

## *The Global Impact of Gangs*

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The American study of gangs can no longer start and stop with local conditions but today must also be rooted in a global context. Studying gangs is important because of unprecedented world urbanization, the retreat of the state under the pressure of neoliberal policies, the strengthening of cultural resistance identities, including fundamentalist religion, nationalism, and hip-hop culture, the valorization of some urban spaces and marginalization of others, and the institutionalization of gangs in some cities across the world.

*Keywords:* globalization; identity; hip hop; armed young men; death squads

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**W**hy study gangs? The short answer is that gangs are a significant worldwide phenomenon with millions of members and a voice of those marginalized by processes of globalization. Understanding these social actors is crucial to fashioning public policies and building social movements that can both reduce violence and erode the deep-seated inequalities that all too often are reinforced by present economic, social, and military policies.

The American study of gangs can no longer start and stop with local conditions but must also be rooted in a global context. How else do we come to grips with Jamaican posses in Kansas (Gunst, 1995), San Diego's Calle Trente and their past relationship to Mexico's Arellano brothers cartel (Rotella, 1998), the Russian "mafiya" in Chicago (Finckenauer & Waring, 1998), female Muslim gangs in Oslo (Lien, 2002), LA's MS-13 and 18th Street as the largest gangs in Honduras and El Salvador (Decesare, 2003), Nigerian drug smugglers coming through Ronald Reagan International Airport (Grennan, Britz, Rush, & Barker, 2000), Crips in the Netherlands (van

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The author wishes to thank Mary Devitt, Paul Elitzik, David Perry, Jim Short, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

*Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, Vol. 21 No. 2, May 2005 153-169

DOI: 10.1177/1043986204273390

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Gemert, 2001), the ties of U.S. tongs to Chinese Triads (Booth, 1999), and other examples of a global web of gangs?

Gang research is important today for six related reasons:

1. Unprecedented worldwide urbanization has created fertile conditions for the growth of gangs, particularly in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.
2. Unlike the expansion of the state in the earlier industrial era, in the global era the state has retreated in the face of instantaneous financial flows and neo-liberal monetary policy, while emphasizing punitive policies toward marginalized communities. Gangs and other groups of armed young men occupy the vacuum created by the retreat of the social welfare policies of the state.
3. The strengthening of cultural identities by men and women is a central method of resistance to marginalization. Whereas fundamentalist religion and nationalism have been adopted by many gang members, hip-hop culture and its "gangsta rap" variant also provide powerful resistance identities and influence millions.
4. Globalization's valorization of some areas and marginalization of others has meant the flourishing of an underground economy for survival and as profitable, internationally connected enterprises run by gangs, cartels, and similar groups.
5. The wealth of the global economy has led to the redivision of space in cities all across the globe. "Economic development," "making the city safe," and "ethnic cleansing" are among the reasons given for the clearing out of "the other" from urban spaces desired by dominant ethnic or religious majorities. These spatial changes have influenced the nature and activity of gangs.
6. Some gangs institutionalize and become permanent social actors in communities, cities, and nations rather than fading away after a generation. These gangs often replace or rival demoralized political groups and play important, albeit often destructive, social, economic, and political roles in cities around the world.

### **THE EXPLOSION OF URBANIZATION**

A UN-Habitat (2003) report finds that nearly one billion people live in slums in the world today. In developing nations, slum dwellers make up 43% of the total population compared with 6% in developed countries. Eighty percent of the population of Latin America is now urban. In sub-Saharan Africa, nearly three quarters of those who live in cities are slum dwellers. India has 25 cities of one million or more and China, as of this writing, has 166 (French, 2004).

The present urban population is greater than the entire population of the world in 1960 (Davis, 2004). Urbanization has accelerated worldwide in processes that were so well described by Robert Park, Frederic Thrasher, and the Chicago School as prime conditions for the growth of gangs. Malcolm

Klein's (1995) argument that "the common varieties of street gang still are an essentially American product" (p. 3) leads in the wrong research direction. The vast majority of gangs and gang members are from Latin America, Africa, and Asia—recent products of urbanization.

Gangs did not originate in the United States. Dickens and others described London gangs long before their American cousins existed (Pearson, 1983). Even female gang members—scuttlers—may have roamed Manchester in the 19th century (Davies, 1998). Gangs have formed all over the world whenever and wherever industrialization and related processes drive people into cities.

For example, industrializing Third World countries like South Africa had gangs, or *skollies*, for most of the 20th century (Pinnock, 1984). "Number gangs" have been known in South African prisons for nearly a century (Shurink, 1986). In the wake of post-World War II urbanization, gangs like the rarry boys in Sierra Leone (Abdullah, 2002) were formed by the children of urban migrants. In New Zealand, Maori gangs have built a national network since the mid-20th century (Hazelhurst, in press). And one familiar figure, Yasser Arafat, learned guerrilla tactics as a street gang leader in Cairo in the 1940s (Aburish, 1998).

Other forms of the gang have been around even longer. In China, Triads began in the 18th century and morphed into gangster activity in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and other large Chinese cities (e.g., Booth, 1999). The mafia, originally a rural 19th-century Sicilian rebel force, took root in U.S. cities and transformed local gangs, like Chicago's Taylor Street crew, into powerful illicit organizations (Hobsbawm, 1969; Nelli, 1969).

Much of the current world literature on gangs, unlike the "at-risk youth" literature in the United States, does not use the label "gangs." The World Bank, for example, documents millions of "street children" around the world and that term includes various semiorganized forms (World Bank Institute, 2000). The "child soldiers" literature, newly supplemented by the category of "children in organized armed violence," is another source of reporting on gangs (Dowdney, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 2004). By perusing the global organized crime literature and the human rights studies (e.g., Amnesty International, 2004; UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime, 2000), other snapshots of youth gangs can be garnered. The Social Science Research Council is currently organizing an international working group on "youth in organized armed violence."

But what is a gang? Group process definitions, from Thrasher (1927) to Short and Strodtbeck (1965) to Moore (1978), describe unsupervised youth developing organization through conflict with other groups and authorities. They pointedly exclude criminalization as a necessary characteristic of the definition of gangs as claimed by Klein (1971) and Miller (1982).

In today's cities, particularly in less developed countries, such unsupervised groups of youth are often "supervised" by a variety of criminal groups and recruited by nationalist and religious militias. Prisons both receive and create gangs that spread back to their communities, as in South Africa (Shurink, 1986), California (Moore, 1978), and Rio de Janeiro (Downey, 2003). The present era has witnessed the proliferation of gangs and other groups who are outside the control of formal state authority. Thrasher's (1927) diagram of the various paths a "casual crowd" can take was prescient (p. 70).

The central issue is that gangs today are organizations of the socially excluded, most of whom come and go as their wild, teenage peer group ages. But a substantial number institutionalize on the streets, either through self-generated processes or with the assistance of already institutionalized armed groups.<sup>1</sup> The similarity of these institutionalized gangs to other groups of armed young men requires that the global study of gangs broaden its focus (see Hagedorn, in press-a). Although I am a theoretical soulmate of Short and Moore, it's clear that one central mechanism for the persistence of institutionalized gangs is participation in the underground economy.

There are no comprehensive, comparative studies of gangs across the world (but see Hagedorn, in press-b; Hazlehurst & Hazlehurst, 1998; Klein, Kerner, Maxsen, & Weitekamp, 2001; Kontos, Brotherton, & Barrios, 2003). However, it is possible to estimate that, depending on the definition, there are at least tens of millions of gang members in the world today.

### **GLOBALIZATION AND THE RETREAT OF THE STATE**

The study of gangs began in an era of optimism about the role of the state in solving problems of poverty and diverting youth from delinquency (Thrasher, 1927; Wirth, 1928/1956). The social disorganization that accompanied immigration, the theory propounded, could be overcome by social programs, settlement houses, and the juvenile court "in loco parentis" (Addams, 1920/1960). The key to combating delinquency, Shaw and McKay (1942) argued, was the organization of communities to control delinquent behavior.

Gang studies in the 1960s argued for new social programs that stressed opportunity as part of a societal war on poverty (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Yablonsky, 1966). Much current gang literature continues to urge increased state intervention (e.g., Klein, 1995; Spergel, 1995), whereas others follow Shaw and McKay (1942) and stress community empowerment, in part through leveraging state resources (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Sampson & Groves, 1989).

Social disorganization theory is theoretically grounded in the Enlightenment notion of the progressive nature of history and belief that the secular state would continue to grow as religion and tradition were weakened by modern society (Elias, 1939/1994; Nisbet, 1980; see especially Touraine, 2000). The only way to overcome the loss of the bonds of old-world culture, Kornhauser (1978) argued, is to strengthen community institutions, an approach that continues to guide social theory today (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Wilson & Sampson, 1995). The role of the state has changed, however, and the gang literature has all but ignored the decline of the state and the rise of global cities that are at the cutting edge of urban political economy (see Castells, 1997; Sassen, 2002).

The vast transformation of the U.S. economy has resulted in economic restructuring that prioritizes information and services over heavy industry, contingent over unionized labor, and consumption over production (see, e.g., Bell, 1960; Castells, 1998). These developments have been accompanied by public policies that stress security and the needs of the new wealthy and fray the safety net for the poor and a weakened working class (Bourdieu, 1998; Touraine, 2001). In the wake of reduced opportunity for unskilled labor, many gang members have remained in their gangs as adults and gangs have become an important ghetto employer (Hagedorn, 2001).

These policies have been accelerated by the war on terror (Calhoun, Price, & Timmer, 2002). In Europe and other advanced countries, the Reagan-Thatcher agenda has been more controversial and contested (Hagedorn, 1999; Pitts, 2000; Wacquant, 1999). In the Third World, International Monetary Fund strictures to reduce social spending, pay on foreign debt, allow foreign capital penetration, and continue a strong military have resulted in the erosion of the social welfare policies of already weak states (Bauman, 1998; Castells, 1998) while increasing what Wacquant (2004) calls “neo-liberal penalty.”

Latin American and African academics have long been skeptical about the progressive nature of development (e.g., de Soto, 1990; Frank, 1970). The retreat of the state in the Third World has created anew what might at first blush be considered conditions of “social disorganization,” with weakened and delegitimized social institutions unable to contain a rapidly urbanizing population. As a result, various sorts of “armed young men” (Hagedorn, in press-a; Kaldor, 1999) including gangs, para-militaries, death squads, and drug cartels that parallel, replace, or complement public authority have proliferated.

The state in many countries can no longer be said to have a monopoly on violence, Weber’s (1968) standard definition of the modern state. For example, in Rio de Janeiro, drug factions control and patrol the favelas and police enter only with massive armed force and then quickly withdraw (Downey,

2003). In Haiti, the state lost all capacity to control the populace and various types of groups of armed youth, leading to the deposing of Aristide and an uncertain status for the new state (Farmer, 1994; Kovats-Bernat, 2000). Recent press reports from Haiti tell of pro- and anti-Aristide youth gangs who now refuse to put down their arms and have turned full-time to crime (Children in Organised Armed Violence [COAV], 2004).

The proliferation of death squads in this sense is another indication that the state no longer can enforce its rule without resort to extra-legal violence. Like gated communities with their private security guards for the wealthy, armed groups or vigilantes, like the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria (Human Rights Watch, 2002), are filling a vacuum within poor communities, where the state is unable to maintain order. In many cases, the state, to preserve “plausible deniability,” subcontracts tasks of violence to informal death squads (Campbell & Brenner, 2000). In Colombia, militias, cartels, revolutionaries, and the military all draw teenage warriors from the large pool of youth gangs in urban areas (COAV, 2003). Castells (2000) sums up this point:

In a world of exclusion, and in the midst of a crisis of political legitimacy, the boundary between protest, patterns of immediate gratification, adventure, and crime becomes increasingly blurred. (p. 210)

This does not mean that gangs are the same thing as death squads or terrorists. It does mean, however, that social disorganization and juvenile delinquency are too narrow for the study of gangs. The structuralist emphasis of most U.S. gang studies is also undermined by the power of identity.

### **THE POWER OF IDENTITY**

Globalization and the retreat of the state have meant more than a loss of social control. The failure of modern institutions and the lack of faith in the certainty of a better future have strengthened *resistance identities*—identities formed in opposition to the dominant culture and the uncertainties of an unstable modernity (Castells, 1997). Touraine (1995) argues that the modern era can be understood best as the clash between the unfettered power of the market and the resistance of national, ethnic, and religious identities.

Within poor communities, resistance identities are held by a wide assortment of people including gangs and other groups of armed youth. Nationalist, religious, and ethnic cultures have grown strong by resisting the homogenizing influences of westernization. Islamic fundamentalism today is but one example of the strength of cultural resistance identities.

Often overlooked is the resistance of women who share ethnic or religious identities but also challenge the male dominance of traditional culture. As

Moore (in press) notes, there is scant literature on female gangs around the world, although such gangs may be increasing. Although most female gangs still appear to be adolescent groups, adult forms may differ markedly from adult male gangs, and both are woefully understudied (Chesney-Lind & Hagedorn, 1999). In the United States, the conflicted voices of women can be seen in gangsta rap music, where misogyny and violence reign, but female rappers strongly protest, while defending Black males against racist attacks on their music (hooks, 1994; Rose, 1994).

The power of rap music is not often discussed in gang studies, although its strong influence contradicts the premise that culture is everywhere in decline, and even more so in subcultures (Kornhauser, 1978; Park, 1940; but see Finestone, 1957, 1967). The present era is marked by the strength of culture, driven by the international dominance of the U.S. media, the resurgence and reinvention of traditional cultures, and the dominance of youth street cultures, even in Islamic countries. In Nigeria, gangs of Muslim youth enforce Sharia for the state, while wearing gold chains, using and selling drugs, and listening to rap music (Casey, 2002). Throughout Africa, Latin America, and Asia, homegrown styles of rap music have captured the imagination of youth.

Although media corporations promote gangsta rap to run up profits, and the lure of sex and violence celebrates values of the dog-eat-dog “cowboy capitalism” of globalization, the broader cultural power of hip-hop helps forge a more complex resistance identity for youth modeled after African American rebellion to White authority (see Short, 1996). Among the founders of hip-hop were former gang members, like Afrika Bambaata in the South Bronx, who consciously saw hip-hop as a way to pull youth away from gangs (Kitwana, 1994, 2002). The fact that rap now contains conflicting ideals of violence and anti-violence, consumerism and anti-consumerism, religion and antagonism to religion, and misogyny and feminism only attests to its overall power in identifying the locus of the struggle.

To say that gangs can be understood through the lens of hip-hop culture is different from saying that gangs are subcultures (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958). Miller and Cohen (1955) both saw subculture as an ethnically neutral and temporary outlook of working or lower class youth and adults. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) saw the source of gang subculture in the particular characteristics of opportunity structures within kinds of neighborhoods and downplayed its ethnic dimensions.

Hip-hop culture, and its gangsta rap variant, is avowedly African American, with African and Jamaican roots. Originating in communal, life-affirming values (Rose, 1994), like all cultural goods today, it is also shamelessly exploited by media companies “merchandizing the rhymes of violence” (Ro, 1996). Gangsta rap is also nihilistic, worshiping destruction and violence in a

way more extreme than Cohen's reaction formation, a paean to Black survival and a violent response to the no-way-out life of the ghetto.

However, the gangster identity exists within a broader, worldwide hip-hop culture and represents an outlook of millions of the socially excluded. This contested resistance identity is no longer a transient subculture of alienated youth but a permanent oppositional and racialized culture arising in the wake of the retreat of the state and the parallel strengthening of cultural identities. The power of gangsta rap within hip-hop culture attests to the importance of the global criminal economy to socially excluded youth.

### THE UNDERGROUND ECONOMY

The criminal economy has been estimated by the UN as grossing more than \$400 billion annually, which would make it the largest market in the world, including oil. Peter Reuter's (1996) more conservative estimates (his low-ball figure of \$150 billion in annual drug sales) are nevertheless breathtaking. The U.S. gang literature has often described drug dealing as unorganized, and low-paying, but the sale of drugs in the United States is tied to an international network of drug suppliers, cartels, and mafias that exercise enormous influence in communities and nations on a global scale (Castells, 1998).

The literature on gangs and the underground economy in the United States is extensive (Moore, 1991; Taylor, 1989; Venkatesh & Leavitt, 2000). But these are local studies and their emphasis, as in my own prior work, is on the insular world of drug dealing in a single city. These studies describe the importance of the drug market to both young gang members and to the community (see especially Pattillo, 1998; Venkatesh, 2000). They also describe drug-dealing gangs as the main street-level employer of youth in the poorest areas of cities, forsaken by industrial jobs (Hagedorn, 2001).

The underground economy, however, has changed over the decades. Portes, Castells, and Benton (1989) explain how globalization has transformed illegal markets into an integral part of the world system. The underground economy has survival functions in urban areas where the formal economy disappears, providing goods and services in unregulated ways that are in demand by more affluent customers. On the U.S. border, a crusading prosecutor who was later killed admitted, "It is sad to say, but while the drug lords are here the economy is strong. This money activates the economy, injects new money" (Rotella, 1998, p. 254). In many areas, profitable illegal markets in drugs are but one business among many that include arms sales and trafficking in women and children. When the formal economy falters, the informal steps in.

An important feature of the global era is the coexistence/convergence of different kinds of non-state actors, including groups of armed young men (see also Goldstone, 2002). Political movements often rely on the underground economy and many state security forces have been corrupted by massive profits derived from selling drugs and guns. As left-wing political movements wane, demoralization sets in and militants, many who have few skills outside of armed struggle, are faced with a dubious moral choice of unemployment or working for drug gangs. Thus, the inability of the new government in South Africa to assimilate all “Spear of the Nation” guerrillas into the police or military has led some former guerrillas into the world of crime. Protestant militias in Belfast, faced with the “greening” of Northern Ireland and what appears more and more certainly as a future reunification with the south, have turned their guns on one another in a war over drug turf. Mexico is the poster child for the integration of military and police forces with the local drug cartels. In Central America, journalist Silla Boccanero sadly reported, “Until recently, a rebellious youth from Central America would go into the mountains and join the guerrillas. Today, he leaves the countryside for the city and joins one of the street gangs engaged in common crime without political objectives” (COAV, 2002).

The informal underground economy is now a structural part of the world order, assured by the uneven development of globalization. Violence is not a necessary condition for illicit enterprises, but when regulation by peaceful means fails, gangs and other groups of armed youth rise in prominence.

### URBAN REDIVISION OF SPACE

Peter Marcuse (1997) argues that the vast expansion of wealth in the world economy has produced global cities that are separated into the “citadel” and the “ghetto.” Space in globalizing cities is redivided as the wealthy and well-paid “knowledge workers” hew out spaces for themselves near the banks and central business districts (see Sassen, 2002). This “yuppie” land grab is accompanied by renewed emphasis on safety, crime, and ethnic antagonisms. The spatial concentration of ethnic minorities—often people of African descent—in the poorest areas of old cities has meant that lands coveted by the wealthy must be “cleansed” of the criminal, the violent, and the “other.” Thus, Chicago has displaced 100,000 African Americans by demolishing the high-rise housing projects that were built to contain them less than half a century ago (Hagedorn & Rauch, 2004). São Paulo is compared to Los Angeles in Caldeira’s (2000) brilliant study of the two cities erecting walls of segregation to keep the dark poor away from the White elite (see also Massey, 1996), the vast expansion of wealth in the global economy.

This worldwide trend has meant the politicization of policies on crime and violence, even though in most cities of the industrialized world, violence declined in the 1990s. In the United States, this law and order trend has targeted alienated and jobless African American youth, resulting in an unprecedented expansion of prison building. America's prisons, at least 50% Black in a country where African Americans make up about 12% of the population, can be seen as but another device for control of the "social dynamite" of the ghetto. Wacquant (2000) argues that the prison and the ghetto are but two nodes on a continuum of social control dating back to slavery. Although prisons are often built far from urban areas, they have become virtually contiguous to ghettos and barrios, as gang leaders continue to run their organizations from their cells. Most gangs in both Rio de Janeiro and Chicago are run from the prison (Downey, 2003; Hagedorn, in press-a). Some gangs have their origins in prison, like La Eme, and later dominate the streets (Hayden, 2004).

### THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF GANGS

Violence in cities of the world varies widely, from very low rates of homicide in Europe, China, Japan, Oceania, and the Middle East to very high rates in cities of many countries in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Within the United States, as in South America, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa, some cities have very high rates, and some low.

Gangs are to be found in cities all over the world, in those with both low and high rates of violence. However, in some cities, gangs have institutionalized and have been present for decades. To say that a gang has institutionalized is to say that it persists despite changes in leadership (e.g., killed, incarcerated, or "matured out"), has organization complex enough to sustain multiple roles of its members (including roles for women and children), can adapt to changing environments without dissolving (e.g., as a result of police repression), fulfills some needs of its community (economic, security, services), and organizes a distinct outlook of its members (rituals, symbols, and rules).

That some cities are home to institutionalized gangs and others not reinforces the importance of local conditions. My research suggests that in every city in the world that has had persisting high rates of violence, there are institutionalized groups of armed youth—for example, Chicago, Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro, Medellin, Caracas, Kingston, Cape Flats, Lagos, Mogadishu, and Belfast—although causality is likely to be recursive. The divided cities literature (Hagedorn & Perry, 2002; Marcuse, 1997) suggests that gangs or other groups of armed youth institutionalize in contested cities with high levels of racial, ethnic, or religious (rather than solely class) oppression, where demoralization and the defeat of political struggle have occurred, and in

defensible spaces that provide natural protection opportunities for illegal economic activity.

Institutionalized gangs are more than a crime problem. Many are deeply involved with politics, real estate, religion, and community organizations and cannot be easily destroyed by suppression or repression of the drug economy. Drug sales also provide opportunities for large-scale corruption and the purchase of heavy weapons. Gangs thus are social actors, in Touraine's and Park's sense. As social actors within poor communities with weak mechanisms of formal social control, gangs, militias, factions, and cartels have the capacity not only to wage war but also to rein it in (see Brotherton & Barrios, 2003; Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Hayden, 2004, for different elaborations of this thesis). Differences among cities (e.g., why Chicago and Los Angeles are home to institutionalized gangs and New York City is not) have not been satisfactorily explained. Understanding the factors underlying the institutionalization of gangs and the persistence of violence are among the most pressing reasons for studying gangs.

#### **CONCLUSION: GANGS AS SOCIAL ACTORS**

The U.S. Justice Department war on terror has redirected funds for research (Savelsberg, Cleveland, & King, 2004), with the result that fewer social scientists will be doing gang research and perspectives are likely to be polarized. Federally funded studies are likely to stress gang links to terrorism, whereas non-federally funded studies may continue to "puncture stereotypes" and stress local conditions. A more realistic and productive future for gang research lies in neither of these directions. Instead, we should combine our sociological and anthropological orientations with urban political economy and the analysis of gangs and other organizations of the socially excluded in the globalizing city. Gangs cannot be understood outside of their global context, nor reduced to epiphenomena of globalization or cogs in an international terrorist conspiracy. To a far greater degree than in the past, we need to study the racialized identities of male and female gang members and the salience of culture.

Gangs are being reproduced throughout this largely urban world by a combination of economic and political marginalization and cultural resistance. We ignore organizations of the socially excluded at great risk. Although the collapse of socialism and demoralization of left-wing forces have been replaced by new social movements that show promise for social change (Castells, 1997; Touraine, 1995), in some places institutionalized gangs and other groups of armed youth have moved into the vacuum created by the demise of the left. These groups are cynical about politics and looking des-

perately for a better life today, not tomorrow. For them, the promises of modernity have proven to be illusory. Gangs are one price we pay for the failure of the modern project.

Institutionalized gangs are unlikely either to gradually die out or be eliminated by force. It might be profitable for social scientists to see them as partners at the table who need to be included in the polity, as Bursik and Grasmick (1993) controversially suggested a decade ago. In Touraine's sense, institutionalized gangs, too, are subjects. Dealing with gangs as social actors requires a policy of both intolerance of violence and tolerance of informal, nonviolent economic activity. It requires more negotiation and less suppression. How we deal with the reality of gangs and others among the socially excluded is one of those markers that will shape the nature, and the future, of civilization.

#### NOTE

1. Although women play roles in these gangs, overwhelmingly they are groups of armed young men, warriors fighting for masculinity, survival, and ethnic or religious identity.

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