

Introduction



Introduction: Global Gangs? Beyond Marginalization and Resilience

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Gangs are gangs, wherever they are found. They represent a specific type or variety of society, and one thing that is particularly interesting about them is the fact that they are, in respect to their organization, so elementary, and in respect to their origin, so spontaneous.

(Park, preface in Thrasher, 1927/2013, p. ix)



Gangs are described as an episodic phenomenon comparable across diverse geographical sites, with the US gang stereotype often operating as an archetype. Mirroring this trend, academic researchers have increasingly sought to survey the global topography of gangs through positivist methodologies that seek out universal characteristics of gangs in different cultural contexts. Following Thrasher's classical definition, a gang is "an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict" (Thrasher,

1927/2013, p. 57). This means that a gang is an informal group of locally rooted peers, in conflict with other peer groups, and sometimes with adult institutions. In short, we understand gangs as an elementary and spontaneous mode of informal sociality, as expressed by Park in his preface to Thrasher's pioneer study about Chicago youth street groups in the 1920s (*The Gang, Ibid.*). In the last century, the transitional zone of the classic slum, mainly male dominated, teenager, territorial, marginalized and viewed as violent gangs, has evolved to a more mixed, transgenerational, multi-sited, multipurposed and complex organization, which makes the group visible in their homeland but also in diasporic territories and in cyberspace (Feixa, Sánchez-García et al., 2019).

But, when delinquency was not considered as a fundamental attribute of youth street sociability, other concepts were used such as peer groups, street groups, subcultures, countercultures, lifestyles... reserving the term gang for street youth groups with members from migrant or ethnic minorities background in the western world, and no for other youth groups. Because of this, when defining what a gang is, it is mandatory to refer both to the use of the term by informants and native actors -to their 'emic' meanings- and to their use by researchers and external actors -to their 'ethic' meanings. In addition, the terms and meanings may vary according to the geographical locations and subcultural traditions that we consider. Our vocation here is to look towards global youth street groups with a local meaning. That is: with a global perspective. In 2006 we introduced the question of global youth, connecting hybrid cultures and plural worlds (Nilan and Feixa, 2006). Fifteen years later, we propose to rethink the issue of global gangs, discussed by many gang researchers in recent years (see Brotherton, 2015; Fraser and Hagedorn, 2018; Hagedorn, 2007; Hazen and Rodgers, 2014; Melde and Werman, 2020; Queirolo Palmas, 2016; van Gemert et al., 2008; Vigil, 2002; among others).

The articles in this special issue present theoretical, methodological and empirical research on global gangs, in the continuum of resistance and resilience. We understand resistance as a (sub)cultural movement that opposes the dominant or hegemonic culture. We understand resilience as an affective, cognitive, relational and behavioural process that combines effective skills as a response to a situation of risk or adversity. In some articles in this issue, the authors recognize youth street groups as forms of youth culture for resisting hegemonic discourses and practices and as social resilience institutions for dealing with and fighting stigmatization. On the other hand, some papers show us how transnational flows affect gang structures and cultures offering the members the economic means to stay alive, including critical perspectives of the "gang globalization" phenomena. The authors have been using methods to revert and understand the current situation of youth street groups across the globe refusing the (North) American centered perspective. In this issue,

the reader will travel from Colombia to Morocco passing through Southern Europe, Cuba or Algeria to understand the local meanings to be involved in a youth street group without forgetting the transnational connections and logics of these groups.

Transnationalism and Youth Street Groups

One of the main methodological and theoretical objectives of the *TRANSGANG* project, with which this special issue is connected, is to develop a renewed model for analysing youth gangs as transnational phenomena in the global age and offer an experimental model for comparing gangs in two transnational groups: Latinos¹ and Arabs.² By transnational we mean specific modes of mobility, exchange and emergent identities originating from the movement of persons, cultural flows, media, technological devices, capital, ideologies and cultures (Appadurai, 1996). Specifically, we are referring to “major transnationalism” (or transnationalism from above) that concerns gang policies, imaginaries and institutional answers, and also “minor transnationalism” (or transnationalism from below) that concerns young migrants, subcultural traditions and living strategies (Lionnet and Shih, 2005; Sassen, 2003). At the same time, the current transnationalism can be physical (mobility of persons and things) or virtual (mobility of symbols through old and new media). We consider three main types of transnational connections (Hannerz, 2010): North-South America (migration and gang culture transfer between the US, the Caribbean, Central and South America); South-North Mediterranean (migration and gang culture transfer between North Africa and southern Europe); America-Europe (migration and gang culture transfer between Latin America and southern Europe). Moreover, there are also other transnational connections, either mass mediated or subterranean.

This is the case in the article by **Elena Butti on Colombian Youth Gangs** as major transnationalism. The author suggest that the surge of transnational illicit economies has led to important transformations in gang structures and cultures. From locally-bound, solidarity-driven institutions, gangs have

1 In this text, we are using Latinos more than an ethnic label, we use it as a generic term for those people from migrant backgrounds who arrived from Latin America to Europe, even if their cultural and linguistic diversity is evident.

2 We use Arab more than in a cultural or linguistic sense, we use it with a geographical meaning to attend to the cultural and linguistic diversity in the region. In this sense, according to the cities selected in the region, Casablanca as a core case, and Tunis, Alger and Oran as contrast cases, we also use the term Maghrebi.

morphed into globally-connected, market-driven ones. The paper argues that the co-optation of youth gangs by transnational organized crime has drastically reduced the sense of protection, inclusion, and belonging that gangs provide to their youngest members. It has also hampered the role of gangs as institutions of cultural resistance and critique. By his part, the article by **Kamel Bourcherf and Razika Medjoub on gold sellers in Algeria** show us the subterranean transnationalism in the informal markets of gold. These markets play the role of intermediary between various actors in the informal gold sector, in particular transnational networks for the supply and marketing of the precious metal. This is part of non-hegemonic economic globalization and a blurry position between major and minor transnationalism. Clearly it is an illicit economic trade but it is also legitimated by both social rules and political instances. As the authors remark, this kind of trade is an “internationalization” of informal economy associated with the development of capitalism and corrupt economic practices.

Beyond illicit economic trade, three articles respond to cultural trends as examples of minor transnationalism. Firstly, the case of **urban music groups in Santiago de Cuba analysed by Ligia Lavielle**. The author shows groups, cultures and scenes emerged from private creations. Despite the fact that the protagonists of these expressions are alike in the point that their practices are relatively independent of the state management, their different tastes, objectives and cultural capitals allow them to take distance of each other. The main roots of these musical performers are transnational – reggae and rock – but they acquire local colors and meanings in the context of Cuban musical scene. The performers unfold transnational cultural capital. The members of the groups dream of sparkling style, where sex, consumer society and entertainment can break down the barriers of macro-socially regulated morality to express naturalized meanings attached to the world of the marginal according to the specific dialectic in Cuba.

Moving to Southern Europe, **Juan Camilo Mansilla and Paolo Grassi compare the practices of migrant youth street groups in Marseille and Milan**. In the two cities, groups of young people, through music production, NGO projects, or illicit drug trafficking networks, have developed globally-oriented strategies to create self-determination and creative spaces as an alternative to structural obstacles and marginalization. The significative question here is the use of global networks and productions to make culture as minor transnationalism present in the drug trade with connections with people in the other side of the Mediterranean. Although, in recent descriptions of the identity creation processes among youth groups, the influence of an alleged global culture centred on the creation of transnational communities (and the influence of music,

specifically pop, rock, rap, reggae and local hybrid scenes) have emerged as major axes for young populations. These cultural elements are setting the primary reference markers for identity negotiation that the authors reflect upon in relation to global youth. Their importance to youth cultures and youth street groups is determined by influencing choices. They invent new ways of understanding the body and diversifying transnational relations, and the possibility of participating in solidarity groups related to similar cultural practices.

In conclusion, transnationalism for youth street groups means the transfer of practices, knowledge, imaginaries and responses (that the youth groups themselves have acquired through migration, subcultural traditions or life strategies with connections) occur in a larger area than nation-states as the cases presented show us. These articles present new ways of talking about transnational youth gangs and displaying strategies and practices that conforms border spaces understood as the place occupied by youth street groups as agents that move between countries, live between public institutional recognition and criminalization processes, and which can become spaces of socialization that overcome, substitute or transfer social, political and cultural organisms existing in societies (Mignolo, 2003). Moreover, migratory processes that generate frameworks of thought saddled between the local and the global, weaving new epistemologies that guide the structures of thought and action of those agents who, through their vital processes, stand on the border between the assumption of the imperial epistemology and the maintenance of the resilient cultural practices. In some way, these border spaces have never been exclusive to the Third World as the articles demonstrate. With recent transnational migrations, these alternative spaces are expanding outside their spaces of origin and it has been introduced into the cities of Europe (de Sousa Santos, 2017; Mignolo, 2003). These border spaces, like physical places, are also located on the urban margins (neighbourhoods, corners, squares, cafés, etc.) so that, from that periphery space, subjects can think of themselves as subjects between two worlds.

Marginality and Resilience

As the different articles' remarks, cities and peripheral territories play a crucial role in cultivating a particular awareness of youth, as proposed by the subcultural perspectives (Bayat, 2012). Neighbourhoods, public parks, commercial centres, informal markets, corners and cafes provide key locations for the formation of youth street groups as elements of identity, care and resilience. Therefore, membership in spontaneous associations established mainly based

on place of residence seems to satisfy an immediate need to establish identity and claim dignity and, therefore, feel relevant and powerful. However, these groups, in the long term, do not transform structural forces or create the conditions that will lead to livelihoods, economic opportunities and secure futures. These sociabilities do not represent an alternative to a socioeconomic and political order, but rather a reaction to it, where dignity is increasingly sought in the capacity to consume.

As a consequence, in order to explore their sociability, two concepts are floating in the different analyses: resilience and resistance. Resilience is an affective, cognitive, relational and behavioural process that combines effective skills as a response to a situation of risk or adversity. This construction process consists in a balance between risk factors and protective factors at various levels, such as personal, family, community and contextual (Melillo and Suárez, 2001; Salgado, 2005). A good example of resilience is the case of **natural mediation** discussed by Maria Oliver and Eduard Ballesté comparing the case of **Madrid and Barcelona (Spain)**. This article focuses on the comparison of the current situation of the groups in both cities, attending to factors as internal structure, link to the territory and their position in the social space. Beyond this, the article pays attention to the mediation processes in which they are implicated, either internal or external, considering the possibilities of both natural and formal mediation. In the case of “natural” mediation exposed, we discover a special skill and knowledge that members of the groups are using to manage conflicts without the intervention of formal instances. Natural mediation is a kind of resilience of the groups to avoid violence and other social dramas. As we can see in the article, despite this, in terms of mediation, youth groups enjoy considerable legitimacy, allowing them to intervene in potential conflicts between the communities in question, on one hand, and between the communities and State institutions, on the other. Membership in these groups, either by kinship, or origin and/or shared residence obliges members to enter into conflict with security forces. Thus, according to our theoretical perspective (Feixa, Sánchez-García et al., 2019), we understand these spaces of sociability as border areas between the subaltern produced by modernization and colonization processes. The marginalization suffered by members of youth groups places them as separate subjects. But they do not accept the options or conditions that (from power) are presented or imposed on them (Mignolo, 2015).

Street groups are strategies for escaping from these situations, for generating action spaces, cultures of resilience and resistance that challenge the established social order as a whole. Thus, youth street groups can be seen as a generational gap and a strategy for benefitting from their ‘deviant’ position,

according to the institutional actors. In summary, “we consider the gang as a dynamic cultural formation in a context of exclusion and social transformation” (Feixa, Sánchez-García et al., 2019, p. 46) that can evolve towards more associative, cultural or sports forms, or may specialize in some type of criminal activity. This is the case of the members of the **Sidi Moussa youth street group in Morocco presented by Rachid Touhtou**. According to the author, street youth groups represent an underground urban counterculture where “class conflict” is being fed by lack of opportunities to climb the social ladder. Globalization (Wacquant, 2009) has psychologically and socially transformed youth into social “victims”/dreamers of “modern” wellbeing. With the failure of the Mahzen,³ young people are looking for ways to resist the marginalization that they suffer from, caused by structural and cultural conditions (Sánchez-Montijano and Sánchez-García, 2020). Also, the Algerian gold sellers are transforming their neighborhood space into an economic territory, which functions as a node in this system bottom-driven world. Selling drugs, stolen devices, guarding cars and other practices in the “safe space” that represents their quarter are trying to make their dreams real, more of them being related to the consumption of capitalist tendencies.

This spatialization of youth street groups, which often does not renounce occupying the central spaces of the city or passively accepting their marginalization, is a fundamental variable when exploring the conflicts and mediations that are generated in governance contexts. These border spaces are located on the margins of the social world, also physically, so that subjects can think of themselves as subjects between two worlds. In this way, youth street groups constitute border spaces that use strategies from both the global world and local memory and practices, conferring power to that space that young people re-signify as response spaces, which in the Maghreb, as Kamel Boucheref and Razika Medjoub and Rachid Touhtou point out, are always constituted as a disruptive or defiant political space. There is, therefore, a social, political and cultural occupation on the border that takes on a conjugation of different positions in the social structure, in the political space and also in the processes of cultural hegemony and counter-hegemony (Feixa, Sánchez-García et al., 2019, p. 70).

As noted in the different articles, if the youth street group responses have something in common, it is marginalization, their stigma and their exclusion,

3 The Makhzen, literally “warehouse” in Arabic Fusha, is a very ancient notion in Morocco, it roughly coincides with the notion of the feudal state predating the French protectorate in Morocco. Bilād al-makhzen (‘the land of the makhzen’) was the term for the areas under central government authority, while those areas still run by tribal authority were known as bilād as-siba (‘the land of dissidence’). Actually, the term “Makhzen” is also popularly used in Morocco as a word meaning “State” or “Government” or “the people loyal to the king”.

whether for political, ideological, generational, cultural, socio-economic or spatial reasons. Therefore, including youth street sociabilities is relevant as there is a generalized inclination to sum up this phenomenon as a crime condemned by the State without recognising the economic and political challenges involved. The State makes use of its power and judicial instruments to benefit from a flexible policy that translates into the use of its right or left hand, in the terms of Wacquant. It is a situation that requires good relationships in the street, a network, to continue resisting the arbitrariness of police power.

The *Continuum* of Youth Street Groups

The different articles and findings make it necessary to update Thrasher's classic definition by incorporating the context of the 'network society' and considering the gang not as a single model but as a 'continuum' (Feixa, Sánchez-García et al, 2019). At one extreme we find, always ideally, the classic gangs based on illegal activities and not only formed by young people – like the *combos* in Colombia and the *tcharmil* in Marocco. At the other extreme, we find youth subcultures based on leisure and economic activities – like the *rastafaris* in Cuba and the *rappers* in France and Italy. And in the middle, there are a variety of hybrid groups that combine both strategies – like the gold sellers in Algeria and the *latin kings* in Spain.

Thus, there are different indicators that allow an informal street youth association to be included among youth street groups. The existence of a "*gang*" implies the presence of five indicators: a) a name; b) an external label; c) an internal conscience; d) ordinary activities; and e) continuity over time for more than one year. Therefore, from these characteristics a gang can include, as the different authors remarks, deviant behaviour, but also nondeviant behaviour, people of different generations (adolescents, and young-adults), genders (men, women and LGTBI), and ethnic, social and territorial origins. But at the end what matters is not only social practices and structures, but also cultural imageries: the so called "gang talk" (Hallsworth and Young, 2008), that came from the American "gansta" style and has become a global icon rooted in cinema, television and in new media (Fernández-Planells et al., 2020).

In adultcentric societies, gangs are viewed as live laboratories for the negotiation of what is allowed and was it not allowed in social relations. On the one hand, the dialectics of legal-illegal and legitimate-illegitimate behaviours transform the complexity of this continuum in dualistic oppositions, that produce ambiguities in the interactions between gang members with social

authorities, institutions and the social environment. On the other hand, youth street groups remain on the few universals present in different geographical sites and cultural contexts across the world (Hazen and Rodgers, 2014).

Last but not least, for the best and for the worst, currently these groups are not isolated, local and face-to-face social microstructures, but interconnected, global and also virtual social networks. For the best, because these connections allow its members to share knowledges, resources and cures in subaltern and migrant transnational spaces. For the worst, because criminal activities, gangster imageries and even 'hard hand' policies and polices became also global. In the end, the case studies presented in this special issue introduce a key research question, to be answered in future investigations: shall we talk about cosmopolitan gangs?

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