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Gangs in the Post-World War II North American City: A Forum

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GANGS IN THE
POST-WORLD WAR II
NORTH AMERICAN CITY
A Forum

Since the beginnings of urbanization in the nineteenth century, American inner-city youths have suffered limited economic choices. In the 1850s and 1860s, it was either low-income work or the street. Later in the century, youths chose between school and the street. In 1888, one journalist penned a typical description:

In the slums and the low saloons . . . wretched young men gather and listen to or recount the crimes of others. It is not always the love of money which spurs them on to the breaking of the law; it is an instinctive desire to be thought well of, to be esteemed, honored by their fellows as the performers of deeds that others dare not do. Many of these rowdies would rather break a policeman's head, or a citizen's, than make an easy capture of somebody's money. Some are little better than wild beasts in human guise. They are slaves to the worst of passions, and, moreover, glory in the fact.¹

By the twentieth century, theatrical and cinematic productions such as *West Side Story* treated the gang as a common fixture of urban culture and the street as a public arena of male authority.

Despite gangs' historical importance and public fascination, historians have been slow to study them. For many, the journalistic works of Jacob Riis and Herbert Asbury, or sociological studies such as Frederic Thrasher's, remain authoritative.² Recent historians, however, are beginning to question and challenge many of the long-held stereotypes and assumptions regarding inner-city youth gangs. Eric Schneider's *Vampires, Dragons and Egyptian Kings: Youth Gangs in Postwar New York* represents one of the first attempts to revise and reinterpret this literature. Broadly speaking, Schneider attributes the emergence of gangs after World War II as an outgrowth of changing conceptions of masculinity and male identity between 1940 and 1970. In a recent review essay in the *Journal*, Andrew Diamond argued that ideological and political factors played equally important roles in gang formation during these years.

Accordingly, the *Journal of Urban History* presents the following debate about the origins and identities of gangs in the postwar North American city.

—*Timothy J. Gilfoyle*
Associate Editor

ERIC SCHNEIDER'S RESPONSE TO ANDREW DIAMOND

Andrew Diamond's recent review essay on gangs, which includes my book *Vampires, Dragons and Egyptian Kings: Youth Gangs in Postwar New York*, focuses on one principal area of disagreement between us: the degree of collective political and racial consciousness expressed by street gangs during the 1960s. Diamond seems to think that gangs were fundamentally instruments of racial consciousness—white gangs as defenders of whiteness and community boundaries, and African American and Hispanic gangs as expressions of nationalism and resistance to racist oppression. He argues, based on his own research in Chicago, that African American and Hispanic gang members merged into a larger movement of empowerment that swept minority communities in the 1960s. While this may describe the evolution of Chicago gangs, its wider application is more problematical and does a disservice to my work, which covers a much broader expanse of time. I will discuss five points that relate to the overall theme of gangs' collective racial and political consciousness.

Let me start with the issue of racial consciousness. When I began my research, I was prepared to conclude that New York in the postwar period was characterized by subterranean warfare, with white gangs in the forefront of resistance to integration and African American gangs organizing attacks on white storeowners and lingering white residents in an attempt to drive them out of territories they were taking over. However, this view was too limited to explain the richness of my data. Racial consciousness was in fact central to the organization of gangs at certain points in time—for example, among white gangs in the 1940s—and in certain geographic locales—such as West Harlem—and utterly irrelevant at others. What transcended periods of racial awareness was a driving consciousness of masculinity that took a variety of forms, many of them self-destructive, some of them political, but all of them rooted in economic inequality. The point is not that class trumps race or vice versa, but that one needs to be attuned to both to understand why adolescents joined gangs and how those gangs changed over time.

My second point concerns heroin use among adolescents in the 1960s. One would never guess from Diamond's essay that gangs were declining in New York in the 1960s and that most commentators (and gang members) blamed the spread of heroin use for their demise. While the sources of decline were more complex, heroin certainly played a role. I argue that increased heroin use was an unintended consequence of successful New York City Youth Board,

police, settlement house, and Great Society interventions in gangs. The destabilization of gangs removed the main peer-organized opposition to heroin use, and the spread of heroin in turn disrupted the recruitment of younger adolescents into gang membership. In effect, youths abandoned gangs—not for the collective activity of politics but for narcotics. Yet nowhere in his essay does Diamond mention the word *heroin*.

My third point has to do with collective consciousness and the potential for adolescents to deal politically with their economic and social circumstances. I think Diamond expects a bit too much from teenagers. Adolescents responded to a labor market that exploited them by quitting or getting fired from jobs, to a school system that did not educate by dropping out, and to families that failed to nurture them by hanging on street corners. Although the institutions of adolescent socialization encouraged only individual rebellion, adolescents in acts of creativity and imagination established street gangs and forged a gang culture so evocative that its forms were repeatedly commercialized. Gangs were a collective response to the difficulties of adolescent life in poor neighborhoods, but in Raymond Williams's terms, they formed an alternative rather than an oppositional culture. They organized not to overthrow the institutions that oppressed them but to be left alone by them. That adolescents rarely transcended their circumstances to transform their alternative culture into an oppositional one when so much around them encouraged only individual acts of rebellion is hardly surprising.

Fourth, we have to consider the actions of individuals versus the collective action of a gang. As Diamond notes, when youths rioted against police, gang members were surely among them. Is that evidence of gangs' political consciousness? Are acts that cannot be tethered to a gang the acts of gangs or of individuals? Sociologists have expended an ocean of ink in battling over what constitutes a gang and in distinguishing between delinquent acts of individuals and the corporate acts of gangs. That distinction is essential in examining how gangs changed over time in response to different social, economic, and political circumstances. Without it, one has analytical mush.

Finally, as an urbanist, I think it important to pay attention to the specifics of place. Gangs in New York and Philadelphia did not morph into gang nations or supergangs that transcended neighborhood, while in Chicago, the Blackstone Rangers, the Vice Lords, and others apparently did. What explains the difference? Is ideology a result of levels of organization, or did ideology create the circumstances for organizational expansion? Surely Mr. Diamond must appreciate that not all places are the same, nor are their histories.

—Eric Schneider
University of Pennsylvania

ANDREW DIAMOND'S RESPONSE

Eric Schneider misinterprets my thoughts on the formation and function of racial attitudes within postwar street gangs. Rather than “instruments of racial consciousness” (a phrase I never used), I suggest we view gangs as infrastructures for the development of a range of shared attitudes and sensibilities. I could not agree more with his contention that one needs to examine the interplay of race, class, and gender to understand why adolescents formed gangs and how these organizations changed over time. The thrust of my critique of *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings* is by no means that race “trumps” class or masculinity. It is rather that one should be wary of too readily dismissing the role of race in the behavior of youth gangs, particularly in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when discourses of rights and racial empowerment pervaded the cultures of everyday life of working-class adolescents in black and Latino neighborhoods.

More specifically, I question why Schneider virtually ignores the emergence of the Black Power movement that exerted such a strong influence on the styles, music, language, and political views of the generation of African Americans who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. His account of gang culture is limited to the development of “bop culture” in the 1940s and 1950s. Consequently, he never considers how this culture morphed into a very different form in the next decade, a milieu characterized by discourses and symbols of racial brotherhood and militancy. The powerful rhetoric of Malcolm X, the assertive sounds of James Brown, the striking African clothing styles, and the black fists painted on walls appear nowhere in his story. Are we to believe that New York gangs with names like the Ghetto Brothers and the Black Spades and gang coalitions called the Brotherhood and the Family were not somehow invested in this transformation?

This context helps explain why sixty members of the Ghetto Brothers “‘barged into’ the local job office at 306 East 149 Street and demanded jobs” in the summer of 1972.³ While this particular event does in fact find brief mention in *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings*, its subsequent analysis is limited to a single sentence: “form gangs, be violent and you will receive your share of the gang money” (p. 243). As I stated in my review essay, there may be some truth to this, but on an issue so divisive as the involvement of gangs in the political sphere, we need to hear a wider range of voices. It is important to consider that the “activist” who made the comment above did so in a report to the Mayor’s Educational Task Force. In fact, nearly every document Schneider cites in depicting these actions as opportunistic originated in Mayor John Lindsay’s administration.

This episode of collective mobilization by the Ghetto Brothers and several other gangs in the Bronx, East Harlem, and Brooklyn in 1972 belies

Schneider's assertion that "the institutions of adolescent socialization encouraged only individual rebellion," as does the participation of New York gangs in the Mobilization for Youth, the March on Washington, and school boycotts. Once again, such events do make it into Schneider's account, but his treatment of them is so cursory as to seem consciously dismissive.

I attribute this to Schneider's adherence to an interpretive framework that defines the "one token agency" for working-class adolescents as "their ability to cause trouble." I find this to be problematic in the case of white gangs, who, in the midst of community decline, were doing much more than causing trouble when they attacked people of color. Applied to the case of black and Puerto Rican gangs in the 1960s and early 1970s, it yields a perspective that ultimately mirrors that of the right-wing backlash to the Great Society project of community empowerment.

This interpretive tendency, moreover, causes the author to overlook some striking instances of political action by New York gangs. In the early 1970s, a radical group called the Young Lords—the New York version of a Puerto Rican Chicago gang of the same name that traded street fighting for community activism—enlisted gangs in East Harlem in their struggle against poor health and sanitation conditions in the neighborhood. On June 29, 1970, for example, the *New York Times* reported that "a coalition of youth gangs and political activists" staged a protest over conditions at a South Bronx hospital and over the alleged beatings of demonstrators a day earlier.

Although more a political organization than a gang, the Young Lords recruited many members from the ranks of Puerto Rican gangs. New York's Black Panther Party, which served as a model for the Lords, also drew numerous adherents out of the gang world. Leading figures in both groups, in addition, were outspoken about how their gang experiences radicalized them. In other words, the relationship between these political organizations and the gang world was much closer than Schneider would have us believe.

Thus, rather than simply denying the political opposition of gangs, I find it more useful to think of New York's black and Puerto Rican gangs of the 1960s and 1970s as elements of a larger youth culture of the streets, which fostered an oppositional consciousness that under certain conditions crystallized into collective action. Eric Schneider is right to see masculinity as a driving force behind gang membership and to emphasize economic inequality in making the quest for honor so destructive. As I previously wrote, on these themes he makes a valuable contribution to the field. Yet once out on the streets in search of respect, other forces influenced the hearts and minds of gang youths. I see no clearer example than police brutality, the spark of numerous ghetto uprisings in both Chicago and New York and an issue that demonstrated to young men of color, gang affiliated or not, that economic injustice and racial oppression were inseparable. "Nightstick justice," as Schneider puts it, was essential to the gang experience, but he deals with it only insofar as it was an alternative to city officials in addressing the gang problem.

Finally, Dr. Schneider makes too much of my neglecting his theory about heroin addiction's depleting the ranks of gangs. First, most of his data supporting this argument date before 1966; by 1970, observers were discussing the gang problem again, which suggests their resurgence probably began around 1968 or so. Second, even if gangs did diminish, which should not be taken for granted in light of the unreliable ways in which agencies counted them, they hardly disappeared. As for my use of Chicago to reflect on the situation in New York, I trust the readership of this journal understands that comparative history is not a precise method but one that can yield theoretical insights in a field as young as gang history.

—Andrew Diamond
University of Michigan

NOTES

1. Unmarked clipping, District Attorney Scrapbooks, vol. 44, New York City Municipal Archives and Record Center (January 23, 1888).

2. Jacob Riis, *The Battle with the Slum* (New York, 1902); Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York, 1890); Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* (New York, 1927); Frederic Thrasher, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* (Chicago, 1927). For a recent work that reflects Asbury's influence, see Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (New York, 1991.)

3. *New York Times*, July 16, 1972.