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## Comment on Luca Queirolo Palmas/1

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Essay

# Comment on Luca Queirolo Palmas/1

by David C. Brotherton

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This is an important contribution to the gang literature from a critical perspective. The research that Palmas has achieved is rigorous and novel, shedding light on processes of the state and state agents vis a vis the gang and its social control in two distinctly different domains, Madrid and Barcelona. The choice of these sites provide rich contrasts in policing practices as well as social and political histories. Palmas draws primarily on the theoretical oeuvre of Bourdieu, applying his well known concepts of cultural capital, the habitus and the left and right hands of the state. In a highly innovative sociological analysis of the changing contexts in which the management of street gangs in these two cities transpires, the author examines the many contradictions in the local and national state's efforts at gang management using to great effect Sauvedet's notions of warrior and pastoral capital. Palmas spent two years in the field collecting *in situ* interviews with street organization members, various members of the police working in gang-related roles and community leaders. He also has clearly spent a great deal of time observing both police and gang behavior and is able to paint a nuanced picture of both front and back stage interactions and the highly politicized context in which they take place. It should be noted that Palmas launched his research after more than five years of working with members of the Latin Kings and the Netas not only in Spain but also in Italy and Ecuador, while he also visited the United States on several occasions to see the groups in the original habitats. These experiences provide an important grounding for this research, in many ways making his Spanish intervention possible.

But what is the essential problematic that Palmas is investigating? And how can we learn from the analysis that Palmas has presented? To me his study poses several key questions that are very much at the forefront of the global gang phenomenon. First, there is the issue of public space in a capitalist society where developers and their bankers are forever claiming these spaces as part of a privatizing dynamic under the violent laws of the accumulation of capital. Second, there is the problem of working-class youth and what do with them in a neo-liberal political economy where the state is no longer functioning to stimulate employment or provide the kinds of services and educational supports customary in social democratic societies. Third, is the issue of global and globalized labor and the problems of integration for the transnational progeny of that laboring class. Fourth, is the issue of (criminal) justice and social control in an age of punishment, social exclusion amid the overdetermining culture of capitalist consumerism. Fifth, is the constant emergence of youth subcultures that develop out of the contradictions presented above and are forms of both resistance and accommodation to the everyday challenges presented by these contradictions. Let me take each of these issues in turn and briefly discuss them in relationship to Palmas's innovative treatment.

## **1. Public Space and the Gang**

The work of Palmas is unusual in that it conceives the gang-space nexus in ways quite different to the dominant U.S. paradigm of gangs and territorialism. This is an important advance in gang analysis and allows us to consider the class-race-ethnic aspects of gangs within the political economy of cities outside of the social ecological paradigms of Chicago. Still today it is rare to see the works of Harvey or Lefebvre mentioned in any of the new Chicago School studies, a fact which speaks both to the disciplinary gate-keeping rampant in the U.S. as well as its thoroughgoing anti-Marxism. In effect, most gang sociology and criminology lacks any notion of political-economic life as if we could understand the organization of the community without it. In the current period I see the question of the gang becoming more and more tied to the issue of who has the right to the city, the classic question posed by Lefebvre and later by Harvey. Palmas gets at this question nicely in his comparison of Madrid and Barcelona and, of course, in the present period of rapid political change is back on the agenda once more. The same question has strong global implications also. In developing societies where space is constantly up for grabs by multi-national corporations, see for example the "redevelopment" of slum areas now underway in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, this often occurs behind the need to rid society of its

gangs, which are usually associated with the threats of drugs and violence. However, a closer look at those doing the development often finds them similarly connected to the narco-economy while the tactics used to displace community residents powerfully resemble the violence such developers attribute to the gangs.

## **2. Whither Working-Class Youth?**

This is obviously a major problem in the currently ordered society regardless of the socio-geographical location. Across the European Union youth unemployment for 15-24 year olds runs at around 22% with at least double those rates in countries like Greece and Spain. In the U.S. the overall youth unemployment for 19-24 year olds is around 16% but for African-Americans it is closer to 30%; however the number of those between 16-24 classified as “socially disconnected”, i.e., not in school or in work, is around 14% for the entire U.S. or about 6 million youth. In developing countries these rates are equally disturbing. For example, in Latin America and the Caribbean the rate of youth between 15-24 without work is approximately 15% but such youth are completely reliant on their families for support or, of course, the informal economy. The point obviously is that capitalism is incapable of providing a future for millions of its youth and the situation is getting worse each year as market-based policies fail to address this most basic tendency of capitalism. Consequently, the fertile grounds of gangs are constantly being reproduced as viable social and economic alternatives and the now globally-linked informal economy beckons these legions of young workers. Nonetheless, it would be erroneous to simply think that the gangs are therefore umbilically tied to the informal economy, e.g. the drugs economy. There are many different types of gangs as Palmas’s work demonstrates and they have multiple functions and cultural styles depending on the community context in which they emerge. The issue today is to understand how gangs become more and more survival mechanisms by which desperate and precarious youth negotiate their social and economic futures.

## **3. The Children of Global Labor**

Related, of course, to the above discourse is the presence of millions of workers crossing borders around the world in search of meaningful employment and what happens to their offspring. In the cases of Palmas’s study, we see these first generation youth of Latin American migrant and immigrant workers dealing with problems of identity and social integration in situations not of their choosing. It was their

parents who made the decisions to try their luck elsewhere due to limited opportunity structures in their homelands and the children had to follow. We see these transnational youth in transnational gangs in different parts of the world and, in fact, they were also there in the early studies of gangs in Chicago in the 1920s. The difference today is that the numbers are even more pronounced even and are added to by the foreign policies of the imperialist nations whose actions in Africa and the Middle East not to mention the long term consequences of Central American interventions have created the largest numbers of displaced populations since World War Two. Added to these dynamics is the proliferation of deportation regimes around the globe, not least the U.S., which repatriates around 400,000 per year, one third of whom are legal residents. These massive displacements of mostly working-class people produce children missing one or both parents with the result that once again the gang becomes an organization that fills a social need in contexts of deep crisis and instability.

#### **4. Criminal Justice in the Age of Punishment**

The fourth major problematic raised by Palmas's study is the role of criminal justice in an epoch when the social roots of crime have been ignored and the behavioral appearances of crime, i.e., its social construction, has been a major focus of the social control industry. In Palmas's study we see these conflicts being played out between what Palmas calls the "gang in" and the "gang out" strategies of Madrid and Barcelona. It is essentially a struggle between views of crime and the criminal classes that rely on either social exclusion or social integration, i.e., Hobbes versus Durkheim. These conflicts of perspective on social control are now global in their reach and the discovery of the "gang" is present in virtually every case. What is needed is a counter-narrative and studies of the nature presented by Palmas to build the foundation of what I call "critical gang studies" [see Brotherton 2015]. The implications of these perspectival struggles cannot be underestimated for they affect not just the criminal justice industries with its state prisons, armies of law enforcement and affiliated bureaucracies but private security corporations that now feature among the largest capitalist enterprises in the world (e.g. G4S, the globe's second largest private employer with 657,000 workers). I would argue that the outcome of these paradigmatic conflicts directly impact on whether we opt for a democratic society and its potential for growth or the continued rise of authoritarianism and the imposition of the security state.

## 5. Subcultures of Resistance and Accommodation

What then is the role of resistance in the groups that Palmas has been studying? Is there agency in how these groups are formed and perform or do they represent different forms of accommodation to the structures of social reproduction? These questions are critically important in gang research but are all too often neglected or avoided due to the adoption of gang discourses that are implicitly pathological either accepting the cultural deficit model of Hirschi and Wilson or the iron cage of social reproduction *à la* Bourdieu. But resistance comes in many forms and consciousnesses and in a reflexive late modernity can have a range of political resonances in gang worlds and subcultures. Four characteristics of gangs are crucial to remember in the present period: one is that many of them have become quasi-institutions of the street, two is that a number of them are now inter-generational, three is that an increasing number of them are global and transnational, and four is that many of them engage in struggles for power against hierarchies of social order. Consequently, when there is a dearth of alternative anti-establishment movements aiming to mobilize precisely the kinds of youth that gangs attract or are virtually born into it should come as no surprise that youth resistance often takes place in and through the gang. At the same time, the accommodation of youth to the current social order may also take place in and through the gang. In other words, these modes of responding to the dominant social order, somewhat similar to Merton's theoretical treatise on youth anomie and the American Dream, are observed simultaneously in gang worlds. In Ecuador, the dominant political party of President Correa recognizes this contradiction and chooses to work with these groups conceiving them as non-pathological street organizations as we have analyzed in the U.S. [see Brotherton and Barrios 2004] and Palmas similarly reports on in Spain and Italy. I foresee this question of gang resistance becoming one of major issues for a regenerated left movement that must emerge from the deepening crisis of world capitalism and I would see that studies such as that of Palmas will play an increasingly important role in shaping the social scientific discourse that we need in this period.

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Abstract: The research of Palmas is rigorous and novel, shedding light on processes of the state and state agents vis a vis the gang and its social control in two distinctly different domains, Madrid and Barcelona? But what is the essential problematic that Palmas is investigating? And how can we learn from the analysis that Palmas has presented? To me this study poses five key questions at the forefront of the global gang phenomenon. First, there is the issue of public space in a capitalist society where developers and their bankers are claiming urban spaces as part of a privatizing dynamic conditioned by the violent laws of the accumulation of capital. Second, there is the problem of what do with working-class youth in a neo-liberal political economy where the state is no longer functioning to stimulate employment or provide the services and educational supports customary in social democratic societies. Third, is the issue of global and globalized labor and the problems of integration for the transnational progeny of the laboring classes. Fourth, is the issue of (criminal) justice and social control in an age of punishment and social exclusion amid the overdetermining culture of capitalist consumerism. Fifth, is the continuous emergence of youth subcultures that develop out of the contradictions presented above and are forms of both resistance and accommodation to the everyday challenges presented by these contradictions. I describe each of these issues and briefly discuss them in relationship to Palmas's innovative treatment.

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*Keywords: Capitalism; Criminal Justice; Gangs; Public Space; Youth Subcultures.*

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