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Comment on Luca Queirolo Palmas/2

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Comment on Luca Queirolo Palmas/2

by John M. Hagedorn

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I am in sympathy with Palmas' perspective on the Spanish state's response to gangs in Madrid and Barcelona. His critical review of the limitations of the strategies of the right and left hand of the State, what he calls the "gangs in" and "gangs out" approaches, are important contributions. I've not read other critiques of the Catalan experience of normalization, but its failure is not a surprise in a world where gangs rank among society's most demonized groups. Progressive transformations of street organizations are rare and we need to study such examples as in Barcelona carefully. Unfortunately when gangs do become "normalized" by the State it is often because they become agents of repression, like the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria or Triad thugs attacking students in Hong Kong. If there is one general lesson from my thirty years of research, it is that gangs are not one thing.

Palmas' essay focuses on the workings of State institutions that Alvin Gouldner [1968] saw as the appropriate object of a radical sociology. My differences with Gouldner will become apparent, but I am also a strong proponent of the need to "bring the State back in" to the study of gangs. Palmas calls his essay "an ethnography of a bureaucratic field of the state" and opposes his views to the positivism of the Eurogang group. Malcolm Klein's [2001] export of American criminology to Europe fundamentally assumes the state as the good guys and the gangs as the bad guys. The situation is much more complex and both Palmas and I realize you cannot understand gangs without understanding the array of policies and practices by both hands of the state.

Indeed we get some idea that the state's actions have consequences in the last page of Palmas' essay. "Z" from the Ñetas says:

"You know, Luca, we were disappointed, we don't want anything to do with institutions now."

The gangs' disillusionment is understandable when we realize how little gang violence there actually was in Barcelona. Much of the fear of gangs in Spain appears to be racialized fears of an immigrant other, not rational fears of real threats to public safety.

This explains the Catalan policy prior to 2012 that "gangs are not a police problem." Palmas thus borrows from Brotherton and Barrios a definition drawn from their ethnography of the Latin Kings:

"Groups composed mainly by youths and adults from marginalized social classes whose aim is to provide members with a solid identity, a chance to be recognized at individual and collective level, a voice to challenge the dominant culture, a refuge from tensions and pressures of the neighbourhood and ghetto life and a spiritual enclave where new rituals can be generated and considered as sacred." [Brotherton *et. al.* 2003, 23].

While Klein *et al.* see criminality as the crux of the gang issue, Palmas defines the "warrior capital" of gangs as mainly a form of resistance identity. Gangs appear to be, like Becker [1967] famously put it, "more sinned against than sinning."

This is where my concerns begin. I think it is inaccurate to see gangs as only reacting to state policies and lacking agency. Worldwide, I see much more variety in gangs and sadly I've found more frightening than hopeful possibilities. While most gangs come and go as street level peer groups, some, like the Latin Kings, develop the capacity to become social actors in Touraine [1988] and Saskia Sassen's [2007] sense. But what kind of social actor is an empirical question and my own studies find some disturbing trends. I'd like to draw on my own research, from *People & Folks* [1988; 1998] to *A World of Gangs* [2008] to my recent *The In\$ane Chicago Way* [2015] to explain some of my reticence about Palmas' essay.

I began my studies of gangs in Milwaukee in the early 1980s after about fifteen years of political activism. I became disillusioned with Marxism's focus on the "industrial proletariat" and realized there were important, dynamic forces within the poorest black communities, labeled by William Julius Wilson [1978; 1984] as the "underclass." In *People and Folks* [1988] I called for inclusion of the very poor and their organizations in strategies for social change and two decades later repeated that call after surveying more dire conditions globally in *A World of Gangs* [2008]. I have always rejected Gouldner's disdain for the study of "underdogs" since I concluded

it was precisely those stigmatized and oppressed groups who might hold the key to significant change. In all my writings, I argued state repression worked to push gangs toward criminality and activists needed to work to redirect gangs toward social movements.

The history of gangs' political involvement, however, does not give cause for hope. In *A World of Gangs* I argued the form of the street gang was flexible, from wild peer groups to community organizations, ethnic militias, or even adopting religious mantles. A few gangs joined social movements and others became organized crime, but many more fought with one another over colors, turf, or illicit markets. Gangs and their members, I argued, have "multiple conflicting identities" and our goal ought to be to strengthen those identities that could be enlisted to support movements for change. Brotherton and Barrios' work in New York City with the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation (ALKQN) is an important example of how to encourage positive transformations.

In the second edition of *People & Folks* [1998] I documented how Milwaukee gangs evolved into "drug posses" that provided jobs that a de-industrialized city could not. My research crew of former gang members and I did our interviews during the height of 1990s gang wars when homicide rates hit all time highs. Our interventions were restricted to helping individual gang members in court cases, linking them to jobs, and getting them into drug treatment or back to school. Social movements necessarily took a back seat to survival.

When I moved my research to Chicago, I began a serious study of gang history and I became close friends with Bobby Gore, the legendary spokesman for the 1960s Conservative Vice Lords (CVL). The story of the CVL paralleled that of the 1990s ALKQN. Swept up in the black nationalist and civil rights movements of the time, the CVL worked to resurrect North Lawndale, cleaning it up with a "grass not glass" campaign, building local businesses of their own, and getting jobs grants from government and foundations. They also took part in movements against job discrimination and squalid housing conditions, sought peace between gangs, and allied with the Black Panther Party and other insurgent forces.

In *A World of Gangs* I tell the stories of both the Vice Lords and the earlier Hamburgs, an Irish gang whose members included the first Mayor Daley. The Hamburgs had gone en masse into machine politics and their former president, Richard J. Daley, was elected mayor of Chicago. Daley feared African American gangs might also adopt a political course, so rather than encourage the CVL's pro-social turn, he declared war and jailed their leaders. Without the guidance of Gore and with their funding cut off, the Vice Lords shed their pro-social clothes and violently dominated Lawndale's heroin markets as their dreams from the sixties shattered.

In my recent book, *The In\$ane Chicago Way*, I add complexity to the agency of gangs and how they interact with state policies. In Chicago, while African American gangs were participating in social movements, they were also negotiating with the mafia (in Chicago called the “Outfit”) to take over retail distribution of drugs. Sometimes gang leaders clashed among themselves over whether or not to expel the drug dealers from their communities. In the end, however, those gang leaders who wanted to wrest control of drug sales from the Outfit triumphed within their gangs. Both progressive politics and organized crime coincided in Chicago’s 1960s gangland.

In the 1970s gang violence reached record highs and prompted the prison based people and folks coalitions to seek to control violence and organize crime on the streets. Gangs in Chicago were always more than neighborhood peer groups and by the 1970s many had developed branches citywide and organized formal cross-gang alliances. As the distribution of drugs became a central gang activity, so did corruption of police as well as the need for protection by politicians. *The In\$ane Chicago Way* documents the determined attempt by “Latin Folks” gangs to create a Spanish mafia, aided and abetted by Italian mobsters and Mexican cartels, and tied closely to Chicago’s political machine. In the 1990s, the people and folks coalitions collapsed in wars captained by power hungry incarcerated gang chiefs. The contrast with the 1990s NYC Latin Kings of Barrios and Brotherton could not be sharper.

It is to this contrast that we need to pay attention. I am not saying that the Kings or Ñetas of Spain are organized crime or that Barcelona is a replica of Chicago. Thrasher was right on this point: every gang is unique and social scientists need to do field research in their own city and describe local gangs in historical context. I have no reason to question Palmas’ assertion that Spanish gangs are

“one of the many possible forms of creative resistance that the youth of immigrant origin and from a lower class background invent to confront the multiple mechanisms of ostracism that cause bias in jobs, education, leisure, and ultimately hinder the construction of a future for these generations.”

However, my research in Chicago, as well as my survey of gangs across the world, suggests that it is unwise to ignore the penetration of gangs by organized crime and to underestimate the power of its instrumental logic. Drugs are big business in Spain as well as the US and Palmas gives indications of gang involvement in the drug trade as well as prison activity. I’ve found globally that while most gangs remain local peer groups, once gangs institutionalize the pressures to join in the world of organized crime are likely greater than the pull of social movements. The state’s policies and the indignities of capitalism sadly push gangs more toward organized crime than toward a politics of resistance.

I understand the scope of Palmas' essay is not on the "social working of youth gangs" but an exposé of the policies of social control of the state and the construction of "gangs as a social problem." On the other hand, when we paint gangs as victims and minimize their agency; when we fail to recognize all of the multiple conflicting identities of gangs; and when we overlook the interests and culture of the cartels and mafia, we hamper our capacity to strengthen the pro-social and isolate the destructiveness that uneasily coexist within the world of gangs.

The stance of social science differs from the polemics of activism. My research has concluded that redirecting gangs is a struggle, not just against outside forces of repression, but also within gangs themselves. Our studies need to build support among the public for less repressive policies. But we also should write in a way that is useful to activists and even gang members who reject organized crime and are building broad movements against oppression.

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Abstract: The author is in sympathy with Palmas' perspective on the Spanish state's response to gangs in Madrid and Barcelona. Palmas' critical review of the limitations of the strategies of the right and left hand of the state, what he calls the "gangs in" and "gangs out" approaches, are important contributions. A review of the author's past work and his new book, *The In\$ane Chicago Way*, suggest research needs to pay more attention to agency and not see gangs as basically victims reacting to oppression. Particularly important is to look for the pull of organized crime on gangs. Research in Chicago and around the world suggest mafias, cartels, and the instrumental logic of organize crime are often more powerful influences on gangs than social movements.

Keywords: *Gangs; Organized Crime; Violence; Social Movements.*

John M. Hagedorn has been doing research on gangs for more than thirty years. He has written three books on gangs, edited two more, and written many articles in both academic and popular journals. He also works as an expert witness using research to debunk stereotypes. He is currently Professor of Criminology, Law, & Justice at the University of Illinois-Chicago. His most recent book is *The In\$ane Chicago Way: The Daring Plan by Chicago Gangs to Create a Spanish Mafia* [2015]. His website is: <http://gangresearch.net>