Urban Disorder and Gangs
A Critique and a Warning

Simon Hallsworth and David Brotherton
Runnymede: Intelligence for a Multi-ethnic Britain

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Foreword

We’ve already learnt a great deal from this summer’s catastrophic riots. We’ve mostly learnt what we do not know; we do not know why so many people thought that they would be justified in using the opportunity to indulge in burning and looting; we do not know what role inequality in general and racial inequality in particular played in rioters motivations; and we do not know what needs to be done to ensure that riots of this kind do not happen again.

For social policy researchers, the riots should have been humbling and led to revisiting some of the assumptions we had been making about our society. Instead, we’ve also had confirmed for us the challenge in our current political climate of making policy decisions based on evidence. Instead of an approach which sought to gather and understand the evidence, we had a near immediate rush to off-the-shelf theorizing. The riots, it seems, have been all things to all people and have only served to confirm existing views rather than being an opportunity for reflection. This rush has led to a number of myths about the events of the summer; rioters were all ‘criminal, pure and simple’, these riots were nothing to do with racial injustice, criminal gangs were key players, young people are out of control, family structures in our cities are not providing the necessary moral framework, black culture is pathological, etc.

The lack of evidence has created a vacuum into which these competing theories have been thrown, and the government’s initial rejection of a public inquiry in favour of a more poorly resourced select committee review and a public engagement ‘victims panel’, may not provide us with the understanding that will cut through the miasma of opinion to discern what really happened and how we make sure it does not happen again.

The policy responses to the summer’s riots are coming thick and fast, with reformers emboldened to dust off their pet projects. It is crucial in this period that we make decisions based on evidence rather than speculation, and consider carefully the implications of the decisions made. Instead of trying to understand the riots in order to ensure that social breakdown of this kind does not happen again, we are at risk of allowing the myths to drive the policy agenda. The chances of lasting solutions are in danger of eluding our grasp.

Here Simon Hallsworth and David Brotherton highlight the dangers of rushing to ‘gang talk’ to explain the riots or to suggest solutions. The implications of poor policy making in this area are likely to have serious implications for those already marginalised groups within our society. In shaping the responses to the riots it is crucial that we do not merely add fuel to the fire but seek to find lasting solutions to ensure that destructive riots do not scar our neighbourhoods again.

Rob Berkeley
Director
Runnymede
November 2011
England today is a state beset by crisis. It began with the financial tsunami of 2008. A crisis perpetrated by global finance capital, aided and abetted by an acquiescent state. This would provoke a near collapse in its banking sector and a recession from which it has not recovered. Before the dust of this particular storm had even settled, a second crisis emerged connected with the British political establishment who found themselves mired in an expenses scandal that would reveal avarice on a staggering scale. Taking the crisis of the over-class to a new dimension entirely, phone hacking by Murdoch's global empire News International exposed the wholesale corruption of British public life. Coupled with mass and sometimes violent protests over austerity cuts, a global economic crisis that had never gone away, and a flat-lining economy, it would be difficult to imagine that things could get much worse.

But they did. Over four days in August 2011, Britain’s inner cities exploded in a wave of violent public unrest unprecedented in recent years as thousands of young people took to the streets. Violence predominantly associated with, but not exclusively perpetrated by, its most powerless citizens; in particular those who inhabited the poorest areas of its metropolitan cities; areas that, in turn, would experience much of the worst violence. At its conclusion lives were tragically lost, stores were looted, whilst swathes of England’s urban landscape were reduced to the status of a devastated wasteland. These events have provoked, and with justification, a sense of deep collective trauma as the search for explanations has gathered momentum: How to account for a wave of destruction that reached from London to cities as far apart as Birmingham, Liverpool, Nottingham, Manchester, and Salford?

Condemnation as opposed to explanation defined the immediate political response as the government and the mass media sought to translate the disorders into a narrative fit for public consumption. Someone had to be blamed and it didn’t take the coalition government long to identify a folk devil that would then be made responsible for the worst urban disturbances the UK has witnessed since those of the 1980s. In a speech given to Parliament which had been recalled to debate the disorder, Prime Minister David Cameron identified ‘gangs’ as the criminal masterminds responsible for organizing 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. They have blighted life on their estates with gang-on-gang murders and unprovoked attacks on innocent bystanders. In the last few days there is some evidence that they have been behind the coordination of the attacks on the police and the looting that has followed. (Cameron, 2011)

Cameron went on to call for a campaign of re-moralization in a society some sections of which he claimed were ‘sick’. This would be coupled with a highly punitive response that would begin with specially convened courts meting out draconian sentences to the rioters. Unsurprisingly, a key component of this punitive response would entail ‘a concerted, all-out war on gangs and gang culture’, the inspiration for which Cameron found in United States gang suppression policy. To signal his ‘get-tough’ credentials Cameron claimed he was seeking policy advice on precisely these issues from the architect of zero tolerance policing in America, Bill Bratton.

The political establishment and the mass media had no reservations in taking up the gangland Britain thesis. In a range of broadcasts various celebrities, media pundits and self-styled (sic) ‘gang experts’ were invited to share their opinions – even though it was evident that many had never encountered a gang in their lives. Within hours of the violence Britain found itself in the grip of gang fever, and gang talk quickly became the dominant narrative from which answers to the questions posed by the disturbances would be found. For those who had the temerity to suggest that the causes might just be a little more complex than ‘gangs’ their fate was to be shouted down by partisan interviewers who accused them of ‘excusing the violence’. Criminologists and sociologists were noticeable by their absence from this debate. In a field consequently freed from any commitment to evidence, the collective wisdom of media columnists, politicians and celebrities assumed centre stage.
Without taking time to reflect on what ‘gangs’ are or what a ‘gang culture’ might be, a consensus was quickly reached that gangs were indeed the criminal masterminds behind the disturbances. Their presence was also identified at the heart of the violence and looting. The gangs were seen simultaneously (if contradictory) as both calculating architects as well as being responsible for what the media were quick to identify as ‘outbreaks of mindless criminality’ (OMC for short). As for explanations that evoked issues such as austerity, class, or deprivation, these were given short shrift; the riots were essentially about criminality and this quickly became the only permitted narrative.

Even though mindless violence by its nature precludes explanation, someone or something had to be found to account for why so many people now appeared to be involved in it. The answer would be found in a narrative that would incriminate instead ‘gang culture’. This, apparently, now defined the way of life of young black men everywhere. Worse, its influence had now spread away from its black heartlands to take root in white working class communities whose young people are also, or so we were told, ‘infected’ by it.

It would be the celebrity historian David Starkey who would project this highly racial discourse into the public arena in an appearance on the BBC TV show, Newsnight. ’Being a medieval specialist, some might wonder quite where his expertise lay in pronouncing informed judgements on contemporary urban disorder, which he had never studied. But in the context of a programme that had appeared to surrender any claim to serious journalism, ignorance was clearly its own qualification. When asked to provide his interpretation of the disorders he identified a ‘violent, destructive and nihilistic black culture that had corrupted too many of Britain’s youngsters’. He went on to argue that:

A substantial section of the chavs have become black. The whites have become black. Black and white, boy and girl, operate in this language together which is wholly false, which is a Jamaican patois that’s been intruded in England, and this is why so many of us have this sense of literally living a foreign country. (Starkey, 2011)

For good measure he then added that Enoch Powell was right in warning, more than 40 years go, that immigration would ultimately cause conflict across the cities of the UK. For those who cannot remember, Powell evoked the image of ‘the River Tiber foaming with much blood’ and called for migrants to be repatriated. Many supported Starkey including Daily Mail columnist Tony Sewell. The looting, Sewell argued, arose as a consequence of a ‘gangsta culture’ to which young people of different races were committed. In its celebration of ‘bling’, this culture provoked a ‘raw acquisitiveness’ that would lead them to target ‘specific stores that are cherished in this culture, such as those selling mobile phones, trainers, sports clothes or widescreen TVs’ (Sewell, 2011). For those who had the temerity to complain about Starkey’s comments, these were condemned for stifling ‘free speech’ in the name of ‘political correctness’ (Delingpole, 2011).

In summary, the gang has been constructed within this discourse as the organizing force behind the disturbances and the organization most significantly implicated in the violence and looting that defined them. Unlike previous riots on the British mainland, these riots were therefore not ‘political’ in so far as they were not considered a protest against anything; this was simply OMC. Within this discourse gangs have emerged, not as a response to poor or adverse social economic conditions; instead they are seen as the product of a pathological ‘gang culture’ which has its origin in the black community but which has now taken root among the white working class (or ‘chavs’ as the right wing media pejoratively label them). This is a culture that celebrates violence, law breaking and material goods and which remains wholly hostile to legitimate authority. As the problem of the riots is essentially a problem of ‘gangs’ and ‘gang culture’, the solution to the disturbances are not to be found in rectifying adverse social conditions but in crime control and criminal justice. ‘Gang crackdowns’ and ‘zero tolerance policing’ thus follow logically as the cure to this ‘criminal disease’.

This Report

The disturbances are deeply shocking events. They present us with a clear and sharp reminder that all is not well in British society. Taken together with the other crisis that have engulfed Britain in recent years; from the avarice and corruption of its ruling classes; to the financial crisis its financiers have bequeathed as their legacy; it would not be an underestimate to suggest that Britain is facing a deep organic crisis. Now indeed is the time for some introspection. Instead, the crisis posed by the disorders has already been defined as one of ‘gangs’ and punitive ‘gang crackdowns’ are being offered as the solution. The fact that these crises might well be interlinked, and signify deeper
failures elsewhere in our social structure, is not an issue that is being publicly debated. The key problem we face as we confront what Cameron calls ‘the broken society’ is black ‘gang culture’ and its pathological manifestations. Indeed, this interpretation has now gained so much widespread acceptance that it has already assumed the mantle of common sense among large sections of the political establishment and mass media. Not only do gangs define everything that is now wrong with our inner city areas, but gang control provides the solution. All that remains for journalists to do is to go out on the mean streets and find ‘gangs’ and talk to ‘gang experts’ about how best to exterminate them.

This takes us to the wider aims of this report which is to contest the way in which the manifold problems associated with the disturbances have been reduced to problems posed by ‘gangs’ and ‘gang culture’ to which ‘gang suppression’ is then touted as the logical ‘solution’. In what follows we will show that this gangland Britain thesis is one that lacks any credibility as a plausible explanation for the disorder. As with previous riots, any attempt to make sense of them must consider precisely what those who promote the gangland thesis the most want to deny, and that is the crucial role of wider social forces to which these disturbances were a response.

By placing the gang at the heart of official explanations, it is our contention that these deeper causes run a real risk of being lost in a world where the gang is being positioned as a convenient scapegoat upon whose shoulders social condemnation will fall. By constructing the gang as a suitable enemy, complex social problems that have their origins in the way our society is organized are being translated instead into problems of law and order to which illiberal law and order solutions are then made to appear logical and necessary.

By placing so much onus on the gang a process of criminalization is being licensed that we suspect will fall most heavily on the black community. Crime in the meantime will become racialized further than it already has. It will do so because, as we will show, the gang talk that animates this discourse is from the beginning deeply racialized. Finally, in the context of a government that has decided it wants to ‘look beyond our shores’ to the US in order to find solutions to the problems posed by gangs here, we will demonstrate why introducing gang suppression US-style is not a good idea. As we shall see, the gang suppression initiatives to which the coalition government appear most attracted, have not worked that well in the US, despite the American States’ ruthless attempt to deploy them to suppress gangs. There is even less reason to suppose that they will work here in a very different context.

On Riots and Gangs: Establishing the Connection

So what precisely is the connection (if any) between gangs and the disturbances and between gangs and gang culture?

Gangs

Evidential support for the claim that gangs were behind the riots was justified on the basis of a statement released by the Metropolitan Police claiming that around a fifth to a quarter of the people they had arrested in relation to the riots were ‘gang affiliated’. This would provoke papers like the Daily Mirror (2011) to bizarrely read this as conclusive evidence that gangs were therefore behind the riots. Leaving aside the status of how accurate such gang designations are (which we return to consider below) it could be noted that if this indeed reflected the composition of the population involved in the disorders, these figures meant that three-quarters of the rioters were not ‘gang affiliated’. Whilst this suggests that the gang members played a role in the riots, what these figures also tell us is that they played a limited role. A fact belatedly noted in Home Office statistics which noted:

In terms of the role gangs played in the disorder, most forces perceived that where gang members were involved, they generally did not play a pivotal role. (Home Office, 2011: 19)

This, of course, assumes that the police figures on gang affiliation are themselves robust and accurate and, as such, can be trusted. But can they? The first point that needs to be made in relation to this is that gang identification is not an exact science. On the contrary it is an interpretive process replete with many problems; not least of which are the subjective assumptions on which they are based. What we can be clear about is that the police attributions are not made on the basis of self-ascribed designations by gang members; nor, as the Home Office itself acknowledged, was any consistent definition of the term ‘gang’ used by the police forces. Police attributions, rather like those of the media, are made by those with the power to label and make their labels stick. The problem with labels, however, is that they are not infallible.
This is not an insignificant issue of semantics. The issue of defining when a gang is a gang is a real issue by no means settled in criminology where it has been debated the most (Brotherton, 2007; Jankowski, 1991; Klein, 2001). From the perspective of media pundits who kept evoking gangs in TV studios following the disturbances, it was easy to get the impression that the term ‘gang’ was being deployed to describe just about everyone hanging around in the context of a riot dressed a particular way. This, it could be observed, is not too far from the usual media trick of describing just about every group that is felt to be causing trouble to someone as a ‘gang’ (Hallsworth, 2011). Given that gangs and non-gangs wear the same ubiquitous street uniform, it could be observed that distinguishing between gangs and non-gangs in the context of a riot is as difficult a task as it is distinguishing them on the street.

Given that street organizations vary considerably, defining them all as ‘gangs’ is not particularly helpful or useful – even if convenient. A group of 12-year-olds ‘hanging around’ is not the same as a territorial group that is armed and systematically violent – which we may want to term a gang. And we might want to separate this from elder and more organized criminals who do not have such a pronounced street presence; or from large street corner societies who congregate in the public spaces around estates, because that is where they all live. Calling all these groups ‘gangs’ extends the application of the term to a point of absurdity (Hallsworth and Duffy, 2010). Given that, in the context of disorder, many groups along with many individuals are likely to be drawn towards, the consequence is that gangs and many more numerous peer groups will be involved. Which might explain why 75 per cent or so of the rioters were not ‘gang affiliated’.

Matters are even more complex than this because how the very people propounding the gangland UK thesis imagine gangs, and how gang life unfolds for those who live gang realities are two very separate things, and this again must lead us to be cautious when the term ‘gang’ is evoked (Hallsworth and Young, 2008). To begin with, the people who are talking about gangs (gang talkers) do not inhabit the same world as those who are gang members. By and large we are looking at a metropolitan, predominantly white, middle class elite, composed of people like David Starkey who have never studied the lives of those they are talking about. The language they use to describe gangs and the way they often imagine gangs to be owes far more to stereotypical assumptions about what they think gangs are, than reflect what gangs and gang realities are like in practice. Take, for example, David Cameron’s definition of what a gang is:

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)

This may well strike many as entirely plausible. It denotes an organized violent group confronting the good society. The only trouble is this reflects a gang stereotype. This is an example of ‘gang talk’ which is an imaginary discourse about gangs constructed by people who do not know much about gang lives (Hallsworth and Young, 2008). Gang realities are, in practice, very different from this stereotype. In the UK context, gangs exist, but they are far more fluid, volatile and amorphous, than the myth of the organized group with a corporate structure (Alexander, 2008; Bannister et al., 2010, Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009:). The same is true of the US, which bequeathed us this gang stereotype (Brotherton and Barrios, 2004; Garot, 2010; Kontos, Brotheron and Barrios, 2003).

The term ‘gang’, it should be noted, is not a neutral description; it comes prepackaged with an array of assumptions that are evoked when it is utilized. The gang as such:

... 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, 1997). 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. (Hallsworth and Young, 2005: 185)

Even in the violent street world, where gang life is lived out, as recent ethnographies of gangs have shown, it is never quite clear who is and
who is not a ‘real gang’ or ‘real gang member’. Some people may claim to be gangs and other around them might well dispute this and accuse of them of simply being ‘wanabees’ (Garot, 2010). In the meantime such distinctions will not be recognized by enforcement agencies who, lacking all epistemological doubt, have no trouble finding gangs everywhere. Given that the number of gangs that can be found (high or low) depends more on the variables used to define them than the presence of real gangs in an area; it is of course possible to find as many as or as few gangs as you need (Hallsworth and Young, 2008). Quite what a suitable amount of gangs amounts to is therefore a political more than a scientific construct. Which is why, in the context of the current debates around the riots, they are apparently everywhere.

With this in mind let us now consider the term ‘gang affiliation’ more closely: What precisely does this term mean: Does it mean gang member (that is, from perspective of enforcement, someone who meets the criteria necessary to be formally labelled as a gang member)?; or does this mean someone who has been seen by police officers associating with other (sic) ‘gang affiliated members’? The term is vague and vague terms need to be treated with considerable scepticism. As most young men who live in the areas where the disturbances occurred will know and often interact with gang members who are themselves integrated into wide friendship and kin networks (Gunter, 2008) it would not be at all difficult to define most as in some sense ‘gang affiliated’.

The lesson of this is that we need to be very careful when we want to identify gangs and, beyond that, place them at the centre of any criminal conspiracy. Adjudicating who is ‘gang affiliated’ on the basis of a vague concept, imprecise measuring instruments, often dubious intelligence, in the context of a society whose way of imagining gangs owes more to a rich and disturbing fantasy life than informed understanding, must leave room for considerable doubt as to the merits of the gangland UK thesis as a plausible explanation for the riots.

**Gang Culture**

Behind the gangs, shaping apparently the spirit of raw acquisitiveness ‘that would motivate them to engage in a spree of looting we find “gang culture”’. It is this culture that explains the riots because it has corrupted black and white youth with its ‘poison’. Black culture is to blame because it gave birth to ‘gang culture’. It is not, as Starkey neatly put matters, an authentic culture but ‘wholly false’ in the sense that it is not British in so far as people who gave birth to it are not, he evidently thinks, authentically British either (i.e. they are black).

At this point it is worth reflecting that as an explanation of the riots we have come a long way from Lord Scarman who, in his investigation into the roots of urban disorder in Brixton in the 1980s, was aware from the beginning he was dealing with a complex series of events that required complex interpretation (Scarman, 1982). And that is why his report would cover issues that ranged from deteriorating police−community relations; through to an analysis of the adverse socio-economic conditions that the black community in Brixton were experiencing; the racism that lay behind this; coupled with the failure on the part of the political establishment to address it. In the gangland UK thesis what we are instead presented with is an explanation that appears to have dispensed wholesale with any contextual factors altogether. What we are left with is a narrative that places the onus of blame on moral failure provoked by a perverse alien culture. This, it could be observed, is not really an explanation at all; this is what David Garland termed ‘the criminology of the other’ (Garland, 1996).

Rather like the expression ‘gang’, the term ‘gang culture’ is often invoked but never defined by the gang talkers who deploy it. It is, as such, whatever anyone wants it to be. Rather like the term ‘gang’ its meaning appears to be found not only in an exegesis of what it is supposed to contain (which we consider below) but the emotive triggers it evokes. ‘Gang culture’ like the term ‘gang’ in this sense constitutes a term which is already pregnant with meaning and emotion; this is, as such, a highly evocative and racially loaded term (Brotherton and Barrios, 2004; Conquergood, 1997).

Let us consider this in more detail. Gang culture, we are asked to believe, is a force that arrives from outside the good society which it then invades. In the manner of a demon, it possesses people, transforming them as it does so. Rather like the old post-war ‘reefer madness’ propaganda about the impact of drugs on the innocent, we are left with an impression of a force that weakens inhibitions, driving young people to terrifying acts of villainy. And this is precisely what the medicalized imagery that saturates the gangland UK thesis is intended to evoke. The ‘poison that spreads’, the ‘virus that infects’, the ‘criminal disease unleashed’ and the ‘sick society produced’.
This is a ‘disease’ that is expressed in a range of symptoms that we are told constitutes ‘gang culture’. The clothes the young people wear (such as their hoodies), the language they use; a predilection for crime, their hostility to authority and of course in the ‘raw acquisitiveness’ that would license mass looting. The vehicle for disseminating this ‘poisonous culture’ is, in the first instance black culture; and through this the violent aesthetics of grime music mediated through electronic digital media, coupled with ‘dysfunctional families’ whose parents have lost all control of their young.

In the reduction of culture to the status of a disease we appear to be going back to our future, because the symbolism of disease also defined the terms in which the Victorians classified what they called their ‘dangerous classes’ (Hallsworth, 2005). The gangland thesis, as such, is really no more than an iteration of an older narrative about the underclass read as the undeserving poor. Only this time, by implicating black culture, what we have is a highly racial discourse that panders to fears of the black criminal other; fears widely distributed in a society with a longstanding racist heritage; fears that are now being mobilized by the gang talkers. And this is precisely what Cameron means when he evokes ‘the broken society’; bad people mired in an illness of their own making.

By mobilizing the imagery of a disease that spreads through infection, any social basis for understanding human action is evicted. Which is why the prime minister can safely and categorically state that issues such as inequality, poverty or austerity cuts are not to blame for the riots. According to this perspective, we are simply being asked to accept that we are dealing with an alien force that is wholly responsible for the riots. This alien force (‘black culture’) gestates within itself (in the manner of the immaculate conception) a ‘gang culture’ which gives birth to gangs who then go on to cause riots. This completely reverses Lord Scarman’s explanation, which found the problems of the riots precisely in adverse social conditions to which the riots were a response. Here society is innocent and social conditions do not matter. As a consequence, wider society and the political order is absolved because no one else is to blame (apart from the gangs). In this explanation tails wag dogs.

### A Question of Place

These disturbances took place in the same areas that the previous riots also occurred. This might have provided some with food for thought. Worryingly, they also include a range of other areas that did not explode in the earlier waves of unrest. The defining characteristic of these areas is that they are poor. They were poor then and they are poor today. These are areas characterized by concentrated geographical disadvantage. These are areas that have not prospered economically, despite the regeneration that was ostensibly designed to improve them. If we look more closely at the social conditions within such areas then we find the usual list of indicators that tell us things are not well. The litany is always the same: unacceptably high levels of unemployment and worklessness; unacceptably high rates of youth unemployment; higher rates of ill health and poor health; poor social housing and overcrowded housing; poor school attainment, failing schools.

These are areas which, in recent decades, have witnessed net declines in the older economies that once sustained them; in particular the older manufacturing base that formed the basis of mass working class employment in the post-war period. These are areas where this older economic base has been replaced by a new service sector economy; only one that does not offer secure jobs or well paid jobs to compensate for those lost. This is an economy organized instead around a flexible labour market offering low wage, insecure jobs; that is, if you are lucky to get these and many young people do not. In a nutshell, we are looking here at many areas subject to what Winlow and Hall term ‘permanent recession’ (Winlow and Hall, 2009).

### Getting Real about the Disturbances

Rather than begin with the assumption that the riots were simply manifestations of OMC, or that to classify the rioters, you begin by looking at their alleged criminal affiliation, a more reasonable approach must entail looking more closely at the profile of the areas where the disturbances occurred, and looking more closely at the population most significantly involved. And it means asking questions about the social and economic conditions in which they live. This entails evoking precisely what the gangland thesis wants to deny and that is precisely the adverse material conditions in which free market society consigns its poorest citizens.

### A Question of People

For purveyors of the gangland thesis the inhabitants of the areas blighted by the disorder are understood essentially in terms of their criminal affiliation (i.e. are they in gangs?). This is coupled...
with an alarming tendency to define such areas in terms of the presence of criminal associations in them. Note, for example, the new term: ‘gang afflicted areas’. Just as any real consideration of the areas blighted by the disorders needs to begin by understanding the socio-economic conditions that define them, the same applies to their populations; the population, in other words, overwhelmingly present in the urban disorders being blamed today on gangs.

What is telling about the recent Home Office figures released on the disorder is that it is not participation in criminal associations that unify the population involved. What unifies them is that they derive predominantly from the poorest sections of our society. The Home Office analysis reveals this class dynamic clearly:

The findings from these analyses reveal those appearing before the courts tended to be from more deprived circumstances than the wider comparable populations in England:
- Thirty-five per cent of adult defendants were claiming out-of-work benefits, compared to 12 per cent of the working age population;
- Forty-two per cent of young people brought before the courts were in receipt of free school meals during their time at school, compared to 16 per cent of pupils in maintained secondary schools; and
- Sixty-four per cent of those young people (for whom matched data was available) lived in one of the 20 most deprived areas in the country – only three per cent lived in one of the 20 least deprived areas (Home Office, 2011:20).

The conclusion we must derive from this is thus clear. The riots are essentially issues of class not criminal association. The issue at hand is how we understand this class. As important is the task of understanding it in ways that do not reduce it to the criminalizing rhetoric of the right and its evocation of a ‘feral underclass’.

Historically, the areas where the post-war riots occurred or from which rioters came are predominantly working-class areas. Historically, many were once home to settled populations who worked collectively in the large manufacturing industries that once provided mass employment for them. Entry into factory life, it could be observed, marked an orderly transition into adulthood for most young men within these communities. Some of these areas were always historically poor. These contained the social residuum, a poor population outside paid employment but which welfare coupled with economic development was supposed to support into paid labour; in short, a diminishing population composed of those who had been left behind. Indeed, in retrospect, the first wave riots of the 1980s can be read as a violent reminder to the wider society that the inclusion that the welfare state promised to its poorest citizens had not occurred.

The social residuum never went away as the architects of the welfare state once predicted. Under the impact of deindustrialization, and the rise of a free market society driven forward by neoliberal government (Conservative and New Labour), this strata has widened out to include many members of once stable but now fragmenting working class communities. Populations whose economic fortunes have declined in a society where upwards mobility for most has ceased. In the process, a new class has been created. The economist Guy Standing terms this expanded residuum the ‘Precariat’ (Standing, 2011). It is this population we find overwhelmingly represented in the disturbances and these predominantly live in the areas where the disturbances occurred.

The gang talkers do not see this. Anchored instead in a Victorian vision of the world, they see instead a feckless underclass, one that authors its own misfortune. This is the wrong way to interpret the precariat. This is the wrong way to interpret the social basis of the disturbances. The problem of the precariat is precisely the precarious situation into which the free market consigns this population. The disorders, we suggest, are, in part, a response to their situation. The problem we face is that the gang talkers, and indeed mainstream society, cannot see this. As Standing notes:

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 only ever shifts upwards into the hands of already wealthy, while older social support systems such as welfare are muttering into coercive workfare. This is a population that our political elites have 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 instead exists 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 (Standing, 2011).

To dwell precariously is to live life in pieces. It is to live mired in stress, anxiety and insecurity (Young, 2007). Unsurprisingly, a deeply internalized and often inchoate anger is never far away, often coupled by a sense of deep resentment. This anger was certainly manifest in the context of the disorders. Indeed, for populations with long memories of being mistreated by social institutions like the police, the police shooting of Mark Duggan in Tottenham, coupled with the misinformation released about his death and the disrespect shown to his family, provided the flash point that ignited this anger. Riots predictably followed as they have before.

Such deeply internalized anger has been present for a long time in many of our inner cities, evident in what we might term the ‘slow riot’ that is often found there. Unlike the ‘fast riot’ of the recent disorder where events unfolded dramatically in quick time, the slow riot occurs in slow time and takes the form of implosive, inwards directed, self-destructive violence, in which predominantly young men kill each other and often for seemingly mundane reasons. This form of violence is often mislabelled as ‘gang wars’. This is not, however, a street world characterized by corporate style gangs but by chronic social disorganization of street life. This is a world populated by volatile, alienated young men, many from chaotic backgrounds, whose formative experiences of formal intuitions is highly negative (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009). This section of the precariat compensate for the failure of the market to provide jobs and secure work by attempting to find respect through alternative means; often through illegal means. These young men are not destined to manage an orderly transition to adulthood; the social conditions they face and the coping mechanisms they adopt as an alternative, militate against it. As such, they face fractured, broken transitions to adulthood. Instead of drifting into crime and then drifting out as they enter full-paid secure work, the drift into crime is not matched by a corresponding exit strategy for some young men.

Anger and resentment also reproduces itself among many sections of the young precariat because in the last decade they have found themselves subject to an extraordinary campaign of criminalization directed against them. This is a population that often finds itself excluded spatially from areas like shopping malls, often on the basis that they are felt to be interfering with legitimate consumption (Coleman, 2008); coercively dispersed when they occupy street corners which is their natural habitat; coercively stopped and searched because it is as a suspect community that they are most often viewed by the adult world; and, not least, subject to public vilification because they do not look contented with their allocated lot. This treatment, often justified in the name of confronting anti-social behaviour carries consequences. Indeed, we would suggest that, in part, the motivation that drove so many people onto the streets, was precisely a desire to reclaim the very spaces from which they have been so forcibly evicted in recent years. In so doing, the powerless achieve, at least temporarily, a sense of power and there is certainly a pleasure to this when you have none. What we can be fairly sure about is that, having been given no stake in wider society – or shown any respect by it; they express in return no respect for the society that materially excludes them. This sense of alienation, we contend, was powerfully communicated in the scenes of wilful destruction that accompanied the disturbances.

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 recognized if we are to understand why the riots took the form they did. For while evicted from meaningful work, the precariat is nevertheless included into the culture of compulsory ornamental consumption around which free market society is organized (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 (Hall et al., 2008; Hallsworth, 2005). 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. Rather than blame ‘gangster culture’ for the acquisitiveness that consumed so many in the riots; this must be read instead as a testimony to how successfully the marketing industries and the culture industry more generally have penetrated their world and indeed their culture. ‘Violent shopping’ that accompanied the disturbances is but an expression of the frustrated desires of flawed consumers.

Though condemned as mindless criminality, it could be observed that those engaged in the looting were not behaving any differently than those exemplary ‘role models’ of our contemporary age, the politicians and bankers before them. Presented with what Gordon Brown termed a ‘regulation lite’ financial regime, bankers evinced no moral qualms about the catastrophic steps they initiated to secure profits even though this meant beggaring the poor in the process. Faced with their own ‘regulation lite’ regime, British politicians behaved in exactly the same way. Rather than condemn looters for their immorality, they simply reflect the values of the neoliberal order more generally where greed is elevated as a cardinal virtue.

The precariat is not ethnically or socially homogenous. It comprises a fragmenting working class now merging with the older social residuum; it includes many minority ethnic communities including many migrants and refugees. Its numbers are also swollen by the downward mobility of the lower middle classes who have also found themselves confronting what Richard Sennett terms the ‘spectre of uselessness’ in a cruel economic order that no longer needs them (Sennett, 2006). Young people form a substantial part of the precariat and it this section that was most significantly involved in the disturbances. Tellingly, for Standing, the precariat now account for around 30 per cent of the UK’s population.

Before we leave the subject of the precariat it should be noted that its construction is a global phenomenon. It comprises as such the losers in a free-market global predatory economy where only winners win and walk away with everything. The precariat might not, as Standing notes, be ‘in focus’ in the UK but with these disturbances it has announced its presence and powerfully. In this, it is not alone: Consider the continued rioting in Athens as its poorest citizens face grim austerity on the basis that bankers must be paid; consider the street occupations in central Madrid by young Spaniards who have no hope of work; and consider the recurrent revolts the French State has experienced among its own disaffected precariat in the banlieue. It might not yet be a class for itself but this class is not going to go away and it is not content.

This is a reality that those who promote the gangland UK thesis do not want to see and maybe cannot see. This is a class who, after all, live in a world wholly divorced from the world of the precariat whose lives (despite their ignorance), they feel qualified to pass judgement on. This is power talking about the powerless; privilege talking about poverty; the secure passing comment on the chronically insecure; the included talking about the marginal. This explains why the best they can do is reduce the worst urban disturbances in decades to an issue of ‘black gangs’. This is metropolitan othering by any other name.

Were they to rediscover the reality principle they would have to abandon the simplistic ideology to which they cling that suggests that riots occur because of alien cultures; it would entail contemplating the catastrophe that neoliberal economics has wrought to the lives of the world’s poorest citizens. And let’s be clear, like an unpalatable meal, this is not easily digested or digestible – even for the well-fed. Which leaves them with no other option than to hold to a failed ideology just like the scientists that Kuhn describes who remain committed to their paradigm even when it has been falsified. Which is why they are compelled to desperately deny what neoliberalism has done, or magically reconstruct this reality in ways that mystify its true nature; perhaps telling each other that everything’s all right really were it not for the gangs.

Othering the Other
While the reduction of the disturbances to a question of ‘gangs’ and ‘gang culture’ may lack explanatory power, it nevertheless has an ideological force and this, as we shall now see, is sinister in its focus, and in its consequences.

Writing about the social response to illegal drug users in Oslo the Norwegian criminologist Nils
Christie argued that they fell into a social category he identified as ‘suitable enemies’ (Christie, 2001). The characteristic features of a suitable enemy are that it constitutes an enemy, the social construction of which most people cannot disagree. The enemy in question either violates moral boundaries widely held or engages in acts of alleged deviance that provokes widespread social disapproval. The fear it provokes is not necessarily proportionate to the dangers it poses to itself or others, because these fears can be ratcheted up through deviance amplification spirals in the form of a moral panic. Here enemies take on the appearance of what Stan Cohen identified many years ago as a ‘folk devil’; a demonic force that threatens not only the rule of law but the moral fabric of society (Cohen, 1972).

British history is replete with folk devils. Flamboyant youth subcultures have certainly featured significantly in a history that reaches back to the teddy boys of the 1950s through to the mods and rockers of the 1960s, to the punks of the 1970s (Hall et al., 1976; Pearson, 1983). In each case the discovery of the these folk devils has been accomplished through the medium of sensational media reporting accompanied by vilification of the folk devil in question by what Cohen terms various ‘moral entrepreneurs’ such as politicians and other ‘right thinking people’. Criminals have also inflamed public anger and have themselves been constructed as folk devils.

An excellent case would be the moral panic that surrounded the sensational discovery of the ‘mugger’ in the 1970s. This folk devil was discovered in the context of an earlier economic crisis in British society, and became associated in the public mind with young black men who, it was alleged, were engaged in an unprecedented spree of street robbery. Despite evidence that suggested that street crime was by no means confined to this population they nevertheless became associated in the public mind as a suitable enemy against which social condemnation coupled with outright repression was deemed an appropriate ‘solution’ (Hall et al., 1978). Muggers were summarily caught and subject in turn to exemplary sentences by the courts. What made the mugger such a potent suitable enemy was that as a category it articulated wider fears the British public had about young people, with white fears about black outsiders threatening the British way of life, with wider fears about rising crime in a society in crisis more generally.

Between 2000 and 2002 fears about muggers again made banner headlines in the news as street crime rose (Hallsworth, 2005). Once again they had become public enemy number one. Then from 2002 onwards the mugger disappeared from public view (even though street crime by no means disappeared) to be sensationally replaced by a new public enemy. This was the street gang. If we consider the nature of the ‘gang talk’ that began to circulate about the street gang then what we find at its core are a series of debatable claims about gangs. They were now, apparently, rife in inner city areas across the UK and, in particular, present in the black community. The fact that the UK has a long-established history of group related violence has in the meantime been conveniently forgotten (Pearson, 2010). American style gangs have not just arrived; they are organizing as we speak. They are, gang talkers attest, in control of drug markets; they control all aspects of life in the estates where they are based (Pitts, 2008); where they now mobilize what are often spoken about as ‘new weapons of choice’. This includes ‘dangerous dogs’ (i.e. pit bulls), ‘gang rape’ and guns and knives which they use on each other.4

Despite the lack of supporting evidence justifying these claims and despite a range of academic work that has cast considerable doubt on the UK gangland thesis (Alexander 2008; Hallsworth and Young, 2005; Hallsworth and Young 2008), the idea that the gangs are now the key lynchpins in criminal enterprise has become the governing orthodoxy; the vehicle for this perception, a moral panic that has been gathering momentum since 2002.5 As with all moral panics, gangs have provoked sensational coverage, often disproportionate to the threats it poses; while the coverage it has received is often exaggerated and distorted (Hallsworth, 2011). Add to this the rise of a new burgeoning gang industry that has a vested interest in the gangs they get paid to suppress; coupled with law and order politicians seeking a convenient way to demonstrate their authoritarian credentials and what you have is a ready-made suitable enemy, the identification of which no one can possibly disagree. And this explains why the gang was singled out as the instigator of the riots and so quickly. It is, after all, responsible for just about every other crime that bothers society, so why not make them responsible for the riots as well?

Suitable enemies also make for convenient scapegoats and that appears to be what we are witnessing now. Indeed, the gang appears ready-made for this purpose. The UK has long feared young people, especially if they are black. The street culture that we find in inner urban areas with its violent aesthetics easily works to confirm the
demonic stereotype, especially when mediated through new media platforms like You Tube. The fact that there is a real problem of violence in our inner city areas also confirms the ‘truth’ of the gangland thesis; as does the appearance in this violent street world of some groups that fit the criteria necessary to qualify as gangs (just in case people might conclude this is a denial narrative).

All of this now makes the case for ‘gang suppression’ appear as a key and necessary component of the ‘solutions’ now being rolled out in the face of the disorder. There are three good reasons, however, why we should be sceptical of the lurch to gang suppression. First, there is, as we shall show below, no reason to suppose that US gang suppression is the answer, even if gangs were solely responsible for the disturbances which they are not. Secondly, though the gang is now being blamed for just about every social evil, it needs to be pointed out that there is excess to this violence that is not gang-related. Finally, in making the gang a suitable enemy, a scapegoating ritual is being mandated which not only licenses the further criminalization of the black community; it distracts attention away from looking at the deeper and structural causes of the riots, which lie in the wider and more general crisis of our perversive economic system and the neoliberal foundations on which it rests.

It is not our intention here to deny that gangs exist, or claim that gangs are not responsible for crime and violence. They most evidently are, as indeed they have always been in a society with a long tradition of collective violence. As such, steps clearly need to be taken to address the risks they pose.4 While it is true that some gangs have a presence in the illegal trade in drugs, gangs do not control the illegal drug trade as gang talkers suggest. While gangs are involved in violence, the violence currently being attributed to gangs involves many people who are not gang related. The same applies to attempts to lay sexual violence at the door of the gang and to blame gangs for dangerous dogs. The lessons of this need to be spelled out. If the violence being blamed on gangs exceeds the gang then gang suppression currently being marketed as a ‘silver bullet’ will not stop the trade in illegal drugs, street violence, sexual abuse and so on. It will most certainly not prevent urban disorder.

By making the gang a scapegoat for just about every social evil currently occasioning public fear and anxiety, so the focus of repression is, we suspect, going to be young black men who happen to dress a particular way who will find themselves subject to public and political condemnation. Worse, given the racial connotations already present in the very idea of the gang, the black community will find itself stigmatized further. This, in turn, will play well to the far right and its racial agenda.

Given that the preferred ‘solution’ to the problems posed by gangs is US-style ‘zero tolerance policing’, what is being licensed is a form of policing that will quite likely create the preconditions for the very disorder it is warranted to suppress. Its application, we suspect, will return British policing back to the bad old days of the ‘sus laws’ whose use mandated a more or less systematic harassment of young black men. In retrospect, looking back at the kinds of policing deployed in areas such as Brixton in the 1970s, this was zero tolerance policing by any other name.7 Its consequence, an angry and alienated constituency of young black men, deteriorating police community relations and the predictable outcome... riots.

By focusing on the spectre of the black gang, British society runs a real risk of losing sight of the underlying conditions that create the basis for the public disorder we have witnessed. Riots always express – and forcibly – the fact that something is badly wrong with the social system (Waddington et al., 1989). The fact that thousands of people across the country took to the streets is a telling indicator that the social fabric of our society is badly frayed. Only instead of trying to understand the complex interplay of factors that might explain this, we are being sold instead a hackneyed criminal conspiracy as an explanation to which criminalization is posed as the solution. In constructing a scapegoat it is not only the case that a suitable enemy is being identified upon which wider anger can be directed; in identifying the scapegoat so the wider society is absolved of all responsibility.

The fact is that we inhabit a society in which around a third of the population are experiencing chronically unstable lives we do not see. The fact that we have mass youth unemployment in areas of our cities subject to near permanent recession is not something that is spoken about. Nor is any real consideration given to the fact that all of this might be connected with the wider global crisis of a perverse form of feral capitalism that has tangibly
failed but which is now being (re)imposed as the solution to its own crisis. These things we do not see because, instead, we are being asked to imagine that the single biggest threat in our lives is criminal gangs.

The United States War on Gangs and Why It Failed

In the context of a society that appears to accept this prognosis, the case of gang suppression US style might well appear justified. The US, after all, has long recognized the gang as a serious social problem and has directed huge resources at sustaining and developing a massive industry devoted to gang suppression. It is nevertheless bizarre to think that the current British government would want to turn to the United States to curb the street gang when that same country has spent billions on repressive tactics designed to suppress them to little avail. Indeed, if we were really seeking policies that promise value for money – as the present government is fond of demanding (although banks and bankers always seem to be the exception to this rule) – then the story of US anti-gang efforts is a story of monumental failure not success.

According to recent estimates from the US Department of Justice\(^8\) there are approximately 20,000 gangs in the US with around 1 million members, which is quite impressive really given that the aim of US policy is to suppress them. Strangely enough this is roughly the same number of gangs that was estimated 20 years ago during the so-called ‘crack epidemic’ when US homicide rates were hitting all-time highs and where the American public were supposedly being terrorized by super-predatory gangs (see DiLulio, Bennet and Waters, 1996; Wilson, 1983), that nouveau breed of natural-born killers without consciences or souls, much like the criminals ‘pure and simple’ discovered by the Prime Minister today in the context of the disorders. Add to this the 120,000 prison gang members that show up on US correctional databases, the tens of thousands of gang members the US have deported to Central America and the Caribbean in the last ten years and one begins to wonder how much value for money our US cousins are getting from a system of control predicated on outright suppression.

This of course assumes that the US repressive model was all about suppressing ‘natural born killers’ who really did pose real threats to the American way of life. Unfortunately there is good reason to suppose that gang crackdowns have always been about much more than public protection. In the context of a society where crime has – and for a long time now – been heavily politicized, ‘tough on gang’ political campaigns have guaranteed those politicians who have played the ‘gang card’ invaluable votes. In turn, billions of dollars have been siphoned into law and order ‘solutions’. This process, in turn, has funded a massive escalation in an ever-growing anti-gang industry which had a self-interest in maintaining the ‘gang problem’ it claims it wants to suppress; just as the prison–industrial complex has a vested interest in maintaining large numbers of (gang affiliated) inmates now circulating through the US penal archipelago. Such campaigns have also ensured that the social conditions that give rise to gangs, that is, the poverty and the extraordinary levels of social exclusion experienced by many millions of its poorest citizens, are rendered all but invisible to a public that is being asked to accept (as is the public in the UK today) that the gang is the source of all social evil.

This project has been around for a long while now. It goes back to the disastrous domestic law and order crusades the US have instigated since the days of President Nixon. All of which have been tied in some way back to what has been constructed as the ‘gang problem’: the war on drugs, the war on terrorism, and now the war on illegal immigration. In each of these populist crusades we find the same demonic gang imagery deployed, often of a type that bears little relation to a street reality that is somewhere else entirely. In the process of ‘freeing’ America from the fell hand of gangs billions of tax dollars have been expended without much by way of success if by ‘success’ we mean creating drug-free societies, an end to the war on terrorism or illegal migration (Brotherton and Barrios, 2011; Brotherton and Martin, 2009; Greene and Pranis, 2007).

But wait, wasn’t there also a war on poverty somewhere in the recent history of the United States? And was not this war somehow linked to the ‘gang problem’ during a time when America thought a little more rationally (and less hysterically) about social problems. Times when people worried that disadvantaged youth might get negatively labelled and find themselves caught in a vortex of socially destructive categories, laws, institutions and their practices, not to mention widening nets of social control? What happened to that era? Aren’t there other lessons we can learn from the US treatment of gangs than that of a repressive model that has failed?
After all, the US was the first county that produced the first real social scientific approach to the subject of gangs (Thrasher, 1927) and it did invent that wonderful sociological term ‘street corner society’ to describe the myriad subcultures that occupy the spaces of so many working-class city neighbourhoods (Whyte, 1959); and it did introduce that great innovation in social work ‘the detached youth worker’ (Thomson, 2000) to reach marginalized young people in their ‘natural environment’; and it did set up the New York Roundtable on Youth in the 1970s so that conflicts between street gangs could be resolved without violence. So maybe there are lessons we can learn from the US after all.

Learning the Positive Lessons of the US War on Gangs

In the 1950s a relatively little known sociologist called Richard Cloward and his colleague Lloyd Ohlin, both at Columbia University, argued that the ongoing problem of youth gangs in US cities could best be dealt with by empowering the most disadvantaged young people through a range of community projects and investments that would change their ‘opportunity structures’ (Cloward and Ohlin, 1961). Such an idea built on the insight of sociologist Robert Merton (Cloward’s mentor) some 20 years earlier that if the constant mismatch between the American Dream of middle class possibility and the working-class reality of economic and social exclusion were not addressed it would lead to various levels of youth subcultural innovation, one of which would be the gang. In other words, the gang was not itself the problem but a symptom of a problem that lay much deeper in society, in its social structures. Thus was born one of the most effective programmes of the late 20th century in the US, the Mobilization for Youth (MFY). Conceived in 1957 but founded with private and public funding in 1962 in New York City, this programme was seized upon by the Kennedy Administration which saw in its holistic, innovative and far-reaching framework, the basis for the nation’s War on Poverty later continued by the Johnson administration (Brotherton, 2010).

The original programme sought to increase public investment in poor areas by improving education at all levels, expanding youth job opportunities, organizing the unorganized through neighborhood associations, and providing specialized services to the most marginalized youth particularly those involved in gangs. By the late 1960s, according to New York police, the growing problem of inter-gang violence had waned considerably and the numbers of youth joining gangs had declined significantly. The urban historian Schneider (1999) concluded that the New York gang intervention policies were a success although the more radical elements of the programme that encouraged the self-organization of community members were viciously attacked in a McCarthyite witch hunt led by tabloid newspapers and conservative politicians with the NYPD still boasting the notorious anti-communist ‘red squad’ lending a helping hand. Though the programme carried on in various guises, most notably in Chicago where it met with a large degree of success despite the criticism of conservatives opposed to any effort at organizing the poor (rabidly continued to this day by Fox News and its various shock jock commentators), this approach to the ‘gang problem’ was the last time the US seriously saw the phenomenon in a community-centered light.

The Bad Lessons the American War on Gangs Has to Teach Us

Since the end of the 1960s, the US government effectively abandoned this humanistic and progressive approach to gangs; an approach that was rooted less in the desire to liquidate gangs coercively and more in intervening constructively with the aim of attacking the problems of social exclusion and disadvantage that created the conditions in which violent gangs emerged. Instead this model and the underlying progressive philosophy upon which it was based, was evicted by an American political machine that was committed to an altogether more malign philosophy of intervention. In this brave new world, gangs were not, as social scientists had long suggested, adaptive responses to the social world of which they were a part; instead they were considered little more than demonic outsiders that could not be worked with but only suppressed (Brotherton and Barrios, 2004; Conquergood, 1997; Hagedorn, 1998; Hayden, 2004).

This shift in philosophy would mandate in its wake policies toward gangs that have become increasingly repressive: from the Watergate-plagued administration of Richard Nixon fully intent on rolling back the gains of 1960s, to the neoliberal presidency of Ronald Reagan and his ‘culture wars’; to the punitive turn in virtually all domestic and international social policies of the
Bush family presidencies; and now continuing with the Obama administration's compromises with the ultra-reactionary Republican Party. In the process the ‘gang problem’ has completely lost its meaning as an indicator of deeper societal ills. Instead the ‘gang’ is simply used as a political football, an everyman's taboo infused with the rhetoric of at least three moral and social crusades which now converge and overlap with devastating consequences for US and global civil society: the war against drugs, terrorism and the immigrant. Capturing the spirit of insanity William Bratton, that born-again ‘progressive’, would intone from his new Los Angeles perch in 2002, that the gangs were the new ‘domestic terrorists’ and were responsible for the drugs trade, most murders and were ‘worse than the Mafia’. These groups were not to be reasoned with but brutally suppressed. What came after was a raft of programmes and policies that had suppression as their overriding theme.

Take, as an example, the recent ‘Secure Communities’ initiative developed by the revamped US Immigration and Customs Enforcement Department under the all-encompassing Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This supposedly targets crime-prone immigrant gang members for removal by passing the fingerprints of all arrested individuals to the DHS for signs of deportability. The results have been disastrous for the US’s immigrant communities who have found themselves racked with fear and fragmenting family structures as their young men have been served with groundless detentions and deportations. According to the New York Times, the policy has led to a nationwide ‘dragnet’ needlessly exiling more than a million people in the last few years alone (New York Times, August 14, 2011). Meanwhile US prisons are spilling over with more than 2.5 million inmates, many of whom are classified as ‘gang members’ where ‘gang affiliation’ is itself an aggravating factor in their prosecution. This mandates gang members being incarcerated in special gang prisons such as the infamous Pelican Bay in California where 8x7 feet cells without windows are the norm and where the inmates are literally subject to a 24-hour lockdown regime.

This is only the tip of the ultra punitive initiatives that the US has mandated as a cure to its gang problems. To those above can be added anti-gang injunctions, conspiracy laws such as the Racketeering Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO), secure housing units in prisons for gang members, gang-enhanced prison sentences, anti-gang association parole and probation conditions, massive networks of gang informants (snitches and provocateurs), special police gang units, special gang immigration agents, special gang school security agents, special nationwide gang data and intelligence bases and special gang budgets with millions of unaccountable dollars paid to gang informants. Though there may well be some cases where success in reducing gangs may be found in some projects, the overall lesson we need to take away from this catalogue of repression is that none of this has solved the problem of gangs. And all this despite the billions spent on destroying, expelling, excoriating and stigmatizing the gang member in the name of cleansing society, removing the cancer from our otherwise healthy body and teaching the incorrigibles, mostly black and brown young men the error of their ways.

If this vast tangled web of agencies and initiatives has tangibly failed to prevent gangs there is little doubt that the burgeoning gang industry has profited from the inflow of the huge sums of money the federal and local states have ploughed into gang suppression. This is money that might well have been invested more profitably elsewhere but in the context of a society where young black men are more likely to experience prison than university this malallocation of resources constitutes what passes as social policy. As a consequence, the gang problem in the US has been thoroughly criminalized; removed from any understandable socio-economic and cultural context; rendered as such an object to which repression is lauded as the only logical solution.

Meanwhile the real and compounded problems of multiple marginality and concentrated disadvantage experienced by America’s urban poor continue to reproduce themselves (Brotherton, 2011; Hagedorn, 2008). These conditions persist because little has been done to reduce the adverse socio-economic conditions that give rise to them. In a neoliberal society where poverty has literally been criminalized, where welfare means workfare and where the prison has become the institution par excellence for regulating poverty and its symptoms, none of this is perhaps surprising (Wacquant, 2010). What is also not surprising is that the intergenerational reproduction of Americas very own criminalized precariat create the ideal conditions in which gangs take root; just as its inflated penal system provides an ideal vehicle through and by which gang identifies are reinforced and mediated elsewhere.

While America might certainly have some good lessons to teach us about gangs and how to
address the risks they pose, there are more stark lessons from America’s recent experience of gang repression we would also do well to dwell upon, and that concerns the wholesale failure of the very policies the UK Government appear beguiled by and want to introduce over here. By way of summary let us spell these lessons out:

- Contemporary gang suppression US style has not worked, if its aim is to suppress gangs;
- Gangs continue to evolve and develop in the US despite and because of its gang suppression effort;
- Gangs will continue to develop because the adverse social conditions that give rise to them persist precisely because nothing has been done to ameliorate them;
- Gang suppression might not have worked to suppress gangs but it has sustained the development of America’s mass incarceration system and it has certainly worked to sustain a burgeoning gang suppression industry;
- In the name of gang suppression the lives of millions of young men in the US, their families and communities have been devastated and destroyed.

None of this has worked yet this ‘solution’ is now being touted to media acclaim as the ‘magic bullet’ we in the UK require to address problems posed by the recent disturbances. This is the equivalent of what, following Bob Dylan, we might see as a dose of malaria being proposed as the cure for a cold.

**Conclusion: The Kids are Not Alright**

In this report we have sought to contest the attempt to make the street gang responsible for the recent public disorder in England; and make a self-generating gang culture an underlying cause. As we have seen these explanations have no explanatory power. These narratives express, as such, the disturbing fantasy life of those who know very little about the street worlds they nevertheless feel qualified to pass judgement on. Unfortunately, it would appear that the policies being framed to address the problems posed by the disturbances are themselves being shaped by this fantasy life. This is why we now find calls to launch new gang taskforces and invite in as part of this one of the key architects of America’s failed gang suppression initiative.

Never mind that gang suppression did not work in the US; despite its failure it is now being proposed as the magic bullet we need to apply to turn round the manifold problems that derive from marginalization and exclusion in our inner city areas. And no doubt huge sums of money will be expended unproductively in pursuit of this misplaced goal. The consequences are already predictable and the US experience can certainly be considered a guide to what might happen next, should gang suppression, Bratton style, become the order of the day. Leaving aside the rather obvious fact that the UK is not the US, which raises significant doubts as to how well programmes developed there will run successfully here; what we will see are programmes that will not work to reduce gangs but which no doubt work well to criminalize many young people and their parent communities. Mirroring the US, our prison population will invariably rise even further than its current inflated state, creating new generations of young people who will find it literally impossible to find gainful work when they leave. Social tensions will deepen and reinforce the deep sense of injustice that is already present. Anger and resentment will not disappear because criminalization reinforces these tendencies further. And so a tinderbox will be created that will make future disorder more as opposed to less likely.

Given the racial connotations inherent in gang talk, it is quite likely the case that the black community and its young people will find themselves on the receiving end of gang crackdowns. Whether the black community will passively accept having their streets policed through the application of LAPD style gang crackdowns remains to be seen.

Alternatively, the government and the mass media might reconsider the response they have chosen to adopt. Fools, it is true, rush in but there is no necessity that impels anyone to behave like a fool. The first step that needs to be taken (and maybe the Home Secretary is taking it) is to relinquish the ‘gang talk’ that has consumed so much public attention because you will not find any answers to the riots by searching for gangs and touting gang suppression as a solution. Second, this means putting gangs in their place. Yes, they exist, but to suggest they are the bearers of all social evil is to make a categorical mistake. Third, it means foregrounding precisely what gang talkers are keen to deny and that is the chronic social conditions that our neoliberal order has created in the UK today. Because, unless we situate the riots back into the social context of which they are
a part, we will understand nothing. This, in turn, entails asking hard questions about the perverse form of capitalism that we appear committed to. While there is no doubting its capacity to channel wealth and power into the hands of the few, it is not working for the many in a society of escalating inequality and disadvantage where upward mobility is now a thing of the past.

We end here with a suggestion. Instead of inviting in Americans advocating gang suppression look instead to American history and retrieve some of the more benevolent lessons it has to teach us. Maybe now is precisely the time for a campaign directed at mobilizing youth. Only this time round it means investing in them and their communities; not law enforcement agencies and a new gang suppression industry.
Appendix 1: Some Unreported but Nevertheless Progressive Lessons from the American Experience

As we have seen, while the case for US gang suppression needs to be resisted there are nevertheless many progressive lessons we can take away from its history which have much to teach us today in relation to the way in which we approach the manifold problems posed by gangs and youth groups in poor areas today. These we summarize below.

Gangs Need to be Approached Holistically

A crucial lesson from the MFY experience is that gangs cannot be approached in isolation from the broader travails of the community which spawn them. The US penchant for gang specialization personnel, knowledge and policy has been disastrous in this regard by ignoring the real needs of poor community members who nearly always cite education, jobs, and affordable housing as their top priorities. Mostly ignoring the social fact that without addressing the punishing, humiliating, stratified lived conditions of the US which led mostly ethnic-Europeans to originally form gangs (now predominantly made up of African-American, Latino/a and Asian-American youth and adults, although there is a substantial number of ‘white’ gangs which tend to be underestimated and understudied) there is no ‘gang solution’.

Thus the myriad deterrence, prevention and eradication based initiatives in the US, funded by both federal and private funds, tend to have very short term impacts, no impact at all, make matters worse, or cannot be replicated. In conceptualizing the gang problem we need to see gangs as a particular form of social response to the intersection of two types of violence: indirect (i.e. the denial of basic social and economic needs to a community which produces social harm in the form of homelessness, hunger, unemployment, functional illiteracy, ill health, etc) and direct (i.e. interpersonal physical harm which can be expressive, instrumental or cultural).

Gangs are Outgrowths of the Redivision of Space

Gangs in the US usually emerge in areas which have been deeply segregated through race-based laws, institutional discrimination, economic disinvestment, discriminatory urban planning, gentrification and apartheid-like policing. In addition, as public space has become increasingly privatized and the middle and upper classes live ensconced behind their socially and economically gated communities, the poor have been literally walled off from access to resources. It is within these spatial subdivisions that gang territories are formed and what the criminologist Hagedorn calls ‘defensible spaces’ are established. Without a fuller understanding of the relationship between built space and gangs, a hallmark of the early Chicago School gang studies, there is little real understanding of gangs.

Gangs have become Alternative Institutions in the US Context

Through the inter-generational experience of failed schools, lack of legitimate and meaningful employment, absent adult role models, corrupt politicians and a contemptuous political class, criminalizing laws, the hypocrisy of organized religion and segregated daily living gangs have replaced many social institutions as a primary socializing agency for many youth (Hagedorn, 2008; Moore, 1991; Vigil, 1988).

Youth are Global and Transnational

Many youth today are raised between cultures. They are children of the global labour force caught between different societies with contrasting value systems and norms which deeply affect their identities. Further, all youth carry with them the
legacies of colonialism. Some of them subjected to extraordinary levels of violence funded and planned by the US in Latin America and the Caribbean as part of its drive against communism and Third World independence. Others hiding in the shadows from US immigration control on land secured by violent acquisition. These contradictory experiences of settlement, transnationalism and colonialism (including slavery) are brushed aside by a culture increasingly dominated by a Manichean discourse of good and evil popularly mediated through Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis. A discourse in which the US has no historical culpability but simply apportions blame, as if the lessons of Martin Luther King had no relevance. Gangs are frequently tied to these quests for identity construction by youth seeking roots in a rootless world. Through their symbols and narratives now globally disseminated these lost and discarded progeny of global labour are the fertile ground for gangs new and old (Brotherton, 2011; Hagedorn, 2008).

Punishment and Repression has Deepened the Importance of Gang Identities

When the chance of an African-American young male going to prison is higher than attending university then there is something seriously wrong with the US approach to crime and to education. The mass incarceration of young blacks and Latinos and the poor in general has brought the street closer to the prison than at any time in US history. This ‘symbiotic’ relationship means that gang cultures now flow effortlessly between the prison and the street, compounding the culture of gangs in daily life which is enhanced by the symbolic appropriation of the corporate hip-hop industry. Further, the removal of virtually all rehabilitative tools in a race-based prison life virtually guarantees the widening popularity of gangs.

The Informal Economy has Replaced the Formal Economy for Many Youth

The decline of manufacturing in the US, massive attacks on labour unions, cuts in real wages, the increasing domination of the market by temporary, often undocumented and outsourced labour and the rise of the menial labour service sector has made employment in the drugs economy much more attractive. The narco-economy is now a full-fledged part of the legal economy as was seen during the financial melt-down when the United Nations admitted that banks were kept afloat by laundered dollars. The ubiquity of the narco-economy in the US is not a figment of the FBI’s imagination but a real opportunity structure for many poor youth. However the multi-billion dollar war on drugs has done nothing to take the profits out of the drugs trade or end the involvement of tens of thousands of youth and adults in this globalized market. Some gangs in the US have corporatized around the drugs economy, e.g. Chicago, others have not, e.g. New York but the drugs economy is a permanent lure for gang and non-related youth in an era of declining legitimate opportunity for the most vulnerable sectors of society.

Gang Members are Political Subjects not ‘Dangerous’ Pariahs

Gang members are often stereotyped as apolitical pathological individuals from broken homes who have little interest in civil society and no stake in the community. This is a dangerous parody of gang members usually by those who have little to no contact with such human subjects or by social scientists whose chief focus is that of drugs and violence. In fact, based on studies in New York and other large US cities, gang members have been shown to be concerned with a range of community issues, often come from intact families and have aspirations like many other neighborhood residents. Consequently, an important and completely neglected approach to gangs is to view their members as social agents who have different levels of consciousness. The groups themselves express different types of ideology, some more developed than others but all of them can be approached through an empowerment model of intervention rather than the simplistic and brutish methods of repression which simply deepen the processes of social exclusion that affect the entire community (Brotherton and Barrios, 2004).

Gender Matters

Many US street gangs include females either as members or as part of a generalized community who can influence over the gangs. While it is true that most gang members are socialized by a strong masculinist culture that prizes honour,
sacrifice and group solidarity, that gang has become a much more complex gendered organism than most outsiders can comprehend. In general, young women are an important part of this culture and have been severely overlooked. Further, the changing role of sexuality in gang culture has also been overlooked. In the US, for example, there are prison gangs that include gay inmates while in New York City there are branches of the Bloods gang that openly have both male and female gay gang members. It is difficult to understand the changing nature of gangs without taking into consideration the role of gender and the changing importance of sexuality within cultures and communities where so many males have disappeared into the prison-industrial complex or have died prematurely, where drug subcultures are part of everyday life, and where the possibilities of identity formation have been radically influenced by the hip-hop generation.

Notes
1. For an analysis of the composition of the urban precariat in London’s inner cities see Pitts (2008)

2. For a case study see Barrow Cadbury research which maps poverty in Birmingham (Cangeano, 2010). Places that were poor when New Labour took office in 2008 are still poor today. This is repeated across the UK.

3. For an analysis of this violent street culture see Gunter (2008), Hall and Winio (2008), and Hallsworth, S. and D. Silverstone (2009).

4. For a critical review of the problematic evidence on which these gang talking assumptions are made see Hallsworth, S. and K. Duffy (2010).

5. For an analysis of the moral panic that has surfaced around gangs in the UK see Hallsworth (2011).

6. This fact has been registered, not least by the UK police, who have for a long time now tried to do something about it. A fact conveniently ignored by the current government.

7. For an analysis of policing black communities see Hall (1977).

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