

BOOK REVIEW

THE GANG & BEYOND: INTERPRETING VIOLENT STREET WORLDS. By SIMON HALLSWORTH
(London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 209pp. £79.00 hb, £25.99 pb)

This is a timely book. It is bold, contentious, provocative and provides a much needed commentary on the current state of affairs in relation to our understanding of and responses to gangs in the United Kingdom. As stated above, it is provocative and no doubt some colleagues singled out for criticism may take offence to the author's critique of their work but this is tempered by a sensible and considered debate. Whether you are a 'gang talker' or a 'gang denier', Hallsworth presents a compelling and in parts, acerbic analysis of urban street gangs.

The book has three parts, all of which are clearly set out by the author in the introduction. It is not rooted in empirical research but rather an interrogation of the current UK situation and a thorough review of the relevant literature. Part one sets the scene and provides a critique of the current UK gangland thesis. Part two, examines the discourse of gang talk, while part three draws upon the work of Deleuze and Guattari to contest the corporatization of gangs in the United Kingdom.

Chapters one and two covered by part one of the text, provide a comprehensive analysis of the many social ills that gangs are currently held responsible for in the United Kingdom. The list includes control of the illegal drugs trade, violent offences, use of weapon dogs, sexual violence and urban disorder. The purpose of this chapter is to challenge the UK gangland thesis. Through the use of the five case studies (set out above) the author succeeds in presenting the view that these crimes have, over the last decade, become associated with and blamed on the supposed intensifying gang culture currently presiding over the United Kingdom. What is principally valuable about this case study approach is the situating of 'contemporary' gang 'problems' within a historical context, i.e. these offences are not new but only now as the author points out, are gangs viewed as the key explanatory variable. Particularly valuable are the case studies on drugs and violence. Drugs and violence are synonymous with gangs but Hallsworth questions this assumption and does so by providing evidence and commentary that questions the epistemological and ontological implications of the assumption. With reference to drugs, the theoretical use of 'economy' provides an interesting alternative to what the author defines as the current corporate gang model—one which positions the gang as having corporate structures and hierarchies. Hallsworth refutes this and with his synopsis of the association between gangs and violence, questions the validity of these assumptions. I concluded from his analysis that academics, police and policymakers need to have a more nuanced approach to the understanding of complex networks and an appreciation that these types of crimes can be entirely unrelated to gangs. I have used drugs and violence as an example, but the author's commentary on the remaining case studies all fit with the call for a more nuanced understanding.

Chapter two provides an autoethnographic account of the author's experiences of growing up in a number of UK towns and cities between the 1960s and 1980s. Detractors

and critics of Hallsworth's work may not welcome the insight into his formative years but the chapter is vivid, informative and written with humour and purpose. The purpose of which is to demonstrate the Pearsonesque, nostalgic view of the past—what was happening then, is happening now but now we choose to explain it through the folk devil—the gang. The chapter is also useful in its description of autoethnography—a methodological approach under-developed and consequently under-used by criminologists.

Part two encompasses chapters three and four. These chapters are perhaps more standard with a focus on gang talk and moral panics. Nevertheless, Hallsworth's analysis of discourse is as persuasive as ever. Situated to explain a number of very recent events—one being the reaction of the UK government to the riots of 2011, gang talk is defined and described as a language game. This is an interesting development and the use of six gang labels to explore the discourse is a valuable addition. The author's assessment of the seduction and unforeseen consequences of gang talk deliver a concise summation of the potentially devastating impact of gang talk and its proliferation into the everyday vernacular. This chapter also helps to provide a balanced argument to the very existence of gangs. Hallsworth makes no apologies for his condemnation of what he views as the current obsession with gang talk but is sensible enough to recognize that gangs exist and can be very dangerous. This recognition may well mitigate some of the criticism directed his way about a text that is unflinching in its view of the route that certain areas of academia are heading and the influential nature of this direction on government and policymakers. Chapter four covers moral panics and the social reactions to gangs. A chronological account of the momentum with which gangs have become a political priority is recounted by the author. This account is made more illuminating by the autographical nature of the recollection. Hallsworth writes just on the right side of sarcasm, recounting many 'expert' meetings attended about gangs. Sarcasm aside, he makes some very valid points about the hazards of buying into a problem that we still do not fully understand.

Part three, consists of chapters five, six, seven and a conclusion. Chapters five and six provide an advancement of knowledge around gangs. They come full circle and develop in more detail the author's account of the corporate gang and the move beyond gang talk. Through the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari the chapters aim to provide an alternative paradigm. At first reading, I was not entirely sure where the author was heading with this alternative way of thinking about gangs and their structures. After re-reading, the approach begins to make more sense. It's a novel approach to be encouraged by an author 'to think like grass' (p. 122), the basic premise being that we need to think in a rhizomatic manner as opposed to arborealist—we need to be grass not trees! We are encouraged to stop thinking and reacting in a sedentary, top-down fashion when we consider gangs, but instead understand them as non-linear and unpredictable—we must think as nomads. At times, I felt that the author indulged his own interest/passion for all things rhizomatic and arborealist. That said, in a field where academics are struggling to develop gang theory, a novel approach to our understanding and interpretation is refreshing. In chapter six we are encouraged to position violence with a deeper understanding of street culture rather than a reversion to gang talk and it is within this chapter that the author attempts take us 'beyond the gang'. The work of Bourgois and Anderson are heralded as the way forward for an improved understanding of street contexts and the role which violence plays. The author sets

out three necessities of street life: the search for pleasure, respect and money. Chapter seven provides a valuable overview of violence in the post-war period. This neatly sets the scene for a synopsis of the economic and political transformations that have taken place over the last three decades in Britain. Hallsworth attempts to explain the ecology of violence in the context of class, and positions this within a new class structure consisting of a 'feral over class' (p. 171), a 'squeezed middle' (p. 171) and a working class. The discussion of the new precariat is particularly valuable. Precarious living and its many consequences, both social and economic, are described by Hallsworth as eroding traditional male, working class identities. He refers to 'life on road' as a parallel response to the experiences of precariousness. 'Life on road' is a parallel society that provides security and clarity for young people, the gang is a sum of this but not its whole.

The conclusion of the book is wonderfully ironic. Hallsworth provides his seven point plan—'How to have a gang problem'. Written by someone with lesser credentials in the field, it could be interpreted as undermining the issue but it is done with intelligence and humour and among the sarcasm, makes some thoughtful observations. As I noted at the beginning of this review, there will be some who after reading this book will be derisive of Hallsworth's work—I doubt he will care. Hallsworth has written an engaging and thought provoking text and one which demands us to think 'beyond the gang'. It will appeal to students, academics and practitioners.

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