

ON THE RELATION BETWEEN GANGS AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The present paper goes beyond Monti's (1996) critique of the "social disorganization" hypothesis regarding gangs in the United States and the research and theorizing based on it. Advanced is an alternative hypothesis that finds gang structure and behavior fitting in with established customs and organizational routines in American society. The model for this alternative hypothesis is found in the work of Tilly et al (1975) who looked at the relation between routine and non-routine collective actions in European societies for several hundred years. Our conventional understanding of gang structure and behavior in the United States does not parallel what Tilly et al found in some instances. However, the basic point that groups like gangs do reflect or mimic more conventional customs and organizational routines shows greater promise for helping us to understand U.S. gangs than does the "social disorganization" hypothesis advanced by American social scientists.

Social scientists who write about urban problems sometimes refer to history, but they usually do not make a careful study of it. Changes that have taken place over a long period of time could help them to make better sense of contemporary problems. Too often, though, their frame of reference does not extend beyond the period in which we live. Nor does it typically include places outside of the United States. The parochial & introspective quality of much American social science research really should not surprise us. After all, there are more social scientists today in the United States than at any other time in the past & we produce more research than do scholars from other countries. On the other hand, our preoccupation with contemporary United States history can yield a pretty skewed picture of the social problems we study and what might be done to address them. A historical perspective would bring added depth to our description of modern problems & provide something of a reality check upon the reforms we propose to introduce as a solution to these problems.

Youth gangs are a particularly good example of a modern urban problem whose depiction has been unduly influenced by our narrow attention to recent history and our ignorance of what is happening in other parts of the world (Klein 1995). These groups are dramatic and have been studied for what passes among social scientists as a long time. It is a common practice, for instance, to cite Frederic Thrasher's 1927 study of Chicago gangs. It was the first social scientific study of gangs. Since then gangs have been studied more or less continuously by many persons. Only rarely, however, does one find references to the origin of these groups in nineteenth century American cities.

Social historians who write about the United States have not made gangs a particularly important focus of their research. American social scientists, for their part, are not

likely to step in and fill that gap in our knowledge when there are so many interesting questions to pursue with modern gangs. Furthermore, our training usually does not lead us to use historical materials. However respectful the tone, the obligatory references to early gangs that we drop in our published writings ordinarily are made without any big theoretical point in mind.

In this short paper, I shall take a much different look at gangs in the United States and try to place them into a broader historical context that includes not just this country but the better part of Europe as well. To accomplish this I will draw on the work of sociologist and historian Charles Tilly who made many contributions to the study of unconventional collective activities such as brawls, riots, and strikes in Europe early in his career. The argument I will introduce here in a preliminary way builds on Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly's (1975) central idea that the conditions which lead to any type of unconventional group behavior are "essentially the same as those that lead to other kinds of collective action in pursuit of common interests." Gangs are not the same as church groups, fraternities, or baseball teams, but they spring from the same social forces and sometimes are used to accomplish remarkably similar goals.

This is not the customary view of gangs held by most sociologists who study these groups in modern urban or suburban settings. It usually is the case that gangs are put into a corner of the social world that is reserved for things alien to us. Gang members are supposed to be different from the persons more conventional individuals come into contact with every day.

In this paper, gangs are placed squarely in the midst of routine group life as it is practiced by most persons. Gangs are merely one among many types of groups that persons customarily create and use in order to shape

the world or to make themselves better understood. Hence, there will be no talk here of gangs appearing in places that are "socially disorganized" or of gang members as defective human beings. Our emphasis instead will be on how gangs and gang members fit into the regular world and behave in ways that do not distinguish them from other groups or persons living in it.

I suggest that a fuller accounting of gangs, and a more plausible explanation for their behavior, are to be derived from ideas which are at odds with so-called social disorganization theories (Bursik, Grasmick 1995; Klein 1995). First, *our society may have problems, but it is not fundamentally flawed, irreparably broken, or racist.* Most popular explanations for the appearance and behavior of gangs are predicated on the idea that gangs are a corrupted form of normal group life that is spit up wherever there is a breach in our culture or institutional framework. Attention to the lingering effects of an "urban underclass," for instance, is supposed to help us account for the persistence and spread of youth gangs in our society. Yet there are many gangs that are not composed exclusively of low-income minority teenagers and not all such young persons become members of gangs.

Tilly's key insight was to put the origin of unconventional groups and collective action right in the middle of established rules and social routines. His argument would be that gangs spring from a social world which, however troubled, is a lot stronger than it appears to outsiders and much more likely to rebound or change effectively in the face of harsh conditions than it is to disappear. A society can have gangs without being thoroughly corrupted or disorganized.

Second, *we have a common culture that is sound and well articulated, yet supple enough to accommodate a variety of ways for persons to be in the world together.* The presence of gangs is less alarming, perhaps, than what they do. In neither case does the republic show any immanent signs of collapsing around us by virtue of being riddled with youth gangs. Nor should the generations of gang members who have found ways of gradually moving into the conventional adult world as they grew up and became older give us anything but hope that our society will be able to embrace more of these young men and women in the future. Scant attention is given to the process of "maturing out" in most gang studies (Klein 1995; Spergel 1995). Yet most gang members do go

on to lead lives that are conventional enough not to draw much attention to themselves as they grow older. If our culture were not sufficiently well articulated or accommodating, these young persons never would find a way to fit into it.

Third, *our civil society works pretty well most of the time.* Gangs fit into the regular world even when they do not reinforce much of the hard work that more conventional persons and groups carry out every day (Monti 1994). That is why they so readily fade into the background in many of the communities where they appear and have been successfully constrained by local adults and community groups when these parties engage young men and women in a clear and consistent way (Spergel 1964; Thrasher 1927).

A world built on the back of these principles has ample room for gangs just as it has room for businesses, clubs, churches, unions, & political parties. Indeed, gangs fundamentally are like any group produced by human beings. They help persons fit into their part of the world better, or at least make it easier for them to be understood by outsiders. This does not mean that the gangs make the world a saner & safer place to live. Nor does it mean that our society is perfect. It means only that gangs "make sense" in their social & historical context and that many conventional groups also are an important part of the same social world. They are not alien to the world occupied by regular human beings, & that world is not "disorganized" in a permanent or far-reaching way.

Gangs share other important social features beyond the fact that they usually are composed of boys & girls or younger men & women. Most gangs are not large. Their typical activities are confined to a fairly small territory, and members are drawn from that same general locale. Gangs have no explicit social or political agenda. These are communal groups that have few territorial ambitions beyond protecting their "turf" from real or imagined outsiders. As such, gangs, as most social scientists have described them, conform pretty well to the kind of groups that Charles Tilly (1979) has said participated in "primitive" acts of collective violence in the era before large-scale industries and more modern cities in Europe were developed.

These disruptive acts they initiated included "the feud, the brawl among members of rival guilds or communes, and the mutual attacks of hostile religious groups." What distinguishes these activities from later forms of

uncivil behavior, Tilly observed, was "not a lack of seriousness, but their activation of local communal groups...usually in opposition to other communal groups." Our conventional understanding of youth gangs in this country corresponds to the type of communal group carrying out the feuds and brawls that Tilly describes. Gang researchers have done a good job describing this type of group and behavior in their studies.

Although gangs in the United States engage in many of the "primitive" acts outlined by Tilly, the connection between them is not perfect. For instance, Tilly (1979) hypothesized that most forms of "primitive" unrest engaged in by communal groups gradually disappeared with the emergence of nations, industrialization, and the cities which we have come to know. We know that gangs are still around in the United States and have prospered in a number of other modern nations as well (Klein 1995). Gangs have managed to hang on and even flourish in societies that are not supposed to make much room for communal groups. The persistence of gangs in the modern world stands as a challenge to Tilly's basic model.

A second part to Tilly's thesis also is challenged by the persistence of gangs. Not just "primitive" violence was supposed to have been lost. Abandoned also, according to Tilly, were "reactionary" forms of civil unrest. These, too, were engaged in by smaller communal groups. The difference between this latter type of activity and "primitive" violence is that groups direct their hostility toward agents and institutions that hold power over them. Their attacks have a political edge insofar as persons try to assert their traditional rights and to criticize the way authorities behave toward them. Classic expressions of "reactionary" civil unrest are found in the food riot,

anticonscription rebellion, the resistance to the tax collector, the violent occupation of fields and forests, (and) the breaking of reapers or power looms. (Tilly 1979)

There are parallels between gangs and the communal groups that carry out reactionary violence. Observers of American gangs often have commented on the "reactionary" quality of these groups and the kinds of activities in which they engage. Gangs are seen rebelling against adult authority and institutions. They challenge police officials, break laws in a willful fashion, disrupt schools, and deface neighborhoods. The defiance that gangs express is

taken as a sign not only of their resistance to outsiders but often also of their parents and neighbors' reluctance to accept a way of life carried by these same outsiders. That is why many gangs and gang members are said to defend their neighborhoods and why, in turn, many of them are not treated in a hostile fashion by their families and neighbors. Tilly's analysis of reactionary communal violence has strong parallels with many descriptions of gang violence. The only problem is that Tilly expected this type of group & uncivil behavior to fade away. Gang researchers have shown us consistently that this has not happened.

Conditions of life in cities did change dramatically, of course, and what emerged in the wake of large-scale industrialization and city building were new forms of human association & collective action. Communal groups, as Tilly (1979) and others have argued, became less dominant than they had once been throughout the whole of modern society. Updated varieties of civil disturbance, to take but one notable example of human corporate behavior, were no longer expected to be initiated by communal groups, but by "specialized associations with relatively well-defined objectives, organized for political and economic action."

The organizations are complex. Their actions are intended to acquire new rights & resources, not reassert traditional privileges as is the case with "reactionary" activities. The strike, sit-in, & violence that was explicitly political in its tenor and goals are examples of this more "modern" type of disruptive behavior.

Although gangs in the United States usually are not compared to political parties or labor unions, there are ways in which contemporary gangs do mimic more modern types of organizations. Some gangs, for example, have formed far-reaching confederations & have developed something akin to a corporate structure. They also have become engaged in sophisticated business enterprises that make a great deal of money through criminal ventures. In some instances gangs even reach out to local public leaders & become part of a more legitimate political operation. This happened in some nineteenth century cities &, at least in Chicago, it is supposed to be taking place today.

There are clearer parallels between contemporary gangs in the United States and the different types of groups and collective actions described by Tilly. The problem is that our gangs represent some kind of hybrid grouping not anticipated in his model or found during the

several hundred years worth of European history that he described. Even allowing for the kind of mixing of organizational types & action orientations that Tilly (1979) suggests may be possible, there is something unique about the combination brought together by many gangs in the US today. A more thorough analysis of the history of gangs in the United States might help to explain how this came to be.

There might be any number of ways to account for this anomalous situation. One plausible explanation, however, is that the hypothesized abandonment of more communal groupings in favor of bigger and more specialized associations was greatly overstated. Much human activity, as many social scientists have shown, still takes place on a local level through small groups that persons know intimately and which meet a variety of their needs. A second explanation for the odd combination of organizational types and behavioral orientations exhibited by American gangs today may be traced to the development of linkages between communal roughnecks and more disciplined and better organized political leaders that began as early as the American Revolution (Monti 1980). Thus, we brought together elements of reactionary and more forward looking types of collective action and expressed them through a combination of communal groups and complex political organizations. Contemporary gangs would then reflect a tradition of joining communal and more complex organizational forms in the same groups.

The world is a more complex place than Tilly ever imagined on this score. Yet the very mixing of disparate organizational forms and action orientations in contemporary youth gangs confirms Charles Tilly's central thesis. The unconventional activities of these groups complement their routine behavior, and gangs have more in common with regular organizations and groups in the community than one typically supposes. Indeed, contemporary gangs in the United States seem to bring together elements of several different types of corporate behavior and structures. They are communal groups that can be part of bigger and more complex organizations that operate across state and even national borders. They battle other communal groups and conduct sophisticated and profitable business operations. Finally, they have no explicit compelling social agenda, but they can become part of an ongoing political operation in a city. The study of history helps to draw out the similarities and differences between contemporary gangs and

older forms of uncivil behavior & social groups.

Each of these connections suggests that gangs draw upon organizational themes that are readily apparent in the conventional world and have a well-established record of success. Gangs are not alien to the organizational and cultural life to which most of us subscribe. They emerge from the same social conditions that produce conventional organizations and regular human beings.

This can be so only because our society is not fundamentally disorganized as so many gang experts believe. Instead, it is capable of producing a varied collection of groups whose form and actions are far more complementary than we imagine. This, in turn, is possible only because we have a culture whose elements are relatively clear and shared by a broad segment of the population. And the civil society constituted and built by these varied organizations persists only because it works well a great deal of the time.

There are gaping holes in the social scientific theories that purport to explain the presence and behavior of gangs in the United States (Monti 1996). These holes are likely to be better filled by drawing attention to the ways in which gangs are connected to the conventional world. Charles Tilly & others have tried to do this with the history of unconventional groups & civil disorder in European societies.

My objective thus far has been to sketch an outline of what an alternative approach to studying and making sense of gangs might look like and to suggest that gangs are a more complex and sophisticated organizational form than is commonly appreciated. Historical evidence of the sort acquired by Tilly and others that might lend support for this line of reasoning, or to refute it, is at best incomplete and spread across a number of different cities. What historical documentation does exist, however, suggests that gangs fit comfortably into a long and fairly conservative tradition of civil unrest in this country.

The history of New York City, to take one noteworthy example, is filled with many moments in which one or another group used violence to make a point (Gilje 1987; Monti 1980). Furthermore, gangs or collections of young men played a prominent role in many of these episodes. Most of these events have not been studied thoroughly, but it is apparent that they began during the colonial period and continue even today. What may be even more surprising is that it took some time for these activities and the young men who participated in them to

be viewed as public nuisances & to be challenged by local authorities. Episodes of deadly gang violence aside, we have become less tolerant of intermittent displays of disruptive behavior by young persons, not more tolerant.

Moments of popular celebration of complaint that once brought elite and common folk together in the street during the colonial period spoke to a variety of concerns. Sometimes, as in the case of public theater, the event was intended to reinforce "traditional bonds of deference and patronage" (Gilje 1987). On other occasions, such as Pope Day, New Year's Eve, & Pinkster Day, displays of plebian enthusiasm took a much different form (Gilje 1987). In a manner of speaking, these events turned the world upside down, if only for a little while.

During days of "misrule" common folk would act like more well-to-do persons or carry on as if normal rules of public decorum & deference had been suspended, which in fact they had been. Persons gave expression to the divisions & hard feelings that separated one class or group from another in the course of everyday life, but they did so in a highly stylized & temporary way. The effect of these reversals in commonly accepted roles & rules in colonial society was, oddly enough, to remind elite persons of their responsibility to those less well off than themselves even as they were being mocked & to reinforce for less prosperous persons the typical part they played in the world.

Another theme in some stylized displays of civil unrest in colonial towns has been likened to rites of passage. On these occasions persons better prepared themselves to "deal with the awkward moments of passing from one status to another" by misbehaving in forceful but customarily prescribed ways (Gilje 1987). New Year's Eve noise making and riotous behavior was only one of the more obvious examples of how disruptive collective acts could serve as a rite of passage into a new and uncharted world. Nineteenth century gangs would come to serve a similar end for many young persons.

Interesting and revealing as these episodes may have been for colonial Americans, we have not yet made any clear connection between these events and the types of activities associated with gangs in our own time. That young men from different walks of life were the most common participants in these different activities by itself does not tell us much. A clearer line between disorderly conduct in colonial towns and more modern displays of gang behavior is to be found in the

ways that popular unrest was utilized in early America.

It is not hard to draw a parallel between days of "misrule" in colonial towns, or "rituals of reversal" as cultural anthropologists sometimes call them, & more modern gang activities. Even more obvious, perhaps, is a connection between rebellious rites of passage in early American communities & gang behavior in our own time. Young men took loud & vigorous exception to established rules & rule makers in pre-revolutionary America, & seem no less inclined to do so today. That such occasions correspond to a period in their lives when they are making the difficult transition from childhood to adulthood only makes their violence look more like the culturally-prescribed outbursts associated with colonial rites of passage.

Larger towns and cities in early nineteenth century America were not immune to the influence of groups of young men that were bent on creating disturbances. The New Year's Eve celebrations already alluded to seemed particularly attractive to young men from less well-to-do families. They apparently took great satisfaction from disrupting more polite social gatherings and most everyone else's sleep (Gilje 1987). More permanent organizations serving similar purposes emerged during the second decade of the nineteenth century. These groups were gangs. Their behavior, sense of territory, and patterns of affiliation were consistent with what Frederic Thrasher came to call gangs in his famous Chicago study a little more than a century later.

There were obvious and painful differences between the comparative restraint exhibited by groups of young and not-so-young men in colonial America and the more disrespectful actions of early nineteenth century gangs. The latter moved beyond the rituals of misrule that had been so common around the time of the American Revolution, and their rites of passage were marked by considerably more lawlessness. Young persons from more well-to-do families gradually reduced their participation in such activities. Older and more prominent citizens stopped defending these outbursts as legitimate expressions of popular will against arcane rules and capricious rule makers, because they were now making the rules. Instead, they came to view these groups as a threat to conventional ways of acting and thinking, rather than as a noisy but safe way of drawing attention to community problems.

The deadly violence and sophisticated criminal enterprises carried out by young male and female gang members in our time represents another big step in the way that young persons seek to fix a place for themselves in the modern world. Unlike earlier displays of popular discontent, however, there is no hint of respect in their behavior, no lapse in the schedule of affronts to conventional standards and customs. Nevertheless, some themes apparent in early displays of popular unrest still are evident in modern gang activity. Gang membership frequently is seen as part of a teenage rite of passage, and the flaunting or rejection of adult authority is a staple in the gang's approach to the world. These themes may be well hidden in contemporary gang activities, but they continue to shape the outbursts we associate with gangs.

Classes of persons with less standing in the community gradually were ceded control over a variety of loud or otherwise outrageous actions that either celebrated or condemned existing standards for appropriate public behavior & the customary practices that gave substance to the claim of such rules on their lives. More prominent or secure classes of citizens withdrew their support for such activities & worked hard to mute all manner of raucous public gatherings & to suppress groups participating in them. Youth gangs became a prime example of the type of group whose standards & public behavior were not welcomed.

Welcomed or not, however, gangs found a place in nineteenth century American cities and were better integrated into ongoing community routines than we think. Disorders initiated by gangs often helped to maintain political groups in power. The patronage they enjoyed at the hands of local politicians also helped to retard the development of what might have become a stable working-class coalition consisting of persons from different ethnic groups and neighborhoods.

The relation between gangs and other forms of political or civic involvement by the ethnic or racial groups from which gangs emerged did not end in the nineteenth century. There was an interesting decrease in gang activity in New York City during the late 1950s when civil rights groups and the Black Muslims began to mobilize local black residents. Gangs composed of black youths staged a renaissance of sorts in the 1970s after civil rights movement in the city lost much of its energy (Monti 1980). The new gangs were more violent and less discriminating in their selection of

targets than earlier gangs had been. They also were better armed.

The new gangs did not become politicized to any great extent. Most seem to have been content to carry out aggressive and highly profitable criminal ventures related to the drug trade. Oppenheimer (1969) was correct, therefore, when he observed that "people with guns but without ideology are bandits." New gangs have no more an ambitious social agenda or political program than nineteenth century groups did.

Despite the obvious dangers they pose, contemporary gangs seem to fit the mold of earlier communal groups more interested in maintaining their own tenuous position in the city's social order than in transforming political and economic relations. (Monti 1980)

Contemporary youth gangs do engage in a variety of dangerous activities that offend large numbers of persons. Yet there is much in their behavior that speaks to more conservative traditions in the use of violence and public displays of bravado. The point of this essay has not been to ignore the outrages of contemporary gangs or to embrace their view of the world. Rather, it has been to place their way of behaving into a larger historical context and to hint at how their ways fit in the conventional world more than they or we are prepared to recognize.

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