Gang talk and gang talkers: A critique

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed a proliferation of interest in the phenomenon of the gang both in the UK and across Europe. Such concern has been driven forward by growing reports of gang activity reported in the media, circulated by populist politicians as well as by academic researchers convinced the European gang has been ignored for too long. This anxiety has coalesced in a perception that the gang is a serious and growing problem, that the rise in lethal violence, as seen recently in inner cities such as London, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool, is connected to the proliferation of the gang, and that the solution to the problem of urban gang violence lies in its suppression. This article takes a critical standpoint against these statements and challenges attempts to interpret urban violence in the UK as a problem of gangs or a burgeoning gang culture. It argues that the problem of street-based violence is not always reducible to the gang and suggests that the solution to preventing urban violence will not be found by sanctioning crackdowns or gang suppression programmes. It concludes by offering an alternate perception of the gang and urban violence and signposts areas that research on urban violence might need to address.

Key words

gangs, violence, rhizomatics, youth culture, cultural criminology

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, twenty-seven young people were murdered in London by other young people. By mid-2008, the deaths of twenty more youngsters had been added to this tally.[1] These deaths had three common features: (1) they all happened in a relatively short period of time; (2) the victim and the perpetrator were mainly young African Caribbean males in their teens or early twenties; (3) all the killings involved the use of a gun or a knife.

While homicides are relatively rare, constituting around 1 per cent of the total number of crimes recorded in England and Wales (Walker et al., 2006), what these fatalities expose is the brutal reality of the violent street worlds in which some young

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people in the UK are immersed. For the mass media, and many policy practitioners, the killings in 2007 were linked to what was attributed to the rise of armed organized gangs in the UK and to what many termed a burgeoning 'gang culture' among young people. This increasingly hegemonic interpretation of the UK's street worlds was made explicit by the New Labour administration in the 2008 Action Plan to tackle Violent Crime outlined in a document entitled *Saving Lives, Reducing Harm and Protecting the Public* (HM Government, 2008). In this document the gang was for the first time explicitly linked to the problem of urban violence and rising weapon use in the UK.

In view of what has been represented as a 'gang epidemic' a plethora of government agencies have commissioned research to examine the gang phenomenon and have developed various policy forums to confront the risks and dangers they are believed to present. The Metropolitan Police Service, for example, now has a dedicated operation[2] to monitor the gang situation in London and recently produced a map that detailed 169 gangs allegedly operative in the London area. The Association of Chief Police Officers also has a lead figure monitoring the gang problem, while the Home Office has established a specialist subgroup, the Tackling Gangs Action Programme (set up in September 2007), overseen by a central Ministerial Task Force on Gangs and Guns, chaired by the Home Secretary to generate policies designed to reduce the risks and dangers gangs are felt to pose. To help Europeans in their effort to understand and confront the gang menace, a consortium of American gang researchers (under the aegis of the American gang academic Malcolm Klein) has established collaborative links with gang researchers in Europe. Under the banner *'The Eurogang Network',* the aim of this collective is to apply a predominantly quantitative framework of analysis to make sense of the gang problem in societies that Klein argues have been in denial about them (Klein, 2001).

If we study the thesis of gangland Britain more closely it appears to be based on a series of conjectures which together define and explain the problem of violent street worlds. At the core of this thesis is the claim that the threat facing the UK is the growth of what is historically thought of as an American problem: the urban street-based gang. These groups, it is argued, are armed, dangerous and prepared to kill. They are believed to control territories, (in particular social housing estates and surrounding areas) and exercise control of, or are heavily involved in, the illegal drug trade. Some research suggests that these gangs are populated by hundreds of people, each of whom occupy different functional roles within the gang structure ranging from 'soldiers' and 'lieutenants' to 'wanabees' eager to progress up the gang hierarchy (see Bullock and Tilley, 2002; Pitts, 2007). These are groups that are reported to have 'initiation ceremonies' and who initiate 'recruitment strategies';[3] gangs populated by young men so ruthless and violent that to cross them would result in violent confrontation. Indeed, according to one prominent account, such is the fear that gangs instil in the local population that young people, growing up in gang hotspots, become gangsters themselves, albeit reluctantly (Pitts, 2007).

Whilst not contesting the fact that street collectives which approximate gangs are part of the problem of violence in cities like London, Manchester and Birmingham, our

conjecture is that constructing the problem of street violence as essentially a problem of gangs is an exercise flawed on empirical, theoretical and methodological grounds. As such, we contest that the UK is experiencing a gang epidemic. At present there appears to be little evidence to suggest a pervasive and growing gang problem here and, far from helping to clarify the dangerous reality of violent street worlds' 'gang talk', as we label this garrulous discourse, runs the risk of misrepresenting what it claims to represent, the reality of violent street worlds. We do not believe that the problem of urban violence in multiply deprived areas is essentially a problem of gangs and, for this reason, will argue that it should not be constructed as if it is. We will go on to argue that the application of the gang label, either as a term applied to describe the problem of violence in inner urban areas or when posed in a circular manner as an explanation of it (violence occurs because of the gangs), will not advance our understanding, but may misrepresent current problems while sanctioning 'solutions' that might be as misdirected as they are misguided. With this in mind we begin this article by outlining five objections to the gangland Britain thesis as articulated in various forms of gang talk. We conclude by considering alternative ways of studying what is a pressing social problem: young, violent men and the violence they do.

THE CASE AGAINST GANG TALK

Objection 1: The empirical case is not proven

For the thesis of gangland Britain to have substance we would expect to see compelling empirical evidence of its existence. We would also expect to see evidence attesting to the fact that the gang has either mutated in the direction of a more violent unit or that gangs in general are proliferating. The first thing to observe, however, is that there is no established gang research tradition in the UK that might help us answer these questions, criminologists having located most of their effort studying youth subculture in the post-war period.[4] This has occurred for good reason. To begin with, early attempts to apply American gang theory to the British context resulted not in the discovery of the gang but in street corner societies, then youth subcultures (Whyte, 1943; Downes, 1966). The fact that subcultures, not gangs, best explained the British condition (Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Muncie, 2004) meant that since then data on gangs have not been routinely collected or disseminated as they are in the USA where the gang is conceived as a major social problem. In other words, in the UK there is no sound evidential base to prove the case one way or the other.

Defining what constitutes a gang has remained a consistent problem. There is little consensus on what groups are gangs and this remains the subject of ongoing debate. The lack of clarity on definition has a significant impact on the measurability of the gang – especially when attempting to quantify the exact number of gangs in existence within a given location. This becomes clear if we consider the few recent studies in the UK on gang membership. Far from adopting any common definition each adopts

its own different interpretation (see Bullock and Tilley, 2002; Bennett and Holloway, 2004; Communities that Care, 2005; Smith and Bradshaw, 2005; Sharp et al., 2006). Some, like the Communities that Care Project utilize a self-definition approach while others provide a definition for the respondents to consider and then use additional 'filters' to attribute gang membership (Bennett and Holloway, 2004; Sharp et al., 2006).[5] Whatever the definition used, however, what these surveys on membership show is that while gangs exist, they are relatively rare. A recent Home Office funded survey examining the extent of gang membership among young people in England and Wales (Sharp et al., 2006) estimated that no more than 6 per cent of the total sampled (5331) could be classified as 'delinquent youth groups.'[6] The Communities that Care self-report survey of 11,400 young people aged 11–15 living in six gang hotspot areas in London found that about 4 per cent of the sample were gang members. In an earlier study on gangs in Manchester, Bullock and Tilley (2002) found that less than 10 per cent of the total sample (40) of gang members were young people under the age of 17; of the 2725 people surveyed as part of the New English & Welsh Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring Programme (NEW-ADAM) examined by Bennett and Holloway, 15 per cent of arrestees had experience of gang life. Of this figure, however, only 4 per cent claimed to be current members of a gang (Bennett and Holloway, 2004). Leaving aside the methodological implications of using different definitions, the results of this empirical trawl suggest that gang membership in the UK is no more than 3–7 per cent of the youthful population.

If the evidence that gangs are more pervasive does not appear to be confirmed by the facts, what of the idea that the gang is a major driver of urban violence more generally? One of the main concerns about the gang is its propensity to engage in delinquency and violent crime. Gang research in the USA has consistently shown gang membership to be associated with violence and crime (Vigil, 1988; Jankowski, 1991; Spergel and Curry, 1993; Saunders, 1994; Klein, 1995; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). Research suggests that gang members are significantly more likely to hold pro-delinquent views and engage in more delinquent behaviours than non-gang members (Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Klein, 1995; Battin-Pearson et al., 1998; Hill et al., 2001; Thornberry et al., 1993). Longitudinal research on gangs illustrates that gang membership facilitates criminal behaviour showing that involvement in criminal activity increases significantly when young people join gangs and decreases when they leave (Thornberry et al., 1993; Gordon et al., 2004).

Several studies in the UK have assessed the level to which gang members are involved in criminal activity and revealed findings similar to the USA (Communities that Care; 2005. Bennett and Holloway, 2004; Bradshaw and Smith, 2005; Sharp et al., 2006). Gang youths are noted to have a higher participation rate in delinquency than non-gang members (Bradshaw and Smith, 2005; Sharp et al., 2006) and are more likely to engage in violent crime (Bennett and Holloway, 2004). That gang members in the UK are disproportionately involved in crime and have a propensity towards violence appears to support the gangland Britain thesis until one takes a closer look at the evidence. If we return to consider the findings provided by Sharp et al. (2006), this shows that while members of delinquent youth groups (DYG) are capable of violence,

they are mostly involved in non-violent offences. The most common offence category was using drugs (51%). Other common offences were threatening or frightening people (40%), graffiti (36%) and damaging and destroying things (31%). Those using force or violence constituted 29 per cent of the whole sample (Sharp et al., 2006). Only a small minority of DYG members had committed a serious offence (e.g. theft from a vehicle, burglary, robbery, theft from a person or assault) or had offended consistently over a period of 12 months prior to the study (Sharp et al., 2006: vi).

Drug dealing and use of weapons, a commonly reported feature of gang life, appeared to be a less frequent activity for members of DYG sampled. The study found that few members of DYG had sold drugs (18%) in the last 12 months, fewer still had carried knives (17%) and only 4 per cent had carried guns (Sharp et al., 2006: 13).[7] However, the report does show that members of DYG (age 10–19) were responsible for about one-fifth (21%) of core offences committed and were disproportionately involved in serious offences (23%) and violent offence (20%). Before seeing in this a confirmation of the gangland UK thesis it is important to recognize that it is notoriously difficult to attribute criminal activity to the gang. Part of the difficultly lies in separating those acts carried out by the individual member from those carried out collectively; Sharp et al. acknowledge this by drawing our attention to the fact that in their study it was impossible to identify separately incidents committed by an individual DYG member from those committed by the DYG. The issue is more important because really to understand the extent of gang related crime and violence we have to determine whether the crime is actually 'gang related'. As Jankowski reminds us, not all violence committed by gang members is gang related. Violence may be committed by gang members, but it is not gang related if it is not enacted as part of a gang's efforts to further its own achievements, productivity and objectives (1991: 140).

According to the findings of the British Crime Survey (BCS) (2004), the rate of violent crime in the UK has fallen recurrently since 1995. This is interesting as wider public fears about the gang have occurred against a backdrop characterized by diminishing evidence of the violence it is alleged to commit. Indeed, had violent street gangs been on the rise then we might have expected to see this reflected in rising, not diminishing, levels of violence. The findings of the BCS also reveal another fact about violence that gang talkers would do well to dwell upon. What the research shows is that the majority of violent crimes committed in the period 2002–3 were perpetrated not by gangs but by individuals (Smith and Allen, 2004: 12). This research also found that half of all 'muggings' and violence against strangers (offences typically thought to be the domain of street gangs) were perpetrated by *one* individual.[8] The number of recorded cases involving robberies perpetrated by groups (of four or more) was considerably smaller at 16 per cent (or 2389) of the total number of muggings. If this sum is expressed as a percentage of the total number of group-related violent crimes, then, for the period studied (2002–3), this equates to a minute 0.09 per cent of the total number of cases.

This finding is also supported by recent research we conducted in Lewisham, an area of London identified by the Metropolitan Police specialist unit Operation Trident as a gang 'hotspot' where we statistically examined and GIS mapped all violent incidences

reported to the police for a two-year period. Our findings show that the overwhelming volume of violent crime (96%) was conducted by lone offenders or by two offenders; group offending involving four participants or more constituted only 4 per cent of the sample. This also supports the findings of Sarnecki (2001), who found little evidence of group offending in his network analysis of violent offenders in Stockholm. It could be that gang members are clever at disguising their violence, but given that they are supposed to be at what Klein termed the 'extreme edge' of delinquency, this proposition is difficult to substantiate.

Every time a young person dies as a consequence of street violence, especially when it involves the use of knives or guns, questions are raised in the media as to whether the incident was linked to gangs and thus gang related. The recent murders of young people, by young men, have been held up by the police and media as providing empirical support for the gangland Britain thesis. Such cases include that of Damilola Taylor, a 10-year-old boy who bled to death on a stairwell on a housing estate in Peckham, a deprived area of London. The murder of Damilola was reported to be gang related. Closer inspection of news coverage on the case reported that Damilola was murdered by a duo, brothers Danny and Ricky Preddie, not a gang.[9] However, the boys, aged 12 and 13 at the time of the murder, were purported to be members of *two* gangs, the Young Peckham Boys and the Out to Bomb Crew (France, A. and O'Shea, 2006). Indeed, according to a report in *The Guardian* newspaper, the brothers were 'at the apex of the rigid pecking order that bound their gang' (Laville, 2006). Notwithstanding what amounts to an unsubstantiated assertion, there is little reliable evidence linking the Preddie brothers to either group; nor is it clear what, if anything, their relation to these gangs had to do with the murder of Damilola. What is known about the two boys is that they lived very chaotic and disturbed lives.

Another widely reported case was that of Toni-Ann Byfield, a seven-year-old girl murdered with her father in 2003. She was, one media report described, 'the youngest victim of gang violence in the UK' (Muir and Ellinor, 2003). The incident was reported as gang related because Mr Byfield was a known drug dealer who the police suspected was 'closely affiliated' to a ruthless cartel of Jamaican crack dealers known as the 'London Linkup Crew' (*Daily Mail*, 2004). It transpired from evidence presented in court that Toni-Ann and her father were shot dead by Joel Smith, a lone gunman who made his living robbing drug dealers.

The increasing problem of [mis]attributing the gang label was reinforced to us when we were asked by the Metropolitan Police Service to study gang-related violence in Hackney, (another deprived area of London) following what was reported as a 'gangland' killing of a teenage boy that resulted in the tragic death of a young man in his teens on the steps of the borough's town hall (Hallsworth and Young, 2005). This incident had been styled by the press as a 'gang-related killing', an interpretation generally accepted by a number of control agents.

The area certainly had a number of groups that, by conventional definition, could be defined as gangs. These certainly engaged in various territorial disputes and utilized violence to settle them. However, our key finding was that much of the violence we unearthed in Hackney was not gang related; though often it was certainly group related.

Most 'street-level' violence was low level and appeared to be connected with what we came to identify as volatile peer groups. These we defined as groups that engaged in an array of delinquent behaviours, including violence, but for whom crime and delinquency is not intrinsic to the identity and practice of the group as the gang as it is typically defined today).[10] Peer groups in Hackney would congregate in public, in ways that were often interpreted as threatening to other people. Members of peer groups certainly did use drugs and drink alcohol, commit criminal acts and on occasions fight. They also carried knives, though evidence suggested this was mainly for protection in a street context where robbery was a real risk. But they were not gangs and nor did they deserve being classified as such.

As for the incident that provoked the research, the murder of a young man, this was not gang related; nor did respondents describe a situation where gangs were identified as a *major* problem.[11] While it appeared from police intelligence that groups of known violent men inhabited the area, some of whom used young men in the local area as 'runners' in a thriving drugs market, they appeared to belong to what are often referred to as 'organized crime groups' (Edwards and Gill, 2003) and it made little sense, we argued, to label this group as a gang (as many were doing). The area was replete with tensions between different groups and individuals and sometimes these would erupt into violent disputes that could resolve themselves in vendettas settled outside the law. To corral all of this into descriptives such as 'gang wars' or 'gang culture' was wholly to misrepresent a complex, multi-layered situation. Invoking the term gang added little to our understanding of violent street life though it certainly did obscure its complexities.

When we asked young people in Hackney who were allegedly gang affiliated about their gang life, most rejected the label. Others thought the term 'gang' was being routinely applied to label all young people who lived in a particular area or housing estate. While the advent of what have been termed 'postcode wars' (conflicts over different territories) has been considered by some elements in the media and by control agents as prima facie evidence of gang wars across the UK, this thesis only works if you ignore the historical record. The risk of taking a beating by straying outside your turf has a long history in working class areas that reaches back well beyond the current fascination with territorial conflict (Pearson, 1983).

Turning away from our own research, it could be observed that other contemporary enquires into street-based violence are conducted without having to evoke the gang as a key referent to explain it. Hayward and Hobbs' analysis of violence in the 24-hour economy does not evoke gangs. Indeed, their findings suggest that the problem of violent disorder was principally one posed by (peer) groups of intoxicated young people (Hayward and Hobbs, 2007). Likewise, Winlow and Hall's (2006) examination of violence in de-industrialized estates in the north of England does not evoke the gang either. They certainly paint a chilling picture of a violent reality, but do not mobilize academic versions of gang talk to make sense of it. In the world they studied they do not confront us with ritualized, self-styled gangs, but something (arguably) far worse: atomized, disenfranchised, nihilistic young people who dwell in a world where violence (threat and actual) is never far away. Bourgois' (1995) study of crack selling in El Barrio again testifies to a violent street reality in New York's ghetto, yet the violence

he documents is not that of the gang alone. It can involve en-forcers protecting crack distribution points, most often, from other violent men who aspired to rob them.

This critique does not, of course, prove that there are no gangs or that some gangs are indeed lethal when crossed. What this exercise attempts to demonstrate is that trying to reduce the problem of violent street worlds to a problem of gangs is inherently problematic.

Objection 2: The attention the gang receives may reflect more the sensational and (often) inaccurate coverage produced by the mass media than it does the objective reality of the street

Whether the sensational and saturation coverage the gang now routinely receives in the mass media justifies being termed a moral panic is a moot question. As we are not media specialists, we refrain from addressing this issue. What is evident, however, is that the coverage the gang has received in the mass media does bear many of the hallmarks of a moral panic if by moral panic we mean a situation described by Hall et al. (1978) such that:

> *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: p 13)*

As illustrated earlier, despite the lack of empirical evidence to substantiate the gangland Britain thesis, the problem of urban violence has become very much framed in terms of gang talk. So much so that *The Sunday Times Magazine* felt able to claim that the UK's inner cities have become 'Sin Cities' awash with warring gang members (McLagan, 2005a); a thesis, by and large, accepted by the mass media more generally. By imposing, without any reflection, a framework of reference that begins with and always returns to the gang, so an interpretive grid has been erected around violent street worlds that permit only one interpretation: it is the gangs that are responsible. At the same time, just as gang talk becomes increasingly hegemonic, so other, more plausible narratives that might help challenge this interpretation get filtered out and silenced.

If we consider in more detail how the media do their gang talk then a variety of journalistic devices can be observed at play in the construction of what we would term the gang myth. The first tactic deployed, has been to apply the gang label more or less permissively and uncritically to any group that appears to occasion social disquiet. This goes hand in hand with a tendency to report that the gang is the problem even

when the evidence linking it is very tenuous. People interviewed about gangs are rarely challenged about their knowledge or understanding of the gang and are often presented with a pre-scripted narrative which they are then (implicitly) asked to follow and agree with (for example, 'it's all about the gang isn't it?'). Leading questions, uncritical acceptance of often unsubstantiated testimony and the time-tested procedure of treating atypical exceptions as rules confirm the picture. For good measure, having terrified the wider population, urgent strategies and policies are demanded of 'experts' to suppress the gang which law and order politicians seem happy to cater for. It is, we suggest, the wide reporting of these incidents, in the context of an insatiable 24-hour news culture, which has helped create gang talk and forge a consensus that the problem of the moment is the problem of the gang. Below we consider some recent examples.

The screening of documentaries such as *Gang Wars* (8 June 2003, Channel 4) and *Rude Girls* (9 December 2003, BBC 2) mobilize a number of these tactics. The *Dispatches* exposé of the hidden world of the UK's dangerous youth gangs involved filming a group of defiant kids (and their self-styled leader Danny (aka Taba)) hanging menacingly around dark lit streets and asking them about the 'gang problem' – which they happily confirmed. *Rude Girls* tracked the lives of three groups of girl gang members, profiling the criminality in which they engaged. While this documentary certainly captured an anti-Semitic, aggressive and prejudicial dimension to the lives of the young women interviewed, as did the *Dispatches* documentary on the young men, what we were being presented with were narratives that hinged, for effect, on the entirely dubious premise that gangs were on the rise; that there are more of them than we imagine; that they are dangerous to the general public; that not enough is being done to curtail them; and that the police and politicians have a societal duty to do so. In both of these exposés the gang label was applied to messy realities that were far more complex than the term gang could possibly encompass. In both these exposés, the testimonies of the young are never meaningfully challenged; although in *Rude Girls* the reporter does uncover that one gang member is not quite the prolific and notorious 'gangster' she makes herself out to be. While both documentaries highlight the hopelessness and pessimism of young people and the real fears and dangers they face, no attempt is made to contest the idea that the problem might be wider than the gang or that the groups in question might not, as currently defined be considered gangs.

An excellent example of journalistic overkill concerned the imputed rise of a new gang in South London called the Muslim Boys, which, according to a report in *The Independent* (14 August 2005), now numbered around 200 members.[12] What made this group so attractive to the media was that not only was this a gang, but allegedly a violent fundamentalist Muslim one at that with a (*sic*) *suspected* connection to Al Qaeda. This was a gang that would allegedly forcibly convert young men to fundamentalist Islam and Imams were apparently being woken in the dead of night to open mosques for this purpose. Resistance could entail death and this was indeed what appeared to happen in the case of Adrian Marriott, who was reportedly shot in the head when he refused to convert.

In his hard hitting exposé of the group reporter David Cohen interviewed a gang member called 'Winston' conveniently photographed wielding a meat cleaver in one hand and a knife in the other (*Evening Standard*, 5 July 2005). His testimony certainly made good copy though the application of common sense might suggest that it would be unwise to take it at face value as the media evidently did. Knives, as far as Winston was concerned, were not where his gang were at:

> *'Knives is fuck-all. Later, my bruvs will be back from their robberies with our skengelengs [guns] and cream [money]. Later there be MACinside-10s [sub-machine guns] all over the floor, laid wall to wall. And moolah! We count it – 10 grand, 20 grand. Then, after midnight," he adds, matter-of-factly, "me and my bruvs go to mosque to pray.'*

When told that the Muslim clerics where not overly pleased with Muslims such as these, Winston remarked in true gangster style: '*Fucking cheek! Mocking us. There'll be retribution for this!*'.

In the article printed in *The Independent* Lee Jasper, the Mayor of London's (then) adviser on race and policing, declared the Muslim Boys to be 'the biggest criminal phenomenon' he has ever witnessed in the UK. According to Mr Jasper the group was 'sworn to bring a criminal jihad to Britain' and he warned that this group 'does not only do law-breaking, they do it, apparently with militant Islamic vengeance' (*The Independent*, 14 August 2005). While not disputing that there is a group of young men known as the Muslim Boys who may well be linked to a number of violent crimes, the terms in which this story has been reported epitomize less a rational evocation of an exceptional case and more an overly sensational exercise in journalism composed largely of unsubstantiated claims and stories. No Imam has yet come forward (publicly) to verify the story of being forced to open Mosques and, so far, no other young men have been identified who have been forcibly converted. As to the alleged Al Qaeda link so far this has not been publicly verified. It could be observed that if the Muslim Boys were the 'biggest criminal phenomenon' yet seen on the shores of the UK, one would expect much more to be reported about them and their activities. Since the trial for the murder of Adrian Marriott took place in 2005, they have literally disappeared from the media radar.

Objection 3: The term 'gang' is not a neutral descriptive of the street world out there. Its use comes with a dangerous ideological baggage from which it cannot be disarticulated.

While it might be thought that the term 'gang' is an innocent descriptive, this is certainly not the case. It is rather a transcendental signifier saturated with meanings that are immediately bought into play when it is mobilized. The term gang does not designate a social problem in any neutral sense; it denotes and, in a tautological way, explains this problem simultaneously. It is a blinding and mesmerizing concept that has a seductive dimension many cannot resist. This is because, in one simple beguiling term, we find embedded a convenient and simple thesis about why things are as they are. The term

gang signifies not this or that group out there but a *Monstrous Other*, an organized counter force confronting the good society; what Katz and Jackson-Jacobs describes as a 'transcendental evil' (Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2004). To deploy Christie's (2001) term the gang provides a ready made 'suitable enemy', suitable precisely because no one can disagree with its classification as such. The monstrousness of the group is certainly bound up with perennial fears the adult world has with its young, but there is an ethnic dimension to this fear in so far as the gang is always seen to wear a black or brown face. Thus the gang problem is always a problem of Jamaican 'Yardies', the African Caribbean Ghetto boys, the Muslim Boys, the Chinese Triads, the Turkish/Kurdish Baybasin Clan, the Asian Fiat Bravo Boys and so on. These are outsiders threatening the good society; outsiders unlike us, essentialized in their difference.

As a group that lacks any structural power, street gangs are well equipped to per-form their allocated role as an ideal 'suitable enemy'. Indeed, it is interesting to note how the social role that the gang has been allocated to perform by a society that excludes it has been registered by 'organic intellectuals' within the black community such as Tupac Shakir and the rap group Public Enemy. By problematizing the criminalizing label Public Enemy sought to contest the politics of exclusion that reproduced them as such; while in Tupac's version of 'Thug Life' so the excluding society was itself confronted by an uncompromising vision of what its own process of exclusion and criminalization had achieved.

Objection 4: Far from confronting the mystifying gaze of the mass media, academic gang talkers all too easily confirm it in their fixation and their elected method of research

While the gangland Britain thesis has been largely driven forward by the gang obsessed media, academic gang research, specifically as this has been informed by the administrative gang research tradition, also helps consolidate this myth. As we shall see, the problem here relates both to the object of research analysis and also to the methods elected to study it.

Gang research, as it developed in the USA from the 1970s onward, grew out of two convictions that have come to assume the status of dominant orthodoxies. The first assumption is that the defining feature of the gang was the group's integral relation to crime and violence (Klein, 1971, 1995; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996), a definition which came to supersede the older (and less criminalizing) definition of the gang as an 'interstitial entity' as this was originally defined by Thrasher (1927). The second conviction was that the gang was a major driver of urban violence and, as such, needed to be understood in order to be suppressed (Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Klein, 1995; Battin-Pearson et al., 1998; Hill et al., 2001; Thornberry et al., 2003). Though both of these assumptions have been contested (Conquergood, 1992; Brotherton and Barrios, 2004; Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2004), these designations nevertheless continue to prevail in the majority of gang research conducted in the USA today. This is particularly the case for academic gang researchers sponsored by state bodies beholden to the same assumptions about the gang. This perspective lies at the heart of the positivistic

criminology associated with *The Eurogang Network* group (Klein, 2001) now being mobilized to explain the problem of the gang in Europe.

While we have not denied the existence of criminal gangs in the UK, and while we accept that these groups are involved in violence, our contention is that the problem of violent street worlds cannot be, nor ought to be, reduced to the gang; nor should the study of the group life be annexed to it. The problem of applying American gang in the UK is that it fails to account for the differing UK context. Such research looks solely at the (ethnic) gang; it annexes the study of all street groups to the gang by creating complex typologies about them; and it proceeds on the assumption that the problem of inner urban violence is a problem of gangs and thus the solution to urban violence is gang research. Given that gang researchers within this tradition, as Katz and Jackson-Jacobs (2004) observe, only reference other gang researchers while avidly avoiding other non-gang-related studies of youth violence, the end result is that research is solely in the language of gang talk! It provides the only interpretive grid, it frames the analysis and, as such, nothing else is seen or allowed. Far from contesting the sensational coverage of the mass media, academic gang research can inadvertently end up helping consolidate it by the single-minded nature of its fixations. At the same time, by only looking for the gang, the wider complexities of life in multiply deprived areas are overlooked.

While ethnographies of the American gang have certainly helped contest the stereotypical vision of street organizations as pathologically inclined outsiders (Hagedorn, 1988; Jankowski, 1991; Brotherton and Barrios, 2004), and by so doing have sought to contest the demonizing logic inherent in popular commonsense versions of gang talk, it could be observed that this tradition is by no means dominant within American criminology which remains committed to a quantitative positivistic method. Our final concern about the influence of academic gang research is that, in its administrative and positivistic form, we find is an approach to the gang and group life, which, far from recognizing it as a complex space of meaningful production, engaged in an analytics that, in practice, systematically dehumanizes already criminalized populations further. The net result of this is to confirm, not challenge, the stereotypical assumptions discussed earlier.

The life of any social group is a complex multifaceted phenomenon as subcultural theory has demonstrated (Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979). As such, it requires an examination, sensitive to the intersection of cultural, political and economic forces at play in its construction which is as much as it requires recognizing the symbolic processes of meaningful construction in which its members engage. Social groups are composed of social relations in movement; they are culture-producing entities shaped by the narratives which their members weave and the passions that motivate them. In the cultural life of delinquent groups not only may criminal acts be planned but in the social rituals its members reflect, articulate and dramatize the dilemmas and contradictions inherent within the social milieu from which they emerge.

In many ways the early pioneering ethnographic research tradition of the Chicago School sought to grasp this lived complexity, just as recent developments in cultural

criminology continue this tradition today (Ferrell and Sanders, 1995; Presdee 2000; Ferrell et al., 2004). It is our contention that in its administrative form, with its commitment to the numbers game, the empirically driven gang research tradition not only fails to grasp group life as a space of cultural production, it actively misrepresents the reality of group life in the reductive empiricist analysis the phenomena brings to bear to describe it. Jock Young has recently, drawn attention in the pitfalls inherent to an empiricist criminological tradition that is beholder to what he terms 'voodoo statistics'. Such a criminology, he argues, is 'denatured and desiccated':

> *Its actors inhabit a world where they are driven to crime by social or psychological deficits, or make opportunistic choices in the criminal marketplace. They are either miserable or mundane. They are, furthermore, digital creatures of quantity, they obey probabilistic laws of deviancy – they can be represented by the statistical symbolism of lamda, chi, and sigma, their behaviour can be captured by the intricacies of regression analysis and equation. (Young, 2004: 13)*

This description captures well the representation that this empirically driven gang research tradition has too often painted of the gangs. At the most general level, many of the surveys conducted on the urban poor appear to state obvious facts represented as profound truths. Among these can be included insights such as males are over-represented in street gangs, and that that gang members typically come from poor areas (Klein, 1995). All of which leads to the conclusion that people who agree to commit crime together are likely to commit more crime than those who do not. In the reduction of complex lives to statistical equations, so the cultural richness of those, often difficult, lives are reduced (in a research gaze) to little more than arid statistics with the consequence that people become reproduced within this discourse as nothing other than walking clusters of de-contextualized variables.

If we follow this reductive process further, then outside of the indefinitely repetitive ambition of specifying how many and how pervasive gangs are, what we find is group life reduced to lists of denaturalized 'risk factors'. These aspire to narrate the truth of the gang by identifying those risk factors, which may by regression analysis promote gang membership and group delinquency. Studies in this area map, for example, psychological characteristics, intelligence variables familial characteristics (such as 'criminality'), and an array of various attitudinal variables. These range from 'commitment to education' and 'respect for teachers' to a plethora of far more dubious attributes among which are included a prevalence of 'anti-social values', 'higher levels of disrespect or officials' and crime of crimes, 'enjoyment from hanging around' (Klein, 1995). All of these, needless to say, can be confirmed statistically.

Whereas the subcultural theorists of the Birmingham school (Hall and Jefferson, 1976) conceived subcultures as a rich source of cultural production and saw in this culture an attempt to dramatize and symbolically address the lived contradictions group members experienced, the empiricist tradition tangibly fails to engage in such questions. To an extent this process of diminution occurs because this tradition lacks any political economy or meaningful grasp of phenomenology and replaces it instead

with a mechanistic commitment to typologizing. It is, however, difficult to escape the conclusion that, to a large extent, the lived life world of those subject to this 'petri-dish' style of research is not worth paying attention to. As we have observed earlier, when the testimonies of the gang members have been collated this has not been undertaken with the aim of understanding the group as a site of cultural production. On the contrary, it has been used instead to develop tools such as risk predictors that can be deployed to help destroy the groups whose testimony has been elicited.

As Katz has observed, the gang as it is reproduced in this species of scientific criminology dangerously misrepresents the complexity of the street world it aspires to represent precisely by virtue of its crude reductionism. To invoke the language of postmodernism, what is produced is not an accurate representation of complex street life but a sort of simulacra, a reification, an identical copy of a reality that may not exist. Katz terms this reification 'the criminologists' gang' and the concept captures well its problematic nature. If we try and excavate the deeper reasons which may help explain why academic gang talking so often fails to grasp the lived realities of violent street worlds then, to evoke the language of the French philosopher Deleuze (Deleuze and Guatarri, 1988), this could be that gang talkers typically impose onto the street the kind of arboreal structures that best define the bureaucratic world in which they normally dwell. A world, which is orderly, hierarchical, discernable, measurable, predictable and thus containable by thought. In effect, most gang talkers are 'tree thinkers' and interpret gangs like trees in an urban forest: they are units that have structure and hierarchy, they are quantifiable and can be defined in terms of clusters of risk factors and so on. This arboreal tendency leads them to over order the inherent contingent, amorphous, volatility of street worlds with dangerous consequences. It leads them, to define street organizations in terms that are inappropriate. This tendency to imagine street organizations as a mirror image of formal organizational structures is not unique. In medieval times gangs were imagined to possess exactly the same organizational forms as the medieval guilds; just as, in the USA, the mafia was imagined in the 1960s as a mirror image of the American corporation (see Cressey, 1969).

Back on the street and some distance from the criminologists' gang the problem of gang life is always elsewhere. This is beautifully captured by the Norwegian anthropologist Moshmus (2005) who comments on the trouble he had in getting his street informants in Oslo to comment on their gang reality:

FIGURE 1 Not the street

> *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. (p. 204)*

The academic gang talking we have criticized is too often not the language of the street or indeed a language that reflects the street and the collectives who populate it; it is too often the language of control and this is different. Gang talk is a language control agents deploy to talk about street collectives with a view to controlling them. What we need to bear in mind and what a constitutive sociology of the street must proceed from is the recognition that street reality is far more fluid, volatile and amorphous than 'tree thinking' gang talkers can capture. To return to Deleuze, we are typically looking at rhizomatic structures not arboreal root systems. This is a very different reality and needs interpreting in its own right and by a language game that recognizes its *sui-generic* characteristics.

FIGURE 2 The street

Objection 5: Far from helping practitioners derive good and sensible policies that may help ameliorate violent street worlds, those who begin with the gang invariably come to assert the need for gang suppression.

If you begin with the a priori assumption that the gang is at the heart of the violence you want to explain, then invariably you will find that gang suppression is the solution to the problem; even if there is an excess to the violence which is not gang related. The USA, as opposed to Europe, has an established gang suppression industry, unsurprisingly its policies are touted as the solution to what is now [mis]defined as the UK gang problem. This follows, even though the huge investment the USA has made in suppressing their gangs has completely failed to curb them. However the mass imprisonment and criminalization of gang members in the USA has certainly helped fuel carceral inflation more generally. Its anti-gang policies represent a chilling component of what Wacquant terms the growing deadly symbiosis between the ghetto and penitentiary.

The problem of gang talk is that it extends beyond simply adopting inappropriate policies. The trouble is that it colonizes the political imaginary and this is the real danger. It does this precisely because of its arboreal tendencies and perverse fixations. What gang talkers collude in producing is not the street world as it is but a fantasy that is always somewhere else. The problem with control agents is that much as they claim to trade in 'evidence-based policy', they tend to work with the fantasy as this is produced by gang talk and respond accordingly. The US government response to the black victims of hurricane Katrina exemplifies this. In this, what Bauman terms 'America's own apocalypse now', the single worst humanitarian crisis that the USA has faced in recent years, became the first to be reconstructed, within 24 hours, as a problem of gangs and black gangsters. The power of gang talk was so well inscribed in the social imaginary of the State its policy makers simply could not position the black community as victims within their symbolic order. And this is why, when the State finally and belatedly entered New Orleans, it arrived not as a rescue effort but as an army of occupation. Though no more than a fantasy of the State, it was this gangland fantasy that shaped the State's material response.

CONCLUSION

The street gang has been fore grounded as the extreme of delinquency in the UK. This production process has been achieved in the mass media by some law and order officials, political commentators, populist politicians and academic researchers. Far from considering the gang as one factor among many in the aetiology of urban violence, the attention that the gang has received has led to the mistaken conclusion that it alone is the problem and that the solution to urban violence lies in suppressing the gang. At the same time, what this exercise in selective foregrounding has achieved, is to push

into the background the multitude of other factors that have a determinate effect on street violence such as poverty, diminishing welfare and the collapse of social systems. Far from helping drive our understanding of urban violence forward, the gang gaze has acted to mystify the problem by making it one of bad people who make bad choices where these people typically derive from marginal and marginalized ethnic groups. The tragic outcome of this is that we are not seeing what is really going on because we are looking in the wrong place to find it. We conclude this article by suggesting that just as we must treat, with considerable scepticism, the explosion of gang talk produced by the mass media and peddled by law and order politicians, we must also treat with equal suspicion the activities of academics who believe they can confirm the gang presence through regression analysis and the reduction of group life to risk variables.

We accept as we stated earlier that gangs exist in the UK. We also accept these are capable of extreme violence. We remain, however, opposed to making this relatively rare unit the key focus of research attention and community safety effort as currently appears to be the case. The roots of urban violence are manifold and to study and understand these it is important that we look beyond the gang to find them. This entails bringing into the research gaze the complex totality of social networks at play within the ecology of any area and studying the array of actors that populate it. This means looking at the world of volatile peer groups which are not gangs, attending to the relationships between more organized criminal groups and street gangs, and not least studying the internal dynamics of the grey economy where it has evolved where legitimate opportunity structures are limited. At the same time, it means doing more than simply subjecting these populations to the statistical truth of regression analysis. It means engaging with these groups as sites of cultural production. Cultural criminology, we suggest, points the way forward here and it is to the ethnography intrinsic to this tradition that we can best expect to find the more compelling explanations. Rather than place street organization at the beginning of analysis, we suggest instead that we begin with the problem of violence and theorize this more acutely, only then reading back to see if it has anything to do with the problem of the gang. While our analysis has focused on the UK, this does not mean that these lessons do not apply to other societies including the USA.

Rather than aspiring to contribute yet another small step in the further development of the industry of academic gang talking, it is our contention that we need to go beyond the gang and beyond gang research. This does not entail abandoning the gang or indeed the lessons that good gang research has to teach us (and these, despite our critique, are many). What it means is putting the gang in its appropriate place and treating it as part of a problem of violent street worlds where the problem of urban violence has always been greater than the gang.

The lesson for officials and practitioners is that they ought to be more sceptical about gang talk and gang talkers. They need to be careful to ensure that when they allocate their rehabilitative and preventative effort they allocate it in ways that do not concede to the gang an importance it does not possess. If the problem is not the gang this also entails developing solutions that are not gang specific. It means not only

looking beyond and behind mystifications like gang culture, it means being very wary about imposing misleading labels. With this in mind, we conclude with three lessons we derive from this sermon. Unless you have good reason:

Refrain from doing gang talk to your friends
Refrain from doing gang talk to your enemies
Refrain from doing gang talk to yourself.

Notes

1 This refers to the number of high profile murders that have occurred in the UK. There are a greater number of incidences that are not reported and do not receive news coverage.

2 See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/7099049.stm

3 Questions about these issues were posed at a Home Office convened seminar in 2007 hosted by Mackinsey Consultants, attended by one of the authors.

4 There are some exceptions to this rule. See, for example, Patrick (1973) and Bean (1981).

5 The upshot of this is that it is possible to find as many or as few gangs as gang talkers require. If you want many you apply few filtering questions, fewer, a few more.

6 Because of the definitional ambiguities associated with the gang this report adopted the term 'delinquent youth groups' based on filtering questions designed and developed by the Eurogang Network to identify gang membership in the USA.

7 The report does not indicate the type of firearm carried by members of DYG.

8 Street robbery (muggings) equates to 11 per cent (or 29,865) of the total number of violent crimes recorded by the BCS in 2002–3.

9 It is not known which of the brothers was responsible for the killing; nor is it clear from news articles whether there were any other participants involved in Damilola's murder.

10 Our work makes a clear distinction between peer groups which may have an intermittent and occasional relationship to crime and violence from the gang which has a far closer and intimate one.

11 On completion of our project a 'problem-solving day' was initiated by the Metropolitan Police to explore further the gang issue in Hackney. A number of key community leaders, project workers and local residents – including people who had been directly affected by 'gang violence' – were invited to take part in a number of workshops over the course of the day. The general consensus among participants was that the problem in Hackney was not one of gangs. However, despite a clear consensus on this issue the facilitators kept demanding that the group return to consider 'the problem of the gang' and became somewhat agitated when people refused to accept this warning.

12 The Metropolitan Police Service estimated a 'core group' of 25.

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