



## Gangs and social change

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### Abstract

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Extant literature on the subject has usually defined gangs as loose associations of individuals engaged in some type of delinquent or criminal activity. Yet researchers have failed to sociologically differentiate gangs from other types of collective behavior. In contrast, this article understands gangs as organizations influenced by the social structure of the urban areas in which they operate. Concentrating on gangs in the US context, the article summarizes both common features and different forms gangs have assumed over five historical eras, arguing that gangs respond to rather than create significant social changes.

### Key Words

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collective behavior • gangs • social change • social structure

### Introduction

Gangs have been the focus of so many studies in the United States that they have become a growth industry. Most recent research has treated gangs in one of two ways: either as a gathering of individuals with a specific negative set of personal attributes or a group of individuals who act in a deviant and/or criminal manner. Troubling about both approaches, though, is their common underestimation of connections between the structural conditions of society at large and the form of collective behavior that is ‘the gang’, and their similar (and sometimes unwitting) recycling of individualistic thought rampant in American culture. This has had the effect of misrepresenting who joins gangs and confusing different forms of collective behavior under the same ‘gang’ concept. For this reason the argument

presented here purposely diverges from, while simultaneously summarizing, contemporary literature on US gangs.

How one defines a gang is a key challenge for gang researchers. According to Malcolm Klein, a prominent researcher in this area, gangs have varying degrees of cohesion and take different forms (Klein, 1998). As Klein states, 'If we can't find a universal definition . . . we can try two other tacks. First, let us exclude certain referents . . . Second, let us review a few of the more commonly accepted attributes or parameters of a variety of gangs' (1998: 21). Consequently Klein excludes groups that disseminate graffiti on public space called 'Taggers'; quasi-religious groups that worship Satan called 'Stoners'; white supremacist groups that are often called 'Skinheads'; and drug-selling syndicates. However, this discussion of the 'commonly accepted attributes or parameters of a variety of gangs' cannot substitute for a cohesive definition, nor is it able to differentiate a 'gang' from a 'band'. In brief, what makes Klein's approach problematic is that he classifies under one heading groups that are not sociologically the same. In so doing, specificity is lost and gangs become barely separable from other forms of collective behavior; the concept comes to lack the theoretical capital necessary to sort divergent groups into appropriate categories.

Understanding the gang phenomenon more satisfactorily requires considering the complex interrelationship between individuals, dynamics of collective behavior and processes of social change. Toward this end this article makes two claims. The first is that gangs are organizations and not loose associations of individuals with psycho-social 'deficiencies'. Quite the contrary: because of the structural character of the gang in contemporary societies, they are disproportionately comprised of people from low-income backgrounds who want what everyone else wants in the USA and are prepared to get it by whatever means necessary. My second claim is that gangs have been remarkably organizationally consistent in form and goals over the past 150 years even as their activities have adapted to a series of historical changes.

With these claims in mind I have organized this article around dual goals. One, reflected in the following section, is to provide a detailed account of the conceptual pitfalls of contemporary gang research. My second aim is to present an alternative understanding of gangs that can explain in structural and not overly psychologized terms why people join gangs while examining how gangs have changed their practices if not their form over five eras of contemporary US history.

## The pitfalls of recent gang research

### *Treating gangs as individuals with negative personal attributes*

Overall, two traditions of gang research have dominated sociological studies of gangs over the last several decades. In the first, gangs are seen as

collections of individuals who have suffered such severe identity deprivation that they look to a group to provide self-esteem and an alternative social identity (Horowitz, 1984; Vigil, 1988). Much of this research has focused on ethnic minorities. For example Horowitz (1984) and Vigil (1988) found that Mexican Americans were marginalized between their Mexican culture of origin and the dominant American culture to which they had migrated. In both studies, lack of personal identity increased the probability that these individuals would join a gang because, as these authors argued, the gang filled an identity vacuum for the individual by connecting him with others in the same socio-psychological position. Thus, for Horowitz, gang members were 'image builders'; for Vigil gang members are individuals with weak egos seeking to use the gang to build a 'self-identity' (Horowitz, 1984: 92–4; Vigil, 1988: 151). In essence, these studies argued that gangs created a sense of worth otherwise absent in individuals' lives.

In the cases of African Americans and Puerto Ricans, though, researchers turned away from a purely psychological approach to one that focused on individuals who come from broken homes. Here, scholars have contended that gang members are more likely to come from single-parent families with no father in the house, leaving these young men without a male role model that would help them establish a 'conventional' identity and lifestyle. With no 'stable' father figure present these youths seek out male-dominant groups that can provide them with what is missing from their own homes; here, the gang assumes the role of a surrogate family. Conveniently, then, these approaches try to explain not only who joins gangs but why. Moreover, flowing from such arguments is a suggested strategy to remedy the situation. If fathers only stayed with the mother of their children to provide a positive economic and emotional environment, and/or if mothers were forced to practice birth control so that children were not conceived in the first place, the numbers of people in gangs, allegedly, would diminish.

However this line of thought, too, is flawed in several respects. For one thing, single-parent, female-headed households are epidemic in most poor urban areas. This makes it difficult to portray single parenthood as a cause when, quite simply, more kids from this background do not join gangs than do (Tucker and Kernan, 1995; Patterson, 1998). Therefore, other mitigating factors must affect whether or not someone joins a gang. Another problem arises from the presumption that individuals join gangs to find new identities. Much of the evidence that has been brought to bear on this point assumes that gang members strongly identify with their gang through, perhaps, time spent, tattoos obtained or clothing worn. Yet, here again, many non-gang members act similarly. For example, fraternity members also spend a good deal of time with their 'brothers' as do sports players with their team members; both often get tattooed and wear clothes that associate them with their respective groups.

Because of this focus on identity, researchers were led away from emphasizing a wider range of advantages that gangs frequently provide

youths who join them. For instance, the gang can assume the role of an economic organization and generate money for its members through its business ventures in the illegal economy. A gang can also act as a much-appreciated social organization that provides its members with entertainment and status associated with groups capable of offering excitement. Among poor or low-income youths, this status is identical to what fraternities and sororities offer the middle and upper classes in legal and socially approved college settings. Thus, it cannot be a lack of identity or even marginal identity that leads individuals to join gangs *per se*. Indeed, this notion overlooks how gang 'identity' becomes attractive because of the specific status and pleasures this social form can bestow in poor neighborhoods and communities.

Other studies within this first tradition of research—i.e. studies that emphasize negative personal attributes—treat gangs as collections of not very smart individuals. I am not aware of any studies that have directly tested the association between low intelligence and joining a gang, but the work of Hirschi and Hindelang (1977), Wilson and Herrnstein (1986) and Herrnstein and Murray (1994) comes closest. These researchers posit a relationship between low intelligence and committing crimes even though there is no evidence for this proposition. Not only has research failed to establish that gang members have low intelligence, but evidence shows that most gang members are extremely sharp. Ironically, it is precisely their 'cognitive competence' in creating business ventures and eluding the authorities that has made it difficult to eradicate them (Taylor, 1990; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Padilla, 1992). Because gang members are intelligent and competent, they have proved stubborn adversaries to the various institutions that have attempted to eliminate them as social problems.

Yet another subset of this tradition is strain theory, most notably associated with Robert Merton's argument (1968) that anomie develops in individuals because of a recognized gap between what people want and are likely to receive (Kornhauser, 1978: 139). Resulting 'strains' occur when goals do not match opportunities. Albert Cohen's (1955) wonderful study of gangs utilized many of the assumptions postulated by Merton's anomie theory. Probably the most important of these was Cohen's argument that gangs form a subculture to compensate for frustration that emanates from the strain between individuals' goals and their ability to realize them. Consequently, in both the work of Merton and Cohen, gangs are conceived as collections of individuals who participate in deviant acts to overcome stigma and gain status.

Relatedly Philippe Bourgois (1995) has argued that becoming involved in the drug trade is a function of wanting respect. Bourgois showed that individuals become involved with gang-related crime because they want status. Yet, an impressive array of other studies confirm that it is money, and the social 'respect' that money can buy, that is the primary motivation for young people to join gangs and not simply status (Sullivan, 1989; Taylor, 1990; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Padilla, 1992; Shakur, 1993).

Still another account in this tradition views gangs as collections of individuals who are sadistic and act out this disposition through violence. No researcher has been more responsible for this view of gangs than Lewis Yablonsky (1966). In his influential book *The Violent Gang*, Yablonsky posited that gang members suffered from psychological maladies that left them more violence-prone than other youth; it was these character flaws that accounted for the high incidence of violence associated with gangs. Yet no other gang study has produced systematic evidence supporting Yablonsky's thesis that gang members have more psychological problems resulting in violence than the general population of youth from poor areas. This is not to deny the obvious fact that individuals in gangs are involved with violence. However, what makes more sense than Yablonsky's notion of gangs as groups of individuals with psychological abnormalities is to envision physical violence among the lower classes as a tool through which respect is obtained when force becomes a substitute for the ultimate power of money. As later elaborated here, most direct observational evidence consistently finds that violence emerges from the social conditions in which gangs operate (Miller, 1958; Suttles, 1968; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Venkatesh, 2000).

Still another individualistically oriented approach in this tradition of gang study relies on assumptions advanced by control theorists. According to the control perspective, gang violence results when one or more of the major institutions that would normally have controlled individuals have become impotent (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Sampson and Laub, 1993). However, again, this line of argumentation suffers from at least one serious problem: it fails to separate the effects of social institutions like schools from socio-economic conditions by which both schools and individuals themselves are greatly affected. For example, do middle-class children avoid gangs or criminal involvement because schools are more competent in controlling their behavior, or because they have a privileged lifestyle with plenty of possessions and liberties that could be lost if they were arrested and convicted of a crime?

The fact that middle-class youths often join fraternities and sororities in high school would indicate that there is a desire to join an exclusionary organization that will provide entertainment and social status. Yet, fraternities and sororities are substantively different organizations from gangs. Where youths in fraternities and sororities are involved in a social organization that may become drawn into illegal behavior through their purchase and consumption of drugs, unlike gangs, they are not socio-economic organizations that exist for the purpose of making and selling drugs. While other differences also exist, the most obvious and important distinction between gangs and fraternities/sororities entails differentials in economic assets.

Last but not least, an influential interpretation of gangs has characterized them as collections of individuals who are the products of social disorganization in certain neighborhoods. No researcher has been more

important in this theory's ascendance of late than William Julius Wilson. In two seminal studies (Wilson, 1987, 1996), Wilson argued that poor communities, particularly African-American communities, became increasingly impoverished as changes in the global economy transformed the USA's production-oriented inner cities to low-wage service centers. This situation hurt African Americans more than other groups because they were more dependent on production jobs, having only recently gained access to a job category traditionally reserved for white workers. This 'macro'-level shift aggravated socio-economic conditions within ghetto communities and made it difficult for African-American-owned social and economic institutions to survive. What resulted was general deterioration in the physical conditions of communities that paved the way for a more general decline in social organization. Thus, according to this line of thinking, increased social disorganization precipitated increased gang activity in these and other ethnic areas.

Following Wilson's lead, other researchers likewise contended that broad socio-economic declines in neighborhoods were instrumental in increasing crime and gang violence (Hagedorn, 1988; Skogan, 1990; Sampson and Wilson, 1995). Yet it would be misleading to characterize this approach as originating with Wilson: more precisely, Wilson himself was strongly influenced by Robert Park and the early Chicago School vision of cities (Park et al., 1925). That earlier vision conceived the city as divided into concentric zones, each with traits related to a specific ethnic culture, generation and material conditions associated with that generation. The poorest immigrant groups were those who were the newest to arrive in the country, thereafter occupying the 'slum' or tenement housing of Chicago and other large industrial cities; succeeding generations of the same ethnic group would occupy housing in areas where the housing stock was, or was becoming, better. While Park recognized that the lower classes were prone to engage in more criminal behavior than members of other social classes, it was Frederic Thrasher (1927) who utilized the general Chicago School framework to study gangs. Interestingly, of all the researchers who have studied gangs, Thrasher remains the most influential among contemporary gang researchers. There are few books about gangs that do not acknowledge the importance of Thrasher for their own analyses.

Following Park and Thrasher, Shaw (1930) adapted the Chicago School's disorganization theory to account for crime by people who lived in socially disorganized areas but who committed crimes in areas that were socially organized. He referred to these geographic areas as 'areas of opportunity'. This had the impact of modifying the original theory but not changing any of its underlying tenets. As a result, the theory remained dominant in the literature on gangs until the 1950s when Gerald Suttles (1968) and William Foote Whyte (1993), both of whom were also products of the Second Chicago School (Fine, 1995), published articles arguing that it was not disorganization that produced gangs, but a particular structure associated with poverty neighborhoods.

Following the Suttles and Whyte studies, both of which remained very influential for 40 years, came an article by Wilson and Kelling (1989) presenting a position that the physical deterioration of poor neighborhoods had a spiraling effect on the social control within these neighborhoods, and it was this lack of control that provided a fertile environment for crime. This article, appearing in a non-professional journal, had an enormous impact on much of the crime literature that followed. The first empirical study of Wilson and Kelling's (1989) argument was done by Skogan (1990), who found evidence that the physical decline of a neighborhood led to social disorder and the rise in crime. Not long after the publication of Skogan's book (1990), an article written by Robert J. Sampson and William Julius Wilson (1995) attempted to marry the arguments of social disorganization theory and its corollary argument about physical decline and disorder. In so doing they presented a theory that wedded William Julius Wilson's argument (1987) about the change in macro-economic conditions, the decline in the physical condition of the neighborhood and the rise in social disorder and crime. This was followed by Wilson's second book (1996) on the plight of the urban poor that attempted to empirically validate the earlier position that he and Sampson had advanced.

The most critical part of Wilson's line of argument was that there had been a significant social and physical decline in the African-American ghetto due to changes in the global economy. His argument was predicated on establishing a time line when poverty, but not social disorganization, was present in African-American neighborhoods. The time line that Wilson chose was the 1940s, and the place he chose to demonstrate this was Chicago's South Side—then the USA's largest African-American ghetto. Wilson used the seminal study of Chicago's South Side by St Clair Drake and Horace Cayton (1945). They found that while there was poverty in the neighborhoods of the South Side, many social and economic institutions at the time provided at least strong social organization for local residents. In essence, disorganization was not present and neither was there a high degree of crime or gang activity.

Using the Drake and Cayton study to establish a comparative time line, Wilson deduced that specific neighborhoods had experienced not only declines in income and wealth, but extreme deprivation so acute as to spawn, among other 'deviant' behaviors, the rise of predatory groups like gangs. Wilson's theoretical argument as it applies to gangs was supported by the ethnographic work of Hagedorn (1988) and Anderson (1990). The problem with this line of argument is that using the South Side of Chicago during the 1940s may not have been a good example because this area was not as socially organized as Wilson suggested. A closer look at the work of Drake and Cayton (1945: 589–94) indicates that delinquency was significant in poor parts of the ghetto as were violence and prostitution. In addition, gangs were already operating in these and other areas, making it difficult to contend that this was the gilded age of social organization for the African-American ghetto. Rather, it would appear that gang formation

is associated with areas dominated by poverty. Even Suttles (1968) and Whyte (1993), who had been associated with the Chicago School, proposed that gangs were an integral part of the poor community's structure rather than an outcome of its disorder. Ironically, this part of their research has been largely ignored by much of the criminological literature.

*Gangs as collections of individuals who perform deviant acts*

A second tradition of research in this area envisions gangs as collections of individuals who perform deviant acts. This tradition underscores definitional dilemmas identified earlier: researchers who study gangs know they are studying a form of collective behavior, but no consensus exists on how to define this form. Therefore scholars in this tradition tend to fall back on individualistic assumptions, perceiving gangs only as loose associations of individuals who perform 'deviant' or criminal acts (Klein and Crawford, 1968). These acts can be economic or violent in character but, in this framework, the illegal character of their practices distinguishes gangs from other associations (Klein, 1998).

This approach, too, has shortcomings. One is that gangs are defined through territoriality; another is that illegality is used as a key identifying trait; and a third is that any group of individuals that refer to themselves as such (and have some formal name) can be considered a gang. First, a consistent finding among most of the research on gangs is that they often identify with particular neighborhoods and act territorially. They may take their names and identities from a neighborhood or geographic part of a community, and then act to protect that territory against intruders (whether or not intruders pose potential threats to their existence). Nonetheless, the disadvantages of territorially based approaches are considerable. One problem is that this approach tends to describe gangs' territoriality in terms that resemble depictions of territorial behavior in numerous studies by animal behaviorists (Lorenz, 1966; Morris, 1967; Suttles, 1972). Partly as a result, images of gangs as packs of individuals preying on virtuous and harmless people have entered the media, thereafter also affecting common cultural understandings (Wacquant, 1994).

Relatedly, in stressing instinctual and emotional reactions amid their territorially based analogies, researchers have often overlooked the quite rational assessments individuals make when deciding whether to join a gang, as well as the purposeful character of individuals' decisions after joining. Instead, they have emphasized the non-rational character of both animal and human behavior (Lorenz, 1966; Wilson, 1993). Cultural or emotional forces alive and thriving in a particular geographic location are highlighted more than a gang's ability to provide material advantages that are otherwise hard to procure in lower-class communities. Interestingly, the culturally oriented work of Jack Katz (1990), who argues that an individual's attraction to crime is largely associated with emotions (and, by



extension, adolescents are attracted to gangs for the context they provide to enact these emotions) shares an affinity in this respect with instinctual arguments made by socio-biologists. Like socio-biologists' work Katz's work has also downplayed, or rejected altogether, any calculation of costs and benefits that enters future (and actual) gang members' decision-making processes.

Another problem with territorial approaches to gangs is their propensity to overestimate these organizations' commitment to remaining in a specific geographic area. Gangs operate in a given area because that location is the only place they are strong enough to feel secure and in control, not because that particular territory is fundamental to their self-definition. This is not to say that groups do not create an organizational identity using a particular geographic place, but that the importance of locale has more to do with issues of market control and security than with psychological identity formation. Gangs are prepared to occupy as much geographic space as they are capable of occupying; this can extend over very extensive areas and boundaries.

In addition to these disadvantages—the ease of animalistic analogies that arises from territorial-oriented definitions and the underestimation of rational motivations that results—a further problem is that not all groups behaving in territorial fashion and engaged in illegal acts are gangs. For example, a college fraternity or ethnic social club that becomes territorial over its house and engages in the consumption of alcohol and drugs, and that uses violence in the hazing of new recruits or for the expulsion of unwanted individuals in the neighborhood, fits a territorially oriented definition of gangs. Yet these forms of usually middle-class or upper-class association should not be, and are not usually, considered gangs.

In lower-class communities, other forms of collective behavior that are not gangs nonetheless conform to these criteria—territoriality, illegality and self-definition involving 'gangs'—so commonly cited in this second research tradition. Take, for instance, a 'crew'. A crew is a name used to identify a group of three to five individuals organized for the exclusive purpose of theft; in other words, the group is organized for the sole purpose of engaging in criminal behavior. Likewise 'posse' is the term often used to refer to Jamaican groups organized around the sale of illegal drugs. Finally there is the 'syndicate', a term used for groups organized to engage in a wide variety of legal and illegal businesses. Each of these groups engages in criminal behavior, has a territory that they operate in and, by the above criteria, could be considered gangs.

Emerging from this analysis, then, is the conclusion that without a more exact definition of gangs, it is impossible to distinguish between the various forms of collective behavior just described. By treating as gangs any association of individuals behaving in territorial fashion and engaging in illegal acts, not only does confusion arise, but a clear sociological understanding of gangs eludes researchers: gangs, and groups that are not gangs, cannot be differentiated. Moreover, amid the resulting definition void, not

only are fraternities, crews, posses and syndicates likely to be confused with gangs: in addition the research has tended to collapse analyses of gangs and bands. Yet, as with other forms of association, bands and gangs are not sociologically identical.

Bands can take two forms: one form has a leader but the group lacks organizational structure; the other entails a collective of individuals who operate without a leader, but may engage in 'ganging' behavior (by 'ganging' behavior, I mean that individuals join together to oppose or attack something). Both types of bands, though, differ from gangs in that they do not follow regularized rules, assume differentiated roles among their members and/or operate under a code that places primary importance on group survival. In the first type, there is a leader and people engage in ganging behavior, regularized rules are not necessarily present nor are differentiated roles assumed. In the second type, a collection of individuals operates without a leader, but regularly associate with each other in loose configurations; they, too, become involved in 'ganging' behavior but only on a period basis. Exemplifying this kind of band are individuals who meet together regularly on the corner, or in some other local space, becoming involved in 'ganging' as a form of spontaneous behavior but not as a result of systematic prior planning by the group.

So far, these problems emerged as a by-product of defining gangs territorially, but this research tradition also suffers from presuming that gangs can be defined as groups specifically engaged in criminal behavior. Once more, this proposition is difficult to sustain. Simply because gang members engage in crime does not mean that they are, or should be understood as, inherently criminal groups. Members of fraternities also engage in illegal behavior that can result in death (albeit admittedly less often); yet these are not considered criminal organizations since most fraternity activity does not involve crime. However, if one were to inquire analogously into the life of most gang members during a 24-hour period, we would discover that most members' time is not spent engaging in criminal activities either. In fact, evidence points overwhelmingly to the fact that like fraternities or other social clubs, gangs are formal collectives that view their main purpose as providing social and economic benefits to their members and their communities (Thrasher, 1927; Suttles, 1968; Vigil, 1988; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Whyte, 1993; Venkatesh, 2000). Thus while much of society, including sociologists and criminologists, may be most concerned with the illegal behavior of gang members, this interest ought not be translated into definition perceptions (and misperceptions).

Much of the research on gangs has more or less accepted and incorporated the presumptions just described. Note that common to the first research tradition (with its focus on negative attributes) and the second tradition (with its focus on 'deviant' activities) is the enormous emphasis placed on single psychic units: both depend on, rather than critically question, the psychically oriented individualism that is pervasive in American thought. Simultaneously, it is not surprising that the significance of

social structure in influencing individuals to join gangs has been underestimated; that the motives for becoming involved in gang-organized activities has been misunderstood; and that the type of association these individuals build and maintain has been misrepresented.

In making this critique I do not mean to imply that, therefore, individuals are irrelevant to the work on gangs. Rather my goal is to correct for a tendency in the literature to assume a modal individual who has grown up in a middle-class environment and who shares—or should share—social expectations linked to what is actually a specific class setting. To the extent researchers start with this presumption, people who decide to join gangs are likely to be seen as socially ‘deviant’ and individuals who join fraternities as ‘normal’: behaviors appear to be the result of psychological pathologies instead of understandable reactions to a particular socio-economic environment. Ironically, some residents in most low-income neighborhoods consider individuals who do not join a gang socially ‘deviant’.

Overall, then, my contention is that the role of structure in creating rational forms of human agency in the lower classes has been consistently underestimated in much of the sociological research on gangs to date. Moreover, this underappreciation has appeared in ways that are both obvious and subtle across a diverse and otherwise quite rich literature. For theories of gangs to be more precise, though, the importance of structure in creating and maintaining individuals’ involvement in gangs has to be brought to the forefront—rather than relegated to the backdrop—of sociological approaches.

### Understanding gangs differently

Structure is a concept that is often used, but also infrequently defined in work on poverty. Here I use ‘structure’ to refer to the configuration of material resources in a system of allocation that establishes various opportunity parameters for each social class. For people living in low-income communities, a scarcity of material resources organizes behavioral choices and influences people’s efforts to become middle class. Consequently, many people who live in low-income communities have to fight their environment to find relief from the burdens it imposes. One of the products of this effort is the development of a ‘defiant individualist’ personality. According to Fromm (1970), distinctive for his interest in combining psychic and social traits, this personality characteristic combines dominant social values—i.e. a stress on being socio-economically mobile and on accumulating capital—with a paucity of resources available for people living in lower-income communities to achieve these objectives. Accordingly, ‘defiant individualism’ leads people to become involved with money-producing economic activities whether legal or not; the trait carries along with it an edge that ‘defies’ any and all attempts to thwart it.

While this 'defiant individualist' personality is present among a number of residents from poor and working-class areas, nearly all gang members have it. This is because gangs comprise the very means and tools used to achieve dominant goals. For this reason, gangs themselves can be precisely defined as organized 'defiant individualism' (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991); but while gangs are organized 'defiant individualism', this does not mean that they are simply loose associations. Rather, as organizational entities, gangs are capable of producing benefits for their members and other people in society, controlling the behavior of their rank and file, and regulating leadership changes in ways that ensure these entities' continuity.

Such organizational qualities suggest criteria by which gangs can be distinguished from other collective behaviors. Again, without such criteria, researchers are left unable to differentiate gang activities from those that are 'pre-gang' (such as a 'band' or parties aspiring to be a gang) or 'post-gang' (such as a group that was once a gang, but has gone into a state of decline). For this reason, an organizational developmental continuum is needed that enables meaningful distinctions between groups to be made, and which can understand and predict divergent patterns of behavior in low-income communities. To concretize this call for a developmental organizational continuum, consider the following example. 'Posse' is the name utilized by Jamaicans to identify a certain type of organization with which some people are involved. Although a 'posse' assumes the same internal organizational structure as a gang, it is organized for the specific purpose of trafficking drugs. Since gangs assume multi-dimensional roles in their communities, they occupy a central institutional position. On the other hand, because 'posses' assume a far more restricted role in their communities, they are not an organic part of the community. Instead the 'posse' represents a new historical actor, with a role and behavior in lower-income communities that is both similar and dissimilar to that of a gang.

The case for gaining sociological precision by defining gangs along a developmental continuum can be illuminated by placing this organizational form in historical perspective. Gang organizations have been incredibly resilient over the more than 150 years they have been part of American society. While myriad social upheavals have affected gang dynamics over this period, missing from the sociological literature on gangs is an appreciation of how progressive social changes have produced concurrent transformations in the functional shape and behaviors of gangs. Gangs operate in society, and societies remain in a constant process of social change; both alter dialectically in relation to each other. Of course social changes occur incrementally, with the accumulation of these increments producing significant and unique changes in people, groups and institutions. Often we call these experiences 'period effects' or 'generation effects' but the meaning is the same: the social conditions of a particular time in history matters in societal form and development. Thus, to fully understand gangs in a particular era, one must consider broad social changes that have affected them at specific times.

Specifically, five critical periods have affected the social and organizational development of gangs over the last 150 years: the Great Wave of Immigration; the Expansion of Industrial Production; the Deregulation of the Illicit Drug Market; the Escalation of Mass Incarceration; and the Proliferation of Monopolistic Market Activity. Each period involved social structural changes that, in turn, affected the environment in which gangs at the time operated. Yet common to all five periods were two factors: first, poverty, or a very limited family income, was a key precondition generating gang formation and involvement; and, second, opportunities for socio-economic mobility worsened during each period, making the gang increasingly attractive by contrast. Let me turn now to each period respectively, showing how they presented significant and sometimes unique material challenges for poor and low-income populations facing structural conditions that progressively worsened their life chances.

### *Gangs in times of immigration*

Continuous waves of immigration to the United States has meant that, despite differences, varied ethnic groups have shared experiences of overcoming prejudice and discrimination from one generation to a next (Archdeacon, 1983; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). Beginning in the 18th century, gangs were associated with the lower classes of the various immigrant groups who found their way to the United States (Riis, 1901; Joselit, 1983; Stark, 1993). Indeed, lower-class position was the main reason young people initiated gangs and became involved in delinquent behavior (Asbury, 1927; Thrasher, 1927; Zorbaugh, 1929). The combination of their parents' lower-class positions, the dominant ideology that the individual must make it on his/her own, and state support for this ideology offered little, if anything, in the way of a social safety net (Patterson, 2000). Therefore, individuals joined gangs because this form of association gave them camaraderie, entertainment and goods to consume—even if the latter were obtained through delinquent acts (Thrasher, 1927; Zorbaugh, 1929: 159).

By the 1990s, though some of these conditions remain, the structure of the immigration experience has changed, affecting gangs in turn in two distinctive ways. First, as in the past, immigrants arriving in the USA have continued to establish their own communities (Waldinger, 2001); some of these groups, like the Chinese and Vietnamese, had a long history of gangs in their own societies prior to immigration (Vigil and Yun, 1990; Chin, 1996). Different of late, though, is that the gangs in various sending countries have waited until their respective countrymen have established their own communities in the United States before sending elements of their organizations to set up enterprises thereafter (Vigil and Yun, 1990, 1996; Chin, 1996). Resulting gangs have been primarily, though not exclusively, involved in drug trafficking and gambling establishments. Since the people living in communities are newcomers, language barriers and out-group

prejudices they experience make them feel socially isolated. This provides these gangs with a fertile environment to develop their operations because such neighborhoods are a conveniently protected environment in which to sell illegal drug products to members of the more affluent sectors of the community. Residents' limited competency in English also ensures an economic niche to establish enterprises to satisfy the immigrant community's entertainment needs. This has been accomplished through the gang's installment of illegal gambling houses. Most significant here is that in addition to these gangs finding drug trafficking and gambling houses to be lucrative, the isolation of the immigrant community facilitates hiding their activities from the police.

Second, gangs have also developed in immigrant communities where the socio-economic mobility of the youth of these communities appears, in the 1990s, even more structurally blocked than in the past. Here a gang emerges when the youths in these areas, primarily those from the first and second generation, become frustrated and disillusioned upon realizing they are not likely to find jobs that can allow them to rise above the socio-economic level attained by their parents (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). This leads some youths to form gangs to generate income they believe will provide them with a better life than their parents. These gangs have had two primary sources of money: extorted monies from small storeowners and restaurant workers living in their communities (Vigil and Yun, 1990), and heroin and cocaine bought with these extorted monies from the larger drug organizations (and then sold to the various retailers in the city). This has proved quite profitable for many of these gangs.

Thus, the character of the immigrant experiences has influenced the development of gangs past and present. This has included both the structural conditions existing in the sending communities, such as the presence of strong and sophisticated gangs, as well as the structural conditions in the host country including blocked mobility and socio-geographic concentration of poor non-white populations. In the contemporary period, the immigrant experience has produced gangs that have been primarily, although not exclusively, predatory on their community.

### *Gangs in times of blue-collar expansion*

During the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s significant opportunities existed for working-class kids to secure working-class jobs. This has influenced the particular character of gangs in the following decades in communities where the opportunity to secure working-class jobs remains (Stark, 1993). In such communities, youth have grown up seeing and talking to family members, relatives or friends employed in blue-collar positions; they have come to know the social conditions that exist in the factories and the life that such work provides. On a personal level, many youths have found these jobs unattractive. Even when they talk about blue-collar jobs in the primary sector they believe that the work is boring and the hours long.

When they discuss the blue-collar jobs in the secondary labor market, their views are even harsher concerning the actual working conditions and the chances of getting what they want out of life. The comments of Albert and Luis are typical in this regard. Albert is a 16-year-old African American whose father works in a factory that makes auto parts for General Motors:

I definitely don't want to do what my dad does. He is always complaining about how fast the production line is. He is always tired and even though he makes good money he never has anything to say about the job 'cause he does the same thing everyday. No wonder he drinks all the time.<sup>1</sup>

Luis is a 15-year-old Mexican whose father works in the garment industry:

My dad is like in a daze around the house. He comes home from work and he is dead tired. He works twelve hours a day, six days a week doing the same job. He has that dust from the machine all over him, and he coughs from not wearing a mask. I hope there is something more for me than a job like he's got.

Youths who see their parents' jobs negatively are likely to wish to prolong the time before they enter this particular job market and lifestyle. Even if high-paying production jobs are available, they are physically taxing because the firms that offer these jobs often pressure workers to work overtime whether the workers themselves want the extra money or not. Further, the work is usually repetitive and monotonous, making it also taxing psychologically. Under these conditions, gangs emerge as organizations that provide a social haven for young people to experience fun and pleasure before assuming jobs and a concomitant lifestyle they wished to avoid.

Thus, in this second structural situation—one that I am calling here 'gangs in times of blue-collar expansion'—primary activities are oriented toward securing financial resources necessary to provide leisure for their members (Miller, 1958). This goal is pursued with resolve through members obtaining part-time jobs and paying dues to the gang organization, and/or by selling illegal drugs and stolen contraband. However, these gangs do not focus on accumulating profit to disperse to their members as they do under other structural conditions; rather their economic activities are concentrated on paying bills related to the entertainment they are providing (Joyeaux, 1960). This is the reason that someone would get a temporary, or part-time job, because they could remain primarily involved in the gang and its leisure activities without having to commit themselves to a full-time work schedule that monopolizes their time and energy. Thus, the gang's primary character here is that it takes on the functions of a social organization (Schneider, 1999).

*Gangs in times of drug deregulation*

In the past, the Italian Mafia monopolized the drug industry, including controls over both production and distribution. However, the Italian Mafia's total control of production and distribution evaporated for a variety of reasons, the most important of which involved ethnic conflict and market control. As ethnic antagonisms became more hostile between Italians and African Americans, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, Italians in general, including the Mafia, found it nearly impossible to be physically safe in these groups' neighborhoods. This cut the Italians off from retailing drugs to the communities that had been their biggest consumers. Then, with the introduction of cocaine on the market, the Italians found it impossible to control access to sources of production. Since Latin America was a big producer of cocaine, various Latin American immigrants in the United States had access to these sources of production on the basis of their ethnic affinities.

As a result of these changes, the Italian Mafia was forced to gradually withdraw their retail operations from most of these ethnic areas and simply wholesale drugs to local retailers (Robinson, 1993). Concomitantly, this opened up opportunities for other segments of the low-income community to become involved in the retail drug industry (Ianni, 1974; Bourgois, 1995). As this happened through the 1970s and 1980s, gangs became involved in different capacities of the drug retail trade. Some gangs distributed drugs and also became involved in the production of crack cocaine and other drugs; some had drug mills that produced synthetic hallucinogens. Moreover, as market opportunities worsened for the poor and working class, increasing numbers of youth found gangs to be an attractive alternative (Kasarda, 1990; Wilson, 1996). It was the combination of contracting market opportunities in the production sector of the economy and the expanding market opportunities in both the production and retail illicit drug economy that stimulated youths from varied ethnic groups to become involved in gangs (Padilla, 1992). For gangs could both recruit young people with the pitch that they could make substantial money, and convince them that they had the contacts necessary to produce a profitable business and the organizational capacity to protect them from other competitions (Fagan, 1989). One of the most important by-products of this structural shift in the contemporary context in which gangs operate is that individuals have now increased the length of time during which they participate. In the past, gang participation would have been confined primarily to a young boy's teens whereas, at present and under the conditions just sketched, participation may extend to age 30 and beyond (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Klein, 1998).

*Gangs in times of mass incarceration*

Although there has been a 20-year 'war on drugs', the industry has continued to grow and to provide a strong opportunity structure for



individuals and groups like gangs and posses. However, the illicit drug trade presents individuals with very high risk, not only in the financial market, but vis-à-vis the law as well. As the drug economy has expanded and more people have become involved, the number of people who are incarcerated has correspondingly risen. In 2002, the United States, due to aggressive enforcement policies developed over the last several decades, holds the leading position among all nations on the numbers of people incarcerated (Wacquant, 1999a). These policies have included enacting legislation to increase prison time for those incarcerated for gang-related crimes; mandatory sentencing laws; the trying of juveniles as adults when violent crimes have been committed; and increased prison building (Donziger, 1996). In turn, this has changed the demography of prisons, producing at least one interesting and unintended consequence.

In the past, street and prison gangs have tended to operate separately from one another. Prison gangs, which became particularly organized in the 1970s, not only controlled the social order of their penal institutions, but were direct extensions of organized crime. By direct extension, I refer to the fact that individuals who were involved in organized crime syndicates in civilian life, but were later sent to prison, became the nucleus of penal gangs. Some prison gangs were formed as a result of the conflict that occurred between inmates, but most were part-and-parcel of the larger world of organized crime.

More recently though, as street gangs have become more involved in the drug industry, and as law enforcement policies have changed, the number of street gang members who are imprisoned has increased. In turn, as these happened, street gangs became more assimilated into prison gangs. For at least the last decade and a half, prison gangs, which are adult-organized crime syndicates, have been trying to organize street gangs under their authority within the prison in an effort to control greater portions of the drug market. Street gangs have consistently resisted these efforts. Since most street gang members are younger, one reason is that youthful gang members do not want 'older boys' controlling them; adolescent rebelliousness has meant that authority imposed on them by older members of society, even if these members were part of the greater gang society, was resented. Yet, as more of these youths from street gangs went to prison, they were forced by the stark reality of the prison structure to affiliate with one of the prison gangs or else risk being vulnerable to the hostile predators within the prison population (Abbott, 1991).

Therefore, individual street gang members have entered an environment structured both by the state authorities and prison gangs; at the same time, many gang members perceive that it is likely they will do more than one stint, spending a considerable amount of their lives in prison. In California, over a period of time, this realization has influenced individuals from street gangs either to become members of prison gangs or to make formal alliances with them. For example, among California's Chicano gangs, prison gangs have divided the state in half: those who live south of

Bakersfield are identified as *sureños* (symbolized by the color blue) and those living to the north are identified as *norteños* (symbolized by the color red). Consequently, whereas before the gang with which an inmate affiliated in prison was not the same as outside, now mergers take place: in this case, various street gangs of Mexican-origin inmates have unified with two dominant Mexican prison gangs, La Familia and the Mexican Mafia.

From this, one can surmise that state policy to incarcerate gang members for longer periods of time is producing unintended consequences. For one thing, an increasing tendency for street gangs and prison gangs to unify means that the resulting collective associations are even more organized and have greater resources to sustain themselves. Another unintended consequence is also that demographic changes resulting from a rapidly increasing number of incarcerated gang members has drastically altered the social structure of prisons themselves. In other words, not only have street gangs been altered, but their increasing numbers in prison destroyed the existing social structure of inmates in prison, creating a new one to replace it (Irwin, 1980). Last, and relatedly, an unintended consequence of the recent developments is that, by changing gang structures on the inside, an effect on gang structures outside prison has been to unify drug markets. None of this is likely to alter at the moment; indeed ongoing rises in incarceration suggest that the situation will continue to worsen at least into the first decade of the 21st century (Wacquant, 1999a).

### *Gangs in times of monopoly behavior*

No issue has concerned the general public or academics more than gang violence. Yet, another missing aspect of most academic analyses is insight into the structural conditions that influence gang violence. Before discussing the structural conditions that impact gang violence, though, it is necessary to clarify the concepts of 'violence' and 'gang violence'. 'Violence' may be defined as the use of force to achieve some desired end. It is a maximizing of physical force to achieve a desired end, and as such must be seen as a tool (Arendt, 1970). 'Gang violence' can be defined in relation to 'gang-member violence': the former involves individuals committing violence as agents of the organization. On the other hand, 'gang-member violence' involves individuals in gangs committing violence as independent agents (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991: 137–77). Clearly, distinguishing between these two types of violence is imperative for understanding particular violent acts in which gang members become involved.

The violence associated with gangs has been influenced by three conditions. The first is associated with 'gang-member violence' and emerges from the material conditions in which gang members find themselves. In essence, 'gang-member violence' is a product of both the structural conditions that permeate the scarcity of resources and the socialized manner that individuals learn to survive in such an environment. For example, gangs have consistently emerged from low-income communities where there has been a

scarcity in resources. Thus, individuals brought up in such an environment learn that they must be aggressive in their efforts to compete and secure these resources because, if they are not, others will get them. This socialization process influences individuals from lower-income communities to be particularly cautious in their approach to others and to employ maximum power in their efforts to secure or maintain a possession or goal. Therefore, individuals who are in gangs, like other individuals from these environments, use violence to obtain their own individually-oriented objectives. It is this individual-oriented type of violence that has been misrepresented by law enforcement, the media and some academics, since it would have occurred whether the individual was in a gang or not (Maxson and Klein, 1990; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991, 1994). In other words, 'gang-member violence' does not involve the gang *per se*.

However, because gangs are organizational artifacts of their environments, they offer positive reinforcement to those who utilize violence to achieve their aims. Power is something that few people in lower-income communities have without resorting to physical force; thus, the more physical force one has as a resource, the more status one will enjoy in these communities. In this way, material conditions establish the foundations for a 'culture of force' that can ultimately be labeled a 'culture of violence'. Through this culture, a view of the world develops with a rationale concerning how power is obtained; what this power can offer the individual or group in the way of material resources; and how status can be expected as a result. Force is the medium through which individuals try to monopolize the economic and social resources available to them.

The second way in which gang violence is structured has to do with the structure of the market in which gangs, as organizations, operate. As mentioned earlier, both individuals and gangs often use force in advancing their interests. However, in conjunction with the structure of the underground economy, levels of gang violence have increased in recent years. With the opening of new drug markets, gangs have behaved like any other capitalist-oriented organization. They have attempted to monopolize the various drug products and the markets wherein they are exchanged. This behavior has been, and will continue to be, particularly aggressive and violent because, contrary to other markets in the legal economy, there is no external party—e.g. a board, an agency, a court or a state—that can regulate the activity of competitors. Thus, in a market that has no outside party capable of intervening to regulate normal operations or disputes, this responsibility falls to the actors themselves and the power they bring to the exchange relationship. Those who possess the most physical power and are willing to use it are the most successful in their efforts to monopolize the various illegal product markets. When one of the competitors has considerably more physical power than the others, there tends to be less violence. However, when there is roughly equal power between competitors more violence will be present because of persistent initiatives to determine who is dominant. In all these situations, the structure of the market (type of

products, amount of supplies and demand) and the structure of the organization (strength of its internal structure and power resources), along with the structure of the realm of competition (physical environment) determine the type and levels of ensuing violence.

In sum, gang violence, both individual member and organizational, results from a dynamic combination of three interacting conditions. These are material conditions of scarcity (encouraging competition over what little exists); a culture that sanctions physical force as the primary means to realize goals; and an available economy that has no formal state-authorized agency capable of regulating the monopolizing behavior of the individuals and organizations involved. Together these conditions form a peculiar structure that establishes parameters for risk and safety.

## Conclusion

This article focused on the relationship between the social structure of American society and the social structure of gangs. Of course many of the conditions identified here developed over time; some date as far back as the establishment of the republic itself. For example, the United States was founded on the image of being a revolutionary society. By this I mean it was founded on a political and social break with its historical origins. The new nation that emerged out of this break both established 'the American' as a new identity and created new structures to help support this new identity. One of the factors that helped to shape the new identity of 'the American' and the concomitant social structures that supported it, was the large and unsettled nature of the American geography. The US was a 'frontier nation' that taught people that there was unlimited opportunity, but that one must depend on oneself (Slotkin, 1985). This emphasis on the individual was also affected by the fact that the state was seen as a potential threat to individual liberty. Thus the State should not be involved in people's lives even if for the purpose of providing for the common good. What evolved was the belief that the state was incapable of being helpful because whenever it intervened it altered the very basis of what produced a productive society; the exact individual spirit necessary to overcome the hardship and defeat was destroyed. In essence one of the fundamental tenets of what became dominant American ideology was the principle that defeat was an important force that made for a great society. This was because both the quest for success, and the fear of defeat, made for a more productive citizen. In turn, it was believed that the fruit of people's labors was to either avoid defeat or to overcome it: this allegedly was what made the US a great society.

These beliefs about inequality produced a political culture where the state is seen as undermining the very essence of what makes the society strong when providing social welfare to its citizens. Most citizens in the US have learned these aspects of the political culture, especially members of the

lower class. Individuals in the lower class know they must depend on themselves and that, if they are to improve their position in life, they must be creative and enterprising. As conditions among the lower class have declined in American inner cities (Wilson, 1996), and the state has retreated from intervening to improve them (Krieger, 1986; Wacquant, 1999b), young males (especially non-white males) have developed strategies to become more enterprising with the opportunities that they have. One, though not the only, strategy employed by some of the lower class has been to become involved in the underground economy, especially with illicit drugs; while individuals can enter this market, it is less personally risky in both economic and personal injury terms if one joins an organized group like a gang (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Padilla, 1992; Taylor, 1993). Thus, instead of being deviants from the prevailing economic culture, gang members have accepted the principles of the dominant social ideology and economic culture, and have adapted their strategies to the opportunities and resources available to them. There have been losers in this effort, but, as in all capitalist markets, winners as well.

This situation has precipitated a structural response on the part of the state. In an effort to control the economic activity of gangs and other groups, the state has increased the number of law enforcement personnel responsible for gang activity. For example, starting in 1992–3, the Federal Bureau of Investigation decided, as a result of the ending of the cold war, to transfer those agents that had been assigned to counter-subversive units (anti-Communist units), into the newly organized anti-gang division. They have passed legislation that increased the amount of time individuals associated with a gang will serve in prison,<sup>2</sup> and they have built more prisons where they dump ever larger quantities of lower-class men (Wacquant, 1999a).

The state's response has caused gangs to react. Since more youths are incarcerated of late for longer periods of time, local street gangs have reacted by integrating themselves into the organized crime syndicates associated with prison. Thus, instead of weakening the organizational structure of gangs through the policy of increased incarceration of gang members, the state's policy worked to strengthened them. Ironically, despite the counter-productive results in affecting the gang phenomenon, the state's continued policy response is to build even more prisons and pass even more harsh rules.

Overall, then, the contemporary gang problem must be understood as a result of certain structural conditions that exist in the United States, or any society with similar structural and ideological conditions that have caused societal inequality to grow (Fischer et al., 1996). Therefore, the gang must not be seen as a collection of deviants, or a deviant form of collective behavior. Rather, it must be seen as both an organization composed of people who have the values and goals of mainstream American society and as an organization that engages in a form of collective behavior that is

particular to the socio-economic conditions its participants confront (Merton, 1968). Yet to understand the gang phenomenon in the United States, it is necessary to consider that socio-economic conditions of American society have continually changed, usually becoming worse for the lower class, and the structures associated with these changes have produced rational changes in the gang phenomenon. This article has attempted to sketch some of these changes and the effects they have had on gangs. In so doing, it has provided a theoretical outline that can be utilized to understand and forecast changes in the contours of the gang phenomenon in the future.

## Notes

1. This quotation is taken from the fieldnotes of a research project that I completed (from 1978–89) on gangs. The study involved participant-observation of 37 gangs. Unless otherwise noted, quotations come from this study.
2. California has passed as part of the state's penal code, 186.20–27 the 'Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act', which provides an automatic addition of one to three years in prison for those who have been convicted of a crime and are members of a street gang.

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