

Gangs

Steve Hall

The most common criminological definition of the 'gang' is a durable and structured group, often territorial and hostile to others, which regards crime and violence as integral to its identity (see Hallsworth and Young, 2004). Yet the study of gangs is characterised by a deep fault line.

On one side traditional criminology is replete with a dizzying array of definitions, typologies, and descriptions of different values and norms that are said to distinguish criminal groups from the mainstream. We have learnt from this largely descriptive literature that criminal groups can exist for various periods of time in organised and disorganised forms and temporary networks. There are many different hybrids and sub-types of such organisation but it is important to realise that the 'gang' is only one such form.

On the other side, social reaction theorists refuse to talk above a whisper about 'gangs', or for that matter criminal groups in general. Early social reaction theorists set up an intellectual embargo by warning us that talk of 'causes' always reduces our sense of the complexity of phenomena, thus playing into the hands of systems of social control which tend to seek lazy explanations as a means to justify heavy-handed interventions. Despite the crime explosions in the UK and USA in the 1980s, social reaction theory was taken forward by the 'governmentality' thesis, which claimed that most forms of criminality are socially constructed by power elites and governments to justify increases in repressive control. In this vein Hallsworth (2011) argues that the term 'gang' is a stereotype, an invented category within a wider discourse of what might be described as a 'gang control industry' consisting of politicians and members of the policing agencies.

However, critical realists argue that both traditional criminologists and social reaction theorists avoid the study of the deep structural causes and conditions that underlie more harmful forms of criminality (Currie, 2010), thus placing strict limits on intellectual inquiry. This systematic denial is a product of what Pitts calls 'crime-averse criminologies' (2008: 33). However, underneath this lies a deeper current of *political catastrophism* in which right- and left-liberals are fearful that attempts to confront criminality's deep causes with interventionist policies will inevitably result in the development of brutal, totalitarian governments. Social science, politics and public opinion are thus paralysed by the constant presence of two pervasive manufactured fears – of the *barbarism of disorder*, represented by images of 'gangs' and other criminal forms in the media, but also of the *barbarism of order*, in which a totalitarian state would invade social life with heavy-handed and pervasive forms of policing (Hall, 2012). These strains of thinking have thus left vulnerable residents of high-crime areas afraid of crime and simultaneously afraid that nobody is there to listen and help.

Before social science can begin to understand 'gangs' and their underlying socioeconomic and cultural currents, it must struggle free from this intellectual straightjacket. The study of media and crime is shot through with political catastrophism. The familiar 'moral panic' thesis argues that the mass media, aiding and abetting the capitalist state, tend to exaggerate the threat crime poses to the 'moral order' to throw the population into a panic. In such a fearful condition they are more likely to vote for authoritarian governments. However, social science has been systematically misreading the crime-media nexus for decades. Most TV or film productions about crime do indeed present criminality in a theatrical mode to raise concerns, but only to set up an initial problem – presented as a strictly individual and ethical

phenomenon with all underlying politics, cultural forces and structural conditions largely ignored – that the forces of law, order and individualised welfare can be shown to resolve. This continuous rollercoaster presentation produces complacency, not panic (Hall, *ibid.*).

Municipal capitalism's image-management agents also play a part in the denial of the reality of harmful crime as they try to attract business and residents to their cities. The dominance of traditional criminology, which downplays underlying socioeconomic conditions, and social reaction theory, which downplays the harmful effects crime, has made a significant contribution to the anxiety, cynicism and loss of faith in democratic politics that are now pervasive sentiments today. Proper critical analysis of criminal gangs has been suppressed by a combination of three powerful forces operating on behalf of liberal capitalism to reproduce the concern/complacency couplet: catastrophist traditional and social reaction discourses, theatrical media stereotypes and governmental image-management.

For Pitts (2011), media exaggeration does not mean that gangs do not exist or inflict real harm on victims and members alike. Youth gangs have in the past thirty years become a real problem in poor locales in Britain, as they have been in the USA throughout its history. They cause harms such as violence, intimidation, weaponization and the recruitment of young people into criminal activity. Gangs increased in number alongside other criminal groups and networks since the arrival of crack cocaine and structural unemployment in the USA during the deindustrialisation process in 1980s. Despite the much-vaunted 'crime decline', in the 2000s – a product of artificially leveraged economies, mass imprisonment, hi-tech security systems and other factors – the youth gang problem in the UK, previously of a lesser magnitude, began to 'catch up' and undergo a convergence of form.

For Pitts, the denial of the harmful criminogenic effects of socioeconomic disruption is nothing less than the 'dereliction of our professional duty' (2011:178) as social scientists. He argues that 'sustained exposure to acute social and economic disadvantage' (2008:33) creates the conditions for increases in harmful crime. This is echoed by other critical realists who seek to contextualise the criminal shadow-economy and explain its effects on social life. They also remind us that amid the colonial legacy and long-running currents of racism in the West, socioeconomic inequality is racialized. African-Americans and Hispanics still suffer from structural discrimination, cultural disrespect, political marginalisation and disproportionate economic disruption, which were only partially addressed by the civil rights victories in the 1960s. Deindustrialization in the USA led to the ghettoization of former industrial workers, some of whom moved into relatively lucrative criminal markets to form gangs and other types of criminal network as functional units in a hostile environment. This process is currently diffusing across the deindustrializing sectors of the West. Young people in the industrial countries now live in an era of *post-politics*, where traditional politics are virtually dead (Winlow and Hall, 2013). As they confront long-term unemployment they are absorbed in consumer culture and feel unrepresented in the political sphere; in these conditions some young people who lack support drift into criminal markets (Hall et al, 2008). Criminal markets are also expanding and gangs and loose criminal networks are emerging in the developing world as neoliberal restructuring disrupts traditional socioeconomic forms and ethical codes (Weigratz, 2010).

References

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Steve Hall is Professor of Criminology at Teesside University. He is essentially a criminologist with interests in philosophy, psychoanalysis, history and political economy. He is author of *Theorizing Crime and Deviance* (Sage, 2012), co-editor of *New Directions in Criminological Theory* (Routledge, 2012) and co-author of *Criminal Identities and Consumer Culture* (Willan/Routledge, 2008), *Violent Night* (Berg, 2006) and *Rethinking Social Exclusion* (Sage, 2013).