OLD HEADS TELL THEIR STORIES

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ABSTRACT

Based on life history interviews with twenty veteran leaders of New York City's street gangs, a comparative analysis is made of the jacket gangs of the 1970's, the drug gangs of the 1980's and the street organizations of today. The data from these personal narratives (Reissman 1994) are supplemented by participant- and non-participant observations of current group activities and film footage of past gang-related events to provide an historical account of evolving youth street subcultural practices. The article argues that agency and empowerment, largely overlooked categories of gang analyses, exposes the poverty of conventional gang theory and the delinquency-centered criteria of gang studies.

INTRODUCTION

During the last twenty years street gangs in New York City, despite their virtual absence from the literature, have gone through several stages of development, becoming street organizations in the most recent phase.[1] There are a host of reasons to explain why this has occurred (Brotherton 1998), such as: 1) the increased importance of street-prison social support systems in light of the massive increase in the inmate population; 2) the continued marginalization of poor barrio and ghetto youth that fosters an anti-colonial consciousness; 3) the timely influence of politicized gang and ex-gang "old heads" (Wilson 1987); 4) the changing nature and organization of the illicit economy and its capacities for self-regulation; 5) the qualitative non-violent evolution of youth street subcultures; and 6) the influence and changing role of women within these new subcultures.

Whatever etiology lies behind this transformation, this period sees gangs creating new sophisticated alternative subcommunities consisting of broad socio-political and cultural associations, organizing both the free and incarcerated. Expressing distinct goals of self-determination and self-help, they have developed a political outlook resembling a grassroots social movement with an eclectic ideology that is spiritualistic, communitarian and utopian (Barrios 1999; Curtis 1997; Horowitz, Liebowitz 1968; Sharkey 1999; Venkatesh 1997).

In contrast to most treatments of gangs that focus primarily on members' adaptations to their environment which lead them to deviant acts of delinquency and violence, this author approaches gang members as social actors whose historically marginalized location spawns a range of licit and illicit practices and collective formations (Sullivan 1989; Venkatesh 1999). The groups that emerge range from street-corner societies (Whyte 1958) and entrepreneurial gangs to spectacular subcultures (Hebdige 1979) and consciously organized collectives of working-class youth and adults, with some groups that have characteristics of all four.

Thus, foregrounded in this article are the following: the human agency of group members, as revealed in their adaptive, resistant and transformational practices; the historical context in which such groups emerge; the symbolic meaning systems constituted by these groups; and the changes in group belief systems and their patterns of collective behavior over time. This unorthodox approach, although at odds with mainstream criminology, is crucial to achieve an understanding of current New York City youth subcultures, represented by such street organizations as the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation, the Asociacion Ñeta and Zulu Nation.

Given the complexity and contradictoriness of the data, an integrated analysis is used that borrows from different schools of thought. To analyze basic components of gang membership the orthodox gang literature is referred to, but to appreciate the oppositional nature of gangs as cultures of resistance, both British and American schools of critical cultural studies are called upon. Finally, to come to terms with the political trajectory of contemporary street organizations, theories of social movements are invoked.

The study is primarily based on life history narratives collected from fifteen veteran members of these three groups and five veterans from New York City gangs of a previous era. These primary data are organized around emergent themes which broadly describe the city's gang evolution. While these data reveal new information about the complexity of the city's street subcultures, above all they demonstrate the transition that some of these subcultures are undergoing as they move from delinquent gangs to community-based

street organizations.

METHODOLOGY

Data and Analysis

The data provided by the twenty respondents who are or have been members of gangs and street organizations in New York City date back to the late 1960's. This selective sample was made up of 17 males and 3 females who ranged in age from 32-52 years. To allow for the cross-referencing of data, interviews with some respondents filmed between 1970-1985 (Chalfant, Fecher 1989), as well as present day field observations of street organizations during meetings, political rallies, demonstrations and socials were also included in the overall analysis.

The analysis utilizes several interpretive approaches that are suited to these type of data. First, analytical induction (Sutherland, Cressey 1966) is employed to tease out the organizing themes (Thomas 1992) from the textually rich but often complexly layered "representations of experience" (Reissman 1994) and observational field notes. Second, Weber's (1949) concept of "verstehen" was found useful in coming to terms with the lived experience of the individual respondents and in understanding their relationship to the larger group or community. Third, to appreciate the longitudinal dimension of the respondents' stories (see Berg 1995; Pearson 1993), historiography helped to situate the data in the broader realms of time and place. Finally, to compare the empirical data to the existing literature, the extended case study method (Burawoy 1991) provided a guide for both critique and development of theory.

Gaining Entre

There were three separate stages to the process of entre. Each stage developed as a result of serendipitous contacts with the respondents, eventually leading to ongoing trusting relationships. These relationships include a strong emphasis on researcher-respondent reciprocity and community solidarity. The initial contact, made in 1994 occurred when one of the researchers shared an educational platform with a respondent. The two developed a rapport which led to the first snowball sample of gang veterans. Following this, in 1996, members of a street organization asked a second researcher to lend his journalistic skills to their efforts at countering negative media publicity. This led to a second snowball sample. Finally, in the same year, another researcher was approached by all three street organizations, requiring his help in providing a neutral space for their regular meetings. This third contact is the current basis of a long term collaborative research project.

Collaborative Research

Mirroring the collaborative research approach to the study of street gangs by Moore (1978) and Hagedorn (1988), a trusting and mutually respectful relationship was developed with the subjects over time. This methodology is useful when attempting to equalize the power relations between the researchers and the subjects and to ensure that knowledge produced from the research can be returned to the subjects' community. At all times, therefore, the researchers bore in mind that they were there to learn from the subjects without the presumption that their own expert knowledge is superior to the self-understandings of the researched.

To carry this out, the project, in part, had to be defined by the subjects themselves. Thus, the themes of the interviews were developed not simply based on the academic or grant-funding concerns of the researchers, e.g. trying to fill "knowledge gaps" in the literature, but by what the subjects themselves felt 1) the outside world should know about them, 2) would be helpful for the community to know and remember, and 3) would be helpful to understand their own past and present. It is crucial to remember that the subjects of this study remain active in the community and that their historical narratives contain powerful testimonies of a past that is rarely chronicled. The research was reflexive in that each interview was returned to the respective interviewee for comments, discussion and further elaboration along with various drafts of this article.

RETHINKING DELINQUENT AND GANG SUBCULTURES

Gang Theory

According to most gang research literature, gangs are generally recognized by their practices of delinquency. They may be traditional or cultural (Skolnick 1995), based on territory and the defense of parochial neighborhood spaces (Suttles 1968), "conflict-oriented", "retreatist" or "criminal" (Cloward, Ohlin 1960), depending on the opportunity structure, or "corporate" or "scavenger-like" (Taylor 1990), shaped by emerging drug markets and

the proliferation of weaponry among the so-called "underclass".

Thrasher (1927) discussed gang subcultural traditions in terms of adaptational behavior and practices that allowed these poverty besieged youth to survive in the disorganized environment of the inner-city. Thrasher (1927) asserted that "The gang is an interstitial group, originally formed spontaneously, then integrated through conflict". Thus, these youth, lacking a sufficient institutional infrastructure in the form of family, school, and church, were often left to raise themselves in street play groups that later became the social, territorial and identificational basis for the growing terrain of gang subcultures.

While Thrasher mentioned the involvement of these gangs in delinquency, it was left to Shaw and McKay (1969) to develop an epidemiological model that pointed to the reproduction of delinquent subcultural traditions in socially disorganized ghetto and slum communities. As Klein (1971) argues, it is this "criminal orientation" that leads the gang to be viewed and/or labeled by society as deviant which, in turn, heightens the members' identification with gang membership and solidifies group cohesion. Combining these empiricist, crime-centered constructions of the gang with Arnold's (1966) defining characteristics of gang activity, the criteria by which gangs are generally assessed within these criminological discourses are: 1) structure, 2) crime/delinquency, 3) territory, 4) integration/ cohesion, 5) conflict, 6) anti-social agenda, and 7) community perceptions.

Critical Cultural Studies

This umbrella term refers to diverse traditions within 1) British neo-Marxist cultural studies, 2) Critical Pedagogy as developed in the United States, and 3) the contemporary ethnography of urban anthropologist Dwight Conquergood. Although, rarely incorporated into mainstream gang studies, such works shed light on conformist and oppositional tendencies within youth gangs and their dialectical relationship to economic, political, cultural and social power structures.

The British school (Hall, Jefferson 1982; Hall, Jefferson, Crichter, Clarke and Roberts, 1978; Williams 1965; Willis 1977), locating the emergence of youth subcultures historically, asserted that it was during the rapid expansion of monopoly capitalism after the Second World War (Baran, Sweezy 1966) that the phenomenon of a primarily urban youth culture first arose. This culture, with its own distinctive values, symbols and norms, grew out of and reflected the contradictions within Western society's expanding systems of mass production, consumption and exchange. Linking the oppressive cultural and political structures and superstructures of a post-war society, the British school recast this development among working-class youth as resistant (Corrigan 1979), self-contradictory (Willis 1977) and within a struggle for transcendence (Brake 1985) of structural boundaries.

American critical pedagogists applied these concepts of youth agency and oppression to the site of education, thereby significantly broadening the discussion of social reproduction (Bourdieu 1984; Bowles, Gintis 1977) both theoretically and empirically (Apple 1982; Fine 1991; Giroux 1983; MacLeod 1995; McLaren 1993). Still, few researchers in the critical cultural tradition have focused on gang subcultures per se, which leaves the studies of Conquergood (1992, 1993, 1997) and his ethnographic analyses of urban gangs' physical and linguistic codes as seminal reference works.

Social Movements Theory

Gangs as forms of collective behavior have also rarely been approached from a social movements perspective since they have not been considered a "collective enterprise to establish a new order of life" (Blumer 1957). To do so, however, adds an historical dimension and a broader political framework of group dynamics.

In this vein, Smelser's (1962) now classic formulation of movement emergence is particularly helpful in understanding the strained societal conditions under which groups develop and the role of belief systems in movement mobilizations. McAdam (1982) offers an alternative model, arguing that insurgent movements are 1) essentially political rather than psychological and 2) develop through a process of continuous interaction between the external structures of political opportunity and the internal organizational strengths of the movement itself.

In more recent times, social movements have been dramatically recast as theorists considered the impact of post-industrialism and post-modernity and the demise of grand narrative traditions of progress, reform and revolution. Thus, for Touraine (1981) social

Table 1: Comparative Characteristics of New York City Street Subcultures

	Subcultural Types		
	Jacket Gangs	**Street Crews**	**Street Organizations**
Period	1970s	1980s	1990s
Structure	Vertical	Loose/Situational	Vertical/Contingent
Territory	local turfs	drug spots	extra-territorial
Ideology	street lore/some radicalism	street entrepreneurial	communitarian/utopian
Delinquency	"cafeteria-type"	drug focused	anti-delinquent
Conflict Management	negotiated terrains	market competitive	conflict mediation/ arbitration
Symbolism	clothing/names/graffitti	conspicuous consumption	beads/colors/meetings/ banners
Integration	relatively well integrated	situational	well integrated/high solidarity
Duration	10 years	temporary	long term commitment

movements are fields of social action, defined and analyzed on three levels: identity, adversary and societal goal(s). Touraine argues that today's social movement is concerned not so much with history making, i.e., engaged in bringing about a new society, but rather with

> struggling....to win back for itself the knowledge, the investments and the cultural model that the ruling class have appropriated to their own interests. (Touraine 1981)

Similarly, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) see a plethora of grassroots, direct-action movements emerging and Castells (1997) has coined the term "cultural communes" to conceptualize the range of new identity-seeking social movements spawned by a decentered, networked, globalized society.

NEW YORK CITY

Not surprisingly, examples of "spectacular subcultures" emerged among the legions of working-class, white ethnic and minority youth in New York City's poorest neighborhoods. First made famous through the musical West Side Story in the 1950's, these youth gang subcultures, often referred to as jacket gangs, continued to develop and multiply well into the 1970's. One indication of their proliferation was the signing of a Peace Treaty in 1973 by 42 South Bronx jacket gangs (Chalfant, Fecher 1989).

During the 1980's these groups began to decline and almost disappeared with the exception of a few residual units (Campbell 1991). However, these were soon replaced by crews, some of which were organized around tagging (Chalfant, Silver 1984), but mostly were derived from and responding to the new opportunity structures of the ever mutating drugs trade. These crews contained many members from the former jacket gangs although they also drew on a new generation of marginalized youth growing up in the barrios and ghettos of the city. The crews were different in both appearance and substance, and reflected many of the changed environmental conditions and dynamics of the city's poorest areas, now thoroughly deindustrialized (Bluestone 1982; Kasarda 1989; Vergara 1995).

In the 1990's the youth subcultures of New York City again qualitatively transformed, this time emerging as "street organizations" that sought to break with their gang pasts and proactively come to terms with ghetto life. Table 1 compares the characteristics of these three subcultural types.

Combining both American and British theoretical approaches, a comparative interpretation of each of these subcultural characteristics is offered in the following section. What is striking is not only the comparison over time between these three group types but, on issues of delinquency, territory and ideology, how demarcated the contemporary street organizations are from the previous two subcultures.

FROM FIGHTING SUBCULTURES TO STREET ORGANIZATIONS

Group Types

The jacket gangs of New York City, consisting primarily of Puerto Rican and African-

American working-class youth, emerged in Manhattan, the South Bronx and Brooklyn during the late 1960's and early 1970's.

> (I): Back then, when I was growing up in the early 70's it was street gangs. I'm talkin' about street-gangs where individuals cut off their dungaree-jackets, put fur around them and then put on their colors. Those are gangs, not like now.
> (R): What gangs do you remember?
> (I): I remember The Tomahawks, the Black Peacestone, The Saigon, The Vanguards, Crazy Hammer Sides, The Jolly Stompers, The Hellcats, Dynamite Brothers..I could go on and on. (Mr. R., The Bronx)

According to the respondents, they grew up within a lower class cultural milieu (Miller 1958) of dozens of youth subcultures in their respective neighborhoods. Their outlaw-type names, part of the complex signification process embedded in young working-class identity construction, were symbolic reactions to the marginal and marginalizing environment within which these youth were raised.

> So lets say we call ourselves the Chelsea Street Boys. Ok, we grew up together. We might have been into sports and now we're a gang. So what happens if any little incident happens? They wanna blame them. And throughout the whole course of this, they take on the negative role. That's what happened to us. We used to get blamed for everything. The police used to harass us and accuse of this and that. In the end we said ok if you think we're bad we might as well be bad. (Mr. B., ex-President of the Savage Skulls)

These jacket gangs, similar to the traditional, cultural gangs discussed by Skolnick (1995), accorded with many of the characteristics found in the traditional U.S. gang literature. Their adherents were large in overall number, spreading throughout the five boroughs of New York City, possessed defined rules and roles of membership, and succeeded in creating a powerful sub-system of values, rituals and communication that attracted many of the city's most marginalized young people. At the end of the 1970's these groups began to disappear, their social and physical spaces destroyed by landlord-inspired arson (Vergara 1995) and their numbers, particularly their leaderships, depleted by the arrival of heroin and its self-destructive, criminalized properties.

The 1980's, however, saw the appearance of a different type of street grouping that was built on the illegal opportunity structures (Cloward, Ohlin 1960) offered by the mushrooming marijuana, heroin, and later, crack cocaine drug trade. Members of these groups also combined their drug activities with other low level criminal activity.

> I was a stick up kid too. At that time, I was sticking up numbers, joints and drug dealers. We were making a lot of money, just our little crew within the B's. (Mr. H., a former crew member emerging from a jacket gang in the South Bronx.)

> I hooked up with them when I was 13 years old. We were into stuff like extortion, selling drugs, running prostitution, numbers everything. We were about making money and hanging out. (Mr. C. formerly of the Hart Street Dragons)

These crews or posses proliferated throughout New York City's poorest neighborhoods (Sullivan 1989) at a time when manufacturing jobs were lost at a rate greater than any other large American city (Fitch 1993) and services to the least affluent were dramatically pared as part of the city's "planned shrinkage" response to the fiscal crisis of the early seventies. In the late 1980's, the dominant youth subcultures in the city again changed their form and large organized gangs came back that, at first, were not so different from the old jacket gangs. As Mr. R., a 1970's member of the Latin Kings, put it:

> They were into gang-banging, negativity, and that sort of thing. I didn't want to be involved in that again.

However, in the early 1990's, with the emergence of a new leadership and a more heterogeneous membership these gangs began to transform themselves into street organizations or cultural associations for self and community empowerment.

> We are now moving into a different phase. We are now moving to become a social movement. The old ways of doing things are behind us. We are not saying we have not been responsible for things in the past but that

is over. We have to look toward to the future. (Mr. H., advisor to the Latin Kings)

Structure

> Let me put it to you, its like a big committee. OK? We say, 'Well, this is the problem here.' Its like the Chrysler Corporation. They got the president, the vice-president and this guy, the president says, 'Well, this is here. I wanna give him all the information about the sales, whatever.' (Mr. B., ex-Savage Skulls)

The organizational structure of the jacket gangs was always vertical (Jankowski 1991), as Mr. B. attests above, based on the pyramidal design of a corporation or the traditional hierarchy of a social club. The groups' members socially hung out together on a daily basis, either in their club houses or on street corners and assembled weekly to discuss their business. There was a great deal of emphasis placed on the role of leadership and the position of the President was a prized one. Under him in the hierarchy were the Vice-President, the War Lord, and the Sergeant-at-Arms, all of whom met to decide on group policy before putting it to the members - although it was the President that made the final decisions. As the numbers grew and their activities took hold not only in many of New York City's poorest neighborhoods but in other states and the commonwealth of Puerto Rico, they were divided into semi-autonomous units.

> We had 25 divisions throughout the boroughs and when I got locked up, that's when the whole thing fell apart. Nobody could keep it together. (Mr. B., ex-Savage Skulls)

Although school, law enforcement and media renditions of gang life often include references to gang members systematically recruiting youngsters (Brotherton 1994), this practice rarely emerged in the interviews. However, they did include the custom of initiation:

> There was an initiation where we put a 45 record on, and sometimes my brother would put on an album. If the record was scratched then forget it! You had to fight 5 guys until the record was finished. So, ok, you fight the guys and you pass the test but you still didn't have your colors yet. Then we'd go to the gasoline station on 162nd street and there was a bottle of dirty oil. You would dunk yourself this high [points to his waist] and then you had to stay like that for a week in the club. (Mr. Y., ex-President of the Ghetto Brothers)

In comparison, the drug crews were much less structured with none of the formal titles described above nor did they remain in existence for long periods of time, consequently they did not build up the subcultural histories and traditions of the jacket gangs. Rather, they were short-lived, locally organized small groups, made up of neighborhood friends and associates. They primarily concentrated their activities on the execution of criminal tasks, adapting their organization to a fast moving, drug-oriented environment (Fagan 1989).

> I didn't deal hand-to-hand. Basically, the spot or the place where the drugs were sold was mine, or me and a group of guys. We got together, put the money together, one of the guys was older and he knew we could work it. He made sure we worked. So, all we did was go buy, collect money, hang out, collect money, buy clothes...that was basically it. (Mr. S. ex-crew member, the South Bronx)

The street organizations are different again to the crews and place great store in their ability to organize, multiply their ranks and maintain their inner solidarity. Their organizational system has been written and is followed assiduously. Like the jacket gangs, as these groups have grown they have been subdivided into semi-autonomous units. In the case of the Latin Kings, these are called "tribes" and each tribe is led by a group of five crowns with a supreme crown in overall charge of the tribe. As with the jacket gangs there is one President, or Inca, who currently heads a Supreme Team which makes policy decisions for the entire organization.

Similar to the jacket gangs, there is a strict division of labor in these organizations, with members nominated to positions such as Secretary of State, Public Relations Officer, Political Advisor and Santo (essentially Spiritual Advisor). These positions change as the needs of the organization change but the duties are taken very seriously, and, unlike the jacket gangs, the members are more accountable for their actions and group responsibilities. As these organizations have emerged out of their gang stage they have had to change a number of the rules, particularly

those that included severe, physical punishments for crimes against the group and initiation ceremonies.

> To get initiated nowadays you have to first go through a period of probation until we know that you really want to be a King or Queen. Then we ask you to do some form of community service such as work in one of the soup kitchens or help with the distribution of clothes to the poor. We are not into recruiting anymore. We don't have to recruit, people are coming to us continuously and asking if they can join. (Ms. R., Latin Queen)

> When I became Inca the number one rule I made was a brother could never, ever kill another brother again. No matter what we find them guilty of. Because we contradict everything we stand for.....The death penalty was abolished, never to be brought back. And I think the Nation loves that about the movement now. (Mr. F., the Latin Kings)

Without recruiting or physical punishment the universals (general meetings), often resembling a revival, take on a special significance for the discipline and maintenance of the organization's local and state structure. The three largest street organizations in New York City hold monthly or bi-monthly all-inclusive universals, at which internal business is discussed and the various leaders from the different sub-divisions constantly confer with one another. It is at these meetings that the main leaders get to rally the membership and provide them with 1) information on future activities, 2) an analysis of the organization's progress and the obstacles facing the movement, and 3) an oral history of the group. The following excerpt from my field notes (10/21/96) provide an insight into this process:

> Roughly 400 LK's are in attendance. They pack the inside of the church, covering all the pews and then line up along both sides. Most of those in attendance are young men between the ages of 16 and 20 years old, along with significant numbers in their late 20's and early 30's. Some of the older male members have their children in their arms. About 50 Latin Queens are also present. They sit together on the left side of the church, many with their children sitting beside them. The leadership is positioned at the front of the church, high on the steps in front of the altar. 10 Latin Kings stand in front of Inca and his supreme crowns as security detail.
>
> ...After several speakers, including the Cacique, or Vice-President, and one of the leaders of the Latin Queens, the Inca rises to speak. He has a few notes in his hand as he strides confidently to the rostrum.
>
> "The truth is that we are a true and great nation. Yet we seem to feel that we have to walk with our heads down because that's the way we have been treated as Latins all our lives. But we don't have to. King N touched on a very sensitive point there, we are in a war at the moment and this goes back to 1940 and not just 1986. The struggle goes on, its like a roller coaster, its full of ups and downs."

Territory

Stark (1993) and Corrigan (1979) have drawn attention to the use of free time by working-class youths, interpreting "hanging out" not simply as an example of idleness but as a forced outgrowth and reaction to industrial society's authority over time, space (Harvey 1996; Lefebvre 1991) and age segregation (Greenberg 1993). Hence, "hanging out" can be seen as an expression of resistance to the routinized needs of capitalist social relations and the schooling systems they help to shape (Bowles, Gintis 1977; Powers 1992). Reflecting on this repressed desire for autonomy and control in their daily life, Mr. B. below, discusses what so much of the gang's social life consisted:

> When I started the Skulls, it was just us, you know, we used to hang out in the park, we used to break night, you know, we used to stay out, it was just us and the girls. We took out a burned-out building, we cleaned it out, we made it liveable, you know, and we would just hang out in the park. We used to drink in there, like that nobody'll bother us, we bothered nobody, just kept to ourselves. (Mr. B., ex-Savage Skulls)

Over time, it was out of this activity of "hanging out" among friends, that the jacket gangs were formed. Just as they constructed a nominal identity for themselves, they also "imagined" (Anderson 1991) themselves to be within intricate borders that overlay the racial and ethnic residential zones of the members. These borders became their territories or psycho-social spheres of control (Vigil 1988) whose real and symbolic properties (marked

by early examples of graffiti) frequently led to inter-gang conflict. However, since these zones of gang influence were within densely populated, ethnically mixed residential areas of public and private housing, it did not produce the no-go zones often contained in accounts of Los Angeles and Chicago gang wars.

Rather, the gang territories were negotiated domains, with members able to wear their jackets in some zones and not in others. Thus, these gangs were constantly involved in generating and regenerating feuds and alliances with and against other gangs, which became a precondition of their existence.

> The Batchelors were a force to be reckoned with. Basically they ran the South Bronx. We always respected the Bronx as far as boundaries go, you wouldn't step into their territory but when they would try coming over the bridge it was on, you know. We had to do what we had to do to defend ourselves. What they were trying to do was to come in and take over. You know, eliminate the Kings, the Aces and the Saints, to make them Batchelors, Savage Skulls or Nomads because they were all cliqued together up there in the Bronx. (Mr. R., The Bronx)

In comparison, the closest that the crews came to expressions of territory was in the boundary maintenance of drug spots which were centered on market domains. Like capitalist enterprises, crew members wanted to keep competition down to a minimum, which they could only do physically by protecting their own selling areas or muscling in on others, or through marketing strategies that undercut rival dealers.

> So, the first thing I did, I took the two bundles and I give them out to everybody for free to all the junkies and I said, "If you bring me customers, I give you a dollar every bag and I give you a morning bag and a night bag so you won't ever be sick."....Later he [the supplier] gave me five bundles. I called him in a half-hour, it was gone. I was known in a matter of two months. I was counting thirty five hundred dollars every two days. (Mr. T., ex-crew member, Brooklyn)

Still, the struggle for and defense of drug turfs could be very intense. In Mr. T.'s case below it mushroomed into an expression of inter-ethnic rivalry.

> So the biggest war broke out between the Dreads and us, you know, the Latinos on the block. Even though I had hair like the Dreads, we were still Dominican and Puerto Rican. We wanted to be like them but we didn't want them taking over our neighborhood. (Mr. T., ex-crew member, Brooklyn)

In terms of territory, the new street organizations are markedly different from either the jacket gangs or the crews. As they build their organizations into nations, the pertinence of parochial boundaries is lessened. As a result, the members and leadership tend to have a much broader vision of their organization's aims, which dramatically reduces the potential for inter-gang feuding.

> We don't claim any particular territory. We are not into that kind of gang-banging mentality, that belongs to the past. We don't think its worth dying over flying your color against another group....for what? To say that you're down with your group? I don't think so. We have lost a lot of good people to that kind of mentality and to me the only winners are the Mayor and the cops - the ones that want us to kill each other off. We learned from our mistakes and we don't intend to repeat them. (Mr. F., the Latin Kings)

Ideology and Politics

It is often asserted in the gang literature that any conscious attempt to develop an ideology, or a set of beliefs that defend and reflect the interests of a certain class (Robertson 1987), are absent among gang members. Certainly, for many members of the jacket gangs, there was a limited concern for political matters of the neighborhood (let alone the nation state) and most of what was discussed when gang members interacted was restricted to the immediate concerns of the gang, such as who the group was now aligned with, threats from other gangs, the induction of new members, criminal proceedings against individuals and so on.

> At that time, all of this was fun. We didn't have anything else to do. That's how we lived. It's a lot different from today. In the old days, this was how we survived, it was an everyday thing. There were no people out there telling us that there were better ways of doing hings. The only guys who I looked up to at that time were the older guys who used to shoot

numbers. (Mr. C., the Dragons)

Despite this tendency toward localism, some jacket gang leaders, surrounded by the social protest and revolutionary politics of the 1960's, were deeply affected by the radicalism of the ghetto and barrio. Mr. Y., ex-president of the Ghetto Brothers, below discusses the founding of his group and its transition toward a street-based political youth group committed to community empowerment, self-determination and gang unity against the Establishment.

(R) The organization began when I started seeing the political organizations coming up like the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, the Puerto Rican Independence movement. I was a Nacionalista though I couldn't see myself saying, "Viva The Young Lords." No, that sounded too gangish for me, but the Puerto Rican Socialist Party sounded legit. That's where I wanted to go.
(I) What was the aim of the Ghetto Brothers?
(R) It was to bring all our brothers and sisters together. Its was to do something for the community. To get rid of the drunks, to get rid of the pimps, to get rid of the prostitution, to get into education, to get into all of this.

In general, however, the example of the Ghetto Brothers was the exception to the rule. Most of the other groups did not take up radical political causes and therefore did not develop a counter-cultural or anti-Establishment ideology. Rather, they remained within their own subterranean gang value system that was culturally oppositional but undeveloped in terms of a cohesive system of thought and action. Similarly, the crews did not advance an oppositional ideological line and, in fact, adopted many of the shibboleths of the dominant class culture in pursuing their entrepreneurial aims.

The contemporary street organizations are quite different to both these types and, if anything, resemble more closely the case of the Ghetto Brothers and their development of a liberation consciousness (McAdam 1982). For example, the Netas, formed in the Puerto Rican prison system by a member of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, are strongly motivated by their commitment to unite, defend and empower the Latino community, fight racism, agitate against the colonialist subjugation of Puerto Rico and advocate for prisoners' rights. Similarly, the Latin Kings are wedded to the doctrine of Kingism from which many of the group's lessons are drawn. This belief system, an eclectic mix of spiritualism, self-help prisoner guidance and community/nationalist empowerment themes, is thoroughly infused with the politics of social justice. Like the Netas and Zulu Nation, the Latin Kings have been active in opposing police brutality and the racism within public educational and criminal justice systems.

In the following exchange, the Inca of the Latin Kings is addressing inmates during a Christmas mass. Like the founder of the Netas, the leader of the Latin Kings is someone from the streets who knows the injustices of the correctional system first-hand. He is attentively listened to by the 100 inmates present, many of whom do not belong to the same organization.

I know what its like to be locked up, to be isolated, to get cut up, to have to defend yourself. I been there and I know that ain't the way to go. We gotta find a better way. So, the last time I came out I vowed I'd never go back but they set me up. Some corrupt cops from the X precinct set me up on a gun charge, but I beat it. I faced 15 years for that rap and I beat it and I never thought I'd be coming back here again without shackles on. But here I am 'cos this system can't run away from the truth, from the righteous. That's the way I see the struggle now. It don't matter if you're a King, a Neta, a Blood, it don't matter whether you're white, or black or brown. It ain't about your color, my brothers, its about your love and respect. What I wanna say today is that we have to bring peace to this institution because if we don't we only gonna let the system keep oppressing us and giving more and more jobs to the CO's [correctional officers], the cops and all those who wanna keep us locked down both inside and out.

Delinquency

In orthodox criminological literature, delinquency is a major criterion for proclaiming a gang's existence and certainly a significant amount of "cafeteria-type" delinquency (Klein 1971) was reported by the "old head" members of the jacket gangs. This included truancy, fighting, petty larceny, car theft and even extended to deadly assault.

> I've been going to jail since the age of nine. Group houses came first. I went to a real jail for the first at the age of 16. I had stabbed a guy 36 times. He had hit a couple of our guys with a car. And then, the guys that he didn't hit, he didn't want to leave any witnesses, so he put the car in reverse and tried to run us down. The he jumped out. By that time I was so scared that I took out my pen knife, a Boy Scout knife, and I started sticking him. (Mr. C., former member of The Dragons)

However, what is important to remember is the context in which this took place. The youth in these jacket gangs were from the lowest class-racial strata, experiencing many of the pathologies that conditions of poverty induce such as disengagement from legitimate adult authority, rejection of and being rejected by public and parochial schools, a paucity of meaningful employment and job training opportunities, cultural invisibility and the constant threat of the criminal justice system. Brother R., a former jacket gang member and now a leader of Zulu Nation, recalls his working-class upbringing.

> My mother worked for minimum wage damn near all her life. She dropped out of school at four years old and went to work in the fields in Puerto Rico. My father was a truck driver and used to work for the city but never passed on the light to us. Myself, the highest paying job I ever had was workin' in the mortuary.

At the same time, many of these youth were in the throes of adjusting between two worlds, either having been brought north by Southern black families or having immigrated with their families from Puerto Rico. One consequence of these twin dynamics of social displacement and inadequate humanistic socialization was the norm of living on the street from a young age. Thus, by their early teens, these youth had already become socialized by the streets' survivalist, "living off your wits" codes of conduct.

> Nobody had a place to live, so we all lived there. Nobody lived with their parents; either on the roof, basements, hallways, wherever we could sleep. On a typical day, we'd spend it stealin', getting into trouble, starting fights. Every day was like that, just the same every day. You get up, you go rob the milkman and the bread man. They started giving us bread so we wouldn't rob them. (Mr. C., ex-crew member, Brooklyn)

As stated, the crews carried out more specialized acts within the illegal economy. Their members, mostly high school truants and drop-outs, were well on their way to developing the "moral careers" (Becker 1963) of the criminal. Faced by the deepening poverty of New York's dual society (Castells, Mollenkopf 1991), these youth saw their membership in the crews as a realistic means to "get paid" and have a social life.

> We were dealing herb. I had like 5 or 6 guys working for me. Ours was petty stuff, half ounces, ounces, nickel bags, even in some instances loose joints. Yo, I give you 100 joints, go to the beach and bring me back 60. Then we decided to try tray bags, I mean were just business men. We had everything we wanted. I had all the girls I wanted. (Mr. H., South Bronx)

The street organizations, however, although they consist of some members who are still selling drugs and who are involved in crime, are eager to develop an alternative mindset to the fatalism inspired by the ghetto economy. With so many members already incarcerated, and many more who have experienced prison, physical violence, drug use and abuse, they are attempting to help members reconstruct their lives through networks of mutual support and consistent messages of self-and cultural affirmation. At the same time, they are quite aware that a different route to personal survival is also shaped by economic realities.

> We want to try to build up some form of self-sufficiency. At the moment we are working trying to provide jobs to our members. You know, its very difficult when you have a criminal record to get a job. I would say its almost impossible a lot of the time. So, we recognize that many of our members when they come out need to be helped especially if we are to try to prevent them going back into the old ways because that's all there is. (Ms. R., Latin Queen)

Conflict

> I think rivalry came after we got away from the scene, with the guys that really didn't know the origins and didn't know...you understand,

how close we were. I used to tell my guys, "Yo, you can't fight with them. That's such and such." But some of the new chapters didn't know." (Mr.B., ex-President, the Savage Nomads)

Among the jacket gangs, nearly all of the fighting that occurred was "expressive" (Block, Block 1995), typically arising from disputes around perceived malicious intentions, disrespect for local turf boundaries and transgressions of personal honor (Horowitz 1983). As discussed, the crews mainly fought over drug turfs and interpersonal disputes. The street organizations of today, however, have learned many bloody lessons from internal conflicts of the past and have instituted their own forms of conflict resolution.

(R) How do you resolve internal conflicts?
(I) It depends on the conflict. Usually, if two brothers are having a problem we have an arbitrator. They would take the person who has the most knowledge, the most life knowledge, or sometimes they would go in front of the whole meeting and each one says what they feel happened and the brothers will vote if they have to. Sometimes we have to counsel them, but if I don't have an answer then somebody else will and we keep looking until we find it. But every man and woman has to make their choice in their own life....One thing we don't allow is physical fighting among our members. (Mr. L., Netas)

This commitment to a peaceful process of dispute resolution within the ranks has led to a sharp reduction in the deaths and injuries among the members (for example, in the trial against King Blood, the District Attorney produced evidence of at least 11 murders among the Latin Kings during the period from 1989-1993). This does not mean that gangs that have not ascended to a new "stage" in their development (the Latin Kings say that they are at the third stage as they move toward becoming a fully integrated nation), are going to cease inter-group rivalry. An important test, therefore, for the street organizations is whether they can hold their members in check when provoked and forestall a destructive and potentially disastrous escalatory spiral of conflict (Hocker, Wilmot 1995). Nonetheless, contrary to much law enforcement thinking on the subject, the likelihood of the organization returning to its gang days is not inevitable. In a recent attack on the Latin Kings by members of a rela-tively new street gang, the leadership managed to contain the situation through adroitly mobilizing the membership into political street action.

We had two of our brothers shot over the weekend.....some of our brothers wanted to go and fire up the projects but I said no. That's what they wanted us to do....so we held a peace rally with over 500 Latin Kings present and invited the mother of the kid who shot our members. She was frightened of me. She thought I was gonna order the Nation to hit at her family. I said to her, "Look, I wouldn't want anything to happen to my family for something I didn't do and what I don't want for them I don't want for anyone else. The Nation is not going down that road anymore. (Mr. F., The Latin Kings)

Symbolism

The jacket gang names, connoting evil and the audacious, precocious outsider, symbolically inverted the powerlessness that was being experienced in the youths' daily lives (Brake 1985). Hence, many of their cultural symbols, i.e., clothing, group monikers and function titles, were borrowed from the middle and upper classes. Once appropriated, these symbols became, literally, the property of the new subcultures and subject to their own myriad, "from below" interpretations. This transgressive act is akin to what Conquergood (1992) calls "performance rhetoric" and embodies the tension between two discursive systems: that of official society (or high culture) complemented by its fetishistic processes of commodification and that of the street (or low culture) and its underground "naming and renaming, symbolizing and resymbolizing, empowering and disempowering".

(I) Why did you choose to do all the lettering in that old English style?
(R) Royalty. It gives you that something, you know, you're special and you stand out as opposed to block letters, say. When people saw that they saw the royalty, they saw the style. (Mr. Y., ex-Ghetto Brothers)

This "slippage" (Conquergood 1992) between the two cultures, with so much emphasis placed on symbolic representation, was not present with the crews, except for those

Table 2: An Interpretation of Meaning Systems Among the Latin Kings and the Netas

Symbols/Artifacts/Gestures	Interpretive Meanings
multi-colored beads worn as necklace, similar to rosary	group affiliation/position in hierarchy/length of membership / sacrifice for group/initiation blessing
hand signs	interactional greeting, mutual and self-recognition, gesture of group and self defiance
grito, e.g., "amor de rey" (Latin Kings), "de corazon" (Netas)	personal membership claim, micro-ritual of commitment & respect for group, claim of independence, autonomy and self-determination, Latino self- and cultural affirmation
universals (monthly meetings)	organizational necessity, informational forum, time for active dialogue and analysis, connection to history, friendship renewal, solidarity reinforcement macro-ritual of group integration

who were fully immersed in the subcultural art worlds of graffiti. The drug crews, whose raison d'etre was the acquisition of status, wealth and power, had little time for such symbolic playfulness. For them, it was enough to brandish artifacts of conspicuous consumption such as cars, gold jewelry and women.

> ....and so in the eighties, even though I was studying, I was still on this drug thing. My people started coming out of jail, so we created a new empire. Now we were living in New Jack City. I went from falling asleep and riding the A train from one end to the other to the windows of the world. Drinking Don Perignon with two bimbos on my back, you know, I mean now we had money. Now we were living large again. Now there was jewelry, the cars, the limos... (Mr. H., the South Bronx)

The contemporary street organizations, however, place great importance on their symbolic displays, since crafting a new identity is a critical element of self discovery and group self-determination. Below is Table 2 that highlights some of the current symbolic artifacts and gestures of the street organizations and their complex set of interpretive meanings.

Although the above requires a more detailed exposition, it should suffice to indicate the extraordinary weight attached to symbolism within these contemporary groups. As McLaren (1993) has demonstrated, so much of the enactment and construction of every day life comes in the form of micro- and macro-rituals which are crucial to the production and reproduction of current power relations. These street organizations are no exception to this rule and with their increasingly conscious opposition to internal and external colonization, and their origins in the symbolically saturated and contested world of the prison system, they struggle openly for what Bhaba (1994) has called a "third space" between the oppressor and the oppressed.

DISCUSSION

Obviously, given the highly qualitative nature of the data, it is important that the above interpretations are not take as generalizable findings which purport to cover the whole range of gang members in New York City at a given moment. Rather, the data illustrate the importance of discerning trends within and across subcultures over time, the role of these subcultures in the development of New York City's poorest communities, and the shortcomings that these point to in the literature. Too often, gang researchers, after citing ecological factors such as extreme poverty, social isolation, capitalist restructuring and increasing state controls, focus almost exclusively on the practices of delinquency and crime. These analytical constructs, in turn, become part of the "root paradigm" (McLaren 1993) used to conceptually distinguish whether a group is a clique, a gang or part of a street corner society. Two prominent researchers and their associates put it this way:

> Some gangs are more violent than others, some are more instrumental than others, some are more involved in drug use than others and so on. Although this variation across gangs exists, it does not detract from the virtually universal finding that gang members are much more heavily involved in delinquency and drug use than non gang members. (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Chard-Wierschem 1993)

And Klein (1995), exhibiting a little more caution, states:

> Where is the tipping point beyond which we say, "Aha - that sure sounds like a street gang to me?" I suggest two useful signposts.
> The first...is a commitment to a criminal orientation...Note carefully, however, that I specify orientation, not a pattern of serious criminal activity, as many in the enforcement world might require.....My second signpost, admittedly difficult to judge from outside the group: the group's self-recognition of its gang status.

For most gang-focused social scientists, therefore, the practice of crime remains the marker that signifies a gang's presence and that accentuates its "difference" from other normative social groups. These empiricist foci, however, contain at least four central flaws that limit their explanatory power.

First, they leave little room for longitudinal considerations of gang subcultures and the possibility of their qualitative transition into movements. Second, they overlook the gang's intervention in both social and cultural struggles, thus denying any claim to historicity (Touraine 1981). Third, they are non-reflexive and rarely question the underlying "domain of assumptions" (Gouldner 1970) and both the social and textual power of social science discourse (Foucault 1974). Fourth, they overlook the contradictoriness (or dialectics) of agency within gang membership, e.g. the notion that youth may be joining gangs as much to shape them as to be shaped by them. As Conquergood (1992) concludes:

> [I]f ethnography [also read social science] is to do something other than reinscribe domination through collapsing or fetishizing difference, it needs to juxtapose cultures and dialogize voices in such a way that the investigator's culture is defamiliarized in the encounter with the Other.

Conquergood's plea for a more critical approach to the study of these subcultures seems to be especially borne out with groups as complex and contradictory as the Latin Kings and the Netas. Based on the above data, it is simply not possible to understand these emergent social movements of ghetto and barrio youth from the traditional criminological empiricist standpoint. To this extent, the British and American schools of critical cultural studies and the range of theories on social movements offer an alternative to the "tautological" impasse (Morash 1983) of the usual tropes of gangs, drugs, crime and violence.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the above that the paradigm chosen by the researcher will very much determine what he or she will find (Conquergood 1997). Thus, an orthodox criminologist might focus on the adaptational function or anti-social behavior of gangs, a critical culturalist could see these same groups filled with social agents striving for self-expression, while a social movement theorist may direct our attention to the genesis of political struggle. In a sense, given the nature of the data, all three approaches are legitimate. However, in the U.S., with its heavily financed criminal justice-oriented research, it is overwhelmingly the former that has and will continue to dominate gang discourse (Hagedorn 1988) and conceptually related studies on urban youth deviance. As I have argued, this leaves the issues of social and political consciousness, transformative action, spirituality, and ideology not only outside of theoretical consideration but completely at odds with most gang policies - whether they are formulated in legislative assemblies, precinct command stations or public high and middle schools.

A skeptic might ask are such street organizations simply social constructions of researchers gone native? And, if they do indeed exist, how long can these organizations continue, given the rise and fall of so-called reformed gangs such as the Chicago "Vice Lords" and "Blackstone Rangers" in the 1960's.

In answer to the first question, after some two years in the field, this researcher is still going to well-attended political protests, monthly organizational meetings and community social events initiated by the city's various street organizations and their supporters. Since time is an essential component of ethnographic verification (Spindler, Spindler 1992), this temporal finding is both a testimony to these groups' organizational resilience and to their consistency in planning against their class adversaries. Moreover, given the criminalizing sweep of New York City's "justice juggernaut" (Gordon 1991) and its high profile targeting of anything that resembles organized resistance against the

mayoral regime, this refusal to be extinguished shows the extent of their "political leverage" (McAdam 1982) in the community.

In answer to the second question, it is unlikely that such liberal largesse will ever again be provided in the belief that gangs can be transformed into mainstream players of ethnic pluralism. But more importantly, these New York City groups have stated explicitly that they are not interested in receiving such government aid, regarding it as the precursor to co-optation, incorporation and paternal social controls.

Although it is speculative, it would seem reasonable to assume that in this period of widespread social and physical insecurity and spiralling inequality (Wacquant 1998), street organizations for both the young and not so young will continue to develop as communities of last resort. At the same time, the complete absence of any radical political alternative for the oppressed assures them of a ready supply of the frustrated, angry and disenchanted. Ironically, the uncompromising stance of the authorities only reinforces the commitment of a critical mass of these groups' members to social change, thus ensuring the continuity of the movements' radical trajectory.

ENDNOTE

[1] The character of gang activity has changed significantly since the early Chicago School years when gangs were seen as manifestations of socially disorganized immigrant and migrant communities. Nonetheless, the paradigm of urban delinquent adaptation by impoverished males and, to a lesser extent females, has continued to dominate the discourse. Little attention, therefore, has been paid to the cultural and political activities of gangs in contemporary settings, to their variegated systems of meaning, or to the conditions of contingency which reciprocally shape gang development.

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