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Response to Brotherton and Hagedorn Comments

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Response to Brotherton and Hagedorn Comments

by Luca Queirolo Palmas

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First my thanks to John M. Hagedorn and David Brotherton for their comments [in this issue]. They both have been important sources in my social scientific education; Hagedorn, in a more conventional way, through his research and publications, Brotherton in a deeper intellectual and empirical cooperation, having shared several ethnographic experiences in different contexts.

My text on *Policies and Policing* [2015] tried to *unthink* gangs taking into account the State as a crucial actor in the field. Actually gangs exist also as a State's thought, in terms of Sayad [1996], or, following the suggestion of Simon Hallsworth [2011], as a *talk*, as a discursive object of an industry. My point, heterodoxically applying Bourdieu theory, was to conceive this industry as a field, a place of positions and interests, struggles and alliances, equilibrium and instability, discourses and practices, rules and powers, production and reproduction. In this perspective, gangs may be conceived as the clients of that industry, as subjects captured and constituted by the different logics of the State's interventions.

For this reason, my text is built on a deep ethnographic experience with several State actors, at different levels: street bureaucrats and higher officers that carry out social policies and criminal justice practices devoted to control and/or to take care of the social body in the more general framework of this endless economic crisis.

I argue that State actors struggle on behalf of different logics, either attempting to normalize and include, or to expel and punish gangs and their behaviours. Eventually, the very result of my research is the emerging of what I referred to as the

gang's autonomy, a topic that I further develop in my book *Enemigos Públicos* [2015, forthcoming], published by *Traficantes de sueños*, Madrid.

The gangs, at least those I had the chance to observe and to share time with, do not simply react to the State's policies – though, every reaction can be assumed to be a form of agency. Firstly, they reject the language through which politics and academia normally define them. They refuse the term of gang. The agency I try to depict, in general terms, permanently shifts from street economy to street politics, depending on time, place, labour market situation, social movements, welfare provisions and other factors. I agree with Hagedorn and I don't ignore the penetration of crime in gangs: it is a structural part of this story. Moreover, I would say that even crime is a kind of agency for gangs and gang members. Insofar as the crime and the violence I observed in the Spanish context are intimately linked to the desire of accumulating social and symbolic capital, gangs actually do not really succeed in accumulating economic capital. Rather, gang members I met and I used to spend time with are young poor, expelled from education and formal labour markets. As other groups of vulnerable working class youth, they get by, often in a desperate and creative way, by mixing up work, welfare and crime. My direct experience with gang youth has been filled by the relentless ongoing request of micro-economic support: metro tickets, telephone calls, food and drinks, informal purchase of goods. A kind of support that evidently clashes or collides with the symbolic realm of honour and pride in the world of organized crime. If I were studying the behaviour of the mafia affiliates in Italy, I surely would never had this kind of interaction with my possible informants; on the contrary, my act should be interpreted as a form of humiliation.

Does it mean that in the next years organized crime will hire these groups of underclass youth? At the moment, I can't see evidences of such a possibility. Actually, in contemporary Spain the most powerful and clearest factor of attraction can be found in organized religions rather than in organized crime or social movements. Several members and leaders involved in our ethnography, have been progressively captured by a religious discourse and a religious practice. Religious spaces – in the Spanish case I'm referring to different evangelical denominations – allow an interesting form of conversion of social and symbolic capitals accumulated in gangs. Religious communities, in their actual functioning, are not so different from gangs: they provide rules and order, they civilize violence and structure everyday life, they generate possible careers, they foster self-esteem with a surplus of legitimacy and pastoral care by connecting different subjects and generations. The religious turn of groups and members I studied is both a form of conversion-exit and a form of street politics: gangs also adopt opportunistically both material and discursive religious spaces in order to get some kind of refuge, a non-repressive or a non-retaliatory

area protecting them from the gaze and the power of different formal and informal actors.

What happens when a street politics attitude crosses the gang scenario and confronts itself with State's intervention? It is important to assume gangs as a scene, crossing over into the State's field by several logics struggling with each other in order to define the true way to live and act within that scene. Youth groups may either counter the pastoral attempt of domestication and denounce the fake character of such inclusion within the domain of citizenship. In the case I observed in Catalunya the leaders of different groups, years after the process of legalization, are still undocumented migrants, without any formal inclusion in the labour market and often exposed to the sanctions of the penal system. At the same time, legalized groups are supposed to work as devices of social policies. The agency of groups in the gang scenario is articulated through exit and voice. When confronting policies of exclusion, groups do enact once more a kind of exit and voice: by respectively trying to guarantee immunity and invisibility to their practices, or fighting for recognition. What seems to be a lack, in this case, is a form of loyalty, i.e., gangs – and this is a clear sign of the non-functioning of migrant and post-migrant incorporation – do not confer any loyalty to State institutions. For they are being perceived as criminal or pathological phenomena, and often excluded from the political system. Further, youth members of gangs are not implicated in a rhetoric of inclusion. When an inclusionary policy addresses them, it was always to justify itself before the *doxa* of natives and recognized citizens. In other words, why should we support criminals? In many cases, the *loci* and officers of the inclusionary policies in relation to gangs are hidden within the State machine. As a senior officer of the social service once told me in Barcelona, “the surgeon does not invite the public when he operates.” Eventually, what I would like to stress concerning Hagedorn's comments, is the need to conceive gangs' autonomy in relationship to the State as a pivotal actor in the production and reproduction of gang groups. “*Redirecting gangs is a struggle*,” says Hagedorn, “*not just against outside forces of repression, but also within gangs themselves*.” And follows: “[...] *we also should write in a way that is useful to activists and even gang members*.”

I totally subscribe to this, both as an activist and as an ethnographer. Let me briefly deepen some epistemological considerations, starting from the useful point of Hagedorn. We, as researchers, are actors in the field, which means that we stand and play, maybe in an unconscious way and with unintended consequences, in certain positions of that field. Gramsci taught us the importance of cultural hegemony and our writings, texts, imaginaries, symbolic productions are co-substantial in the struggle for hegemony. To open texts, and to break the crystallization of the knowledge we produce, requests to recognize the autonomy of gangs, their capacity to produce and

disseminate knowledge, and eventually subjectivity. My idea of social science is inspired by Burawoy's notion of a public sociology, one where mutual translation and the cooperative production of knowledge is assumed as part of the scientific enterprise. *The volume B* of our ethnography of a bureaucratic field of the State has been an essay of visual sociology, a collaborative film written by gang members;¹ our role as social scientists consisted in generating a field of empathy for the emerging of different self-narratives on the everyday life in these groups called gangs. We assumed the editing of the film, accepting the style codes of the participants who opted for fiction. Thanks to that code, our talk went beyond academia and other groups endowed of cultural capital, penetrating through *Facebook*, *Youtube* and other social networks, inside the gang scenario.

This is a good question for academics: in an era where index factors and the production of articles shape the intellectual condition, are we able to rethink social sciences through linking our various ways of writing to different codes, such as theatre, the arts, the production of images and performances? Ten years of research experience within gangs and other subaltern groups taught me that writing is a power-based machine, often perceived by subjects in the underworld as a powerful device of control. According to Conquergood [2002], only middle class academics assume that all life is a text, because writing and reading is so functional for their lives and their careers. How can we re-imagine our research *habitus* when we have to explore subaltern worlds, where knowledge is subjugated and reproduces itself following less objectified forms? Can research be re-thought as a common task that comes out of a cooperation frame unifying *researchers* and the *researched*, opening up a field for transparent struggles among different ways of interpreting social worlds?

Indeed, the way we practice research is always co-related to the knowledge we can extract and to the ability of this knowledge to construct and to spread broader imaginaries and narratives beyond the walls of academic markets; that which should be our role and position as intellectuals is something really far from current academic careers so umbilical in their *modus operandi*.

Let me now briefly conclude on the five issues in Dave Brotherton's comments regarding an agenda for further research in critical gangs studies.

Gangs perform, in my view, a right to the city labelled as problematic and pathological by urban regulators. They occupy and construct the urban environment in a de-commodified form. Their members are, as other categories of undeserving poor,

¹ *Buscando respeto* ("In search of respect"), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSMHicXO7F0>, [2013], has been directed by José Gonzalez Morandi, edited by Maria Romero Garcia, and produced by Laboratorio di Sociologia Visuale, Università di Genova, Universitat de Lleida.

a permanent target of expulsion devices, nonetheless, they permanently re-occupy such evacuated spaces. Gangs resist their expulsion as *war machines and through nomadic flows*, following Deleuze and Guattari's metaphors and they interrupt the urban order and then disappear avoiding, if possible, repression, in order to re-appear in other times and spaces. They are flows rather than solid presences. Differently from Chicago school perspectives, gangs do not act anymore in the interstices, in empty spaces, on the contrary they insist on full spaces, invested and shaped by the rationality, and the resources, of urban administrators and regulators. Somehow, without any intentional political attitude, gangs' practice of the city affirm the use-value of space against the exchange-value of the space. In Barcelona, the normalization process of gangs parallels the new regulations framed under the urban philosophy of *civiness*, whose very idea consists in a pedagogy about the legitimate use of the city: don't drink alcohol in the street (only in bars), don't beg, learn how to access formally to public spaces, avoid the *intensive use of space*. Such sets of rules, in terms of the two French theorists, perform the logic of an apparatus of capture. Understanding the conflicts and debates on urban spaces today is mainly through understanding the forms of capital extraction and the forms of subjectivity and resistance.

Gangs I observed are subjects, among others, in the field of working class youth styles and practices; they stand like a possible set of belongings, a structure of opportunity able to collect different forms of capitals. In my ethnographic field, gang members, the offsprings of global labour, used the imagined communities they invented as a way to resist symbolic humiliation associated to first and second generation migrants. Through gangs, youth try magically to resolve a structural position of *double absence*, in Sayad's terms about the symbolic place of migration. Doing so, they reinvent their social status in a society perceiving them as the consequences of an *inopportune posterity*.

If gangs articulate a field for permanent symbolic investments, the same is doing Criminal Justice in an age of punishment towards subalterns and, specifically, towards gang members; in Spain the judicial practices and efforts, as well as the media narratives, often emphasize minor and episodic crime appearances, and comfortably address as public, and suitable, enemies subjects who have structural problem (in-documentation, lack of economic resources, etc.) in front of the functioning of the judicial apparatus.

Finally, Brotherton stresses the point of accommodation and resistance. I always try to apply the concept of field in Bourdieu theory as a space for production and reproduction at the same time. Indeed, I suggest that we need to be careful of a too severe polarization among these terms: i.e., production/reproduction, accommodation/resistance. In my experience gangs' ways of acting are mainly ambivalent

gestures, according to the situation, time, space and power. Their gestures either accommodate to and resist the dominant order. Gangs reinvent the public space against market uses, and, nonetheless, they struggle against other similar groups of working class youth; they denounce police harassment, but they can develop harassment against their own members; they spread new imaginaries and narratives for humiliated youth and, once more, living as all of us in a capitalistic society driven, their ways of thinking and acting are not immune from sexism, homophobia, undemocratic attitudes and fascination for money. And so on.

Gangs are here to stay, as a structural part of the city in a post-migration society, imbued in their words and worlds with all the contradictions that a vulnerable position has no chance to avoid. For that reason, agency appears to researchers when we abandon the idea of a frontal confrontation, a cultural product of our socialization as activists and intellectuals, and we follow the suggestions of James Scott about the hidden transcriptions and the arts of resistance.

Escaping the pathological gaze on gangs and subalterns allow us to understand their presences as subjects of material and symbolic conflicts on capitals' distribution in an unequal society.

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Abstract: The focus of this article is the fabrication of gangs as a social problem in contemporary Spain. The mobilisation of several agencies during the last ten years to highlight, eradicate, heal this object-problem has created expert officials from different State bureaucracies, as well as models of relationship, career, cooperation and conflict. Using, in an heterodox way, some categories of critical thought and Bourdieu theory, the article explores ethnographically the functioning of this bureaucratic field, observing the policies and the policing of gangs, as well the everyday practices of agents of the right and left hand of the State in defining, constituting, managing, stigmatising these forms of subaltern youth sociability.

Keywords: *Gangs; Police; Youth; Migration; Policies.*

Luca Queirolo Palmas is professor in sociology of culture at Genoa University. His main fields of research are youth cultures and inequality, migration, prison life and street-gangs. Director of the laboratory of Visual Sociology (www.laboratoriosociologiavisuale.it) and co-director of the journal *Mondi Migranti*. Previous Senior Marie Curie Fellow at LLeida University.