialising tendency is then reflected in the traits they subsequently 'discover' in the gangs they research. Gangs thus have:

- Clear determinate boundaries. These distinguish the inside of the gang from the outside and hence allow issues like membership to be clearly distinguished by positivist science and not least enforcement agencies.
- A division of labour. In this corporate vision of the gang, members are allocated into distinctive offices which perform clear functions for the reproduction of the whole.
- A vertical command structure. In this power moves downward from the leader through various cadres of lieutenants to street soldiers whose lives the gang leaders control.
- Bureaucratic procedures. They engage in 'grooming exercises' as part of their 'recruitment strategies'.

- They 'organise' and control crime

But as we shall now establish the properties of formal organisations cannot unproblematically be applied to the street world of gangs even if some gangs want to appropriate them. But to get to this we need to return to Weber.

For Weber modern bureaucracies, at least in their distinctively modern form, constitute hierarchical, centralised, command structures (Weber, Gerth et al., 2009). Within bureaucracies power always moves from the top down through a system dominated by leaders who administer, through various subordinate levels beneath them. When people enter bureaucracies as employees they inhabit pre-established offices where their duties are carefully delineated by formal rules they are expected to abide by, where rules are made and applied impersonally. Positions within the organisation are obtained on the basis of technical merit such as qualifications; and promotion occurs by seniority. As Bauman, observes, the modern bureaucracy is a rational problem solving machine (Bauman, 1989). Whilst they often exhibit a range of perverse traits (not least being their awesome capacity to grow and reproduce themselves), for Weber they are nevertheless the most effective tools humanity has developed for realising the various ends society establishes for itself be this finding cures for a disease, or developing the means to destroy other humans. While not denying that gangs may aspire towards various bureaucratic features, as we shall now establish, whatever street organisations are, they are not corporate nor can they ever be fully corporatised. They cannot, simply because, as we also establish, the street world is by nature a rhizome.

While it is evident that gangs have structures and large gangs many arboreal features, it could be observed that in practice trying to create a rational bureaucracy out of an informal street organisation is rather difficult even if there

is a will to create one. Let's begin at the beginning. People by and large enter bureaucracies that pre-exist their employment in them. These are located in dedicated premises such as a factory or a set of offices. Cadres of administrators work to ensure that everything works; specialists are employed to realise the specific ends to which the organisation is geared (such as making things, or providing services) and these work to regimes presided over by managers who are specialists in management.

Much as functionalist orientated gang talkers like to fantasise that all of this holds true of gangs read as criminal corporations, in reality, none of this holds true. Gangs it is true might well fall back on established rituals, in order to reproduce themselves, but their structures are always emergent and have to be created and maintained in a habitas largely devoid of the supportive features corporations simply take for granted. More than this, they have to create their structures on an on-going accomplishment and in the face of opposition not only posed by other gangs (many of whom will not even accept that they are a 'real gang') but by enforcement agencies who conspire at their destruction. Most gangs do not own property; they do not own extensive offices; they are literally urban nomads who inhabit the street are often distributed across them which creates its own set of problems.

While evidence suggests that more successful criminals are those who are well networked and possess key criminal skills (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009), It is also worth noting that the raw material out of which a gang is typically formed are not disciplined adults who eek out their 9-5 jobs with the comfortable expectation that they will receive regular wages in remuneration. Gangs are populated instead by young people, many immature, some with long established histories of violent victimisation behind them, and that's only for starters. As Jankowski observes, they are often strung out on an unhealthy diet

of fast food, not to say stronger, illegal intoxicants (Jankowski, 1991). Nor in the subterranean world of the street do they live a regular 9-5 existence. In a world where boredom is a regular feature and where the threat of violence is never far away, simply trying to impose corporate structure on a gang let alone persuading a group of 'defiant individuals' to accept such discipline, rules against the possibility of effecting a normal corporate structure. Given most gang members typically drift into gang life and drift out after little more than 2 years (by which time most have had enough) we are not looking at organisations that can self-reproduce easily anyway – at least by formal corporate means.

If a key characteristic of formal organisations is the subjugation of their employees to informal codes of conduct applied impersonally, this does not necessarily follow in informal street organisations beholden to the codes of the street. Gangs are rarely if ever fully impersonal. They cannot be because gangs inhabit a *habitas* where personal and kinship relations matter and where clientelism is the primary method by and through which relations are organised. If we accept, as indeed we must, the fact that violence is a valued currency in the streets, then it also follows that a capacity to demonstrate and harness violence may well be the qualities that leads some to positions of dominance in gang structures. All well and good, only these are not necessarily the right qualifications you need if rational organisation is what you are after.

Indeed, far from being cold, impersonal organisations where objectives are formally established before resources are rationally distributed to realise them, gang structures are radically informal. In them the personal matters which means personalities matter more than formal positions held by those employed to them on the basis of technical merit. Within most gangs, the organisational goals are less pre-planned but situationally determined and

driven. Within gangs, the world is not predictable but radically contingent. And whereas in formal organisations business imperatives are realised through the application of a cold impersonal instrumental rationality, this does not hold for the street life of gangs where personal and business imperatives often overlap and blur, sometimes with tragic outcomes. The code of the streets to which most gang members subscribe, it could be noted, is not a regime that is necessarily well geared to creating stable functional organisations (Anderson, 2000).

It could be observed that this wholly self-destructive aspect of gang life lies at the heart of most fictional accounts of it. Indeed, it is precisely this feature of the criminal underworld that provides the dramatic tension around which the plot of the average gangster book or movie is organised. Pinky, in Graham Greene's novel *Brighton Rock* (Greene, 1975) aspires to take the place of a recently deceased gang leader but his emotional instability negates this, as indeed does the opposition he faces from far more powerful gangsters around him. Alex, in Anthony Burgess's *Clockwork Orange* (Burgess, 1962), feels he is an untouchable leader in the eyes of his gang of 'droogs'. After all, he provides them with a regular diet of ultra-violence, drugs and sex. What more do they need or desire? But they are experiencing relative deprivation and its getting them down. They are unhappy at his bullying style, and not least the low rewards they feel they receive relative to the huge rewards they believe they deserve that other gangsters around them are getting. Eventually they topple their leader and Alex's time as a successful gangster terminates in prison.

Scorsese's film *Goodfellas*, (based upon the 1986 book *Wiseguy* by Nicklos Pileggi (Peileggi, 1986)) is again a wonderful parable on the inherent instability and banality of gangster life. Even as the group of men around whom it is set become more established and successful criminals, irresolvable

problems ensue from the endemic contradictions inscribed within the criminal habitas of which they are a part. From the very beginning the hero has to navigate through an environment saturated with the excesses perpetrated by men who are systematically violent and some dangerously psychotic. By the time the movie ends, its hero has developed a drug habit, he is turning state evidence against his erstwhile colleagues and his closest friend has tried to kill him.

Many real life examples can also be cited that express how gangsters and their gangs become self-defeating. The career of the Kray Twins in London's East ended after Ronnie Kray walked into a pub and shot Jack (the hat) Macvitie dead in broad daylight. Their inflated sense of omnipotence led them to perpetrate acts of excess that exceeded any business logic. And so the seeds were sown that created the preconditions for their self-destruction. In the words of the old maxim, 'those who live by the a word tend to die by it'. And this would certainly fit the context of a volatile street world of cities like London today where business imperatives and personal ones often intersect in troubled and messy ways as we shall see in the next chapter. Where strong emotions run riot and where young gang affiliated men kill each other and often for the most pointless and stupid of reasons (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009).

The point I am trying to make here is that gang life is inherently unstable and even despite achieving a degree of formality in relation to organisation, instability remains integral to the grammar of street life and street organisations. Arboreal features then, while a feature of gang worlds, do not define street organisations which are by nature inherently rhizomatic. Simply concentrating on the organisational features, creating various typologies distinguishing between groups in relation to the degree of organisation they possess, I suggest,

is to miss the point. The street is an impossible space, a zone of radical indeterminacy.

To return to Deleuze, whilst gangs may aspire to territorialise, both in the sense of seizing space and creating structures, they confront and from the beginning powerful forces, externally and internally, that over-determine their capacity to do so. They are, I would suggest, as much, if not more, subject to radical processes of deterritorialisation, and this is a feature that leaves them better characterised as rhizomatic. Gangs, are, as such, permanently unfinished affairs, always social relations in movement, always over-spilling, always *intermezzo*. They never simply assemble (as paranoid gang task imagines the process) they disassemble and reassemble all the time, transforming themselves as they do, metamorphosing as they go.

To be Bataillian for a moment, it could be argued that in part the problem with arborescent thought is that it constitutes gangs in the same way that economists think about energy systems more generally, that is, as systems that consume energy which they then translate into surpluses valorised productively into system reproduction and growth. This, incidentally, is how most classical theories of economics function; take functionalist sociology, as an example, also begins with this premise, namely, that the social system operates in a self-rectifying state of dynamic homeostasis (Parsons, 1999). Drawing on Mauss study of potlatch, read as a socially destructive mode of exchange (Mauss, 1967), Bataille argues instead that social systems invariably produce surpluses that are not expanded functionally into system reproduction and growth and which, consequently, are squandered unproductively and often catastrophically in the form of deficit expenditure (Bataille, 1988). This surplus, the 'accursed share' as he termed it, is never incidental to the life of the system that produces it. More

to the point, the way this surplus is expended can and does define the operation of the system as a whole far more so, in fact than its economic base.

Informal groups like gangs I would suggest can best be understood in Bataille's terms as assemblages that are rarely legible by reference to arboreal thought systems which want to construct them as if they were fully functional, homeostatic entities. They do not and never can be reduced back to systems that simply valorise surpluses into system growth. On the contrary they exist and from the beginning in an *economy of excess* and to get to this you need to think of them rhizomatically, as movements which invest in forms of glorious and sometimes terrifying and tragic deficit expenditure, much of which is anything but instrumental or rational. And this, it seems to me, is precisely the strength of Jack Katz in his observations on street life as radically anti-utilitarian (Katz 1988) and *excessive*. But there again, Katz is himself another intuitively rhizomatic thinker.

### **Rhizomatic organisation**

Consider the terms gang talkers use to designate gangs. They have a division of labour, a pyramid structure, cybernetic control systems, they engage in 'recruitment' or 'branding' 'strategies', they 'organise' and 'control' crime. Isn't it simply so arboreal. If, however, as we have tried to argue here, the street simply cannot be corporate (even if it tried), it follows that we need to jettison the very terminology such gang talk trades in. What we need instead is a conceptual universe that better recognises the distinctiveness of informal organisations and which does so without committing the other cardinal error (again endemic to criminology) which, in opposition to corporate excess, reads the streets simply as 'disorganised'.



As we saw, when we studied the nature of the rhizome, it is not that they lack organisation, or indeed structure, it is only that the organisational features they display do not follow the predictable logic of arboreal systems. To grasp the world of the street as rhizomatic we need a language that recognises the characteristic features of street organisations in ways that respect their sui generis nature. To an extent, such an exercise does not entail trying to invent such a language from nothing. Ethnographers, true to their craft, have already began the process. So let's start with them and work sideways from there.

We can begin with Thrasher and his description of gangs as a unit that spontaneously forms. What a wonderfully and refreshing rhizomatic image this poses to arboreal gang talking traditions who talk instead of 'recruitment' and 'grooming'. Aldridge, Medina and their colleagues also get close to rhizomatic thinking in their designation of gang life as 'messy networks'(Aldridge and Medina, 2005; Aldridge, Ralphs et al., 2011); far and away an infinitely more accurate designation than found for example in John Pitts arboreal fantasy of a 'super articulated gang'(Pitts, 2008). Other metaphors lend themselves, as an alternative to the tired categories of corporate gang speaking. Are they not instead better read as imperceptible, spectacular, spontaneous, impulsive and situational. And far from being characterised by firm boundaries that delineate where the gang inside begins and ends, as arboreal thought reads the gang, we find instead porous, fuzzy borders which, far from ever being clearly delineated, are always invariably *vague*.

Instead of possessing a clear corporate structure the gang read as rhizome instead presents itself as fluid state that is intrinsically amorphous. It never 'develops' it always proceeds by way of 'flows' from one state of intensity to another. It does not congregate it swarms, it does not march, it drifts and it in its drifting we discern it's essential nature as a nomadic life form. Arboreal

thinking wants to confer on the gang a fixed immutable essence, the gang however read from within a rhizomatic frame of reference is better understood as a perpetual, always deferred accomplishment.

Rather than read gangs as a command structure shaped in the image of a tree, lets capture them and their development instead rhizomatically as ramifications, lateral offshoots; in a sense, a glorious species of weed. And the metaphor fits. Like invasive weeds that survive in the most hostile of environments, gangs also flourish in the most hostile of terrains. And even if they are ripped up, as weeds often are, like weeds isn't it simply amazing how resilient they are; how they reproduce themselves despite all attempts to destroy them.

Some might find this all a little too abstract and obtuse? Is nomadic thought and thinking simply an inflated language without any meaningful use-value or; as Roger Matthews is fond of saying, 'policy relevance' (Matthews, 2005). Let me now concretise some of these terms in order to show that they convey explanatory power.

Let's begin by taking issue with the issue of clear and determinate borders that arboreal gang talk likes to impose around gangs. Think here, for example, of the many attempts that are made to quantify gang membership and produce gang typologies by putting them into neat and tidy conceptual boxes. An entire industry has been established around this. Think too of those lovely corporate diagrams of the gang headed by generals presiding over various subordinate layers in what invariably is presented as a pyramid.

Contrast this instead with the world of the gang as it is described by the new generation of gang ethnographers such as Robert Garot (Garot, 2010) and Timothy Lauger (Lauger, 2012). Here gang boundaries are never clear-cut, just as gang membership is never fully established or confirmed. In fact, in their

narratives, nothing in the world of the gang is ever quite where it ought to be. What they present us with instead are vague and ambiguous identities in a world in which the inside and outside of the gang are never clearly defined; where gang reputations are contested both by outsiders and by gang members; where ones gang identify is sometimes elevated but also and at other times disavowed. Far from being fully accomplished entities as arboreal thinking constructs them, as Lauger's work shows, it is social accomplishment on the part of groups who have to struggle hard and in the face considerable scepticism, to demonstrate that they are, in fact the real thing, a bone fide gang (Lauger, 2012).

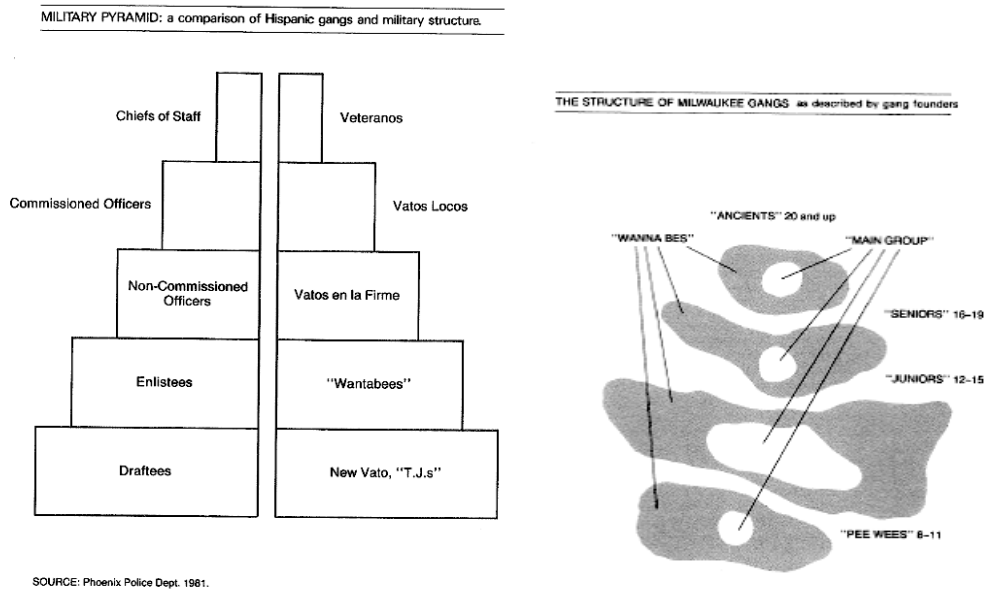
And it is in the desperate attempt to demonstrate and reveal their true gangness that we find revealed another intrinsically rhizomatic feature of gang life and that is the inherent propensity of gang members to myth make. Far from being the calculating advocates of instrumental rationality, as functionalist models of gang development imply, gang members inhabit instead a lifeworld in which their fictional representations of themselves carry as much significance and, sometimes even more, than their embodied material selves (whatever they are).

In corporations, of course, you know who is and who is not a member. Employment records tell you all you need to know. In the world of the gang, however, nothing is as ever as clearly delineated and established in organisations where the borders between the inside and the outside are never exact.

This inherent vagueness is wonderfully conveyed by Hagedorn who presents us with a wonderful double take on the gangs of Illinois (Hagedorn and Macon, 1988). He begins with the representation of the gang as fantasised by its enforcement agencies. He then provides an alternative representation derived from his ethnographic engagement with gang members. The

enforcement image reflects all the trademarks of gang talking tree thinking. The gang as a pyramid composed of various offices. In Hagedorn's representation we are faced instead with an entity composed of strange amorphous shapes with blurred boundaries; where the linkages between levels appear anything but corporate.

Figure 2. The military model of gang organisation and Hagedorn's alternative



Conquergood is another intuitively nomadic thinker. Like Hagedorn he also recognises that there is no clear inside and outside to gang life which flows, he argues, through a multiplicity of borders. If you look closely at gangs, he says 'it becomes evident that borders are constructed on multiple and mobile fronts' He is nothing but emphatic: 'borders absolutely crisscross the entire domain of gang culture' (Conguergood, 1994: 28). These include the border that separates the group as a bonded ensemble from the wider community they aspire to distinguish themselves from; borders between the groups and other gangs with whom they are in conflict; borders between gang members and their

families and the antagonistic border that separates the group from the enforcement agencies who conspire at their destruction. The culture of the group as such does not emanate from the top down or from a clear centre out to a periphery in the manner of arboreal organisation. It develops at these defining cleavages and processes in directions that are by no means linear and predictable.

In arboreal texts we find the gang represented as a functional agency with various post holders performing an array of functional tasks. But is it ever like this in reality? Is the gang ever a stable functional entity? Considered rhizomatically, they are simply multiplicities in movement. Consider for example how gangs occupy space. It hangs about over here and does so seemingly for long periods of time during which little happens. Then something does, its state changes dramatically, it might suddenly grow, it might disappear, then reappears, splits, disassembles and then seemingly magically reassembles elsewhere. And so we are back to the idea of the ever changing, always modifiable map that Deleuze equates with the rhizome.

Wherever they are they are never quite where they are supposed to be. They exist of course, but not on this estate but that one over there, always displaced, always somewhere else. And this elusive subterranean quality reflects itself into street representations no more so brilliantly realised as when gang members are asked to narrate their gang realities which are never quite as clear cut as arboreal thinking likes to imagine. This is captured beautifully by the Norwegian anthropologist Moshmus (Moshmus, 2005) who comments on the trouble he had in getting his street informants in Oslo to comment on their gang reality:

I had several talks with Aki, Vat and others involved in gangs in Oslo's street worlds. These talks tended to reduce the gang phenomena to be about someone else. It was as if we talked about someone not present. When I tried to talk to my informants about their reality their reality became someone else's, even to them. Talking to me they did not use their own language to speak about themselves. They did not use the language they lived their reality in; the language they would use when they were living their gang reality. My informants were skilled in the language of the controllers . . . but that was a language about them. It was not a language their experience lived in. (Moshmus, 2005: 204)

The idea that gangs occupy and totally control life in the ghettos and estates where they are found plays a prominent role in arborescent gang talk. The truth of matter is that like invasive weeds, gang develop and take root in the interstitial spaces of the sedentary state and it's hard arboreal apparatus. It is not so much a process of seizing territory from the formal order, this is a gang talking myth. In their subterranean world the everyday world of the wider society passes them by, literally. Their primary source of interest is in each other. Yes, they settle but in the gaps and fissures. And once established, despite every attempt to uproot them, like invasive plants they persist and reproduce themselves. And even when the state aspires at their very extermination and removes them from their natural environment, they reproduce in the heart of the hard machine; exploiting as they do every crack and crevice in the administered order.

The recent history of American gang development and it's expansion globally in the face of outright attempts on the part of the state to wholly exterminate it, exemplifies this, the American gang rhizome. We can trace the

story from the 1980s when the post war Fordist order began to fall apart leaving in its wake a de-industrialised urban environment populated by a new urban underclass (Wacquant, 2008). The emerging ghetto, provided, as ghettos always have, a fertile ground where urban street gangs could take root and thrive (Thrasher, 1927). Only where traditional gangs were traditionally short lived, in a post-industrial, de-industrialising world no longer capable of providing secure employment for the new burgeoning precariat (Standing, 2011), they started to persist for far longer (Hagedorn and Macon, 1988). 'Multiple marginality' as Vigil observes provides a hothouse environment for gang development (Vigil 1988). Nor was it simply a matter of established gangs simply continuing. In the manner of the rhizome they subdivided and subdivided again, throwing off new offshoots as they evolved, creating the basis for new cliques that would subsequently emerge in towns and cities that had never previously experienced themselves as having a 'gang problem'.

The response on the part of the state was simply to embark on a process of wholesale repression (Wacquant, 2004). Far from destroying the gang the American punitive turn created the preconditions for the gang rhizome to mutate again. As a direct consequence of the mass incarceration of thousands of gang members, like invasive weeds, the gangs took root and flourished in the prison system. Through the penal estate the gangs further extended themselves throwing out new offshoots as they did, again sub-dividing as they evolved.

In addition to the 'deadly symbiosis' the state was forcing between the penitentiary and the ghetto, the US state innovated further by embarking on a coercive programme that entailed the wholesale deportation of thousands of gang affiliated young people back to their country of ethnic origin (including many who had been born in the USA) (Parenti, 1999; Brotherton and Kretsedimas, 2008). Destination states would include the Dominican Republic,

and South American states like Ecuador. Did this prevent gang formation? On the contrary, the gang rhizome simply throws out new offshoots that then took root in countries where previously they did not exist. Nowhere has this been more evident than in Equator, where in the wake of deportation, gangs that had their point of origin in the US penal gulag such as the Nieta and Almighty Latin Kings and Queen Nation, took root and flourished.

Nor does the story stop here. Women from states like Ecuador moved to European states like Italy and Spain in the first decade of the twentieth century, to take low paid work in their service sector. Eventually their children moved to join these economic migrants. Facing a hostile climate of racism, criminalisation and marginalisation, these young people brought their gangs with them. And so the Almighty Latin Kings and Queens and groups the Nieta, founded in the USA, began to establish themselves in European cities such as Barcelona, Milan and Genoa. And once again we are back to the rhizome, with its surface and subterranean ramifications. A rhizome that today is further extending itself and in the face of outright repression, and in what can be considered to be very hostile environments. 'The world of gangs' (Hagadorn, 2008) it could be observed, is a world constructed by the gang rhizome.

## **Conclusion**

While cultural criminology has accomplished much in its celebration of ethnographic research methods and while the critical ethnographers they celebrate have provided key insights to our understanding of informal street organisations such as gangs, this tradition has not, as yet clearly formulated the epistemological and ontological break their work necessarily implies with more orthodox gang talking traditions. In this chapter, by drawing upon the work of Deleuze and Guattari my aim has been to suggest that by reinterpreting the



study of informal organisations within a rhizomatic frame of reference, not only can the *sui-generic* properties of informal street worlds be captured in ways that better reflect their intrinsically nomadic status, such nomadic thought takes us decisively beyond the arboreal fixations of conventional gang talk.

At the same time, I have also tried to show precisely why conventional gang talk fails. Despite the fact that its subject is nomadic life it invariably approaches it within an arboreal perspective. While such an approach might be relevant to the study of formal arboreal organisations, this desiccated sociology is not relevant to the study of street worlds that are ontologically very different.

Other policy prescriptions follow from this and criminologists and sociologists of the street need to bear them in mind. Be aware of the trees that grow in our heads, for once they grow, all you will ever find are trees everywhere when really the object of your study is grass. To think like grass, avoid then reverting to the old procedures. So don't study things from the top down, resist the general in you. Think from the middle and proceed sideways from there and see the world a better way.

# Understanding Street Collectives

Simon Hallsworth and Kim Duffy;

Abridged from a report for London Councils '*Confronting London's violent street world: the gang and beyond*' 2011

## **Introduction**

Over the last decade a new 'folk devil' has come to prominence in British society. This, the urban street gang is believed by many to be the instigator of the most serious violence in the UK today. The threats allegedly posed by this group range from public fears of young people 'hanging around' to stories of 'gang rape', violent territorialism, gun and knife related violence, the use of 'weapon dogs' and the importation and distribution of illegal drugs. Cumulatively the impression promoted by the media, politicians and many enforcement agencies, is that structured organised gangs are more prominent today and the offences in which they engage have become more serious.

Drawing upon recent and relevant research this report explores the 'gang' situation as it pertains to London. While the report identifies gangs and gang violence as a real threat, the report is nevertheless critical of the way the term 'gang' is often used and is particularly critical about attempts to conflate into terms like 'the gang' and 'gang culture' diverse social problems that need to

be addressed in their own right. Whilst confronting gangs remains an important issue, the report argues for an approach which locates intervention effort within a wider appreciation of the violent street periphery where gangs are found. Gangs are certainly part of this world but other groups and criminally involved individuals inhabit this world as well. These, the report argues, need to be understood in their own right and as they intersect together. If the aim of intervention effort is to prevent such violence then effort must address this totality in a measured and proportionate way and not focus on one part of it at the expense of the whole.

### **Structure**

The report begins by briefly profiling the evidential base on which this review is conducted; it then examines some recurrent problems in the way the term 'gang' has been popularly used and abused by examining gang myths and stereotypes. A framework for defining gangs and differentiating these from other groups that have some involvement in crime and violence is then developed. This involves distinguishing gangs from delinquent peer groups and both of these groups from more organised crime groups. The following section examines the extent to which serious violence involving the use of weapons in London can be attributed to gangs. As this section shows, gangs are violent by nature and weapons can be used in certain contexts which the report identifies. As this section makes clear, other groups, including volatile individuals who are not in gangs, are also responsible for much of the violence that is being attributed to the gang, while some problems being attributed to the gang turn out, on inspection, not to be gang related.

The second section draws the implications of this analysis together arguing for an approach to serious violence which looks beyond the gang.

Rather than privilege a particular group as the object of intervention, the report argues instead that intervention effort needs to be directed at the spaces where gangs and other groups are located; this constitutes the volatile periphery of a violent street world. A framework for understanding this world is then developed.

The report concludes by examining the principles that should inform the intervention effort directed to address the violence of the street periphery and profiles a range of interventions that can be mobilised to confront the different risks and dangers peer groups and gangs types of group pose.

## **Methodology**

This report brings together relevant and current research that has been conducted into gangs and other criminal groups in London over the course of the last decade. Substantively, the report draws upon four sources of data. First, this report reflects on findings of primary research that the author, along with colleagues from the Centre for Social and Evaluation Research, have conducted into issues connected with gangs and other criminal groups<sup>21</sup>. Secondly, this report makes reference to relevant research that has been conducted into the contemporary gang situation in the United Kingdom. Thirdly, this report draws

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<sup>21</sup> This includes research conducted for the Metropolitan Police Service, the European Union, the Home Office, Youth Justice Board and various London boroughs, including Hackney, Brent, Ealing and Enfield. The evidential base for this research has involved extensive interviews with gang affiliated and no-gang affiliated young people with older 'gangsters' and with a range of practitioners who have some involvement with or expertise in relation to criminal groups and weapon use.

upon a wide body of literature relating to gangs, including a range of academic articles and books. Fourthly, this report utilises findings from interviews conducted for the purposes of this project with a range of professionals and practitioners working with young people in London.

### **Gang Myths and Stereotypes**

To understand fully the 'gangland' situation in London it is necessary to be able to distinguish fact from fiction and evidence from assumptions. This is not always easy in a society where many stereotypes about gangs enjoy wide circulation and where the language used to describe them often dispenses with proportion in favour of an inflated rhetoric. One way to accomplish this task is to consider some of the problems that follow from deploying the term 'gang' in ways that lack rigour but which are widely used. Another will be to consider some of the stereotypes that have evolved around the gang.

Let us begin with bad definitions. The most popular but least helpful way of understanding the term 'gang' is as a blanket label applied to define any group that is felt to cause trouble to somebody. This is the way in which the media typically operate and this mode of classifying gangs is also widespread among the public at large. The term 'gang,' applied this way, constitutes a universal shorthand to denote a troublesome group. While popular, this approach is neither satisfactory nor useful. Street organisations vary significantly and mobilising the blanket label 'gang' to encapsulate them all submerges important differences that need to be recognised. A group of eleven year old lads 'hanging around', for example, is very different from an armed, territorially affiliated group of eighteen year olds looking for trouble; and this differs in turn from a group of adult criminals planning a heist. Calling all these

groups 'gangs' is not helpful and works against producing a definition fit for purpose.

If we consider further the mythology that surrounds the gang then this often derives less from the dangers posed by the gang and more from stereotypical images that people hold which are then projected upon them. Though a perennial problem of inner urban life, the gang today is imagined as essentially new and this is accompanied by the perception that gangs are proliferating. This view is often accompanied by the notion that the gang is moving from a state of disorganisation to one of progressive organisation. It may, for example, be claiming new territory which its members then coercively control or be expanding its membership base by 'grooming' or 'recruiting' new members who are then brutally exploited. Rather than understand the gang for what it often is, a disorganised street group, many impose upon the gang an organisational form and command structure few 'gangs' in fact possess. In effect, the gang and the street world it inhabits becomes corporatised: invested, that is, with a complex division of labour and a command structure that resembles that of a corporation or an army<sup>22</sup>. While gangs often have a diverse membership, they are typically identified in the public mind with minority ethnic groups.

While gangs certainly exist, it is often the case that their actuality and prevalence is exaggerated and in many cases the perceived presence of a gang occurs because people elect to define a group as such. As we found in the course of conducting interviews with young people<sup>2</sup> (many of whom had been

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<sup>22</sup> This tendency is not new, the same occurred in relation to the American Mafia which was fantasised as a mirror image of the American corporation in the 1960s. See Cressey (Cressey, 1969).

classified as 'gang affiliated' by practitioners) most did not define themselves as gang members. It is also worth noting that the language practitioners use to describe what gangs are and what they do (they 'groom' and 'recruit', they have members with names like 'wanabees') reflects the language of control, not the gangland realities in which these young people live out their day-to-day lives. The point here is that the language used by practitioners to represent gang life and the way it is experienced by those who live 'gang' lives are sometimes two very different things.

The lesson to derive from this section is that if we want to talk about gangs we need to do so appropriately and accurately. In practice this means not falling into the pitfalls of 'gang talk' outlined above<sup>4</sup>. It means knowing how to distinguish stereotypes and myths from an often very different, street reality. It means maintaining a sense of proportion in a context where this is not evident and recognising that effective policy must be evidence-based.

### **Defining Gangs and Other Street Organisations**

The extensive American gang research literature shows that gangs possess many different features<sup>23</sup>. They are typically durable; they may have a leader and some division of labour within them. They often have a name by which they know themselves and by which they are known by others. Many lay claim to a territory which they attempt to control. Their members may adopt particular stylistic features that distinguish them from other groups, such as wearing colours. Gang members may develop a subculture which has its own language and which is defined by the performance of specific rituals. Finally, the

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<sup>23</sup> See Hagedorn J. and Macon P. (1988); Klein M. W. (1995); Decker S.H. and Van Winkle B. (1996); Huff C.R. (1996).

life of the group may also involve engaging in violence and crime of various descriptions.

This begs the question as to which of these factors constitute the basic building block out of which we might want to construct a definition of the gang as it is found in the London context. The answer to this question is that we need to highlight core factors. Given the fact that the gang is not the only type of group in London that is responsible for committing crime and violence, it is not enough to profile the gang alone. This also needs to be accompanied by an analysis of other street and criminally inclined groups as well. In what follows, three kinds of collective which have some engagement in crime and violence are identified<sup>24</sup>. These can be termed respectively the 'peer group', the 'gang' and the 'organised crime group'. Each borough is likely to have variants of each of these groups, though the most violent and dangerous will typically be found in the poorer boroughs.

### **The Delinquent Peer Group**

*The delinquent peer group is composed of friends and associates who are known to each other because they share the same space (school or neighbourhood) along with a common history and biography (they have grown up together and have shared the same experiences). Delinquency and criminal activity is not integral to the identity or practice of the peer group or its members but can occur in given contexts in some peer groups, specifically in public spaces where they are most visible.*

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<sup>24</sup> This definitional framework was originally developed for the Metropolitan Police Service. See Hallsworth S. and Young T. (2005).



The peer group is the most pervasive form of social group found in European societies. Peer groups exist among all socio-economic groups and both young people and old, male and female, will find themselves members of one or more of them. Most peer groups have no involvement in crime and violence and people do not belong to them for this purpose. Through involvement in peer groups people live out their lives as social beings. In them they find comradeship, they pass the time of day, seek mutual support and avoid feeling isolated and alone. For the most part people do not join such groups, they spontaneously form.

While generally benevolent, some peer groups (particularly those populated by young people) may find themselves engaged in anti-social behaviour and sometimes violence. In the British situation this may involve binge drinking, fighting, smoking, and low level drug use. Street robbery is also predominantly perpetrated by such groups and this is most likely to occur in poor inner city areas. Some groups may also become involved in fights with others and, because many also wear a 'street uniform' and have a pronounced public visibility, they regularly induce fear into adults who often imagine they are gangs. These are not gangs however nor should they be labelled as such because crime and violence is not integral to group identity as it is in the case of a gang. Members of peer groups may drift intermittently into some anti-social behaviour and crime but most of those who do will also drift out of it as they complete their transition from childhood to adulthood. While most peer group engagement with anti-social behaviour is trivial and episodic, peer groups can be volatile and such behaviour can escalate to that which is risky and harmful. It is when this occurs on an ongoing basis that the peer group can become a gang.

## **The Gang**

*The gang can be defined as a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of people who see themselves (and are recognised by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is intrinsic to the identity and practice of the group.*

The minimal characteristic features of the gang are that it has: a) a name; b) a propensity to inflict violence and engage in crime and c) violence and delinquency perform a functional role in promoting group identity and solidarity. While the presence of an organisational structure, a defined leader, group rituals and a definable territory claimed by the groups as its own are also characteristic features of some gangs, these are supplementary features not essential defining characteristics of all gangs. Whilst the organisation, ethos and structure of the gang differ from that of peer groups, the gang is a derivative and mutation of it.

Though there are examples of girl gangs in the USA such groups are relatively rare and gangs are predominantly male dominated groups with which women are associated. In the UK there are very few female gangs though female peer groups are often being mistaken for them. The age range for gang membership lies between early teens and the early twenties. Ethnically, the gang is likely to reflect the ethnic demographic of the estates where it is found; in this sense it is not confined to one particular ethnic group. In London, where minority ethnic groups are over-represented in many of London's poorest boroughs, the gang structure typically reflects this demographic.

As John Pitts observes, it is in areas subject to concentrated disadvantage that gangs are typically found<sup>25</sup>. These are areas where long term structural

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<sup>25</sup> See Pitts J. (2008).

unemployment is high as are other indices of deprivation like poor housing, rates of poverty and benefit claimants. While most young people from deprived backgrounds do not join gangs and aspire to enter the formal labour market by obtaining qualifications, not all succeed. For those who are not bequeathed good opportunities in life engaging in the illegal economy may provide an alternative means by which socially desirable goods can be obtained. Gangs also provide spaces where structurally powerless men may accumulate a reputation and by so doing achieve status in a social world where they otherwise find little.

According to the few UK surveys that have been undertaken to establish gang prevalence within the population, the number of people who meet the academic criteria for being defined as a gang member is relatively low and usually comprises between 3-6% of the sample group. These kinds of survey are often conducted on high risk groups in high crime areas and tend to overstate the degree of membership in the wider population<sup>26</sup>.

Like the peer group, gang members come together because they typically share a common history and biography and because they live in the same neighbourhood or estate. Some people may 'join' a gang, but most will spontaneously form in the same manner as a peer group. Like the peer group the gang also acts as a space where excitement may be generated and the mundane boredom of everyday life temporarily transcended. Like the peer group the gang offers its members the security of belonging, a place where friendships are established and where reputations can be made and tested.

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<sup>26</sup> See Bennet T. and Holloway K. (2004). 'Gang Membership, drugs and crime in the UK'. British Journal of Criminology 44(3): 305-323; Sharpe P. *et al* (2006). 'Delinquent Youth Groups and Offending Behavior: Findings from the 2004 Offending Crime and Justice Survey'. Home Office.

Indeed, for most of its existence, the gang functions like - and is indistinguishable from - street-based peer groups who 'hang around'.

Where the peer group and the gang are distinguished from one another is in the role and status that crime and particularly violence plays within the group. Whereas in the peer groups violence is something that sometimes happens, in the case of gangs a propensity for violence is intrinsic to the group and its identity. This could be because the men within the group are themselves violent; it is also the case that the group actively search out opportunities to be violent.

While the American stereotype of the gang points towards a group with many members, a complex division of labour and a command structure located in a central hierarchy populated by leaders and lieutenants, this model does not apply in the case of London or indeed the UK as a whole. This does not mean to say that the members of some gangs do not allocate themselves different roles<sup>27</sup>. However, rather than understanding organisational structure by reference to the

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<sup>27</sup> An important note here on street language. The people who inhabit the street worlds of London often have a vocabulary that they use to define its occupants. They may refer to 'tiny's' (meaning very young children), 'youngers' (teens), and elders (adults). They may also use expressions like your 'endz' (your territory), the 'man dem' (your friends); 'crew' or 'brethren' (the group you hang around with). They may also talk of 'faces' (known criminals). None of this is surprising or sinister unless gang obsessed individuals take hold of these terms and from them construct the fantasy of a criminal gang where designations like 'tiny's', 'youngers' and 'elders' are now brought together as part of a corporate street structure, while the term 'man dem' is reconstructed to mean 'gang'.

division of labour a gang may claim, it is more accurate to understand its organisation as characterised by relations of domination and competition between members. In this sense the gang typically exhibits more pack-like behaviours than those found in formal bureaucracies. Dominant figures are dominant, for example, not because they have more qualifications or have obtained an elevated position through interview, they are dominant because they are more ruthless and 'hard' than less dominant members. Status within the group however only exists for as long as it can be defended from status challenges. As such reputation and honour can never be presumed but have to be continuously demonstrated and reaffirmed. This makes most gangs highly volatile and unstable entities. The lesson to take from this is that it is rarely the coherence of the group that makes it dangerous; it is rather precisely its volatility and the volatility of its members that lead to lethal outcomes such as stabbings and shootings. Social disorganisation as opposed to corporate organisation defines the way most London gangs are organised<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> There is currently an ongoing debate between researchers on how organised contemporary gangs in the UK are. For researchers like John Pitts the gang in London today can take the form of a highly corporate structure that imposes total control over social life in the estates where it is based. This position however has attracted considerable criticism both on the basis that this attempt to corporatise the streets reflect gang talking myths rather than realities; and because other researchers such as Hallsworth and Silverstone, Aldridge and Medina have found little empirical proof of such structures. Their work stresses instead the fluid, volatile and 'messy' nature of street life and organisation. See Aldridge J. and Medina J. (2007); Pitts J. (2008); Hallsworth S. and Silverstone D. (2009); Hallsworth S. (2010).

Gang life for most gang members is a very insular and parochial space where small insults and disagreements over status and respect can assume a significance and command a response literally inconceivable to those who are not part of this often institutionally disconnected world. The volatility of the gang is compounded by the fact that a number of gang affiliated men are psychologically unstable. Many have long and complex histories of violence and violent victimisation and a significant number derive from chaotic family backgrounds<sup>29</sup>.

Finally, life is volatile because street life is itself often chaotic in the sense that things suddenly happen that involve violence or which demand a violent response. It could be, for example, that a gang member is found by another gang away from his territory and is beaten up. In the name of collective honour one gang may retaliate against another or proxies for it in what can quickly become a vendetta. It could simply be that someone looked at someone the 'wrong way' and such disrespect had to be addressed violently in the name of street justice. 'Beef', to use the colloquial street term for conflict, can be provoked for many perceived and actual slights. Unfortunately, among the more volatile gangs in London, weapons are also used.

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<sup>29</sup> In a Home Office study into gang and gun crime conducted by Hales, Lewis and Silverstone they found that of their sample of 80 people, "40 had previously been threatened with guns, 29 shot at and eight had been shot; 28 had been stabbed, 17 injured with other weapons, 34 had been robbed and three had been kidnapped. Additionally, 26 reported friends or family members shot and injured and another 26 reported friends or family shot dead". See Hales G. Lewis C. and Silverstone D. ( 2006).

## The Organised Crime Group

*The organised crime group is composed of men for whom involvement in criminal behaviour is intrinsic to their identity and practice and for whom such involvement is their purpose and justification. These are not boys nor would they typically define themselves as a street-based gang. These are professionals who 'do the business' where the business of crime is an occupation.*

In economic terms, it is organised crime groups that exercise disproportionate control over the illegal means and forces of crime production. These are populated by professional criminals who typically occupy the core of the criminal underworld while the gang, along with volatile peer groups and various individuals, comprise the periphery.

Many of the organised crime groups in London are family based criminal firms and it is familial association that provides the bedrock of trust and loyalty between members<sup>30</sup>. Ethnicity may also provide another axis around which membership may be based. Other criminals who are not family may be affiliated to these groups directly or through networks, but these are often close friends with whom family members grow up, or people who have mastered particular criminal skills and can be trusted. It could be noted that the family unit is the oldest and most traditional form of organised crime group. It persists because blood relations remain the strongest unit out of which trust is formed and trust is a crucial currency in illegal contexts.

The family firm is not the only form of organised crime group. Professional criminals may work together specialising in a particular criminal enterprise like commercial burglary. Membership in this sense occurs because

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<sup>30</sup> See Decker S.H. and Van Winkle B. (1996)..

these men have grown up together (sometimes being part of the same gang in their earlier life), or alternatively they have met through their involvement in various criminal networks, including prison. Many possess key criminal skills; they may have an established reputation for being good at their job; and importantly, they also have a reputation for being trustworthy<sup>31</sup>.

In the face of globalisation the family based 'firm' has not declined; it is more the case that iconic criminal families and other criminal groups are increasingly meshed into flexible, criminal networks and it is through such distributed networks that criminal enterprise in the global context is conducted<sup>32</sup>. These networks may be international in scope and are integrated through the use of communication technology. As Potter (1994) argues, these are 'flexible adaptive networks that readily expand and contract to deal with the uncertainties of the criminal enterprise'<sup>33</sup>. While popular mythology still likes to imagine organised crime to resemble a corporation (think here of the Godfather

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<sup>31</sup> Findings from research by Hales and Silverstone (2005), Hales *et al* (2006), Hallsworth and Young (2006) and Young *et al* (2007). See Hallsworth S. and Silverstone D. (2009). '.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion on the nature of organised crime networks see Edwards A. and Gill P. (2003); and Lea J. (2002). It could be noted that in studies of organised crime (rarely referenced by gang 'experts') the idea that this was perpetrated by a 'Mr Big' who heads a corporate criminal gang was discredited long ago. It could also be noted that while large organised criminal groups exist, they are typically found in weak states and crisis states. These typically include major drug producing countries.

<sup>33</sup> See Potter G. (1994).



movies) this is not how serious crime is organised in the global 'network society'<sup>34</sup>.

Many of the professional criminals who operate through such networks are likely to have access to firearms but they will not routinely carry them. On occasions they will use them to settle conflicts which have a business motive and sometimes (but rarely) they will use them to settle personal disputes. To this extent they are also beholden to the 'codes of the street'. As professional criminals they typically operate in ways that remove them from the street retail sector of the drug marketplace which is also the most violent; this they delegate / subcontract to more youthful peer groups, individual dealers and gangs in the street periphery<sup>35</sup>. In their work orientation they operate as businessmen and operate in accord with the imperatives of capitalist business which is to make a profit. Because the businesses in which they trade are illegal, such transactions are not formally regulated by the rule of law (let alone formal business ethics). Violence, by default, becomes the de facto regulating force within the underworld in which they operate. This means that while professional criminals may be more careful than gangs members about the violence in which they engage, violence is still a currency in which they trade.

Professional criminals engage in a range of criminal behaviours. This can include providing illegal services such as prostitution or protection, selling legitimate goods acquired illegally, trading in illegal goods such as drugs, or engaging in acquisitive crimes such as fraud, armed robbery or kidnapping. The supply and trade in illegal drugs is the principal mainstay of the illegal

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<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of the network society see Castells M. (1996)

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of the life world of professional criminals see Hallsworth S. and Silverstone D. (2009).

economy in which most organised crime groups operate in London, as is also the case internationally.

**Profiling Groups in Relation to Risk**

The threats posed by each group described above vary. On one hand, organised crime groups are likely to be populated by men who engage in the most serious of crimes and who, if caught, will receive the most severe sentences. But because these men are likely to maintain a low street profile they are unlikely to provoke much public disorder. Gangs and delinquent peer groups on the other hand have a much more pronounced street presence and are likely to engage in activities that induce far more public anxiety. This occurs even if the crimes they commit are less serious.

<b>Key features of street organisations</b>			
	<b>Peer Group</b>	<b>Gang</b>	<b>Organised Crime Group</b>
<b>Membership</b>	Mixed or single sex groups.	Predominantly male.	Predominantly male.
<b>Age</b>	Any age, most volatile predominantly aged between 14 and 19.	Teens through to early adulthood.	Men aged from 19 onwards.
<b>Participation in crime</b>	Predominantly low level ASB, some involvement in street robbery.	Street robbery, some participation in the retail street end of the illegal drug economy.	Mid to high level drug import and distribution, also trade in illegal services such as protection.

### Key features of street organisations

	Peer Group	Gang	Organised Crime Group
<b>Participation in violence</b>	Predominantly episodic and low involvement in violence.	Violence is integral to the life of the group. Can express itself in gang wars and violent territorialism, in defence of drug markets, in attempts to rob other drug dealers, in leisure venues, in the context of street level justice as a response to honour slights and acts of disrespect. Violence is rarely regulated by street codes and conventions. In the street world business imperatives and more personal motivations blur and merge.	Violence is typically regulated by norms that delimit unnecessary violence. Violence is mobilised instrumentally in pursuit of criminal goals (armed robbery), as defence against attack and as a mode of regulating a business where normal rule of law does not apply.
<b>Weapons use</b>	Some may carry knives, predominantly for defence.	This group will carry and use weapons. While most likely to use knives they will occasionally have access to reactivated guns although it is unlikely that gang members will know how to use these nor have knowledge of their origin.	Organised criminals will often be armed with guns and will know how to use them though many will not routinely carry them. They will typically subcontract violence to individual career criminals and/or gang members.
<b>Structure</b>	Friendship groups.	Fluid, chaotic, messy and volatile friendship groups, limited (if any) division of labour, rarely if ever any corporate structure.	May operate through family 'firms' or a group that specialises in a particular crime. These will be locked into global networks.

### **From the Gang to the Violent Street Periphery**

As the section above concludes, to focus on the gang alone and see this as the only group that requires an intervention would be to make a mistake. It would also be a mistake to condense all the problems of urban violence into a problem of gangs. As we have seen gangs are not the only group that engages in violence, nor is the problem of weaponised violence a problem of groups alone as many other violent and volatile individuals are also involved. The policy implications of this are profound because these findings challenge the current focus which is to lay the blame for serious and weaponised violence in London at the door of the gang.

Despite the fact that the problem of urban violence extends beyond the gang, intervention policy runs a real risk of being reduced to an issue of gang suppression programmes. While gang suppression is certainly justified it could be observed that such intervention alone will not prevent interpersonal violence; it will not prevent drug distribution; it will not prevent young women being sexually exploited; nor will it address the problems posed by 'status dogs'.

Rather than focus on a particular group and see this as the solution to the problem of violence, it would be far more sensible to focus instead upon the spaces where gangs and other violent groups and individuals are to be found - the violent street world where they intersect. In what follows we consider the structure of this street world to identify its constituent features. One way to

understand this violent world is to conceive it as possessing a constitutive core and an outlying periphery<sup>36</sup>.

### **Profiling the Core**

The core will typically be populated by older men 'who do the business' of crime and who operate either as individual professional criminals or as members of more organised crime groups. Entry to the core would appear to be dependent on a number of factors: the ability to demonstrate entrepreneurial flair and ability, the ability to be well connected to local and national criminal networks, a capacity to be violent and ruthless but also to control the exercise of violence appear essential characteristics. Most who operate within the core have grown up as part of the periphery but have grown out of it. Instead of drifting out of crime and into law abiding behaviour (as most do) they have become 'differentially associated'<sup>33</sup> into the criminal underworld, accumulating criminal contacts and criminals skills along the way..

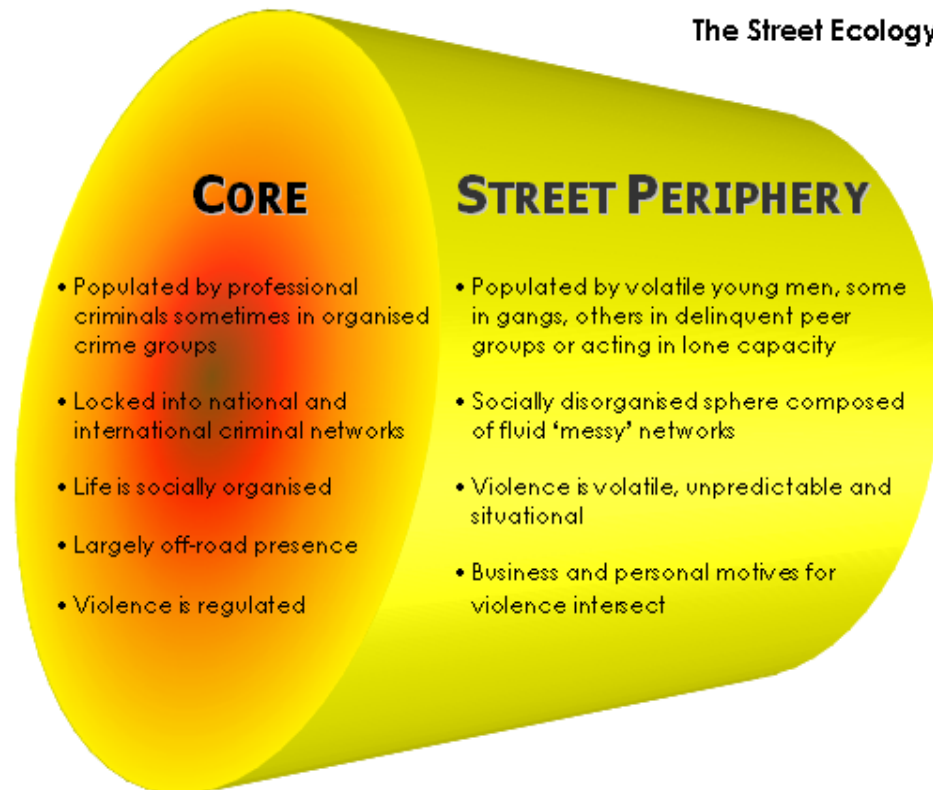
### **Profiling the Periphery**

The periphery is populated by younger, more volatile young men (and occasionally women) along with various individuals (such as lone drug dealers) who have some involvement in crime and the criminal economy. It is within the periphery that we will tend to find gangs and delinquent peer groups. Here we find volatile, fluid, messy, amorphous and chaotic networks, rather than organised, corporate entities. Here violence is less predictable and more

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<sup>36</sup> One of the problems attendant on those who like to imagine the gang as a complex corporate structure is that they make no distinction between the core and the periphery. In this model the core controls the periphery.

impulsive and situational. People in the periphery are also more likely to be more psychologically unstable and immature than those found in the core and are subject, as such, to low levels of social and self-control. In the periphery business imperatives and personal motives often blur together with fatal consequences.



### **Relations Between the Core and Periphery**

Different forms of relationships exist between the core and the periphery. This relationship can veer along a continuum from mutual support and help to ruthless exploitation.

### *Mutual support*

While by no means under the explicit direction of professional criminals or organised crime groups it is evident that there are often close ties that bind groups in the periphery to the groups that occupy the core (to which many younger people may be related). Younger siblings of established gang members may form youthful equivalents of the groups populated by their brothers, while older gang members may subcontract out lower level, street based work to them or, on occasion, set them up to conduct illicit business.

### Instrumental relationships

Relations between the core and periphery can also be of a more instrumental kind. This is particularly the case in the drug retail sector where individual drug dealers will purchase illegal drugs from a higher level dealer in the core for street level distribution. Here the relationship, usually between people who have grown up together or live in the same area, is of a strictly business kind where drugs are exchanged for money. The real risks and dangers associated with the violence that often accompanies this sector are thereby negated as younger people take the risks involved.

### Exploitative relationships

Relations can be of a more violent and exploitative kind. Where people are known and trusted, deals are typically honoured on the basis that you 'don't jack your peeps' (you do not rob from your own). Relations can however be far more coercive and some young people (whom Pitts calls 'reluctant gangsters'<sup>33</sup>) may be forced into doing particular jobs for older gang members who might also prey on young, vulnerable women. Those who betray the older and established criminals (for example, by running up a significant drug debt) may

be violently assaulted or kidnapped. The same can happen to people who have their drugs confiscated by the police.

To summarise the implications of this for practitioners:

- it is not enough to focus solely on the gang as violence and weapon use cannot be addressed through gang suppression alone;
- the focus needs to be located on the violent street world where gangs and other violent groups and individuals intersect which has two spheres:
  - an inner core populated by professional criminals and organised crime groups locked into national and international networks; and
  - a volatile street periphery populated by gangs and delinquent peer groups along with other individuals;
- intervention efforts as such must address the street periphery as a totality - not focus attention on one part of it (the gang) at the expense of the whole (individuals, peer groups and gangs).

### **General Principles of Intervention**

If the problem of the street cannot be seen solely as a problem of gangs then a comprehensive and holistic intervention strategy needs to address the risks posed by all troublesome groups within the volatile street periphery, not just the gang. Applying a one-size-fits-all model as an intervention strategy will not work.

For the most part confronting organisations which have some involvement in crime will not require importing gang 'solutions' created in other societies which are very different from the UK. Overall, the aim of interventions must be to strengthen existing provision within each borough, not create new tiers of intervention which then become expensive, self-serving industries.



Given that the violence of the street periphery is not a problem of gang members alone interventions should target the criminal behaviour of all the individuals and groups within the periphery. This should involve using existing criminal ordinances and being cautious about erroneously treating offences as 'gang' issues when the relevant evidence does not merit such an assumption. To put this another way, care should be taken not to make the mistake of conceding to the gang an importance and significance it often does not possess.

### **Identifying What Works**

Care should be taken to discover what interventions, or features of interventions, do and do not work. Projects, as such, need to be rigorously evaluated to demonstrate that they are successful and effective in achieving their targets. There cannot be evidence free zones particularly in the context where policy should be evidence led. Finally, as individual communities are unique, what appears overall to be similar problems between them may stem from different causes or, because of the make-up of the community, require a different response. What works in one area may not work, or indeed may be counter-productive, in another area. Therefore, importing models and projects successful in other areas (including American models) to London may be inappropriate and outcomes unlikely to be replicated. Targets pertaining to what works should be meaningful and care should be taken that activity is not masquerading as performance. The value of programmes is not necessarily locked in explicit outcomes but works on many levels in different ways. Strategies and protocols should be flexible to allow agencies and services to develop organically in response to the needs of the young people they work with.

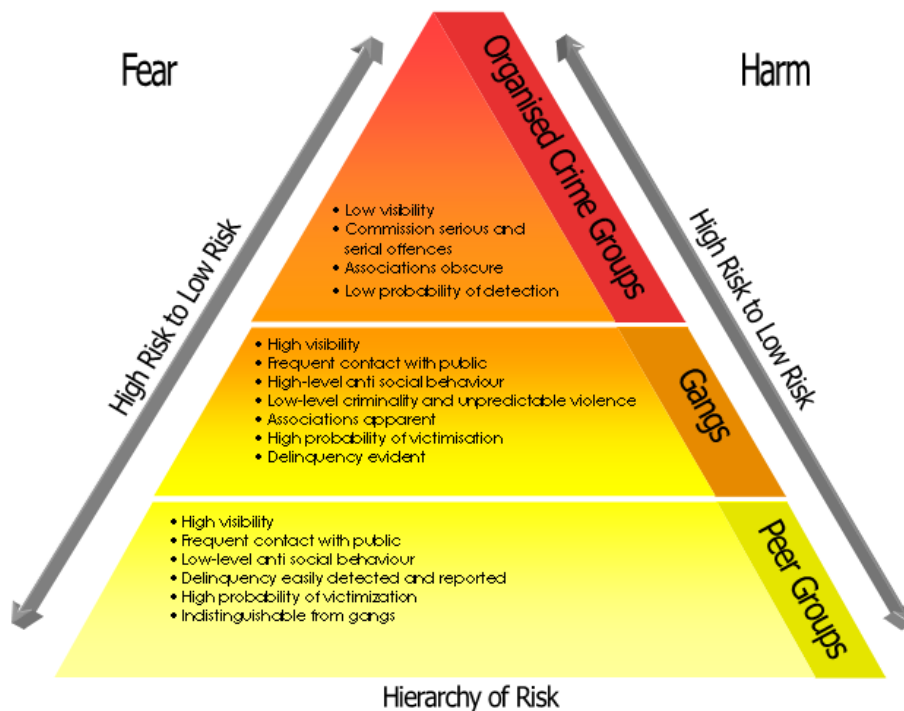
## Locating Effort and Allocating Services

Interventions directed at peer groups that are not systematically criminal need to emphasise proactive and informal interventions over the use of repressive sanctions. The kind of work conducted by youth workers, conflict mediators, arbitrators and community workers would all fall within this category as they presuppose some kind of conversation and negotiation with groups and their members. Conversely, for those who are more criminally inclined such as gangs and organised crime groups, the situation would reverse and favour official law enforcement over non-repressive interventions. The rationale for this is simple. As organised crime groups comprise career criminals who cause high levels of social harm, evade detection and are committed to their vocation of crime, informal interventions are unlikely to be successful. Peer groups however are composed of law-abiding individuals and low-level offenders and treating them as competent career criminals is likely to criminalise those to whom the label ought not to be deployed.

In what follows an overview of the intervention strategies for confronting different groups is outlined. Given that the audience for this report is practitioners who will have a remit to work with gangs and volatile peer groups (rather than organised and professional criminals) the interventions described apply specifically to these groups.

<b>Locating Effort</b>			
<b>Group type</b>	<b>Nature of risk</b>	<b>Mode of intervention</b>	<b>Service type</b>
<b>Organised crime groups</b>	High	Enforcement	Targeted and specialist
<b>Gangs</b>	Medium / high	Enforcement / integrative	Generic and targeted
<b>Volatile peer groups</b>	Low	Non repressive and integrative	Generic

The hierarchy of the threat posed by each group can be conceptualised in different ways dependent on the purpose of classification, as demonstrated in the pyramid of risk below. It is useful to note that while peer groups and gangs (often indistinguishable from one another) pose the highest risk to public order given their street visibility, in terms of social harm it is the organised crime groups which pose the greater threat given the seriousness of the crimes in which they are involved.



This bears relevance to designing interventions strategies and programmes which, in order to be fit for purpose, should be developed with awareness for the following:

- Where risk is high interventions should be tailored to address particular problems posed by different groups. For example, if the high risk pertains to fear of crime, more needs to be done on the level of social integration and building community relations, whereas if the high risk pertains to serious offending a tailored law-enforcement strategy is more appropriate;

- where risk is low interventions should be general and generic, with care taken not to unnecessarily marginalise nor criminalise low-risk groups;
- interventions are required at each level both to inhibit delinquency and upward migration to more serious levels of criminality and violence;
- interventions targeted at particular groups, rather than social problems, can have negative unintended consequences, such as glamorising gang membership or illegal dog ownership;
- addressing the problems posed by one group in isolation is unlikely to have a significant impact on crime reduction; and
- interventions aimed at peer groups and gangs will not appreciably reduce the serious and serial offences which cause the most harm to society.

# Street Representations and Street Realities

# Gangland Britain? Realities, Fantasies and Industry

Every age produces a 'public enemy' and such 'enemies' have a habit of changing. In 2002, public enemy number one in the UK was the 'street robber' (Hallsworth, 2005). Such 'folk devils' had, of course, always existed but, in 2002, they re-emerged with a vengeance. As in the 1970s, the 'street robber' became the source of considerable anxiety and sensational media coverage (Hall et al, 1977). Fast forward eight years and haven't things changed? Nobody today is preoccupied with 'muggers' and 'street crime' is barely mentioned (despite the fact that there is still a fair bit of it around). If anxiety pertaining to 'muggers' once abounded, this has seemingly now been replaced by a burgeoning fear of youth 'gangs'. Indeed, according to the 'Gangland Britain' thesis, youth 'gangs' are on the move everywhere. Moreover, it is claimed that such 'gangs' are armed, organised, predatory and lethal.

What are we to make of this re-focussing? According to John Pitts (2008; this volume), we are looking at a society where 'street life' has changed - and is changing - dramatically; a society where, until recently, few if any 'gangs' existed, to a society where 'gangs' are mushrooming apace. Pitts (2008) is both unequivocal and bold in his convictions. We are, he asserts, witnessing the 'changing face of youth crime' and many state agencies appear to agree. The UK government, for example, has identified the 'gang' as a primary target of its 'action plan' to tackle violent crime (Home Office, 2008). It identifies the 'gang' as a serious threat to public order and, accordingly, it has established designated 'task forces' (to address the threats that 'gangs' supposedly pose) and introduced 'tough' legislation (to suppress them). Government ministries are

not acting alone. Indeed, every major agency within the criminal justice system – including the Metropolitan Police, the Youth Justice Board (YJB), the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) - has either commissioned research on ‘gangs’ or has commissioned research to find out what to do about them. Many similar agencies have established various committees to deliberate over ‘gangs’ and many others have created specialist positions with a dedicated ‘anti-gang’ remit. At the local level Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) have replicated such responses. Many CDRPs have identified the ‘gang’ as a primary ‘public enemy’ and have sought, and been granted, government funding/public money to help them tackle ‘gang’ activity in their respective areas. Accordingly, a growing ‘industry’ has emerged, populated by a multitude of organisations and consultants offering ‘expert’ opinion, guidance and advice, together with ‘tailor made’ programmes in ‘gang’ suppression.

In the face of such ‘industry’ it is ostensibly difficult to question the ‘gangland Britain’ thesis. Surely, all we need to know is that ‘gangs’ have arrived and we need to ‘get real’ about this problematic phenomenon. Or do we? This chapter poses a ‘heretical’ counter-thesis by arguing that whilst social entities commonly termed ‘gangs’ (notwithstanding the problems of definition) certainly exist (as they always have done – see Davies and Pearson, this volume), there is less evidence to suggest either that ‘street violence’ can be reduced to a concern with ‘gangs’ or, that ‘gangs’ are the principal drivers of violent street crime. Indeed, the problem of the street is not primarily derivative of *organised* armed groups; rather social *disorganisation* better explains the violence that is increasingly being attributed to ‘gangs’. A central contention here is that the problem of the ‘gang’ is not the ‘gang’ itself, but the media driven ‘moral panic’ and ‘gang control industry’ that surrounds it. The major

problem, therefore, lies less in suppressing 'gangs' and more in addressing the 'industry' that has emerged to 'tackle' them.

### **The 'gangland Britain' thesis revisited**

The 'evidence' apparently underpinning the 'gangland Britain' thesis has been critically reviewed and found to be lacking (Hallsworth and Young, 2008). Given that the UK has no established record of conducting qualitative and quantitative 'gang' research (unlike the US) there is no readily available data to verify, or not, whether the presence of 'gangs' has increased or decreased in recent years. What the limited number of existing surveys indicate is that the level of 'gang' membership is relatively low among the population at large (ranging between 2 per cent and 7 per cent dependent upon the definition of 'gang' used). Furthermore, such surveys typically focus upon the 'usual suspects' (young people in deprived areas and/or young offenders), which almost certainly produces skewed results that artificially inflate and overstate the actual level of 'gang' membership (see, for example, Bennet and Holloway, 2004; Sharp et al, 2006).

On closer inspection, much of the violence attributed to 'gangs' appears not to be specifically 'gang' related. Even if 'gang' members commit offences, it is often not evident that the offence in question is motivated by 'gang' membership in and of itself. It is precisely because a significant volume of violent crime is routinely being defined as 'gang' related - coupled with the tendency on the part of the media to apply the term permissively and arbitrarily to classify all and every group that occasions harm to others as a 'gang' - that has, at least in part, served to establish and consolidate the 'gang' as a new 'folk devil'.



Drawing on grounded research with young people in areas supposedly awash with 'gang' activity, it is certainly possible to identify some young people who might reasonably be classified as 'gang affiliated', but many others typically labelled 'gang members' simply do not recognise and/or conceptualise the peer groups with whom they associate as 'gangs' (Hallsworth and Young, 2008). Indeed, far from the streets being overrun by 'gangs', the most pervasive street collectives appeared to comprise volatile peer groups randomly and erroneously labelled as 'gangs' by control agencies. If, in order to legitimately be classified as a 'gang', a group has to have some integral relation to crime and violence, then the overwhelming majority of young people involved in the research simply failed to qualify (Hallsworth and Young, 2008).

Interviews conducted with practitioners across a range of different UK cities have revealed that few believe that the problematic issues posed and experienced by young people are, in fact, derivative of 'gangs' (Young et al, 2007). Interestingly, many practitioners have minimal informed knowledge with regard to 'gangs'. That noted, the experience of many practitioners leads them to conclude that the principal problems of the street are more accurately understood in terms of young peoples' often chaotic and deeply distressed lives, coupled with endemic deprivation and structural marginalisation. Few practitioners appeared to perceive the 'gang' to be a new or escalating phenomenon and, in an intriguing test of the proposition that young women were increasingly involved in 'gangs' (part of the current control fantasy), members of youth offending teams were invited to identify girl 'gang' members. The exercise failed to generate anything like a substantive sample of 'shemale gangsters' and, of those so identified, most were more akin to young women who had experienced deeply troubled and traumatic lives than to the 'gang' girls of the of the populist imaginary (Young et al, 2007; see also Batchelor and

Young this volume). Whilst it could be argued that this research focused upon areas without the same degree of 'gang' organisation as those studied by protagonists of the 'gangland Britain' thesis (particularly Pitts, 2008), a better way of understanding the core discrepancies between the respective sets of research findings might more readily be understood in terms of the problematic assumptions that 'gang talkers' routinely make in conducting their inquiries.

The first thing to note is that the fundamental claims that Pitts (2008) makes about 'gangland Britain' derive from field research conducted in London. Quite how it is possible to generalise from such findings and argue that they reveal the 'changing face of youth crime' is open to question. Equally, the evidential basis upon which Pitts builds his case is also questionable. Indeed, the argument is principally rooted in the testimony of practitioners (interestingly referred to as 'informants' thus invoking policing discourse) whose narratives Pitts appears to accept at face value. Whilst it is, of course, possible to garner good evidence by talking with front-line practitioners working with young people at street level, it is equally important to acknowledge that the epistemological implications of such testimony need to be critically interrogated in ways that seem to be overlooked in Pitts' work. As others have found in the course of conducting research into 'gangs', practitioners, are inclined to project a level and degree of organisation onto the street that best reflects the kind of organisations to which they belong (Hallsworth and Young, 2008). In this sense practitioners tend to see (and perhaps want to see) structures, hierarchical divisions of labour and organised entities that they can map and which chime with familiar agency discourses. In other words, they do 'gang talk' in a manner of 'tree thinking' and this arboreal way of seeing and interpreting the world leads them to misrepresent what are often fluid, amorphous and even rhizomatic street realities.

Young people often replicate the same conceptual errors. As the Norwegian anthropologist Moshmus (2005) observed, they do not live their 'gang' realities in the way that they are typically invited (by researchers) to narrate them. Often, young people themselves revert to what we might call 'gang talk' which, in reality, is the de facto language of control agents. The problem with Pitts (2008) and most other 'gang talkers' in this respect, is that they fail to adequately address complex (and perhaps inconvenient) epistemological issues. Maybe they cannot, because they are 'tree thinkers' who (even despite themselves) ultimately inhabit the space of the control imaginary - constructing a fantasy of the contemporary street as a world dominated not only by 'gangs', but 'super gangs', that control all aspects of social life in the areas in which they operate. It makes for a good story but perhaps that is all.

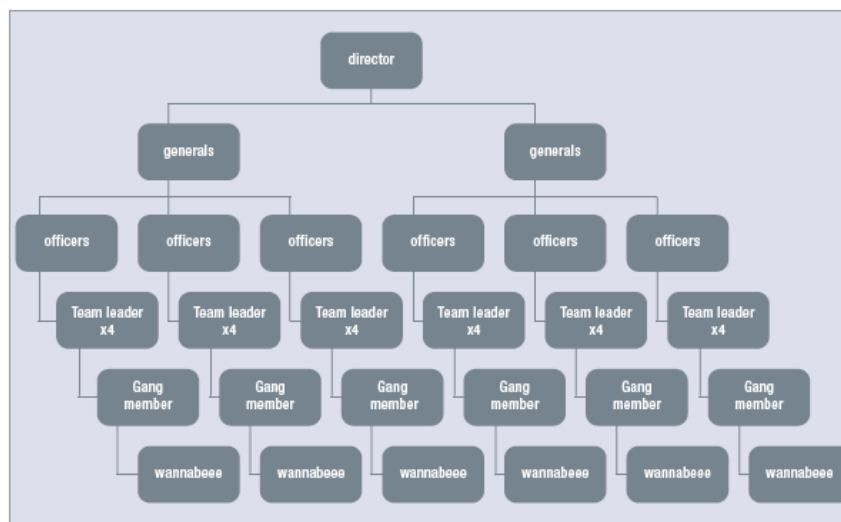
Whilst Pitts (2008) is right to assert that street life is not totally disorganised and that, in response to globalisation, new forms of criminal organisation have appeared, he may well be wrong in supposing that organised 'gangs' define the adaptation and he is certainly mistaken in looking to Castells (1996) to support such a claim. Indeed, Castells is the consummate theorist of the network society and it is precisely through complex distributed networks - rather than the territorial 'gangs' that Pitts appears to situate at the heart of things - that organised crime evolves. Similarly, the 'reluctant gangster' thesis that Pitts develops - holding that young people are coerced into becoming members of 'gangs' - is also questionable. There is little disputing that relationships between organised criminals and their 'on road' brethren are frequently coercive and exploitative, but the relations between the *organised core* and the more *disorganised periphery* of the street world is characterised by a multifaceted complex. Such relationships can veer between support and help - provided to and from people who are kith and kin - to more calculated and

instrumental business contracts between buyers and sellers in the drug economy.

If contemporary youth 'gangs' amount to the 'changing face of youth crime', then what are we to make of a British history replete with stories of estates populated by young men and sometimes older and more professional criminals (see Davies and Pearson, this volume)? Estates where, getting a good kicking if you were in the wrong place at the wrong time, is a longstanding risk many young men (in particular) have experienced whilst growing up in urban settings. And how are we to conceptualise the longstanding traditions of collective violence that have always been a feature of street life in the UK (Patrick, 1973; Bean, 1981)? Indeed, the 'changing face' claim implies the negation of history and invokes the amnesia that Pearson charted many years ago in his seminal study of 'hooligans' and 'respectable fears' (Pearson, 1983; this volume).

A wider source of critique that might be levelled at 'gang talkers' begins with the *a priori* assumption that the problem of the street is one of 'gangs'. In other words, whilst 'gangs' are certainly part of a complex – and sometimes deeply problematic – street tapestry, by focusing on 'gangs' alone, by reifying the 'gang' and constructing it as a kind of fetish, the 'gang talkers' actually appear to lose sight of the wider ecology of the street itself which, arguably, ought to be the real focus of any attempt to understand violent street worlds. But Pitts (2008) and other fellow travellers are not the only arborialists in the expanding 'gang' research community. Indeed, many others advance similar claims. The figure below, for example, invokes another fantasy of the street, this time taken from a publication produced by Jonathon Toy (2008), a leading practitioner in the 'War Against Gangs' in London.

Figure 1: *Fantasies of the street (1): 'Business typical organisational gang structure'*



Source: Toy (2008: 31)

Similarly, one might consider the totally 'evidence free' New Labour 'action plan' to confront violence (Home Office, 2008). The document - without any evidence to support such a contentious claim - identifies the 'gang' as a major driver of lethal violence. Despite utter disregard for any notion of 'evidence driven policy', the 'action plan' makes the case for 'gang' suppression as a solution to violent crime and a whole new paradigm of risk management is touted as the solution.

### **Rethinking violent street worlds**

If the violence that occasions public concern cannot legitimately be attributed to organised 'gangs', how are we to make sense both of the violence itself and the anxiety and outrage that it tends to induce? Why do certain constituencies of young people (normally boys and young men) routinely carry knives (and sometimes guns) and use them against each other, sometimes with fatal consequences? This question has recently been addressed by drawing upon

a range of different research projects (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009). Rather than begin (as is the tendency of 'gang talkers') with an apparent presumption that the answer is to be found by looking for 'gangs', it is arguably more profitable to listen instead to what many young people – and, indeed, convicted adult criminals - have to say about the violent street worlds they inhabit(ed). Whilst such testimonies certainly feature 'gangs', few tend to conceptualise the 'gang' in quite the same ways that control agents are inclined to do. In other words, 'gangs' might – in certain circumstances – form an integral part of street reality but they do not fully envelop or totalise that reality. Rather than impose a particular construction of the 'gang' (typical of control agents) upon complex street realities - what Katz and Jackson-Jacobs (2004) have appropriately termed 'the criminologists gang' – it is necessary instead to attempt to understand what such testimonies tell us about multi- dimensional street worlds and the violence that might characterise them (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009). This requires making a heuristic distinction between the lifeworld of more organised and professional criminals - the *organised core* of the street world where men 'do the business' and crime is a vocation - and what might better be understood as the more *disorganised periphery* of 'on road' activity.

Professional criminals are 'successful' because they are well networked, they manifest a pragmatic orientation to their work (typically mid-level drug dealing and armed robbery) and they are able to mobilise entrepreneurial flair in their chosen lines of activity. They tend to work with others, mostly those who they have grown up with or who they meet in places such as prison. Often (but not always) the groups they are part of have specified names or, more likely, are known by others (including control agents) by ascribed names and identities. Such men can certainly apply and/or mobilise violence and many are trained and skilled in using guns (unlike their 'on-road' brethren), but they are

also acutely aware of how 'bad for business' (and dangerous for themselves) using weapons can be.

Firearms are accordingly used sparingly and preferably in an organised and calculated manner. This does not mean that such men – the criminal core - are not violent but, arguably, they are not as problematic as others who operate 'on road', at the margins or periphery. Indeed, this latter group occupy a hyper volatile world where violence is omnipresent and can, and does, explode for relatively mundane reasons. Moreover, once unleashed, violence tends to escalate randomly and rapidly. Life 'on road' is often populated by unpredictable young men from chaotic backgrounds whose psychological instability is often compounded by long histories of violent victimisation. Such young men certainly face threats from territorial groups but that is only part of a more complex picture.

Many struggle to make a living at the retail end of crack-cocaine and heroin markets; a trading place which is also incredibly violent. Indeed, as research from the USA and the UK attests (Jacobs, 1999 and 2000; Lupton et al, 2002; Wilson et al, 2002), this is probably the most violent arena in the criminal underworld. Violence is, as such, a competence that has to be learnt and mastered in a world where street survival is literally the name of the game. While 'gang talkers' imagine that the problem of violence emanates from the presence of organised 'gangs' (the *core*), the reality implies that it is the social disorganisation of the street *periphery* and the self-destructive ways of 'on road' life that prevail within it, that is the principal problem.

Violence may be ritualised and, as such, regulated by normative street codes (at least in part) or, alternatively, it may be anomic, unregulated and normless where the absence not the presence of a clear social structure (which many 'gangs' provide) creates the preconditions for violence to occur. For this

reason it is difficult to equate life 'on road' with 'subculture' in recognisable sociological terms (Hall et al, 1976). Rather, 'on road' might be conceptualised as a way of life predicated precisely on the social demolition of its inhabitants. In a social world where capitalism is destructively reproducing itself from above, 'on road' is seen to represent one of its concomitant effects, the destructive self-reproduction from below:

Here a small number of socially marginalised men have come to respond to their predicament destructively in what becomes, at times, close to what Thomas Hobbes described as 'a state of nature', what he termed a 'war of all against all'. Life 'on road', is not a world where the social contract has much salience or purchase. This is the zone of the outlaw. This is a zone where deeply internalised anger and rage among depoliticised and deeply alienated young men finds violent expression. The tragedy here is that the rage and anger they feel is not directed outwards and towards the world that marginalises them. Instead it is directed inward and against each other. Guns have become a part of this logic of self-destruction as young men pointlessly die at each other's hands (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009: 373).

### **A moral panic?**

If the violence of the street is not reducible to a question of 'gangs', how has the problem of the street come to be constructed as a problem of 'gangs'? Or to rephrase the question, how and why has the 'gangland Britain' thesis become dominant to a point where it is seemingly taken to provide the accepted hegemonic interpretation of violent street worlds? One way of understanding this phenomenon is to invoke the familiar sociological concept of 'moral panic'



and to situate the emergence of the 'gang' as 'public enemy' as the latest in a long line of 'folk devils'. In this way, the rise of the 'gang' might be interpreted as a classic case of deviancy amplification.

In 'Moral Panics and the Media' Critcher (2003) – following Cohen (1972; 2002) and Hall et al (1977) – presents a processual model by way of explaining the stages through which moral panics evolve and develop:

*Emergence.* This is the process, according to Cohen (1972:9), whereby a 'condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests'.

*The media inventory.* Here the threat is articulated specifically through the mass media. An 'enemy' is identified and presented through processes of exaggeration, distortion, prediction and symbolization (Cohen, 2002: 16-34).

*Moral entrepreneurs.* 'Various groups and organisations then take it upon themselves to pronounce upon the nature of the problem', and identify appropriate responses. For Cohen (2002: 1) the 'moral barricades are manned by editors, politicians, bishops and other right-thinking people'.

*Experts.* Socially accredited experts then pronounce their diagnoses and solutions.

*Coping and resolution.* Experts and moral entrepreneurs translate ideas into practice. Control initiatives are exploited and if - as is often the case - they are found lacking they are expanded. *Fade away.* Moral panics rarely last long. The

moral panic ends when the condition disappears, submerges or deteriorates.

The rise of the 'gang' within public consciousness appears to 'fit' with the moral panic model. Up to 2002 there was limited media interest in 'gangs'. The focus of media reporting was, as stated, fixed upon the spectre of the 'mugger'. This radically changed in tandem with widespread media reporting of a series of violent episodes that came to be defined as 'gang' related. It began in 2000 with the death of 10-year-old Damilola Taylor in South London<sup>37</sup>, but it was the apparently random murder of two girls in Birmingham, in 2003<sup>38</sup>, that cemented the arrival of the 'gang'. With a small but steady stream of fatal shootings, often involving young Black males, the 'evidential basis' of a society facing new and alarming threats - posed by armed 'gangs' - evolved. Street crime effectively disappeared as a news story as the 'gang' steadily and incrementally came to replace the 'mugger' as the new public enemy.

There is little doubt that the media reporting surrounding the 'gang' had all the hallmarks of 'exaggeration', 'distortion', 'prediction' and 'symbolization' that Cohen (2002: 16-34) terms the 'media inventory'. Cases of violence reported as 'gang related' were, on closer inspection, not 'gang' related at all (including, interestingly, the death of Damilola Taylor whose murder provoked the original 'discovery' of the 'gang' but who was actually killed by two brothers (Hallsworth and Young 2008)).

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<sup>37</sup> In November 2000, Damilola Taylor, a 10-year-old schoolboy, was killed on a council estate in Peckham, South London, after being stabbed in the leg. Two brothers aged 12 and 13 were subsequently convicted of his manslaughter.

<sup>38</sup> Charlene Ellis aged 18 and Latisha Shakespeare aged 17 both died outside a New Year's party in 2003 in Aston, Birmingham, after being hit by a hail of bullets dispensed from an automatic weapon in a 'drive-by' shooting.

Despite this, having 'discovered' 'gangs' the media has since applied the term permissively to include seemingly all and every group of (working class) young people with any street presence. It is not only the media who apply the term 'gang' indiscriminately, however. Ofsted (school) inspectors, not normally recognised for their criminological expertise, have nonetheless identified a burgeoning 'gang culture' in British schools (Ofsted, 2005). Not only have 'gangs' arrived, according to such accounts, they have been ascribed organisational capacities that they cannot possibly possess, as was the case with the sensational reporting of a group of 'Muslim Boys' in London. This 'gang', it was claimed by the *Independent* newspaper, had Al Qaeda connections and their stock in trade was (allegedly) forcibly converting their 'victims' to Islam (Malik, 2005). Add to this a rash of ill-thought out 'gang' documentaries - most of which have relied upon treating exceptional cases as the norm, asking leading questions and often treating unsubstantiated (not to say often absurd) testimony as gospel truth - so the 'gangland Britain' thesis assuredly came to establish itself as 'the changing face of youth crime' (Pitts, 2008).

To sensational media reporting must be added the contribution of a range of other dubious moral entrepreneurs within the burgeoning 'gang control industry'. For example, Lee Jasper - the then Mayor of London's principal adviser on 'race', youth and crime - proclaimed, in the *Independent* article on the 'Muslim Boys' that they represented nothing less than the 'single greatest criminal threat' he had ever witnessed (Malik, 2005). And even more absurdly, when the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, subsequently held a press conference - to publicise his anti-gang and anti-violence credentials - he was flanked by the actor Ross Kemp whose 'expertise' on 'gangs' (and thus his credibility to pronounce 'solutions') amounted to no more than being cast as a

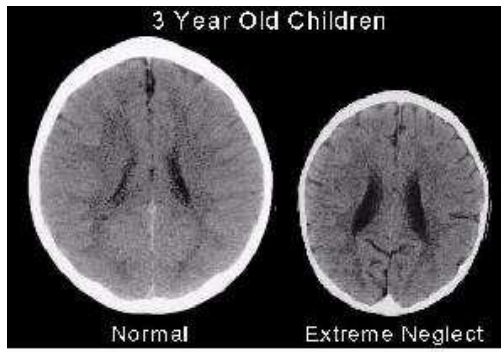
gangster in a popular soap opera ('EastEnders') and, on the back of that, fronting a 'documentary' series on 'gangs'. The Mayor's 'informed prognosis', for what it is worth: 'gang' members had bad role models and needed better ones (the military) (Crerar, 2008).

The emerging 'gang control industry' – the presence of which has, paradoxically, fuelled moral panic - is nothing but eclectic. To help develop its anti-gang strategy, for example, the Home Office commissioned private consultants. Similarly, at a seminar convened at 10 Downing Street - co-chaired by the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary - a representative of the Wave Trust (a proselytising organisation steeped in biologically reductionist theories of crime) argued, in part, that the problem of 'gangs' arose from the fact that the average 'gang' member had an atrophied brain by the age of three (Wave Trust, 2007). In a subsequent conference on 'gangs' - attended by the Mayor of London - an image of an atrophied brain appeared as part of a PowerPoint presentation provided by the Wave Trust (by now apparently accorded the status of gang experts). Truth to tell it looked like a walnut (see figure 2)<sup>39</sup>.

*Figure 2 Fantasies of the street (2): The brain of a 'gang member'?*

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<sup>39</sup> This image was subsequently used by a senior Metropolitan Police Officer to illustrate the 'reality' of British 'gangs' at an international conference convened in Rome by the European Council in 2007. Sections of the audience were, to say the least, somewhat incredulous. On being asked where the neglected brain originated from, the officer had to concede that it belonged to a 3 year old Romanian Orphan, subject to extreme neglect and abuse.



The head of the British Race Equalities Council at the time, Trevor Phillips, also attended the Downing Street seminar. He was subsequently quoted by the Guardian as a leading player in the development of the government's anti-gang strategy (Muir, 2007) (although quite where his supposed 'expertise' on 'gangs' came from is unknown). Phillips' 'expert' solution was similar (and as idiotic) as Ross Kemp's: gang members need military role models don't they?

Perhaps most problematic of all, academics have also played a significant role in helping cement the dystopian vision of a society plagued by 'gangs'. Notwithstanding the more nuanced attempts to understand 'gangs' - that have cast considerable doubt on any notion of an organised counter force confronting the 'good society' (Aldridge and Medina- Ariza, 2005; Alexander, 2008) - the problem is that more accurate, but less sensational terms, like 'messy networks' (Aldridge et al, this volume) rarely appeal in quite the same way as sensationalised constructions of 'gangs' and, as such, are easily ignored by the media and political elites with an interest in having their fantasies of the street confirmed rather than challenged. An associated problem with academic 'gang talkers' actively searching for 'gangs' and deploying surveys to help them 'find' them, is that such fixed determination is almost certainly going to yield 'results'.

More than that, given the fluidity and elasticity of 'gang' definitions, the 'researcher' can find as many or as few 'gangs' as their methodological variables - to measure 'gang' prevalence - allow. While the interventions of identifiable academic 'experts' into this policy arena might be expected to dispel some of the more grotesque media distortions, it has paradoxically acted to reinforce moral panic and escalate processes of deviance amplification further.

Politicians comprise an additional constituency to have found considerable mileage in the 'gang'. New Labour ministers, for example, have been quick to seize and pronounce on the 'gangland menace'. Tony Blair, when Prime Minister, was quick-off-the-mark in pledging a crackdown on 'gangs' and actively promoting the implementation of anti-gang legislation. Similarly, Iain Duncan Smith, representing the new face of 'compassionate conservatism' (sic), produced a report on 'gangs' entitled *Dying to Belong* that presents yet another vision of the 'gangland Britain' thesis, offered this time as confirmation that Britain is indeed 'broken' (Centre for Social Justice, 2009).

At the practitioner end, a range of personnel have emerged from the woodwork in recent years, seemingly reinventing and presenting themselves as self-professed 'gang' experts and serving to front a disturbing proliferation of anti-gang policy and practice initiatives. As an example, at a conference run by the National Probation Service in 2008 ('Steps 4 Change: Addressing Serious Violence'), one practitioner presented a paper on the rise of girl 'gangs' flanked by two 'gang girls' whose voices were never heard (as the male practitioner did the talking for them). According to this 'expert', girl 'gang' members are far more dangerous than people imagine. Scarily the conference delegates were busy noting down this nonsense as if it was the gospel truth. The 'expert' concluded his presentation by drawing the audience's attention to the dedicated programme his organisation now provides to tackle the 'disturbing' rise of

'gang girls'. As he noted (without irony), he had identified an 'important' gap in the market!

What moral panic and the work of the media – alongside an army of other 'right thinking people' (Cohen, 2002: 1) who should know better – have managed to cement, and quite successfully, is the fundamental notion that the UK is facing an unprecedented threat from organised criminal (youth) 'gangs'. The underpinning control fantasy provides that such 'gangs' are on the rise, they are large and organised, they are more dangerous than they used to be and they have to be stopped. All of this is said to necessitate the delegation of more and wider powers to the control apparatus. Perhaps inevitably, without any meaningful 'gang' intervention programme of its own, the UK government has looked for guidance to the USA, where the 'gang control industry' has tangibly failed but where such failure has not prevented its widespread implementation closer to home.

### **The industrial logic of 'gang' production**

Moral panics tend by nature to be relatively intense but short in duration. Eventually they fade away as 'solutions' are developed by control agencies and/or the media lose interest and, in time, normally turn attention to an alternative 'folk devil'. While the 'discovery' of the 'gang' certainly fits with the developmental cycle of moral panic discussed by Cohen (1972; 2002) and Critcher (2003), its demise is less certain in the short term. Indeed, it is more likely that violent street life - engendered by multiple forms of marginality in polarised cities - will continue to feed the 'gangland Britain' thesis.

It is not only 'gangland killings' that sustain such fantasy. Rather the term 'gang' is now so nebulous, fluid and elastic that it is randomly applied to just about any group of young people 'hanging around'. The fundamental idea that

society is facing an organised counterforce – as distinct from a disorganised mess - ensures that the focus of attention remains on the ‘gang’ rather than the social and economic conditions that tend to produce violent street worlds. In this sense the ‘gang’ provides us with what Christie (2001) terms a ‘suitable enemy’, upon which an insecure society can vent its rage and indignation.

The continued rediscovery of the ‘gang’ also meshes well with the needs of the emerging post welfare security state that requires a tangible object on which to focus. Conceptualising the street as an amorphous messy reality is too complex, fuzzy and uncomfortable for most control agents. It unsettles and challenges their explanatory universe that is typically constructed in arboreal terms. If the street world can be reduced down to readily defined ‘office’ and neatly organised divisions of labour – ‘lieutenants’, ‘soldiers’, ‘aspirants’ and ‘wannabees’, for example – to particular group identities allocated ‘risk’ scores and, ultimately, to coercive control, it lends itself to convenience whereby multiple, intersecting and extraordinarily complex phenomena are simplistically encapsulated by the problem of the ‘gang’. The term ‘gang’ might also remain popular because of its intrinsic growth potential. As noted, it is an elastic construct that can be mutated, blurred and hybridised at will. The term is pregnant with possibility. New ‘gang’ typologies are readily created – including ‘girl gangs’ - and blended with other reifications such as ‘knife crime’ and ‘gun crime’.

Following Christie’s lead (2000) it could also be noted that there is also an industrial logic to the reproduction of the ‘gang menace’. Until recently the UK had no established ‘gang’ experts and certainly little by way of a developed ‘gang control’ apparatus. But this has all changed and there is now a burgeoning industry that, on one hand, claims to suppress the ‘gang’ whilst on the other hand paradoxically feeds from it and, accordingly, has a vested



interest in discovering and maintaining precisely that which it ostensibly aims to expunge. Ultimately, a stage has been reached where too many people have too great a vested interest in the 'gang' to surrender the gangland fantasy.

At the general level, 'gang talk' operates like a lubricant oiling the control apparatus in ways that allows its constituent cogs to turn and mesh together. 'Gang talk', in this sense, animates the system. It provides a clear and common focus around which the control apparatus – and its various vested interests – works. Take, for example, the research community who have had a field day: discovering 'gangs', defining 'gangs', producing 'gang' typologies and, not least, proffering views and informing 'action plans' pertaining to what needs to be done. This is now big business. Whereas, until recently, few academics were researching this issue, 'gang' research has now mushroomed. The political community is equally, if not more implicated. 'Gang talk' provides politicians with the ammunition they need in order to demonstrate governing competence within the emerging security state.

Where, until recently, there were few 'gang' experts and few 'gang' suppression programmes, these are now proliferating like weeds. One of the core beneficiaries is the practitioner community that has found common purpose in 'gang' suppression. By becoming 'gang' experts and – in some cases - chairing various anti 'gang' committees and task forces, many practitioners career prospects have prospered. Others, particularly in the private sector, have created 'anti-gang programmes' attracting generous funding from central and local government. John Pitts (2008) refers to 'reluctant gangsters' but there is also a constituency of reluctant practitioners who have found that unless they also do 'gang talk', they are unlikely to receive the necessary resources needed to sustain services for the troubled young people with whom they work. Indeed, as an indication of such absurdity youth workers have been known to

attempt to have their young people identified as 'gang' members precisely so they can access services and support that would otherwise not be available.

### **What is to be done?**

From the perspective of the control imaginary the solution is clear. A new 'public enemy' has emerged and it must be suppressed. Inspired by the USA, 'solutions' are now being borrowed and are currently being rolled out across the UK. Many problems of the street certainly derive from the behaviours and actions of violent men operating within the volatile world that is the retail end of the illegal drug economy. This is a world where violence is produced by messy, amorphous and profoundly disorganised processes as distinct from organised and regimented divisions of labour. But because many 'gang talkers' occupy the space of the control imaginary this is not the street reality they typically want to see. It's simply not convenient: it collides with and unsettles not only their explanatory universe but also, in many cases, their vested interests in the industry that is keeping 'gang' mythology alive.

Real solutions cannot be found from within the control imaginary and others must be sought out. If the problem of the street is its social disorganisation then, in part, a solution lies in creating a more organised street world. The way forward is not to confront this volatile reality by suppressing the 'gang', but by radicalising and politicising the often deeply alienated and marginalised young people who live amongst it. Far from looking at the emerging 'gang' suppression industry as the solution to the problem of street violence; it must itself be conceptualised as part of the problem. To build a better society, therefore, it is ultimately necessary to eliminate the 'gang' control industry.

# Deciphering Gang Talk

We are back in England yet again, it's August 2011 and London is burning. The police have managed to shoot dead yet another Black male in dubious circumstances and across the city thousands of people have taken to the streets. The resulting disorder unfolds for a further four days as the riots reach out beyond London to take hold in cities across the country. It would be the worst outbreak of urban disorder England had witnessed in decades. Someone or something had to be blamed and it was not going to be the police. Within three days of the riots the Prime Minister, David Cameron, convened a press conference and identified 'gangs' as the criminal masterminds responsible for organising the riots, and 'gang culture' the background cause. Put together, these were responsible for what he went on to identify as a 'major criminal disease that has infected streets and estates across our country'.

At the heart of all the violence sits the issue of the street gangs. Territorial, hierarchical and incredibly violent, they are mostly composed of young boys, mainly from dysfunctional homes. They earn money through crime, particularly drugs and are bound together by an imposed loyalty to an authoritarian gang leader. (Cameron 2011)

Let's go back in time now to 2007 where Hurricane Katrina, obeying every prediction that had been made about such an event, swept into New Orleans, breaching its levees, burying the city beneath an avalanche of water. If this was a tragedy for the city it was an even greater tragedy for the city's poorest Black community whose neighbourhoods were devastated by the

resulting floods that would also go on to claim many lives. Only this would be a tragedy with a difference because within 24 hours of the levees being breached, the worst humanitarian crisis the United States had experienced in recent decades became discursively reconstructed instead into a crisis of law and order. Instead of recognising the Black population as victims cruelly abandoned by a federal government seemingly impervious to their plight, a dominant theme in the reporting of Katrina was of Black looters, armed Black gangs on the rampage and Black rapists. And the power of this 'gang talk' was so powerful that when the authorities eventually returned to the abandoned city; it returned more as an invasion force than a rescue effort.

Two very different events, but each unified by the fact that, in both cases, versions of 'gang talk' were mobilised to make sense of them. Not only did gang talk establish the definitional narrative, as we have seen, reality was then (re)ordered around it: in the case of New Orleans, troops were sent in to reclaim the drowned city from its gangs, while, in the immediate aftermath of the riots not caused by gangs, the British government developed a gang-suppression policy as its response

These two cases are graphic but by no means unusual examples of events where 'gang talk' has come to provide the interpretative grid by and through which divergent social problems are rendered legible, even when the events in question are by no means solely or even remotely gang-related. In the US the gang has been equated with the terrorist threat, the illegal drugs trade, and global crime more generally. In the UK, media hysteria has seen the gang blamed for everything (as we have seen) from outbreaks of dangerous dogs, to the mass rape and sexual abuse of women, to most shootings and, not least, the organisation of the illegal drugs trade.

The sensational and often hysterical coverage the gang has received has by no means remained absent from the radar of critical scholars. Dwight Conquergood was one of the first commentators to draw attention to the criminalising rhetoric at play in the way gangs were being represented and the criminalising functions such a discourse performed.

In the public sphere, the label gang is a thickly layered representational screen onto which powerful and contradictory images are projected. The term gang powerfully cathects and conjures middle class fears and anxieties about social disorder, disintegration and chaos, that are made palpable in these demonised figures of inscrutable, unproductive, predatory, pathological alien Others lurking in urban shadows and margins, outside the community of decent people. (Conquergood 1991: 4)

In his own reflection on the way the gang was represented, not least, within the academy of American gang researchers, Jack Katz also observed the disjunction between the way the gang was being narrated in official discourse and a street reality that was very different (Katz and Jackson 1997). The 'gang', he argued, appeared less a descriptive term identifying groups out there in the street, but appeared instead as a 'transcendental evil' into which wholly disparate social problems could be unproblematically folded. In the UK, Claire Alexander has also pursued a similar theme. The term 'gang', she observes, is one heavily saturated with a cultural and not least racial baggage from which it is difficult to disentangle (Alexander 2008).

Given the seductive appeal of gang talk and the sheer variety of social problems it is now deployed to explain, a case could be made for exploring its nature further, and this will constitute the focus of this chapter: its aim, to build

upon and develop the insights of Conquergood, Katz and Alexander by seeking to decipher the enigmatic discourse, gang talk. To explore this 'garrulous discourse' the chapter addresses two questions: 'What are the defining characteristics of gang talk?' and 'Why is this discourse so seductive'? It concludes by looking at some of its unintended consequences.

Gang talk, I will argue, constitutes a free-floating discourse that can operate wholly independently of gang realities as these unfold in any street context. In constitution, it can be considered a *conspiracy discourse* produced by those who do not live gang realities but have a vested interest in gang lives and gang worlds. Gang talk is thus a discourse that reflects what, following Lefebvre, I propose to term *representations of the street* not *street representations* as gang members produce them.

Gang talk is a discourse that possesses a determinate structure. It constitutes, as such, what Wittgenstein would designate a 'language game' replete with its own vocabulary and rules of composition; rules that gang-talkers intuitively iterate and reiterate in the gang talk they produce. Gang talk is organised around several common self-reinforcing tropes about gangs and how they are imagined to develop; these can be narrated and recognised by gang-talkers without any of them ever having to have met a gang member or a gang in their lives. Gang talk, then, can reveal the 'truth' of 'gangs' wholly independently of any empirical confirming evidence.

Gang talk is seductive precisely because of the performative role it plays and by reference to the primal and powerful archetypes it harnesses. This is not a discourse that lends itself to disconfirmation because, as we shall establish, gang talk operates through iteration and confirmation. It is seductive precisely because it is performative. It is popular because the archetypes it trades in are timeless and because it provides a seemingly plausible narrative about the way

things are. At the same time it is also a discourse of power and must also be understood in terms of the ideological role it plays in stabilising a post-welfare neoliberal security state and its constituent social relations.

### **Defining Gang Talk**

By 'gang talk' I mean to designate a discourse about gangs that has wide currency. It is a discourse that works to make meaningful the world of gangs both to those who produce this discourse and to others who are receptors of it. By and large, the producers of gang talk (hereafter 'gang-talkers') are those with a vested interest in gangs (of some sort) but who are not of the world of gangs they talk about. They may be journalists looking for a good story about them, enforcement agencies that want to suppress them, practitioners on the hunt for gang suppression money, the public who are scared of them, academics wanting to study them, or policy-makers who have been given the mission of developing anti-gang strategies.

These are people who, by and large, do not belong to the street world of gangs they want to talk about and who, consequently, have a distance from this world. They produce, as such, and to evoke the language of Lefebvre, *representations of the street* not *street representations* as those who live gang realities produce them (Lefebvre 1991). This disjunction is important but often lost on gang-talkers who imagine *their* world and the world of gang members is, in some sense, cognate. It is not. Gang-talkers, therefore, occupy a very different discursive space from those who live *gang realities*. Those who live gang realities at the same time live their gang realities in very different terms than the gang talk that gang-talkers produce about them. Gang talk as such constitutes a discourse of power because gang-talkers are primary definers of deviance and

their interpretations predominate over street representations which are silenced or, alternatively, translated into versions of gang talk.

Just as it is important to distinguish *representations of the street* from *street representations* so it is important to distinguish the order of representations from the world of *street practices* (see Figure 3.1). This is a material reality populated by social relations within and between groups (gangs and others), relations that are in perpetual movement. This order is not directly legible either to those who live gang realities or to gang-talkers who want to comprehend the street world where gangs dwell. Gang talk does not capture this reality because what it typically trades in are idealistic representations of the street. While gang-talkers might well respond that they in fact trade in street representations having spoken to gang members, their epistemological illiteracy blinds them to the fact that when asked to narrate their gang realities ('Tell me about your gang please') what they tend to get back is more gang talk.

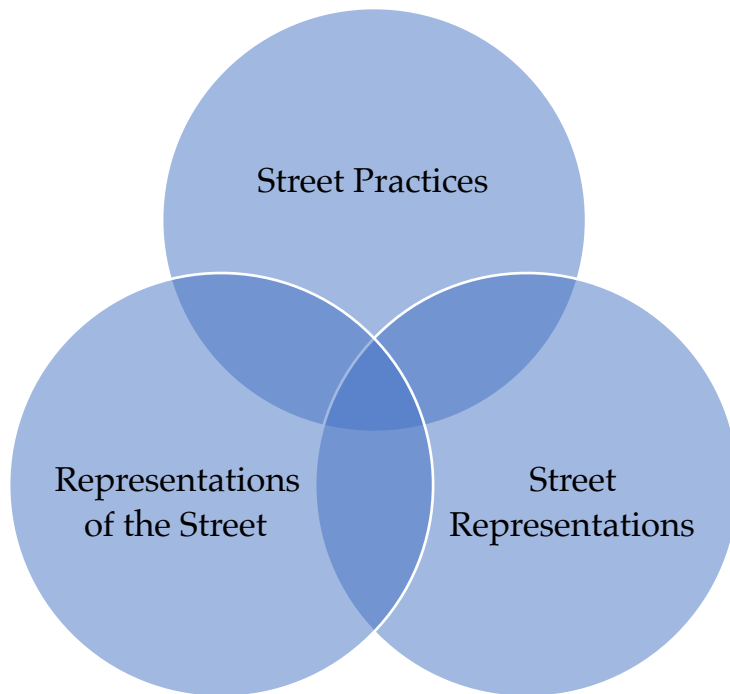


Figure 3.1 Ontologising the street



Rather than engage with gang talk as a discourse that is mistaken about its object (they are wrong about the gang for this or that reason), or see it as the product of a moral panic that exhibits moral panic features (over-reaction to an event, sensational coverage, the pathologising of an enemy (Cohen 1972; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994)), I would suggest that more can be gained by examining gang talk as an imaginary discourse that best exhibits the desire production of its producers. Gang talk, at least as I intend to approach it, can thus best be read and studied as a collective control fantasy that reveals the predilections, anxieties and desires of its producers more than the truth of the street it aspires to represent.

### **Reading Gang Talk as a Language Game**

If we consider the literary genre of fantasy-writing, evoked in novels and cinema such as *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, then what we find distinctive about it is that the worlds in which the novels are set are not just fictional but literally fantastic (Butler 2009). These are imaginary worlds often populated by imaginary beings set in parallel worlds or worlds set in some remote time. These are magical places populated by magical beings, but at the same time they also possess recognisably human attributes which are what make them familiar to us.

Gang talk, I would suggest, is not unlike the fantasy genre insofar as it does not capture the reality of gang practices, but rather a fantasised

representation of them. These are found materialised in various journalistic accounts, press releases, academic articles, reports and statements about gangs. Gang talk, like fantasy fiction, is an imaginary construction which reflects gangs less as they are, and more how they are imagined to be; where what is imagined represents the phantasmagorical desires of gang-talkers. This is why, as we shall see, the gang, as gang talk constructs it, has a sensational appearance that has little to do with a material reality that is often more mundane. As we shall also observe, gang talk is also populated by similar tropes to those reproduced in fantasy fiction, particularly in its evocation of a world reduced in Manichaean terms to Evil subterranean multitudes that are on the rise and which must be vanquished by those of the Good.

To study gang talk then we need methodologically to treat it as a self-enclosed, self-referential discourse that has a distinctive structure we need to interpret. To study this we need to look at how the gang is imagined and positioned within this discourse. The first point to note is that gang talk is a conspiracy discourse; one that coalesces around a perspective on gangs where they are presumed to be a potent threat and one that is growing. Gang talk, then, is an unending paranoid rumination about the evil gangs represent and pose in the process of their mutant development. Within this discourse, as we shall observe, seemingly innocuous events and activities assume the most sinister dimensions. In this world gangs do not spontaneously form, they 'recruit' and 'groom' instead; they do not communicate, they engage in 'branding exercises'. In David Garland's terms, to study gang talk is thus to engage with what he terms 'the criminology of the other' because it is as 'Other' that the gang is imagined (Garland 1996). The question I now want to pose here is what precisely is it that is 'Other' about them?

To address this, it pays to think of gang talk as a language game in Wittgenstein's (1953) sense; that is, as a primitive language defined by common terms and bound by common rules that define the permissible moves that any player (gang-talker) can make in the gang talk they produce. As a language game, gang talk is composed of a series of mutually self-reinforcing tropes. Each reflects a particular 'truth' about the gang and the alleged pattern of its development. There are, I will suggest, six that require consideration (though that said, there may well be many more). These may be studied under the following headings:

- Novelty:* They were not here but now they are and we have never seen their like before.
- Proliferation:* They were few but now they are many. Now they are multitude.
- Corporatisation:* Until recently they were disorganised but now they are organised and organising as we speak.
- Weaponisation:* Their violence was once manageable but as they organise they appropriate and possess ever more terrifying 'weapons of choice'.
- Penetration:* They may emerge in particular areas but over time they expand to penetrate and colonise new settings (they are out to get us!!!).
- Monstrousness:* Gang members may look like 'normal' people but they are essentially different. 'Here be monsters ...'

For the most part the evidence I adduce to explore and substantiate these elements of gang talk is derived from the UK experience. As a case study the UK

is relevant because it has been undergoing a moral panic about gangs for some years now. As with other moral panics, the gang has found itself at the centre of moral outrage from a state that has now delegated an array of alarming coercive powers to enforcement agencies; many taken 'off the shelf' from the US. The media continue to report the gang in sensational terms while enforcement agencies, in what has become a burgeoning new anti-gang industry, have produced an ongoing blizzard of gang-talking reports about them.

In what follows I will draw, albeit selectively, on a range of different gang-talking texts. Most, it could be observed, present themselves as serious documents composed by serious commentators seeking to reveal the Terrible Truth about gangs; a number even claim that the 'truth' revealed is based on empirical research and constitutes a 'realist' analysis of the gang phenomenon. Here, without exception or apology, I treat them as fantasy constructions.

### **Novelty**

British history is rich with groups that might well be said to constitute what we today call 'gangs'. In the Middle Ages they were known as 'canting crews'; in the seventeenth century the notorious highwayman Dick Turpin belonged to what was known as the Essex Gang (Hallsworth 2005; Harris 1971)). In his novel *Brighton Rock*, Graham Greene narrates the tragic history of would-be gang member Pinky, set in Brighton during the period between the First and Second World Wars (Greene 1975); while in the novel *Clockwork Orange*, written in the 1960s, Anthony Burgess paints a dystopian vision of a British future overrun by gangs (Burgess 1962). Gangs, in other words, have always been around and the public have always been fascinated by the lives of gangsters.

Despite being a perennial feature of street life in many neighbourhoods (as we saw in Chapter 2) gang talk constitutes the gang as an entirely new phenomenon, the like of which has never been seen before. As Geoffrey Pearson observes, in imagining the gang as eternally new, the public is caught up in a form of historical amnesia about a past characterised as invariably benign and peaceful (from which gangs are absent) which is then set against a bleak dystopian present (Pearson 1983, 2011) now apparently overrun by gangs. Captivated by the shock of the new; the idea that they have discovered something the like of which has never been witnessed before, gang-talkers produce a fantasy of the present characterised by an immense rupture with the past. Evidence of the hold this way of thinking exercises is nowhere more clearly exemplified than in the widely held claim that gangs in the UK today represent nothing less than what Pitts terms 'the new face of youth crime' (Pitts 2008).

That similar refrains about youth groups exist back through the twentieth century (and beyond) becomes, unfortunately, lost in this exercise in negation.

### **Proliferation**

It is not just that the gang is here where until recently it was not, gang talk also coalesces around the idea that the gangs are now proliferating; where they were once few, now apparently they are multiplying and are now many. And, of course, it is getting worse all the time. This narrative is often bound up with a representation of gangs and gang culture imagined as some form of infectious disease or virus that gestates in one group before migrating to another, which then becomes 'infected' by this mutant 'criminal disease'. This refrain became popular in the aftermath of the riots of 2011, not least after the appearance of celebrity historian David Starkey on a primetime news

programme, who argued that a gang culture that had gestated in the Black community had now reached out to infect the culture of the white working class.

Most gangs are populated by young men and most gang offending, according to the available evidence, is male (Klein 2001). None of this, however, has prevented various journalists from recurrently discovering girl gangs populated by hyper-violent 'she-male' gangsters who, we are asked to believe, have become as dangerous or even more so than their male counterparts. Though, as Tara Young's (2009, 2011) and Susan Batchelor's (2009) careful and detailed demolitions of the 'she-male gangster thesis' attest, the evidential basis for such claims is weak, headlines nevertheless proliferate: 'Mob Violence: The Rise of Girl Gangs' (Lee 2008), or 'The Feral Sex: The Terrifying Rise of Violent Girl Gangs' (Bracchi 2008).

Nor is it only young women you have succumbed to the gang infection. According to other reports, gang members are getting much, much younger. Hail the rise of the 'tinies' as they are known, young gangbangers aged no older than three, armed and dangerous and on a street near you (Clements and Roberts 2007).

### **Corporatisation**

Not only are the gangs multiplying, the gang today is evolving and organising in ever more lethal directions. The narrative runs something like this: 'Once upon a time the groups were disorganised and posed a relatively small threat we could deal with; but now they are organising as we speak, and now pose terrible threats to us all.' At its most developed this (hysterical) aspect of gang talk works by conceding to the gang-bureaucratic attributes that best describe the structure of corporations and armies. In this projection, a street

reality which is most often composed (as we shall subsequently see) of loose, amorphous, fluid and, in a Deleuzian sense, rhizomatic networks (Hallsworth and Silverstone 2009) becomes reconstructed in terms that best describe the organisations that gang-talkers typically inhabit. And so the gang is ascribed with elaborate divisions of labour and a complex vertical, hierarchical structure.

This attempt to *corporatise the street* by projecting upon it attributes that best define formal social institutions is by no means new. To return to the Middle Ages the Canting Crew was imagined in organisational terms that corresponded to that of the medieval guild. Entry to the Company of Thieves required a solemn oath while the Canting order was imagined to possess twelve subdivisions (the Canting Orders) presided over by the 'Dimbler Dambler', the Prince of Thieves (Harris 1971). Moving forward to the 1960s and the same process could be observed in the US, nowhere more brilliantly worked through than in Cressey's evocation of the Mafia as a shadow corporation (Cressey 1969). This fantasy of organised crime as a criminal corporation involved conceding to it a pyramidal structure presided over by the Godfather, supported by a company lawyer (the 'Consigliere'), run by various middle managers (the Lieutenants) who control the street 'soldiers'. The same process can also be seen at work in the UK today, in accounts of gangs that rework street terms like 'elders' (older gangsters), 'younger' (younger men), 'tinies' (young children) and 'wannabes' (would-be gangsters) and transforming this into a full-blown bureaucratic gang structure (see Pitts 2008).

The attempt to corporatise the gang also reflects a key trait about gang talk more generally. Again, to revert to the language of Deleuze, gang talk is constructed from within an arborescent (tree-thinking) perspective and this is nowhere reflected more than in the pronounced tendency to approach the gang in the same way sociologists traditionally studied bureaucracies and to deploy a

managerial language to describe their features (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). In the words of Jonathon Toy, for example, a practitioner musing on the gang situation in London, 'organisational gangs', as he terms them,

are well structured, profit led businesses. They are led by entrepreneurial, dynamic individuals, capable of creating high levels of loyalty with dividends being paid to the board of directors as a reward for success. They have a strong recruitment policy, akin to headhunting, and are willing to fire people who do not perform or who go against the ethos of the business. (Toy 2008)

He goes on to identify the organisational features of this new criminal gang in a diagram that is resolutely corporatist in inspiration (Figure 3.2).

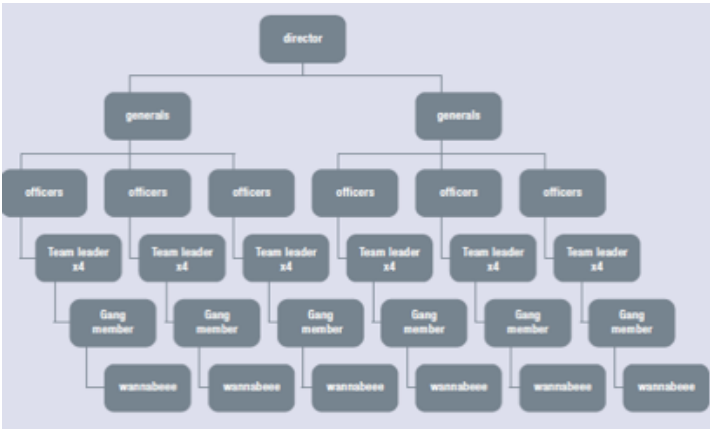


Figure 3.2 Gang talking fantasy: The corporate model of the gang  
Source: Toy (2008: 31).

**Weaponisation**



As the attraction of gangs is bound up ineluctably with the violence that gang members do, it is unsurprising that a key focus of gang talk condenses around the weapons gang members allegedly carry. To a degree, this aspect of gang talk is also bound up with the idea that as the gang becomes more organised, gang members are more likely to carry weapons, while the weapons they carry become ever more lethal.

In the UK, the gang-talking narrative that surrounded the contemporary (re)discovery of the gang exhibited precisely this narrative. Gangs, it was alleged, were no longer fighting each other with fists; they were now carrying knives and were increasingly arming themselves with guns to sort out their 'gang wars'. If that was not enough, the gang was also beginning to innovate by using what the media and other right-thinking people like to term 'new weapons of choice'.

As we saw in Chapter 1, they have quite a lot of these, including dangerous dogs such as pit bulls which have now become 'a weapon of choice for gang members, drug dealers and street corner thugs' (BBC News 2009); while according to ROTA, 'Rape has become a weapon of choice, and used against sisters, girlfriends and on occasion mothers, as it is the only weapon that cannot be detected during a stop and search' (Firmin 2010).

The idea of the gang imagined as an armed, insurgent unit perhaps also explains why they were so quickly identified and blamed for the urban disorder in the UK in 2011. After all, they have been blamed for every other inner-urban problem in recent years, so why not riots? This also helps to explain why they can be identified with the capacity not only to cause riots but also to destroy community life entirely; a sentiment expressed clearly by government minister Iain Duncan Smith, a self-styled expert on gangs, in his reflections on the causes of social breakdown:

Gangs have created no-go areas and made impossible the very things that could help deprived neighbourhoods to rejuvenate, such as community action and business development. Gangs are both a product of social breakdown and a driver of it. (Duncan Smith 2011)

### **Penetration**

Fears about the 'new weapons of choice' are compounded by various fears and anxieties about the gangs' capacity to extend themselves through space. They begin as always in the inner-city estates where they emerge, but, over time, they reach out to colonise other settings which they dominate and control. This fantasy is expressed variously in the idea that super-gangs have developed which now exercise total control over social life in the estates where they are found (see Pitts 2008), to fears and anxieties over what are often referred to by gang-talkers as the 'recruitment strategies' of gangs, and in particular the corrupting role they play in 'grooming' vulnerable people and enticing them into a life of vice and crime.

Gang members often groom girls at school and encourage/coerce them to recruit other girls through school/social networks. There is also anecdotal evidence that younger girls (some as young as 10 or 12) are increasingly being targeted, and these girls are often much less able to resist the gang culture or manipulation by males in the group. The girls often do not identify their attackers as gang members and tend to think of them as boyfriends. They may also be connected through family or other networks. Girls are often groomed using drugs and alcohol, which act as disinhibitors and also create dependency. Girls may also be used as

mules to transport drugs, which frequently involves trafficking within the UK. (London Serious Youth Violence Board, 2009)

Nor are gangs today geographically bound to the estates which they apparently control. In such narratives the gang is imagined as a mutant force that invades new territories in order to feed upon ever new categories of victims. They have, apparently, invaded the prison system. Apparently radical fundamentalist Islam gangs are not only rampant in the penal system, they are forcibly converting young men to Islam within them (Beckford 2012).

If this isn't bad enough, it gets worse. The gangs apparently are also seeking to target posh girls-only schools in leafy suburbia, at least according to the findings of the self-defined 'watershed' ROTA report:

Girls who carry firearms and drugs for their boyfriends often live in areas that are not perceived to have a 'gang-problem', may attend grammar or private all-girls schools, will rarely be under any form of surveillance or be known to any specialist services such as children's or youth offending services have their own bank account where their boyfriend can store his money. (Firmin 2010)

Note what is being evoked here: the world of childhood innocence corrupted; a world where decent girls who attend privileged schools in 'good' areas, are targeted by evil gang members from the ghetto who force them to carry their weapons and hide their criminal goods. That the report was based, as we have seen, predominantly upon opinion, much of it garnered from people who had no gang affiliation, where the term 'gang' was never defined, escaped notice. As for the claim that gangs were targeting grammar school girls, the

report (in common with most gang talk) produces no evidence at all in support of the sensational claim being made that everyone else then unquestionably accepts.

## **Monsters**

If we consider the way in which gang members are described in gang-talking narratives, what comes across is a vision of a population who are not only systematically dehumanised but rendered absolutely Other. In this guise they appear as violent psychotic outsiders, driven by depravity to crime; wholly devoid of recognisably human attributes.

If we consider further what it is that is monstrous about the gang then one of its most evident features is that its members are almost always imagined to belong to or come from a minority ethnic group. The legacy of deeply inscribed racism, it could be observed, invariably reflects itself in gang-talking narratives not least when produced by white middle-class gang-talkers. And this explains why, in the UK, the gangs are invariably Black or Asian. This also explains why group offending is never found in predominantly white middle-class suburbs, though fears of wealthy areas being penetrated by gangs forms a potent trope within gang talk, as the idea of the gangs targeting privileged schools reminds us. Like the undead in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; the gang member is conceived as someone who is essentially different from the indigenous (white) population. And like the undead in *Buffy*, this is a population that cannot be reasoned with but only coercively controlled.

Monstrousness is also bound up with the idea prominent in gang-talking discourses that the gang member is essentially different from 'normal' members of society. They may be born different or, once subject to the fatal embrace of the gangs or that wonderfully nebulous term 'gang culture' (having been 'groomed'

or 'recruited'), they become different. Here are the signs and symptoms that define those who have been subject to such a process of conversion, at least as fantasised by the authors of a report into serious youth violence in the UK – a report which, to define a typical and recurring feature in the gang-talking literature, adduces absolutely no evidence at all to support its claims:

*Gang identifiers:*

- Child withdrawn from family;
- Sudden loss of interest in school. Decline in attendance or academic achievement (although it should be noted that some gang members will maintain a good attendance record to avoid coming to notice);
- Being emotionally 'switched off', but also containing frustration rage;
- Started to use new or unknown slang words;
- Holds unexplained money or possessions;
- Stays out unusually late without reason, or breaking parental rules consistently;
- Sudden change in appearance – dressing in a particular style or 'uniform' similar to that of other young people they hang around with, including a particular colour;
- Dropped out of positive activities;
- New nickname;
- Unexplained physical injuries, and/or refusal to see /receive medical treatment for injuries;
- Graffiti style 'tags' on possessions, school books, walls;
- Constantly talking about another young person who seems to have a lot of influence over them;
- Broken off with old friends and hangs around with one group of people;

- Associating with known or suspected gang members, closeness to siblings or adults in the family who are gang members;
- Started adopting certain codes of group behaviour, e.g. ways of talking and hand signs;
- Expressing aggressive or intimidating views towards other groups of young people, some of whom may have been friends in the past;
- Scared when entering certain areas; and
- Concerned by the presence of unknown youths in their neighbourhoods. (London Serious Youth Violence Board 2009)

In reading the above, continuities can be established between the way the gang member is being identified today and older myths and stereotypes reproduced about dope fiends in the 1940s and 1950s; everyday stories about how decent, well-behaved kids from respectable families became demented and depraved addicts having been forced to take the evil 'weed' by a drug dealer. As with the dope fiend, we find signs of dropping out of the good society as a marker of gang belonging ('broken off with old friends', 'dropping out of positive activities'), as we do signs of entry to a new monstrous gang order (adopting certain codes, a new nickname, and so on).

Monstrousness is also evident in the eternal fascination gang-talker's exhibit towards what are often imaged as the evil induction rituals gang members indulge in. Initiation ceremonies often garner considerable and salacious interest. And several circulate, though evidence attesting to their reality is often difficult to find, as research into this issue attests (Decker and Van Winkle 1996). For some gangs, apparently, rape is used as a rite of passage, while other gangsters, it is claimed, apparently require would be wannabes to randomly shoot or stab a stranger as a price for belonging.

Taking the idea of the gang member as abnormal monster to its logical conclusion, images of an atrophied brain were presented by members of the Wave Trust, a proselytising organisation steeped in biologically reductionist theories of crime, at practitioner conferences and seminars about gangs in the UK, with the implication that this is what the brain of a gang member looks like. The brain in question was that of a seriously neglected three-year-old Romanian orphan.

### **The Seduction of Gang Talk**

None of this disputes the fact that gangs exist and can be dangerous, however we elect to define this vague and elusive term. There are gang realities and we need to comprehend them. Moreover, gang lives fit certain aspects of the ascribed archetypes which help to confirm the gang talk that gang-talkers do. Guns and knives are not discursive constructions, not least when used by gang members to shoot each other. Gangs, as such, are not, as Aldridge and Medina (2010) observe, spectres or chimeras of the control imaginary. That said, when gang-talkers attempt to engage with the reality of the gang, it is not the reality of *gang practices* that they engage with, what is produced instead is an imaginary set of representations about gangs that take the archetypal forms described above, and it is these that take precedence when gangs are being evoked by the wider gang-talking fraternity.

In such representations any sense of proportion is invariably evicted. Rare instances become indicative of the norm; the exception defines the rule. Complex, messy lives in this process are reconstructed into evil caricatures; a pornography of violence prevails in which only the most extreme representation is allowed and heard. In this highly essentialised construction complexity simply has no place. All gang members are ubiquitously alike and each and

every one embodies every pathology the gang-talking fraternity identifies. In the evocation of the gang as the harbinger of all evil the gang literally becomes what David Brotherton terms 'everyman's other'.

The archetypes around which gang talk is assembled are deeply ingrained in the social imaginary. They are not, as such, new; all that gang talk does is reassemble them. The image of the gang, in this sense, parallels archetypes about fearsome outsiders everywhere. Historically, elements of these can most certainly be found in the folk literature and fairy tales; they also provide the stable of much fantasy literature that also hinges on the arrival into the good society of dark subterranean forces that mean it harm. In our insecure age, primordial fears about the Other continue to enjoy wide dissemination. Fears about the terror threat represent yet another manifestation. So too does gang talk, which also articulates long-established perennial fears about outsiders everywhere.

Gang talk, it could be noted, is never a neutral discourse, but one bound up with a racial subtext from which it cannot be disentangled. This helps explain, not least, why gangs have been so sensationally rediscovered in British society. The fact that they were associated from the beginning with Black youth, an already criminalised population, has a lot to do with it. For Conguergood, gang talk is itself bound up with what, following Said, he identifies as 'orientalism' (Said 1978); only in this case the 'other' being evoked is no longer the exotic colonial subject abroad, it denotes instead the 'new postcolonial natives of the urban jungle'.

The inner city and suburbs are polarised sites within a new economically articulated geography of power and domination that remaps the colonialist axis between capital and colony. The 'inner city', like Joseph



Conrad's Congo, is spatially imagined as a journey into a dark interior, the penetration of a cavity, an orifice, an absence a moral decent into an urban heart of darkness'. (Conquergood 1991: 5)

In gang talk then we find a world reduced to a fundamental binary between the healthy 'included' (white) middle-class society and, confronting it, (Black) feral gangs that threaten to overwhelm it (unless beaten back). In a recent paper McGuire explores further what it is about the Other than constructs it as such (McGuire 2011). To arrive at this, he argues that we need he argues a science of abnormality, a teratology; in effect, a science of monsters. Gang talk, I suggest, is one of society's most potent teratology's, a treatise on the imagined deformed and deforming nightmare that white society imagines is taking root within the inner city 'heart of darkness'.

Why are these teratology's continuously resurrected in the space of our contemporary and consumed so avidly? The answer to this is that they are performative; they provide an interpretative grid through and by which murky, difficult chunks of reality may be readily comprehended. They offer a ready-to-hand vocabulary that puts messy reality into context and place. Not least, gang talk provides a vocabulary about gangs that everyone can quickly recognise even if the producers of gang talk have never met gang members or gangs. Gang talk also chimes well with the arborescent horizons of control agents. By corporatising the gangs and locating them into their various offices, so a reality is constructed (as opposed to discovered) that they believe they can manage and control.

In a postmodern, hyper-real culture, where the signified and the signifier have long departed company (Jameson 1984; Harvey 1989), gang talk is ready-made for narrating the 'reality' of a world which, in Richard Rorty's terms, is

already 'well lost' (Rorty 1972). In the 'society of the spectacle' (Debord 1994), gang talk establishes the reality of the gang but as simulacra; as an identical copy of a reality that never existed (Baudrillard 1981).

But there is also an ideological function to gang talk that needs to be acknowledged. In the post-welfare, neoliberal state where penal-fare as opposed to welfare increasingly defines the way in which poverty is managed (Waqant 2009); gang talk helps establish the terms in and by which the global precariat, the losers in the neoliberal, winner-takes-all society, are now defined. Together with underclass thinking more generally, it reconstructs the lives of the urban poor as feral outsiders; as a population to whom pain dispensation appears necessary and, not least, just. It constructs them in Nils Christie's terms as a *suitable enemy* at the same time as it establishes the included society as a *suitable victim*. In Conquergood's terminology, gang talk as such 'functions as discursive apparatus for controlling and containing difference, managing the problem of diversity' (Conquergood 1991: 7).

In part, this ideological function is realised precisely through the visceral emotions that gang talk evokes. Gang talk is not a neutral discourse or one that operates only at the level of explaining *What the Gangs are Doing Now*. What gang talk does is simultaneously appeal to deeply-inscribed fears, phobias and anxieties the good society has about its monstrous outside that are ignited in its very evocation of it; fears grounded on primordial ontological insecurities about dark strangers violating, penetrating and invading the body of society that gang talk mobilises, harnesses and then translates into fear, indignation and rage. In so doing, gang talk establishes the emotive register then comes to define the control response. Fears easily translated through media amplification spirals into the demand for coercive action against enemies reduced to terms of absolute, essentialised, difference.

Collective fantasies are not merely fictions that can be discarded if they have been falsified. People cling to them with faith. In this, they behave rather like scientists attached to paradigms that have been falsified but who refuse to accept the failure of their science (Kuhn 1962). And so it is with gang talk, the Philistogen theory of the street. It produces a self-referential reality that everyone readily comprehends and into which everything gangs do or are imagined to do can be condensed and folded: knives, dangerous dogs, shootings, muggings, riots, the drugs trade, social breakdown, and so on. Given this, what gang-talkers want to find is not evidence that challenges the gang talk that constitutes the orthodoxy of their conspiracy discourse, so much as a further iteration of the archetypes and thus a confirmation of the orthodoxy.

Let me take this argument further. Academics who undertake respectable gang research, whose findings either challenge the orthodoxies of gang talk or which fail to deliver the sensational truth about the gangs which gang talk demands and trades in, are those most likely to be ignored. This has certainly been the situation in the UK, and I suspect the US as well. If, however, the researcher appeals directly to the archetypes embedded in gang talk (novelty, proliferation, corporatization, weaponisation, and so on) then the findings will almost invariably be celebrated and widely reported – and funding is likely to follow.

And when we come to study policy formation in respect to gangs, the same logic applies. Gang suppression is less a rational proportionate response to a threat whose nature is carefully identified in a world dominated by 'evidence driven policy'; it conversely takes the form of a set of knee-jerk responses, where overwhelming force is used to address the problem of the gang, when the only evidence being marshalled is that typically produced through gang talk and its constitutive archetypes. And this also helps explain the often wildly

disproportionate responses that gangs attract. 'Wars' declared against an imagined evil, rather than a proportionate response to social problems posed by unruly groups among multiply disadvantaged populations.

### **Unforeseen Consequences**

But gang talk can also produce unforeseen consequences in its othering. To understand this, however, we must return to the insights of Labelling theory as this was articulated in the work of Becker and Goffman many years ago. As Becker argued, labels are potent, they exist not only as vehicles through and by which deviant groups become classified as deviant by those with the power to label them as such; they determine both how agents of social control respond to and perceive the rule-breakers; they also shape the way rule-breakers subsequently perceive themselves, often in the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Becker 1964). Gang talk in this sense is a potent way of labelling groups; it defines what they are, it establishes the magnitude of their difference; and the appalling nature of their crimes. It establishes them as a public enemy and legitimates their coercive treatment. Living with the burden of stigma is difficult, insofar as it often forces those stigmatised to acquire the deviant personality they have been ascribed (Goffman 1963).

The gang talk that saturates the US is illustrative of this process. By classifying entire generations of ghetto youth as a public enemy, and treating them as if they are, so the preconditions have been created where the ghetto responds by coming to accept the demonic labels used to classify them. These are then thrown back in the face of the excluding society. 'We will become the nightmare you imagine us as' arises as a predictable response. This, not least, was a fact recognised by organic intellectuals within the hip hop movement.

One exemplar would be the group Public Enemy; Tupac Shakur's 'Thug Life' and Outlaw Immortalz also play on this refrain.

And the same process it seems to me is also at work in the UK today. In a world where gang talk saturates public and political discourse, groups of young people in poor areas are not only being labelled as gangs, they are also being treated as if they are. Many reject the demonic labels they find imposed upon them; but as Cohen's work on the Mod phenomenon and Jock Young's early work on 'drug takers' many years ago demonstrated, some may well come to assume the persona of the folk devil into which they are being interpolated (Cohen 1972). And this leads me logically to the final irony: *the unintended consequence of gang talk is that it constitutes the Other it designates*. The deviant, as always, is less discovered but produced.

## **Conclusion**

Trying to have a reasoned debate on gangs in any society is difficult. The object of enquiry does not lend itself to easy definition as the academic gang-literature attests. And the task of studying worlds that are themselves closed to and often hostile towards outsiders is inherently difficult. But attempting to get to the reality of the gang is also be-devilled by gang talk of the kind I have tried to identify here. The 'truths' in which it trades are not those of the gang realities it claims to narrate but partakes instead of the phantasmagorical elements I have tried to describe here. A paranoid hyper-real, conspiracy discourse that proceeds wholly separately from the street world it claims to represent. A collective fantasy that has its own rules of constitution and combination, as we have seen, and which, like most fantasies, does not lend itself to falsification. While it might appear that this populist discourse belongs to the world of the mass media, the foolish and the ignorant, this I fear is to underestimate the

seductive allure of this discourse that also continues to infest and infect the academy. The question I want to pose, but leave unanswered here, is, how far can the pitfalls of gang talk possibly be avoided? Indeed, can they?

# Tilting at Windmills: In Pursuit of Gang Truths in a British City

In this paper we present the findings of a small empirical research project conducted in Birmingham, a large Metropolitan City in the UK in 2013. The project was commissioned by the local police and was initiated with the aim of helping establish the nature, prevalence and structure of urban street gangs in a research site defined by the police and governmental agencies at the time as 'gang afflicted'. As a small snapshot study the research findings have clear limitations in relation to generalisation. That said, they do throw up some interesting findings that bear in on current debates within and outside of academia on the urban street gang phenomena.

The research in question was commissioned with the aim of helping provide the commissioners with a reality check on the urban gang situation in the UK during a period when many sensational claims were being made about gangs both within and outside of the academy. Claims to the effect that gangs were the new face of youth crime; that contemporary gangs were large and hierarchical; that gangs were a serious developing threat in English cities; and that gangs were responsible for a range of social evils including orchestrating riots and taking over the penal estate. Claims we will simply badge up into what we propose to call the *contemporary gang talking inventory*.

As we shall see, when we went in pursuit of these 'gang truths' in an area defined by the authorities as 'gang afflicted', the gang and group realities we found, bore little relationship to the sensational claims embodied in this inventory. Nor, as we will argue in conclusion, did the very real problems of

violence in the area we studied, lend itself to a policy response shaped around gang suppression then mediated as a magic bullet by the government.

Prior to profiling our research, however, it pays to briefly consider the status of gang research as this has developed since the urban street gang was sensationally (re)discovered in Europe in the opening decade of the twenty first century. It also pays, to consider more broadly the sensational social reaction the discovery of the urban street gang has provoked as these frame the social and political context in which this research was conducted. If the findings of the research must be considered tentative, they nevertheless support some contemporary approaches to the study of urban street gangs, while also challenging other approaches and not least policy.

### **The contours of contemporary European gang research**

Until the 21st century the urban street gang was considered predominantly a uniquely American problem not a European one. Having failed to discover USA style gangs in the UK in the 1960s, criminologists in the UK predominantly ignored urban street gangs and studied youth subculture instead (Hebdidge, 1979). Looking across at Europe more generally, the same story can be told. Groups across Europe may engage in crime and violence but this was not interpreted through the urban street gang lens.

This began to change in the opening decade of the 21st century when concerns about street gangs began to appear in the popular media who then began to report their activities in a sensational manner. In the UK the arrival of the gang was directly linked to a series of fatalities specifically involving young Black males. Many appeared gang related, and, though a number of others were not (on closer inspection) it was through the gang lens that they were interpreted (Hallsworth & Young, 2008). Looking more widely across Europe,



the gang was not traditionally conceived as a European Problem. This began to change in the twenty first century and for varied reasons. Offering empirical confirmation of the 'gangs have now arrived', kind, the arrival into European cities such as Milan and Barcelona of urban street gangs such as the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation and Neta, suggested an all American problem now appeared have migrated across the Atlantic to become a European one (Feixa et al., 2008). Reports about the activities of groups that appeared to have clear gang connections in societies as diverse as Norway, The Netherlands and Germany also confirmed the picture (see Klein et al. 2001, 2006; Decker & Weerman, 2005). Given that young people in inner city estates across Europe were now readily embracing the uniform of the American ghetto warriors, gangs appeared to many an altogether new and sinister phenomenon.

Academic attempts to interpret what was happening across Europe began to spiral in rather different and often starkly opposing directions. As the findings presented here both support some of the interpretations that have been made, while challenging others, it pays to identify the contours of the gang debate as it has developed over the last decade.

In an attempt to bring to Europe lessons learnt from America the Eurogang Research network was established under the leadership of a team of professional academic, administrative gang researchers led by Malcolm Klein. Pursuing a predominantly positivistic, numbers driven research agenda, Klein and Maxon argued that gangs existed in Europe and used the results of quantitative surveys to demonstrate that they met the definitional criteria necessary to be defined as gangs, where their definition stressed systemic involvement in crime. Klein and Maxon went further. It was not that the gang was a new phenomenon, it had always existed, only European scholars had long been in denial about it. This they termed the Eurogang paradox (Klein et

al., 2001). If the gang was not new, nor did it resemble, they argued, the stereotype of the American Street gang imagined as large and defined by a corporate structure. They stressed instead the more informal aspects of the gang and used a typology developed in USA to profile its variations.

Promoting what he claimed was a left realist approach to the study of the urban street gang UK academic John Pitts (Pitts, 2007, 2008), went much further. Using findings from empirical research conducted in London, he and his associates (see Harding, 2014 Toy, 2008) contended that urban street gangs were both large and corporate, and represented nothing less than the 'new face of youth crime'. In common with Klein and the Eurogang, the gang as he defined it was essentially a criminal unit and, as such, something that needed to be suppressed in the name of law and order.

Offering a more cultural criminological, not to say critical perspective, our work (see Hallsworth & Young, 2008; Hallsworth, 2013) challenged the emerging orthodoxies of the 'gang talk' that Pitts, along with an emerging industry of 'gang talkers' were promoting: the gang as corporate entity, the gang as the new face of crime, the gang as the latter day harbinger of urban mayhem responsible for everything from gun crime to organising riots. Our critique challenged the epistemological, ontological and methodological assumptions that had come to frame the gang debate.

While not denying that groups that met whatever definitional terms to qualify as gangs existed, we argued that most groups that engaged in the crimes blamed on gangs did not. Rather than wrap up group offending into a gang typology as the Eurogang researchers sought to do, we argued that the gang was one of a number of possible grouping which included peer groups and more organised crime groups that were not gangs and should not be defined as such (Hallsworth & Young, 2005; Hallsworth & Duffy, 2011). We argued that

when subject to empirical scrutiny, many of the problems blamed on gangs had causes that simply were not gang related. While gangs could and did use guns, gun crime was not confined to gangs. Most gun crime as Silverstone and myself argued, could best be explained by looking instead at the volatile make shift lives of the denizens of a violent street culture known by its own inhabitants as 'on road' (Hallsworth & Silverstone, 2009). Far then from making the gang the principle object of a governmental crackdown, our work, echoing the American traditions of Elijah Anderson (Anderson, 2000) and Phillip Bourgois (1995), emphasised the need to foreground a highly violent and volatile street culture that had taken root in many British Cities, as opposed to reducing complex street realities to a problem of gangs. Drawing upon the lessons of critical criminology our work also focused upon understanding the social reaction the gang was producing. We have consistently emphasised problematic labelling, and not least the racial and criminalising assumptions that underlay public gang talk.

This focus would also be reproduced in the work of Aldridge and Medina et al whose ESRC funded research in gang city also discovered groups that less resembled formal bureaucracies but what they termed informal messy networks (Aldridge et al., 2011). Gang labels, they also emphasised, were being permissively applied by control agents and to the detriment of those to whom they had been successfully applied.

This paints in broad brushwork terms the contours of the contemporary debates around the urban street gang at least as it has unfolded in the European context. More recent work on urban street gangs in a sense sides implicitly or explicitly with various elements of the positions outlined above.<sup>40</sup> Harding's

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<sup>40</sup> For an overview of the positions in the current debate see the papers assembled in Goldson (2011).

recent work (Harding, 2014), for example, echoes Pitts position which holds gangs to a new escalating phenomenon. As with Pitts, the gangs he claims to have discovered appear to equate directly with the American Stereotype: large, hierarchical and with a complex division of labour. Working within a more street sensitive, ethnographic tradition the recent work of Alister Frazier (Frazier, 2015) and Joanne Moore (Moore, 2015) in Glasgow paint a very different position, one more akin to the work of Aldridge, Medina, Hallsworth and Young. Glaswegian gangs inter-generationally reproduce themselves; they are at heart informal friendship groups that take root within multiply deprived working class estates, members typically have a pronounced street presence. Though a capacity for violence is certainly a competence members have to demonstrate, these ethnography's also highlight other less criminalising aspects of gang life, such as the search for excitement. Both ethnography's also explore the inter-generational reproduction of the gang and frame its formation and reproduction within a cogent analysis of the post-industrial city. As with American ethnographers like Brotheron, and Hagerdorn, the gang in this body of ethnographic work is far more than a criminal entity and in these works we find the life of the 'other' humanised in ways it is not in the more administrative criminological traditions.

If this summarises, albeit with considerable brevity, the internal history of developing gang research in the European context, looking externally at the wider social reaction that the discovery of the gang has provoked, then it is fair to say that in relation to the way the gang has been constructed in the mass media and by various 'right thinking people' (to use Cohen's formulation (Cohen, 1972)) the gang appears as little more than a demonic other. And it is this way of framing it that has quite literally dominated the policy and media debates in the UK. If we now consider this, the contemporary gang talking

inventory, the urban street gang has quite literally been blamed for just about every manifestation of urban violence (Hallsworth, 2013). Gangs were now being placed at the heart of the drugs trade, blamed for the rise in weaponised violence, and among other things, the systematic sexual exploitation of women (Firmin, 2010) in what appeared close to what Cohen would define as a moral panic (Cohen, 1972). Following the English riots of 2011, the urban street gang was singled out as criminal mastermind orchestrating the disorder, and gang suppression was meted out as the policy response (even though evidence began to emerge (and quite quickly) that the role of the gang in urban street violence had been heavily overstated). Summarising the government line minister Ian Duncan Smith identified the urban street gang not only as a symptom of social breakdown in the UK but a net driver of it (cited in Wintour, 2011).

### **The research project**

The project we will now discuss was commissioned by the West Midlands Police and ACPO in the wake of the English riots of 2011. It was commissioned in the wake of an international conference on gangs convened by the government, and the creation of what would become the government's key social response to the riots, the Ending Gang and Youth Violence Taskforce (HM Government, 2011). This would be funded to the tune of £15 million and was supported by the employment of 100 'gang experts'. Groups of these were to be dispatched to various 'gang afflicted areas' to support the development of effective gang suppression policy and practice.

It should be pointed out that the research we were commissioned to undertake was not connected with or funded by this gang suppression programme but by the local constabulary as an independent project. Our commissioners, in effect, wanted a reality check on urban street gangs. In the

context of a society where they were, as we have seen, being blamed for urban violence and community breakdown, our commissioners wanted to know whether the gang problem was as serious as the gang talking inventory would suggest.

In order to meet the terms of the research brief, rather than go looking for gang truths in an area of Birmingham where the knowledge base on urban street gangs was limited, we asked to study the gang problem in an area that had an established reputation for gang related activity and which was already labelled by the police and government as 'gang afflicted'; in other words we went looking for the truth about urban street gangs in an area where confirmation of their violent excesses could be most readily confirmed. That is, if they existed. The target areas in which research was conducted were Handsworth, Lozells and Aston.

### **Research sites**

Before we make some more broad and personal observations about the socio-economic conditions of these areas, it is worth noting that the sensational attention that the gang has come to command in British society was not least confirmed by what was manifestly a gang related incident in Handsworth which saw two women murdered in a drive by shooting. This was directly connected to conflict between two established local urban street gangs, the Burger Bar Boys and The Johnson crew. These were populated by local young Black men drawn from a wider Afro Caribbean Community resident in the area. It could be noted that Handsworth's reputation for urban violence has a longer history. In the 1970s, it had an established reputation for street crime and it would be a violent street robbery in the area that would provoke the moral panic that formed the focus of Hall et al.'s seminal text 'Policing the Crisis' (Hall

et al., 1978). The first wave of 'Black riots' that swept across England in the early 1980s also saw Handsworth quite literally go up in flames. In an area where police and community relations were strained, the research sites we selected were perfectly matched to the research brief we had been given.

Leaving aside the status of these areas as 'gang afflicted', these are multi ethnic areas that have for decades been home to generations of minority ethnic populations both from Africa and the Caribbean and from India and Pakistan. Though these areas are vibrant and culturally rich,<sup>41</sup> they are also areas characterised by high levels of deprivation and poverty. Many young people growing up in these areas, including those with gang affiliations, would have faced and directly experienced as a consequence the symptoms that generations of academics have associated with deprivation and poverty: overcrowded and sometimes substandard housing; higher than average rates of crime; high levels of welfare, high levels of unemployment and underemployment in a predominantly low wage economy. The research was also conducted against a background of recession and in the context of a state that had embarked on a programme of sustained cuts to welfare and welfare services.

## **Methodology**

Mindful of the fact that different constituencies might well have very different conceptions about the nature and extent of the gang situation in the areas we studied, we elected to deploy different researchers to interview members of the key constituencies whom it appeared reasonable to expect,

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<sup>41</sup> During the 1970s Handsworth was home to one of the UK's most successful Reggae bands Steel Pulse. Their album 'Handsworth Revolution' is also arguably one of the greatest reggae albums that came out of the UK. A searing critique of an unjust society and a call for urban and cultural insurrection.

might have an informed understanding of the gang situation in the area. A dedicated researcher was thus dispatched to interview front line officers in the areas studied, along with intelligence officers and members of the local gang suppression unit. Another researcher was tasked with interviewing local community stakeholders who worked closely with young people. Given concerns had been raised about the presence of gangs in the penal estate another researcher interviewed staff in the local prison.

Finally we employed a youth worker resident in the research sites to conduct a series of interviews with young men at a local youth club located in Handsworth. The young men interviewed were selected by the youth worker on the basis that they had a pronounced street presence, were affiliated in some way to local youth groups (which may or may not be gangs), and who, as we shall see, had some involvement with violence. The young men were aged between 16 and 20 and in terms of ethnicity were predominantly Black. While this is admittedly a narrow demographic and by no means representative of all ethnicities in the areas studied, it was nevertheless among the young Black male population in Birmingham that urban street gangs came to prominence, Given we were looking for gang truths were they might most reasonably be expected to be found, studying this constituency appeared justified.

Each researcher conducted their research independently of each other. Only when the final report was written did the field researchers see the results of each other endeavours. The reason we pursued this tactic was because we wanted to see if the gang realities each constituency saw converged around a common gang reality, or a series of different ones. We return to this issue subsequently.



The questions we asked were shaped by our research aims: How far did the gang reality in the area correspond to the sensational claims mediated both by academics and practitioners nationally. We thus asked questions about:

- The perceived seriousness of the gang situation in the area
- The number of gangs resident in the area
- Group organisation and structure. Were 'gangs' large, territorial and hierarchical, did they have initiation rites and did they forcibly recruit members as many were arguing
- Group engagement in crime and violence
- The nature of territorialism
- The relation of gang members to their communities.

Though this snap shot research might not deliver the depth of research an ethnography by its nature reveals, it would, we felt, address the question of seeing how far gang realities in the area equated with the gang inventory then driving gang suppression forward.

### **Participants**

Young men we interviewed were aged between 16-19 years. Six participants identified as Black Afro Caribbean, one White UK, two mixed race – White UK and Black Afro Caribbean, and one mixed race – south Asian and Black Afro Caribbean. Two elder ex-gang members were also interviewed about their experiences, both were Black Afro Caribbean. Both were in their thirties.

Fourteen community stakeholders were interviewed who had direct experience of working with young people in the pilot areas. Six men and four women consented to interview whose age ranged between 20-40 years.

Participants stated they had worked with youth from 1-10 years (mean 5.1 years) in areas that covered a city wide location. Job roles that they occupied were described as youth worker, mentor, Director of organisations that worked with disaffected youth, Director of community interest organisation, faith organisation worker, or social entrepreneur. All stated they had obtained their knowledge from direct work with youth in the Birmingham city area, four also stated they knew gang members through friends/family or had lived in areas populated by gangs in the past or present day.

Officers and staff from WMP also contributed directly with this study as participants, specifically personnel from the Gang Task Force, Pan-Birmingham Gang Team, Safer Neighbourhood Team, the Multi-agency Gang Unit (MAGU) an integrated offender management team that work with gang nominals, Force Intelligence and the Birmingham Community Safety Partnership. Interviews normally lasted approximately 1 hour and where possible, a stakeholder questionnaire was also completed for direct comparison with responses from the complementary stands of the research. Participants of this strand of the research ranged in rank from Detective Inspector, Sergeant, Constable, PCSO and civilian staff, all sharing a knowledge of USGs and the areas being reviewed.

Interviews lasted approximately one hour on average. The responses of young people were audio recorded, while the responses of other participants were noted in detailed written format. Content analysis is used to analyse the collated data and the integrity of the research was checked by asking the participants retrospectively if our analysis of the data constituted an accurate reflection of their experiences.

### **A plenitude of gangs?**

In the context of a society in which the urban street gang has been allegedly discovered as the 'new face of youth crime' it made sense to begin our investigation of gang land realities by enquiring just how serious the gang problem was perceived to be in this 'gang afflicted' area and try and establish how many gangs there were. What became clear as we assembled the different research strands was that each constituency we interviewed did not see a common gang reality; different constituencies saw the same reality but often in very different ways.

The police constituted the constituency most likely to argue that the gang situation was serious. They were also most likely to identify violence in the area as gang related. But even this constituency was by no means homogenous. Intelligence officers identified far fewer gangs than front line officers and some officers were quite sceptical about the seriousness of the gang situation. When we explored this discrepancy further it emerged that the term 'gang' as it was intuitively applied by front line officers, constituted a term that could embrace most groups they worked with in the course of their day to day work roles. In order for intelligence officers to have a group formally identified as a gang, however, it had to meet the criteria for gang membership as this had been formally identified by the Home Office. Given that a number of the front line officers worked within dedicated gang suppression units, the fact that their work reality meant engaging with groups identified as gangs , also helps explain why for them the gang problem was recognised as serious.

The other constituencies we spoke to did not see the gang situation in the area as quite as serious as the front line officers. According to one Home Office accredited 'gang expert' we contacted (employed by the government in the

wake of riots), there was 'no gang problem' in Birmingham that deserved study – we were, he made clear, wasting money). While the community stakeholders we interviewed acknowledged that gangs posed problems in the area, they were also adamant that the problem was not quite as serious as was often made out. They acknowledged that the area faced real problems, not least connected to violence, drug use, and violent territorialism, but they did not define all of this through the gang lens. They also drew attention to other social problems in their area such as youth unemployment and ethnic tension

As part of an initial ice breaker, the young people we interviewed were asked to list three things about the area they lived in which they liked and three they disliked. One reason for asking these questions was to establish how readily the gang situation registered in their minds as a serious issue, without us actively prompting them into reflecting about it. Good things about the area included 'good food' and 'good people'. Gangs were mentioned as an issue by three of those interviewed but it was not the only bad thing they registered. Crime and violence and the use of weapons were also cited by most as serious issues they confronted, as were the activities of people referred to as 'stupid' (ergo dangerous).

In the case of the interviews conducted in Birmingham Prison with staff who worked with offenders it was by no means evident that gangs were considered a serious issue at all (at least in the prison) though some interviewers did raise a number of concerns about the way some groups were being labelled as gangs. The young men who entered the prison, we were told, tended to leave their gang and territorial affiliations at the door. The prison staff also took care to ensure that wings within the prison was not segregated on postcode / gang lines.

A few gang names recurred from the testimonies we received with older gangs such as the Burger Bar Boys and Johnsons receiving considerable attention, A range of other more recent gangs were named including the B515, the Slash Crew, the Sodamite Soldiers, the Raiders, Cash Money Crew, GSA, Bang Bang, Shot and Neel, Mob Squad and B21. However we were unable to find wider confirmation that all these groups actually existed.

As noted above, the target areas came to prominence as ‘gang afflicted’ as a consequence of the activities of two resident gangs, the Burger Bar Boys and the Johnsons. For some of the police officers we interviewed these groups were apparently still in existence and were said to have migrated into organised crime and were actively recruiting from ‘feeder gangs’. According to an ex Burger Bar Boy, interviewed as part of the project, the gang he had been part of no longer existed. Members had, he argued, either been imprisoned, grown out of the gang or had left the area. An ex-gang member once affiliated to the Johnsons was also sceptical of the claim that the group he once belonged to was active. Nevertheless during our research we heard from our community stakeholders that some young people from the area were claiming ‘Burger Bar’ and ‘Johnson’ affiliations. One provisional conclusion that can be derived from this is that getting to gang truths is often difficult because gang mythology often gets in the way in a world where gang knowledge is fragmented and incomplete. At the end of this exercise we had to tell our commissioners that we had no clear comprehension as to how many gangs operated in the area. Different constituencies simply saw the same reality but in a very different way.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> That said the police did compute numbers in ways that other constituencies didn’t. Some front line officers identified 30 whilst the intelligence community 8.

The young people we interviewed didn't help clarify the situation either as we had considerable difficulty getting them to identify gangs and their respective territories with any success. They did not want to implicate themselves or their friends, nor did they want to be seen helping the police. As we had a prior agreement that we would not incriminate any group or individual in the course of our research, we were not going to push them on this issue. If they did not want to implicate particular groups they did however tell us a lot about the groups to which they belonged and the things these groups did. As we shall see, while these groups to which they belonged engage in many of the activities blamed on gangs, serious questions could be raised over the extent to which group offending in the target areas could be reduced to question of urban street gangs and whether the groups to which these young men belonged could legitimately be defined as gangs.

### **Group characteristics**

In the wake of the English riots of 2011 Prime Minister David Cameron identified what he saw as the defining characteristics of the urban street gangs he held responsible.

At the heart of all the violence sits the issue of the street gangs. Territorial, hierarchical and incredibly violent, they are mostly composed of young boys, mainly from dysfunctional homes. They earn money through crime, particularly drugs and are bound together by an imposed loyalty to an authoritarian gang leader (Cameron, 2010)

A position reinforced in the work of a range of British academics who like Pitts (2008) and Harding (2014) appear to have discovered gangs with clear

corporate structures; in effect, gangs that reflect the stereotypical structure of the American Street gang. In a word where many policy makers were also identifying corporate style gangs (see Toy, 2008), it made sense as part of our enquiry into gang realities to explore group structures as these were perceived by our research subjects.

A number of police officers interviewed for this project described gangs in terms that did equate with established American gang stereotypes. They saw groups that had, as such, clear offices such as generals, lieutenants, soldiers, and runners. But not all police officers saw gangs this way. Some saw the groups as less formal structures but more informal and often chaotic. When pushed as to the source of their information most officers acknowledged that this was derived from work they had read. When we spoke to the young people about their group belongings, a rather different picture of group life began to appear.

When confronted with a list of things gangs had been widely accused of doing, such as organise drug dealing, rape women, deal drugs in schools and 'mug' old people, young people by and large did not contest what was being presented to them as a stereotypical model of urban street gangs, some of whose offences they were prepared to accept as descriptive of gang activity (though, all but one questioned the gang as rapist characterisation). However, when they were asked to describe the kind of groups they belonged to, not only were they clear that their groups had no clear hierarchy and structure, they painted a very different picture of group life to that presented in police accounts and mediated in the work of academics such as Pitts, Harding and Toy. The groups they were part of were invariably friendship groups populated by people they knew and who in many cases they were related to. They had grown up together, lived in the same area, shared a common ethnic heritage and attended the same schools:

'we live in the same street', or 'he's my cousin' were emblematic of the kind of responses we received.

Though the idea that gangs reproduce themselves through 'recruitment' has received much attention (see Pitts, 2008), this was not considered an issue for community participants, young people or for the elder ex-gang members all of whom were highly sceptical about such claims. The young people interviewed were also clear that their groups did not have initiation rituals, though as one interviewee asserted, there was a sense in which the people they 'rolled' with were expected to 'support your back', that is defend the group in the face of status challenges by others. No one we interviewed spoke of 'wanabees', nor when asked 'did their group take orders from 'elders'' did we find any that did. No one interviewed for this project saw group membership as in any way coerced or coercive and 'reluctant gangsters' as Pitts terms them (2008) we found none. Indeed, as one young man interviewed for the project noted, the very idea appeared absurd to him on the basis that it would be impossible to trust such recruits given you could not trust them to 'support your back' in a time of trouble. The young people we interviewed were also adamant that they did not have leaders or a formal division of labour where people in the group held ranks. Nor importantly did the young men we interviewed define themselves as gang members, though a few were very clear in their testimonies that this was how they were being classified by enforcement agencies.

Our interpretation of their street reality and group belonging was that they did not meet the criteria used by the government to define urban street



gangs.<sup>43</sup> These were better described as 'volatile peer groups'. Nor were they corporate. They reflected in ways that echo the work of Aldridge and Medina, far more fluid, amorphous and informal groups. While it might be argued that we were talking to the wrong people it could be observed here that the research site and the young people who occupied it were immersed in the violent side of street life. Interestingly no one outside of the police we interviewed made mention of the activities of more organized corporate style gangs in the area. It seems reasonable to us to suggest that had they existed we would have been notified about them.

Though research in cities like London, have identified gangs with membership running into hundreds (see Pitts,2007a, 2007b), this was not how they were perceived by the people we interviewed for this project. The general consensus of those we interviewed being that the groups to which they belonged contained between 8 and 20 members. One elder ex-gang member interviewed was adamant that large numbers of people made any gang unmanageable and unable to function effectively. In his own words 'size', he claimed 'killed gangs'.

The overall consensus among officers and community stakeholders interviewed was that the gang / group situation in the target areas was overwhelmingly a problem posed by young men to each other, where the men in question were seen to be overwhelmingly Black. The ethnic dimension to the gang situation however was not explained in terms that saw the situation as a

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<sup>43</sup> The official government definition of gangs reads: 'A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who: 1. see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group; 2. engage in criminal activity and violence;. 3. lay claim over territory (not necessarily geographical but can include an illegal economy territory); 4. have some form of identifying structural feature; and 5. are in conflict with other, similar, gangs.'

'Black' issue. It was more the case that the gangs / groups of areas like Handsworth reflected the ethnic demography of the estates where they were based. In East Birmingham gangs were considered predominantly a problem of Asian men.

In a world where girl gangs had also been identified as a developing issue and abject of intervention (see Bracchi, 2008), we also asked our research subjects whether girl gangs were an issue locally. Though a number of police officers and some community stakeholders saw the relationships between gang members and girls as problematic and in need of further investigation, no one mentioned girl gangs or raised them as a problem in the area. For the young men we interviewed there groups were exclusively male affairs, girls appeared to belong to a different world separate and away from the group and its activities. This finding held for every young man interviewed.

### **Territorialism**

In the context of a society who were routinely equating (as Cameron indeed had) gangs with territory and which saw 'postcode wars' between territorially affiliated gangs as a net driver of urban violence, we asked our interviewees a series of questions about the role of territorialism in the area and its connection to violence. All the people interviewed for this project identified territorialism as an issue and a serious one. Whether the issue could be reduced to a gang issue however we will question.

As we saw in the section above, the groups we appeared to be dealing with here did not fit the criteria that would formally allow them to be classified as gangs, that said there was no doubt from the testimony of the young men we interviewed that they lived incredibly territorial lives. A finding that not least

equates with wider gang research and not least the work of Aldridge et al. (2011).

All individuals we spoke to were aligned to and identified with the area, street or estate where they lived. All young people, in turn, were identified with that area by other people. The turf in question could be a road, a tower block or a post code. In the words of the young men, these constituted what they identified as their 'ends' (or 'endz'). It appeared from their testimony and from some of our community stakeholders that while you might be identified with a particular street or estate, you were also part of and identified with the wider locality in which you lived such as Handsworth.

When asked whether they 'claimed' their territory or just had a territory they hung around in most young men tended to the latter view. Though clearly identified by their area of origin by other groups, there were mixed reactions when asked how far they would defend their endz. If a group of outsiders from a different endz entered, then it appeared reasonable to ask them to declare their intentions, but as one young man remarked, it depends on their attitude. Violence did not appear a forgone conclusion. When asked how far they would fight to defend turf, the response was less about defending territory and more about defending the group if it was threatened – and its members were expected to do this. In the words of one young man: 'I aint going to die for no postcode'.

Outside of their endz however lay zones of danger and everyone we interviewed highlighted the very real risks and dangers young men faced if they left the security of their home ground and entered that of others. As one young man argued 'if you're not from ednz, people don't like you'. One youth worker explained how even the task of visiting a youth offending team in Handsworth posed real risks for young people who had to visit it if they came outside the area. This was also confirmed in conversations with Youth

Offending Team Staff in the area. What these interviewees also identified was how new technologies such as mobile phones facilitated mobilising groups rapidly in the event of a perceived excursion into someone else's territory by an outsider.

It was also clear from talking to community stakeholders that a state of often longstanding and intra generational conflict existed between different groups and between different areas more generally. These myths of longstanding conflict appeared culturally reproduced with younger groups picking up longstanding traditions of conflict ('beef') with other groups in different postcodes area. In fact it was this intergenerational reproduction of conflict through collective memory, coupled with a stark inability to let the legacy go, that ensured the violence continued. How to end vendettas whose origins are lost in the mist of time remains a serious community safety issue. What we found in Birmingham appeared to parallel closely the wider forms of violent territorialism also found in the work of Aldridge et al. (2011) and recently by Fraser (2015) in his study of Glasgow gangs.

Social media platforms and underground radio were also used by groups to proclaim their territorial affiliation (and gang affiliation) often through the medium of rap and grime music. These social platforms were also used by groups/ gangs to celebrate successful excursions they had made into another's territory. Often these provocative displays took the form of a direct status challenge where one group celebrates its alleged dominance over another.

If so far we have found little evidence that would confirm many claims made about urban street gangs, at least as inscribed in the contemporary gang talking inventory, in the case of territorialism we certainly did find confirming evidence. The young people we interviewed were clearly territorial and violent territorialism was clearly an issue for them. However before this might be

interpreted as posing stark confirmation of a gang land reality, it bears to consider the question of territorialism as something rather wider than simply something gangs do. From our interviews what came across was the fact that all young people were territorially affiliated. In the words of one young man 'everyone has endz', not just gang members. While it might well be the case that groups of territorially based young men with violence on their minds might well take territorial defence more seriously than those who were not. Leaving ones endz however was a risky business for many young people, not just territorially affiliated street fighting groups we were dealing with.

### **Violence and offending behaviour**

The fears that urban gangs command today is ineluctably bound up with the perception that they are at heart criminal entities and this is the key aspect of gang life identified in the gang definition that has been used to identify them. In what follows we examine the dimensions of group involvement in crime and violence.

From the testimonies of police officers, as we have seen, gangs were implicated in a range of illegal acts. These ranged from interpersonal violence, public disorder such as that involving 'hanging around', intimidating others, street robbery, territorial conflict, to street level involvement in the retail sector of the illegal drugs trade where they engaged either in selling drugs, 'running' them for elder more established dealers or robbing other dealers. There was also a broad consensus that gang members routinely carried and used weapons such as knives or guns with knives appearing to be the weapon most likely to be carried.

The relationship of gangs to more established criminals and organised crime groups was also raised as a key issue, though detailed intelligence

supporting this allegation not often supplied. In the words of one elder ex-gang member, his involvement in more serious crime occurred from his late teens and involved engaging in an array of scams to make money including fraud, raiding clubs and bars with his gang to engagement to selling fake jewellery. His entry into more organised crime and away from street based fighting occurred, he stated, when more organised criminals began to arrive on the scene where these were relatives. These included a cousin who had been deported from the USA for weapon related offences and Jamaican relatives heavily involved in wholesale drug retail. These relations both led to an increase in the serious of the offending he was engaged with and the level of weaponisation that accompanied it

Though front line officers were clear that gangs played a significant role in the commission of crime and engaging in a range of violent acts it could be noted that police figures on violent street crime do not record much of it as gang related. Indeed only a small percentage of it is and this disjunction between claims and statistical record bears thinking about. It could be that incidents that are gang related are not being recorded. It could also be the case that producing clear definitions governing what is gang related and what is not needs to be developed. We found no evidence that they were. It could also be observed, however, that most of the crimes blamed on gangs also appeared to be perpetrated by people who were not in gangs and who on arrest were not found to have known gang affiliations, which, when pressed, the police acknowledged. In this category fell a range of violent events from stabbings to street robbery and involvement in the drug trade. This issue, if correct, raises questions as to how appropriate the current focus on gangs are as the net drivers of serious youth violence.

What did come through from the interviews with the young men we spoke to however was a clear sense that group life was violent where the most dangers were posed by young men to each other in what remained a violent street world, where in the words of one young man, people could get shot or stabbed for a range of 'stupid' reasons. What also came across was that violence could be both expressive and instrumental. That is, it could arise spontaneously in the context of a personal disagreement or be planned and perpetrated in the commission of a criminal act. It also appears to be the case that in the street world that the young men we studied existed, violence could suddenly flair up in a world where business imperatives for mobilising violence and more personal ones intersected messily with each other. The motives for using violence thus varied as did the contexts where violence was deployed.

Though criminal endeavour appeared to be part of the lifeworld of the groups studied in the target areas, it was violence that appeared the most problematic aspect of their day to day lives of young men we spoke to. What made the violence in which they were implicated often serious and sometimes lethal was that weapons could and were being used. These included knives and guns, but clubs were also mentioned as an issue.

Interpersonal violence appeared to be a potent risk that any group potentially faced once they left the relative security of their endz. It could erupt, moreover, out of nowhere and what might appear to most for very insignificant reasons. For example, as one young man described, one group of men left their area for a club in Erdington one evening. It was getting late and the weather wet and rainy and a number left. About 15 remained. They walked round a corner to find themselves facing a larger group of older men (elders) and these carried knives and staves. Violence ensued. Two young men had just left college and entered a chip shop to get some lunch. Two other young men from elsewhere

were there and an altercation broke out outside the shop. Two men started fighting another one reached for a knife. The narrator's hand was cut in this incident. A group of four men were enjoying a stroll through the city centre. Another group passed them but looked at them 'the wrong way'. They entered a shop and the group followed. A fight subsequently ensued.

The seriousness of the violence here was attested by the fact that not only had every one of the young people we interviewed experienced violence of this sort, but everyone knew friends and acquaintances that had been stabbed and shot. In their world this was an everyday hazard. Serious violence was a normalised aspect of their lifeworld

## **Conclusions**

As we saw in the introduction among the many sensational claims made about gangs are that they are large and corporate in structure, exercise total control over the estates where they are based, forcibly recruit members, and are armed with various weapons of choice. The research we conducted in Birmingham was designed as a reality check on this, the hard side of the contemporary gang talking inventory. As would have become clear there is considerable disjunction between the sensational claims made about gangs within this inventory and a street reality we discovered that appeared very different. Let us summarise our findings before considering some policy implications

Though mindful of what the enforcement agencies were telling us, it appeared to us that the groups we were dealing with in the area were not corporate or hierarchical. They were best characterised as volatile informal peer groups, not urban street gangs. To this extent our typology of street groups worked (see Hallsworth & Young, 2005). Nor, as we have observed, did these



groups do the kind of gang like things that have been attributed to the urban street gang. They did not have forcible recruitment strategies, they did not have initiation ceremonies and nor did they have formal ranks or leaders. The research findings then tended to chime rather more with the gang sceptic side of the academic gang debate rather than with the work of those who like Harding, Pitts and Toy discover corporate gang Leviathans. It also most definitely challenged the government orthodoxy represented by the work of the Centre for Social Justice, the key government authority on the subject of gangs. Going further we would suggest in a world where debating the meaning of the world gang has commanded considerable attention, the grandfather of gang research Frederick Thrasher definition of the term 'a group that forms spontaneously but is integrated through conflict' captured succinctly what we found (Thrasher, 1927).

The young men in the groups we studied however were territorial and violent territorialism was clearly a serious issue in their lives. Though this is most certainly the case, the extent to which territorialism was a gang issue alone is open to question. As Kintrea et al. (2008) work on the role of territorialism in young people's lives found, many young people are territorial. The young people we spoke to were not territorial because they were in gangs, they were simply reproducing in their conduct a cultural trait that has a long history and is widely distributed (see also Hallsworth, 2013 for a historical take on this trend). To put this a different way, violent territorialism is not a product of urban street gangs and their gangness, it is an inescapable part of street culture in a world where every occupant will identify with their territory and be identified in turn with the territory they come from by outsiders. The young men we spoke to all identified the risks and dangers associated with being

where others do not want you. The contexts for violence could not, as we have seen, simply be laid at the door of the urban street gang.

The discovery of the urban street gang has been driven by wider fears of its role in driving violence in general and weaponised violence in particular forward. As I hope we would have made clear in this paper, the young men we interviewed lived violent lives. Indeed, going further, violence was a disturbingly normalized part of their everyday reality, and weapons were clearly present in this reality and were often used. However prior to jumping to the conclusion that it was the gang that was responsible for this, we would argue instead that framing the problem of violence in this way is both irresponsibly reductive and misses a broader picture we need to recognize if we are to understand the very real violence that exists in the areas we studied. As we saw when we studied the violence the young men we interviewed were involved in, it was difficult to blame all of it on their group belongings. Badging it up as 'gang related' in this sense was not helpful. The violence that found them might have nothing to do with their gang belonging and many people not in gangs appeared to be doing the violent things being blamed on gangs

In a nutshell, the problem of serious violence we have explored here could not be reduced to gangs alone. The problem here is that by constituting the gang as the sole object of analysis, by in effect, reifying the gang, so the wider violent ecology of the street and its determining role in shaping violence is lost in a gaze that simply reduces difference and complexity to a mono causal obsession about groups called gangs. Which again suggests that to get to the truth of the violence it pays as Hallsworth (2013) argues to 'look beyond the gang' and study the wider street ecology in which the kind of groups we describe here operate.

Which takes us logically to the policy implications of our research which was, as we have observed, conducted in a context where gangs were being blamed for all and every manifestation of urban violence, and where gang suppression was touted as the logical policy response. If, as we have argued here, the problem of violence manifestly evident in areas like Handsworth cannot be reduced to a problem of large corporate gangs conceptualised as a potent developing threat, then this must surely raise questions about the appropriateness of making gang suppression the panacea to a violent street reality that bears little relation to the gang talk mobilised to describe it. As Don Quixote discovered long ago, tilting at windmills is not a good thing.

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