

STREET GANGS AS A FORM OF GLOCAL RADICALIZATION

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The origin and development of large industrialized cities has been accompanied by the spread of youth gangs, starting with countries such as the United States of America. In recent decades, however, the phenomenon has also undergone unprecedented expansion in Europe and emerging countries as a result of the uncontrolled growth of urbanization, and it has taken on new transnational forms, thanks to the increased criminal mobility enabled by globalization.

Two main features characterize gangs anywhere in the world. The first is the intense and essential relationship they have with the street, most notably in ghettos and slums: the gang as corner society. The second is marginality: gangs constitute an embryonic form of self-organization of a minority community cut off from the normal mechanisms of social ascent. This explains in part why gang membership has long been identified as a form of social deviance, if not of sheer criminality.

Today, although ethnic homogeneity still prevails within individual groups, ethnicity is rarely an immediate cause of conflict. Rather, in turf wars individuals belonging to the same ethnic group can often be seen fighting against each other. Furthermore, some gangs have demonstrated their capacity to create settlements in countries (and sometimes on continents) other than those where they originated, giving rise to authentic phenomena of criminal colonization of the neighbourhoods they arrive in.

Each gang has its own specific path dependence: gangs born in particular places, undergo their own life cycle, from latency to institutionalization, which can allow them to evolve from simple agglomerations to real transnational networks, as well as determining their decline. The phenomenon of gangs is also linked to the transition from adolescence to adulthood and can, therefore, burn out in the absence of adequate generational turnover.

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San Salvador, El Salvador, 1996

Gang members make a pact of revenge over the grave of a slain leader.

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Gangs' affiliates are not doomed to live a life of crime. Rather, their fate depends on the strategies adopted by institutions to counter the phenomenon and, to an even greater extent, on the criminogenic factors in a specific context. Gangs, in fact, are in all respects one of the forms assumed by the growing clustering of the criminal industry, in a market of illegal goods and services that is becoming ever more complex and globalized, and completely immune to the cyclical downturn in demand. Besides being an indicator of low integration and limited social cohesion, the spread of gangs in urban areas represents a manifestation of the existence of a criminal milieu sophisticated enough to allow major groups (mafias and drug cartels) to implement risk externalization strategies, or to subcontract out to gangs those tasks – street crimes – that increase visibility and, consequently, the likelihood of incurring repressive action by the state.

As further confirmation of the importance of organizational factors, gangs demonstrate an extraordinary capacity to increase intra-group cohesion through the creation of their own subcultures, and are capable of providing their affiliates with a system of beliefs and rules, as well as a vision of the world that places them at the centre of the universe and above others (so that, for once, they are not relegated to the margins and lower strata of society). The tenets of these subcultures are violence, chauvinism and religion. Violence has a symbolic value, to the point of being adopted as an initiation ritual, inflicted on new recruits or perpetrated against uninvolved peers. Yet violence is above all an individual competence and an asset for the group: a professional duty that, if not fulfilled, can lead to mockery and derision, expulsion or even death, and that, for this very reason, must be accompanied by all the trappings of courage, reputation and honour. Furthermore, gangs satisfy the need for a (misunderstood) manliness incited by a culture of origin still imbued with patriarchy – a need that, on the other hand, goes unmet by the host society, which prevents young people from becoming adults by taking on normal working and parental roles.

Paradoxical as it may seem, religion is the single element that, in the majority of cases, provides gangs with the rules and principles required for internal cohesion. Evidence of this is offered by the proliferation of religious tattoos among gang members in different countries, which cover all the denominations of Christianity: from the Catholic ones of the Neapolitan Barbudos, to the Protestant evangelical ones of the Central American maras, to the Orthodox ones of the Russian gangs. Tattoos, which are often associated with complex linguistic and gestural codes, satisfy the need to emphasize one's own differences, the 'we' from the 'they', and to strengthen group loyalty to the point of making it literally indelible. This also helps to explain why

religion can then become a vehicle of redemption. This is demonstrated, for instance, by the case of Central America – one of the most violent regions in the world, precisely because of the spread of the so-called maras – where Pentecostal evangelical churches play a key role in providing teenagers with an alternative to gangs, using religious practices and group therapies to reintegrate them into society and to reframe their models of street masculinity.

The importance of gangs' subcultural dimension is also demonstrated by the fact that street (and prison) gangs have given rise to one of the most important popular music phenomena of the twentieth century: the rap and hip-hop movement, which has successfully left the ghetto, one might say, to become a mass phenomenon – a manifestation of counterculture and protest. Not only that, but, born of the black gangs of the United States, it has been adopted over the last few decades in every type of slang and is now becoming established as a propaganda tool of criminal brands, for example for the Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13) and the Eighteenth Street Gang (also known as Barrio 18), which are able to form their own Hispanic rap groups and produce music videos, some of which now boast millions of views on social media.

The above-mentioned examples are not accidental.

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MS-13 and Barrio 18 have become the paradigm of a new global threat. The first in particular has long been identified as the number one public enemy of the United States – where, for that matter, it was born, on the outskirts of Los Angeles, made

up of young Salvadoran immigrants, in response to other Hispanic gangs who had long been rooted in these neighbourhoods. The massive deportation policies adopted by US administrations since the end of the decade-long civil war in El Salvador in fact allowed MS-13 to carry out a 'return' colonization, which was soon extended to much of Central America and, more recently, to Europe (Spain and Italy) and Australia.



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