# Reluctant Criminologists: Criminology, Ideology and the Violent Youth Gang

*John Pitts*

**Abstract:**

*In the light of governmental concerns, and increased government investment, in strategies to deal with youth gangs, one might have expected criminology to have been at the forefront. In fact criminologists in both the mainstream and on the 'left' have not only been reluctant to engage with the 'gang problem' but have, in some cases, effectively denied the existence of gangs and the 'gang problem'. This article explores why this might be and how this denial is serving to deflect attention from the changing nature of the 'gang' and the threat this poses to young people and families in gang-affected neighbourhoods.*

**Key words:** Youth Gangs, Left Idealism, Gang Proliferation, Criminology.

IN MAY 2012, the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), using the following definition reported that they had identified 259 violent gangs and 4,800 'gang nominals' in 19 gang-affected boroughs in London. The national figure is thought to be several times this number. These gangs, the MPS suggests, range from organised criminal networks involved in Class A drug dealing and firearms supply, to street gangs perpetrating violence and robbery. These 259 gangs are thought to be responsible for 22% of the serious violence in the capital, 17% of the robberies, 50% of the shootings and 14% of rapes:

> *A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who (1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, (2) engage in a range of criminal activities and violence, (3) identify with or lay claim over territory, (4) have some form of identifying structural feature, and (5) are in conflict with other, similar, gangs.*
>
> <div align="right">(Pitts, 2008; Centre for Social Justice, 2009)</div>

Assuming that the Metropolitan Police are not 'making this up' (of which more later), one might have thought that the 'violent gang' would have attracted a great deal of academic attention. But not so. Indeed, a hallmark of the contemporary debate about youth gangs in both mainstream and left-liberal criminology in the UK is its apparent scepticism about the very existence of such an entity. Thus, discussion veers between speculative characterisations of gang-involved young people's families, largely futile squabbles over definitions (cf Youth Justice Board, 2007), the

debunking of 'gang mythologies' (cf Aldridge et al, 2011) or clichéd representations of the gang as a product of the fevered imaginings of a malevolent state (Hallsworth, 2011). However, this reticence is prompted not so much by doubts about whether gangs exist or not but by the belief that 'gangs', as an object of criminological analysis or political intervention, either cannot or should not exist.

## Individualisation

Most mainstream criminologists remain insouciant about the gang question because they have already answered it. For them, the gang as an object of serious criminological enquiry is, at best, a subsidiary concern because, ultimately, crime of any sort, and crime rates, are explicable in terms of the moral character, proclivities or deficiencies of criminal individuals and the situational strategies and social interventions put in place by the authorities to contain them. This view finds expression in the 'risk factor' paradigm' (Pitts, 2008) and the logic of its perspective dictates that the gang can be no more than an incidental repository for the aggregation of the risk factors besetting its affiliates.

However, dissatisfaction with this simplistic approach, which arises in large part from the failure of the proponents of the risk factor paradigm to consider the historical conditions that have fostered the emergence of youth gangs and the economic, social and cultural circumstances that have sustained them, has led some criminologists to investigate the processes or developmental pathways that intervene between risk factors and outcomes ... in order to ... bridge the gap between risk factor research and more complex explanatory theories (Boeck et al, 2006). This revised project is rooted in an acknowledgement that the impetus towards crime and violence may have multiple causes; that subtle differences in initial conditions may, over time, produce remarkably different outcomes (Byrne, 1988), meaning that children initially deemed to be 'at risk' in similar ways embark upon different criminal pathways while some 'high risk' children do not go on to offend at all (Farrington, 2000).

But, none of this high-falutin' thinking has percolated down to the Department for Communities' Troubled Families Team, brought into being in the wake of the August 2011 riots, and headed by erstwhile Anti-Social Behaviour Tsar, Louise Casey. The Team is charged with identifying and intervening with the 120,000 troubled families whose children are most likely to become rioters and gangsters. But how shall we know them? We shall know them, it seems, because 'scientific evidence' derived from New Labour's Family Intervention Projects (FIPs), over which Louise Casey also presided, is said to indicate that they will be beset by five or more of the following risk factors:

1. A low income,
2. No-one in the family is in work,
3. Living in poor housing,
4. Parents have no qualifications,
5. Mother has a mental health problem,
6. One parent has a long-standing illness or disability
7. The family is unable to afford basics, including food and clothes.

Leaving to one side the disputed veracity of the findings of the FIP research (cf Gregg, 2010) and the fact that at least six of these risk factors are indicators of poverty rather than criminality, the evidence that they are the characteristics of the families of gang affiliates is vanishingly slight. Nonetheless, the Troubled Families Team has a budget of £448,000,000; 44 times greater than the Home Office, Ending Gang and Youth Violence initiative. Worries about the dubious theoretical logic of the intervention will doubtless be compounded by the fact that in several local authority areas the contract to 'turn' these troubled families 'around' has been awarded to G4S.

## We Blame the Parents

But why this focus upon 'troubled families'? Because, in the wake of the 2011 riots, David Cameron, in thrall to Iain Duncan Smith's re-working of Charles Murray's 'underclass thesis' (1984), had pledged that by the end of his first term he would 'turn around' the 120,000 troubled families in Britain who were at the root of the nation's social problems. As Duncan Smith had earlier observed in his Broken Britain manifesto:

> *Most significantly however, a catalyst and consequence of these pathways to poverty, is the breakdown of the family. Marriage, far more stable than cohabitation, has rapidly declined in recent decades; 15 per cent of babies in Britain are now born without a resident biological father; and we have the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe. Without strong families violent and lawless street gangs, whose leaders are often school age, offer a deadly alternative.*

(Centre for Social Justice, 2008)

This assault upon the poor and unpartnered suggests that poverty is a by-product of an overweening welfare state that rewards fecklessness, undermines individual responsibility and discourages parental propriety, producing a culture of dependency and entitlement wherein sexual profligacy and criminality become the norm. Thus, the 'broken' (risk-factor rich) 'family' becomes the progenitor of the 'broken society'. However, far from generating their own poverty through fecklessness, most single parents are working.

There are, today, around 2,000,000 single parents in England and Wales (26% of households with children). Only 3% of these families are headed by a teenager. Over 50% of single parents with children under 12, and 71% with children over 12, are in work (a higher proportion than for 'couple' families).

As to the link between single parenthood and gang involvement, we have already noted that the Metropolitan Police (2012) have identified 259 violent youth gangs with 4,800 'gang nominals'. There are approximately 700,000 children and young people aged between 12 and 25 living in single parent families in Greater London. If we assume that around two thirds of MPS 'gang nominals' come from single parent families, it means that Greater London's single parent families contribute fewer than 0.005% of 'gang nominals'.

This suggests that single parenthood per se, does not have an 'independent effect' upon the involvement of children and young people in violent youth gangs and that, therefore, something more complex must be at work. Whether this will cause mainstream criminology to abandon its quest for the cure for Louise Casey's 120,000 troubled families remains to be seen.

## Sympathy for the Devil

In his book *Power, Conflict and Criminalisation*, Philip Scraton (2007) contends that 'adult power':

*… was reinforced and reproduced through dominant ideologies that ascribed behavioural norms to the developing child. The social, political and cultural construction of the 'normal child' resulted in techniques of normalisation while targeting those who transgressed its boundaries as 'abnormal', 'deviant' and 'criminal'. This included policing children's individual and collective resistance to interpersonal, familial and institutional exertion of power by significant adults in their lives.*

Yet, as Terry Eagleton (2003) has argued:

*It is a mistake to believe that norms are always restrictive. In fact it is a crass romantic delusion. It is normative in our kind of society … that child murderers are punished, that working men and women may withdraw their labour, and that ambulances speeding to a traffic accident should not be impeded just for the hell of it. Anyone who feels oppressed by all this must be seriously oversensitive. Only an intellectual who has overdosed on abstraction could be dim enough to imagine that whatever bends a norm is politically radical.*

Nonetheless Scraton insists that the imposition of norms has led inevitably to the 'demonization' of the young; a process in which:

> *... individuals, groups or communities are ascribed a public, negative reputation associated with pathological malevolence often popularly represented as 'evil'. While ideological in construction and transmission, demonisation has tangible consequences in social and societal reactions.*

This undifferentiated assault upon 'adult power', also known as 'social control', may contain a kernel of truth but, as the revered criminologist Stanley Cohen (1985) has observed:

> *The term 'social control' has lately become a Mickey Mouse concept, used to include all social processes ranging from infant socialisation to public execution, all social policies whether called health, education or welfare.*

## 'Right-on' but Irrelevant

This preoccupation with the corrosive impact of 'social control' means that crime, and the harm it generates, particularly for those at the bottom of the social structure, is at least minimised and at worst wholly ignored (Lea and Young, 1984; Young and Matthews, 1992; Matthews and Young, 1992). As Elliott Currie (1986) observes:

> *This minimisation of the impact of crime and an unwillingness to make the link between poverty and crime finds its corollary in an idealisation of the criminal as a kind of proto-revolutionary.*

Moreover, he argues, such unreflective partisanship renders these social scientists politically irrelevant by perpetuating '... an image of progressives as being both fuzzy-minded and, much worse, unconcerned about the realities of life'.

These telling criticisms notwithstanding, the type of criminology practised by Scraton and other 'Left Idealists' (see Lea and Young, 1984) permeates the contemporary debate about youth gangs. They do have a point of course. There are historical continuities between youth subcultures past and present and the, sometimes misplaced, social anxieties they engender (Pearson, 1983). There are also many adolescent groups in the UK characterised by fluid membership and porous boundaries, engaged in relatively innocuous adolescent misbehaviour that are wrongly identified as 'gangs' (Klein, 2008). It is also true that the term 'gang' is used indiscriminately in popular discourse, the media and the criminal justice system and that, all too often, its use is stigmatising and racist (cf

Alexander, 2008). Moreover, from the late 1970s, successive UK governments have exploited the fear of crime for electoral advantage (Pitts, 2003).

But violent youth gangs do exist and their existence poses a serious threat to the safety, well-being, and in some cases the lives, of the children, young people and adults who live in gang-affected neighbourhoods (Bullock and Tilley, 2002; Youth Justice Board, 2007; Palmer and Pitts, 2006; Pitts, 2008; Matthews and Pitts 2007; Palmer, 2009; Centre for Social Justice, 2009; Balasunderam, 2009; Pitts, 2011).

Unlike the people condemned to live in gang-affected neighbourhoods and those who work there, these crime-averse criminologists effectively 'wash their hands' of the sometimes lethal gang-related crime and violence that occurs in them. They are however vehemently opposed to what they regard as the oppressive 'social reaction' to this 'alleged' behaviour, an opposition which is regularly rehearsed to audiences of like-minded 'progressives' at international conferences and seminars. Thus an endorsement on the back cover of a recent academic tome ostensibly concerned with 'gangs, territoriality and violence' (Goldson, 2011) reads:

> *Goldson's collection is the first in the UK to systematically and critically expose the 'crisis discourses', amnesia and minimal knowledge that routinely surround the burgeoning 'gang control industry'.*
>
> (Muncie, 2011)

## Comrade Lenin, Loquacious Left Bankers and Labelling Theory

These criminological critiques of social reaction draw their intellectual sustenance from a variety of, not necessarily compatible, sources. At the heavy end are those who continue to carry the torch for, or at least wear a badge depicting, Vladimir Illich Lenin (1905), the Marxist revolutionary who regarded theorising as a political intervention that would help to achieve ideological unanimity. Hence Lenin's somewhat idiosyncratic approach to the frank and open exchange of conflicting viewpoints:

> *The principle of democratic centralism and autonomy for local Party organisations implies universal and full freedom to criticise, so long as this does not disturb the unity of a definite action; it rules out all criticism which disrupts or makes difficult the unity of an action decided on by the Party.*
>
> (Lenin, 1905)

For the dwindling band of latter-day criminological Leninists in Anglo-America and the European mainland, the party line dictates that the 'gang' is a fabrication of, what the, subsequently

incarcerated, Marxist-Leninist philosopher Louis Althusser (1969) termed, the 'ideological state apparatus'; the purpose of which is to deflect attention from the real contradictions of capitalism towards allegedly problematic 'outgroups'. This strategy, by setting one section of the working class against another is, Leninists agree, also designed to undermine class solidarity.

Lenin's original deliberations were subsequently augmented by two French psychiatrists, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guttari (1972) who had fallen under the spell of post-modernism. They argued that because the ideological state apparatus generated Arborescent forms of knowledge, spinning simplistic 'totalisations', like the idea of 'the gang', from diverse and contradictory social phenomena; radicals should embrace a, non-totalising, Rhizomatic epistemology in which any phenomenon might be linked with any other, irrespective of its species. They explain this strategy thus:

> The ... rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible to neither the One or the multiple. It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three, four, five etc. It is not a multiple derived from the one, or to which one is added (n+1). It is comprised not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills.

This elucidation could be unfathomably brilliant, a dire warning against theorising whilst stoned, or a salutary instance of Frederick Nietzsche's observation that those who know they are profound strive for clarity (while) those who would like to seem profound strive for obscurity (Dyer, 1999). Unsurprisingly, Deleuze and Guattari have attracted criticism (see for example, Sokal and Briemont, 1998, *Fashionable Nonsense*, and Dyer, 1999, *Artificial Stupidity*). Writing in 1999, Geoff Dyer observes:

> Nowadays it would bestow about the same intellectual gravitas as a dunce's cap. And the whole idiom of discoursese has ossified to the extent that it is now actually insight-resistant: it is impossible to formulate interesting – let alone original – thought in these terms.

This is largely because the logic of rhizomatic thinking, with its insistence that the 'true' nature of social phenomena is unknowable and that any attempt to organise these phenomena into categories or causal chains is necessarily oppressive, actually negates the possibility of human thought, let alone human communication, altogether. Human communication is predicated upon a shared understanding of the meanings of words, or of the words we use to dispute their meaning, and a shared perception of the basic characteristics of the world we inhabit. (eg Norwich is in Norfolk /My bank is in the High Street – this said; although post-modernists might dispute the example

of Norwich, they all seem to know the way to the bank), and a belief that, by and large, the person with whom we are talking is endeavouring to speak the truth. Without this, communication becomes impossible. As Jurgen Habermas (1981) observes:

> *Postmodernists ignore what is absolutely central to any sociological analysis, namely, everyday life and its practices.*

The derision to which the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari have been subjected notwithstanding, Hallsworth and Young (2011) appear to believe that this is the perspective from which we should view the violent youth gang, namely as a fantastic social construction, existing only in the schizoid imaginings of an oppressive 'state'.

## Disabled by a Label

C. Wright Mills (1957) argues that if we are to understand social phenomena, we must develop an appreciation of their history and the subtle interplay of the social and economic structures, the cultures and the biographies which shape them. However, for the romantically inclined left-liberal criminologist, labelling theory, which eschews every one of these considerations, is the theoretical perspective of choice (Taylor et al, 1973), albeit one which is infrequently acknowledged. While the antipathy towards the state is slightly less evident in labelling theory than in the (vulgar) Marxist-Leninist account described above, it too weaves a tale of how, ultimately, 'gangs' are spoken into being by the state.

Kitsuse (1962), one of the original 'labelling theorists' makes the astute, if tautological, observation that:

> *Deviance is not a property inherent in certain forms of behaviour; it is a property conferred upon these forms by the audiences which directly or indirectly witness them.*

But Lemert (1967) 'ups the stakes' considerably in arguing that:

> *This is a large turn away from an older sociology which tended to rely heavily upon the idea that deviance leads to social control. I have come to believe that the reverse idea, ie, that social control leads to deviance, is equally tenable and the potentially richer premise for studying deviance in modern society.*

And, of course, the groups upon which the labels are conferred, Liazoz's 'Nuts, Sluts and Perverts' (1972) are, almost always, the poor or the oppressed, while those conferring the labels are, almost always, the well-to-do and the powerful. As Howard Becker in his groundbreaking essay 'Whose

Side Are We On?' (1963) observes:

> *In any system of ranked groups, participants take it as given that members of the highest group have the right to define the way things really are.*

If, he argues, this 'hierarchy of credibility', is a universal feature of the social world, then social scientists have a moral obligation to 'tell it like it is' from the perspective of the powerless and the oppressed who are the subjects of labelling.

Ignoring the well worn criticisms that labelling theory fails to account for primary deviance, ie why they do it in the first place and that, from the outset, it focussed mainly upon 'crimes without victims', left-liberal criminology sets out to challenge what it perceives to be the 'demonization' of lower class youth by powerful labellers. However, this romanticisation of, or identification with, the 'labelled' subject tends to work best in the abstract and so too does its corollary; an unreflective antipathy towards the 'zoo keepers of deviance' (Taylor et al, 1973), the psychiatric nurses, the social workers, the teachers, and the alleged labellers: 'the police', 'the professionals', 'the press', 'the government' and, of course, 'public opinion'.

But the real world seldom throws up such simple binary choices between the good guys and the bad, the labelled and the labellers. If we are on the side of young men labelled as 'gangsters', who will be on the side of the young men they have shot and killed, and their families? Probably not left-liberal criminologists, because to be on their side would mean acknowledging that the idea of the violent youth gang might have some substance.

The sting in the tail of labelling theory for those who use it as a stick with which to beat suspected labellers is its contention that if the label is conferred publicly and dramatically by those who have the power to impose their 'definition of the situation' upon the subject, this will spoil their identity and the deviant role ('thief', 'junkie' 'gangster'), once imposed, will then become their master role which they will re-enact in perpetuity. Cultural Criminology, a contemporary reincarnation of labelling theory but, importantly, one which takes cognisance of the subtle interplay between real crime and its representation, points to the mirroring role of the media in this process.

> *Deviants look at the media representation of a lifestyle and think that is how they need to act and behave. Cultural criminology strives to place this interplay deep within the vast proliferation of media images of crime and deviance, where every facet of offending is reflected in a vast hall of mirrors.*

<div align="right">(Ferrell et al, 2008)</div>

But if Labelling Theory and Cultural Criminology are even half right about the process of 'becoming deviant' (Matza, 1969), violent youth gangs exist; the dogged denials of left-liberal criminology notwithstanding (Aldridge et al, 2008, 2011).

## The Changing Gang Form

Left-liberal criminology's de facto denial of gangs means that it cannot countenance the possibility that the gangs, in which it does not believe, are changing. However, many people; police officers, youth and social workers, health care professionals and others working with gang-affiliated young people, as well as the families who live in gang-affected neighbourhoods, believe that they are.

The 28s emerged in Lambeth in 1988. It was composed of 28 British born black and mixed heritage young men who had attended the same school. In the mid-1980s, Brixton had become home to drug dealing posses from Kingston, Jamaica. Although they were originally involved only in street crime the 28s soon graduated to drug dealing. But this latter activity brought them into conflict with the Jamaican posses, involving them in violent 'turf' disputes resulting in the deaths of several gang members.

By the mid-1990s, a new generation of 28s re-branded as the PDC (Peel Dem Crew/Poverty Driven Children) had emerged. The PDC consisted of a hardcore of young men, Elders, in their late teens and early twenties, attended by crews, small groups of younger boys known variously as 'Youngers', 'Run-arounds', 'Soldiers' or 'Sabos' (derived from 'saboteurs'), aged around 14 and 15, who acted as 'foot soldiers' for the gang, and younger children Tinys who ran errands for them. Elders tended to make their 'Ps' (money) from drug dealing (largely Skunk, Crack Cocaine and Heroin) or 'taxing' 'shotters' who dealt drugs in their area. The PDC also has several legitimate businesses, including a barbershop on the Angell Town estate called Prestige Designer Cuts, and a record label, Public Demand Cartel.

The younger crews, like the MZ, the SW2 Boys and the Stockwell Park Crew, normally consisted of young people who lived on the same estates or attended the same schools.

Gang Youngers sometimes dealt 'soft' drugs on a small scale but one of their main roles was to collect the proceeds from hard drug sales for the Elders, some of whom were connected into the upper echelons of the drugs business. The Youngers were left to make what money they could from low-level 'soft' drug dealing and street crime. By the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, the PDC was considered to be the biggest gang in London. They were certainly one of the most highly publicised and one of the most violent. However from 2007, a series of drug – and respect-related murders of senior PDC figures, the arrest and imprisonment of five others on firearms charges, and agitation from below, meant that the PDC began to fragment into a plethora of new, younger, gangs.

In the late 1980s there was only one 'gang' in Manchester's Moss Side; the Pepperhill Crew, so called because they met at the Pepperhill public house. In 1990 a shebeen, an illegal drinking den, was set up near Gooch Close and some of the Pepperhill Crew from that side of the Alexandra Park estate started to congregate there. Because most of the remaining members of the Pepperhill Crew lived on or close to Doddington Close, they rebranded themselves the Doddington Close Gang. There were now two gangs, the Doddington Close Gang on the eastern side of the estate and the Gooch Close Gang on the western side. Both groups were dealing narcotics, but they co-existed peacefully enough. However, this all changed when a member of the Doddington left an expensive leather jacket at his girlfriend's house on the western side of the estate. The following day a member of the Gooch was seen wearing it. The Doddington took this to be a token of extreme disrespect and in March 1991 a member of the Gooch was shot in a 'drive-by' shooting on Gooch Close. This incident was the catalyst for over 20 tit-for-tat murders during the next decade. In 1995, Raymond Pitt was killed by members of the Doddington (his own gang) and his assassins and their associates founded a new gang, the Pitt Bull Crew, under the leadership of Raymond's brother Tommy. The Pitt Bull Crew then entered an uneasy alliance with the Gooch Close Gang, but the killing continued unabated. In 1996, the murder of 17 year old Orville Bell by the Young Gooch was the catalyst for the formation of the Longsight Crew by Orville's brother Julian. A series of tit-for-tat shootings ensued and, as a result, in June 1997, five members of the Young Gooch were sentenced to 43 years in prison for firearms related offences. Nonetheless the violent conflict between the Young Gooch, Doddington and Longsight gangs continued into the 21st century until, in late 2007, on the basis of evidence from 'gang members' and an elaborate 'wire tap', GMP's Operation VIOLA arrested 11 senior members of the Gooch Close Gang and, in April 2009, at Liverpool Crown Court, they were convicted of 154 shootings, including 5 murders, 5 attempted murders and 94 serious woundings.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, the groups that transmogrified, first into violent street gangs and then criminal business organisations would probably have remained what they were originally; 'posses' of disenchanted young black men making a living from street robbery, burglary and 'steaming'. But in the 1980s and 1990s they rose to notoriety on the tidal wave of class A drugs flooding into Britain (Silverman, 1993) and a sudden over-supply of firearms. They became the local street presence for an international trade in Class A drugs facilitated by familial and fraternal connections to the Caribbean or the Indian sub-continent. In the 1990s cocaine trafficking constituted over 40% of Jamaica's GDP, (Silverman, 1993). But as this lucrative market grew, so too did the violence, and while some of those at the top were handsomely rewarded for their involvement in this fiercely competitive trade, many others were murdered, maimed or jailed. Some of the survivors were absorbed into the upper echelons of organized crime, a few went straight, while others became 'virtual gang experts' or members of police-community consultative committees. But their retirement has not marked the end of gang violence in these areas.

This period also saw the emergence of 'Asian' self-defence groups, endeavouring to protect their communities from violent 'skinhead' invasions. In London, groups of older Bangladeshi adolescents and young adults mounted a fierce and protracted 'fight-back' against the young men professing allegiance to the far-right British National Party or Column 88. These groups, the Brick Lane Mafia, the Docklands Light Posse and Shadwell Community Defence, claimed to be offering the protection that the police had failed to provide. This too was the impetus for the formation, in Birmingham, of The Lynx Gang and the Muslim Birmingham Panthers formed in response to the threat posed by both White, far-right, 'skinheads' and two predominantly Black African-Caribbean gangs the Johnsons and the Burger Bar Boys. However, the Asian vigilantes of the 1980s had, by the late 1990s, transmogrified into violent street gangs, some of which were heavily involved in Class A drug dealing. Indeed by the 1990s, several of the estates in Tower Hamlets had become major centres of the London heroin trade.

## The Losangelisation of the English Street Gang

Although the jailing of Manchester's Young Gooch in 2008/9 and the waning of the PDC as a result of imprisonment and murder marked the end of what were in effect criminal business organisations with a strong street presence, it did not signal the end of gang crime in these areas (Pitts, 2011). Instead, it presaged a proliferation of more, more chaotic, and younger gangs.

A survey conducted in Lambeth in 2007 identified over forty named 'gangs' in the borough (Ahmed and Pitts, 2007), the most notable being ABM (All Bout Money), TN-1 (Tell No-one) the Acre Lane Campaign, all of which identified themselves as Crips; and Murderzone, T-Block, Gipset, O31 Bloods (Otrey), OC (Organised Crime) and the GAS Gang, who claimed affiliation to the Bloods. This proliferation of younger gangs was accompanied by a sharp escalation in gang violence.

In South Manchester, in 2007/8, following the arrests of the Young Gooch, there were a record 146 firearms discharges. In Lambeth in 2007 there were 23 gang-related murders.

What set these new gangs apart was not their involvement in violent conflict per se – this was a characteristic of the gangs they had superseded; it was that, as with the fighting gangs described by Cloward and Ohlin (1960), violence now became their raison d'être because involvement in gang violence was their primary, and in some cases only, source of status and respect. These new gangs maintained a strident presence on social networking sites and made no secret of their illicit activities. They were audacious, sometimes suicidally so, undertaking 'invasions' of territory 'owned' by armed adversaries, simply to enhance the 'respect' in which they were held.

The identification of the Gooch and the Doddington gangs with the Bloods and the Crips is said to stem from a failed attempt by former Los Angeles Crip Juan Longino to broker a truce between them in 1994. The new gangs that eventually coalesced around the Gooch and the Doddington

claimed a tripartite affiliation to the Gooch and the Doddington, the Crips and the Bloods and Blue Team and Red Team (Manchester City and Manchester United football clubs). These newcomers included the OTC (Old Trafford Crips), the Rusholme Crips, the Fallowfield Mandem/Mad Dogs, HGC (Home Grown Crew) and HCG (Holdgate Close Gang) who claimed affiliation to the Gooch/ Crips, in the eastern part of South Manchester and the Longsight Crew, the Young Doddington Crew and the MSB (Moss Side Bloods) in the west, who operated under the banner of the Doddington/ Bloods. The current ACPO gang survey has identified over 40 gangs in Greater Manchester.

In 2010, 26, primarily Bengali, gangs were identified in Tower Hamlets . Their members were younger and their activities more violent. They too claimed affiliation to the Crips or the Bloods. One of the original Brick Lane Mafia observed:

> *What these new boys across Bethnal Green and Poplar don't realise is that we had reason to 'make noise' back in the day, we were protecting ourselves for most of the time, our noise was used as a defence not as a weapon. Today, the up and comers are making noise purely to start beef. People today saying E1 is not what it used to be, they forget Brick Lane had it all, it's our area that is keeping Bengali culture and religion alive, unlike those up there who follow cultures that ain't even theirs. They boast about being Bengali yet they talk with black influenced slang and praise Tupac.*

The structure of these new groupings is similar to those in Los Angeles, in that the many smaller gangs and crews claim affiliation to either the Crips or the Bloods (Carter, 2012). This changed identification also marks a shift from a gang culture rooted in local economic, cultural and political realities and indigenous traditions, to one in which the key (sub-) cultural reference points are global not local; mediated via film, the internet (Peter and Valkenburg 2007), music (Weitzer and Kubrin 2009), and Playstation games, rather than experienced directly. In 'Learning to Become a Gangster', Tea Bengtsson (2012) demonstrates how three boys in a young offenders centre in Denmark teach a new boy to become a 'real gangster'. This involves learning the central elements of 'gangster style' as well as tips about how to manage oneself out on the streets, where the values of respect, loyalty and criminality are central to the successful discharge of the role.

Jean Baudrillard (1998) speaks of 'hyper-reality'; a state in which the subject, bombarded by the media, finds difficulty in distinguishing between what is real and what is fictional. As the two realms become blurred, Baudrillard argues, the human subject comes to seek fulfillment through simulation and imitation of transient simulacra of reality, rather than through an encounter with the 'real'.

One key aspect of a gang member's mediated reality lies in the palm of his hand; his Blackberry, which replays a version of events in which he was involved with an ever more elaborate commentary crafted by a growing band of 'significant others' who ascribe meaning, attribute responsibility and,

like a Greek Chorus, chronicle the ebb and flow of the protagonists' status. Simon Harding (2012), who undertook fieldwork in central Lambeth, writes:

> The gang suffers further violation when images of the incursion are posted (marketed) widely on SNSs (Social Networking Sites). The violation is played out endlessly in cyber-space repeating the humiliation: each viewing diminishing the relevant Street Credit of the gang. This is addressed quickly via an impact statement and a challenge – a Retort, quickly posted to counteract the damage done. A verbalised 'impact statement' denies any current or lasting damage by the incursion, 'ain't no big deal', even suggesting it was permitted, 'we let you Bruv, so we could film you and know who you are'. A challenge is then made, inviting the visitants to repeat their win. Retaliation is promised in strong terms and the consequences for this violation made clear. By posting this Retort, the violated gang attempt to stem the damage done to their own Street Credit. As the drama now plays out in cyberspace, one negative advert is met with another. Those violated by the incursion now clamour to get 'face time' on screen in the posted Retort. Large numbers are corralled as evidence of support and the strength of the gang. Insults fly and individuals are singled out and targeted for 'dissing'.

Given their origins in the entertainment industry (Hagedorn, 2008) the styles and social practices that gang members absorb from globalised 'gangsta' culture tend to be preposterous caricatures of human behaviour. This means that affiliates are destined always to be 'wannabees', aspiring, and urged on by peers, to achieve ways of being which are unattainable. But, as Cristia Emini (2011) notes, 'wannabees' are the most dangerous kind of gang affiliates because they will do anything in their attempts to be accepted as the 'real thing'.

One particularly worrying aspect of this quest for authenticity in this hyper-real world is the apparent rise in group sexual assault (MPS, 2012) and gang-related sexual violence (Firmin, 2011); a product of a (mis)conception about how proper 'gangstas' conduct their sexual relationships, gleaned primarily from commercial media (Hagedorn, 2008). This misconception is compounded by a tidal wave of readily accessible pornography available on the Web (Flood, 2009) and the capacity of individuals to generate a home grown versions via 'sexting' (Ringrose et al, 2012). This 'sexualisation of culture' perpetuates the association between masculinity and predatory sexual prowess and, according to Coy (2009), justifies sexual violence.

## The Proliferation of Gangs and Gang Culture

Early findings from the ACPO gang survey suggest that we are not only witnessing the proliferation of new, younger, gangs in established gang-affected areas, but also in previously unaffected neighborhoods and towns.

In 1975 the eminent gang researcher Walter B. Miller found that six of the twelve largest US cities had a 'major gang problem'. However, research undertaken with David Curry in the early 1990s (1993), revealed that the problem had now spread to ten of the twelve major cities. Moreover, Spergel and Curry found increases in gang activity in cities of all sizes, with a remarkable 63% increase in the far smaller 'new gang cities'. By the mid-1990s, chapters of what had originally been the Los Angeles-based Crips and Bloods could be found in 45 other US cities, mainly in the mid-west and the west. And in all of these cities it was 'minority' and migrant youth who were most heavily involved.

Some of the gang proliferation in England may amount to little more than the adoption of 'gangsta' style. Youth workers in North West England have observed that some relatively privileged young people in Cheshire's smarter towns and villages are adopting a 'gangsta' style that goes beyond dress codes and musical taste to influence their personal and sexual relationships. This phenomenon was also identified by Robert Gordon (2000) in his Canadian studies of gang culture in the 1990s. In Keighley, in West Yorkshire, a town with several established street gangs and criminal business organisations (Andel and Pitts, 2010), the 187 M-C-ing crew have recently burst upon the scene. Affiliates wear T-shirts bearing the legend 187, the US police code for drive-by shootings, they also have a strong web-presence, but no known criminal involvement or criminal connections.

Conversely, in 2004 in Derby, a city with no previous tradition of gang violence, two men were injured in a gang-related shoot-out and 14-year-old Danielle Beccan was killed in a drive-by shooting. In 2005, Simeon Grignon (26), was falsely accused of being a member of the Browning Circle Terrorists, said to be responsible for Danielle's death, and was stabbed to death by affiliates of the neighbouring A1 Crew. 2006 saw three more gang-related murders and in 2007, members of the A1 Crew, on their way to the Notting Hill Carnival, were stopped by the police and found to have a loaded firearm which, they claimed, was to protect them from a rival Derby gang. Between December 2007 and May 2008 there were 13 more gang-related incidents in which firearms were discharged, the most serious being the murder of 15 year old Kadeem Blackwood, said to belong to the Yunga Browning Circle Terrorists. However, by 2009, largely as a result of a major police operation, gang violence had dwindled significantly.

The proliferation of gangs and gang culture appears to be a product of both local innovation, as was the case in Cheshire, Keighley and Derby, and gang migration, either to create new drug dealing territories or to avoid the attentions of the police in the neighbourhood of origin.

In the recent period we have seen migrations of some of Southwark's Peckham Boys to Luton, the Custom House White Gang to East Anglia and the Church Road Soldiers/Crime Scene Boys from Harlesden to Bournemouth. These migrations often bring gang related violence in their wake:

*The man killed in the Roumelia Lane (*Bournemouth*) shooting appeared in a music video with X Factor judge Tulisa Contostavlos. Police believe Reece G, or Stylie, was the victim of a 'pre-planned and targeted attack and the flat in which his body was discovered had been associated with Somali drug dealers in recent months. Reece, 21, has been linked to the Church Road Soldiers – a gang known to operate out of the Church End Estate in Harlesden. He had been filmed earlier this month alongside N-Dubz star Tulisa in a video for rapper Nines on the notorious estate.*

<div align="right">(The <em>Bournemouth Echo</em>, 25th July 2012)</div>

As in the USA, these various types of gang proliferation are most prevalent in times of economic recession and social and economic polarisation (Gordon, 2000; Hagedorn, 2008).

## A Radical Response?

Between writing the subheading above on Tuesday 31st July 2012, and returning to the computer on Thursday 2nd August 2012, two teenage boys lost their lives in gang-related stabbings in London. If mainstream and 'radical' social scientists who continue to deny the significance, and understate the impact, of gang involvement want to ameliorate this tragic situation, they must abandon their stubborn insistence upon the primacy of social reaction and, following C. Wright Mills dictum (1959), that the role of social science is to transform private troubles into public issues by unravelling the complex relationship between history, social structure, culture and biography, help to figure out the implications of such an analysis for politics, policy and practice.

## References

Aldridge, J. Medina, J. and Ralphs, R. (2011) 'Collateral Damage: Territory and Policing in an English Gang City', Goldson B. (ed.) *Youth in Crisis: Gangs Territoriality and Violence*, London:Routledge.

Alexander, C. (2008) *(Re)thinking 'gangs'*, London, Runnymede Trust, 14.

Andell, P. and Pitts, J. (2010) *Youth Gangs and Gang Culture in West Yorkshire*, West Yorkshire Constabulary.

Balasunderham, A. (2009) 'Gang-related Violence Amongst Young People of the Tamil Refugee Diaspora in London', *Safer Communities*, Vol. 8. Issue 2 April.

Baudrillard, J. (1998) *Simulacra and Simulations, Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*, Stanford University Press.

Becker, H. (1963) *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, New York: Free Press.

Bengtsson, T. (2012) 'Learning to become a "gangster"?' *Journal of Youth Studies*, Volume 15, Issue 6, 2012 pp. 677-692.

Boeck, T., Fleming, J. and Kemshall, H. (2006) 'The Context of Risk Decisions: Does Social Capital Make a Difference?' *Forum for Qualitative Research*, Vol.7 No.1 Art.17, January.

Bullock, K. and Tilley, N. (2002) *Shooting, Gangs and Violent Incidents in Manchester: Developing a Crime Reduction Strategy*, London: Home Office.

Byrne, D. (1988) *Complexity theory and the social sciences*, London: Routledge.

Carter, R. (2012) *History, affiliation, tactics and structure of the Gooch Close Gang*, Unpublished, Greater Manchester Police.

Centre for Social Justice (2008) *Broken Britain*, London: Centre for Social Justice.

Centre for Social Justice (2009) *Dying to Belong: An In-depth Review of Street Gangs in Britain*, London: Centre for Social Justice.

Cloward, R. and Ohlin, L. (1960) *Delinquency and Opportunity*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Cohen, S. (1985) *Visions of Social Control: Crime, Punishment and Classification*, Cambridge, Polity.

Coy, M. (2009) 'Milkshakes, lady lumps and growing up to wait boobies: how sexualisation of popular culture limits girls' horizons', *Feminist Review*, 10(1), 61-75.

Currie, E. (1986) *Confronting Crime: An American Challenge*, New York: Pantheon.

Deleuze, G. and Guttari, F. (1972) *A Thousand Plateaus*, Paris: Metro.

Dyer, G. (1999) 'Artificial Stupidity', in Dyer D, *Anglo-English Attitudes*, London: Abacus.

Eagleton, T. (2003) *After Theory*, London: Allen Lane.

Emini, C. (2011) *Youth Gangs and Gang Violence in Brent*, Paper delivered to the National Deviancy Conference, University of York, July.

Farrington, D. (2000) 'Explaining and Preventing Crime: The Globalisation of Knowledge', *Criminology*, Vol.38 No.1 February 1-24.

Ferrell, J. Hayward, K. and Young, J. (2008). *Cultural criminology: an investigation*, Los Angeles: Sage.

Firmin, C. (2011) *This Is It. This Is My Life: Female Voice in Violence*, Final Report, London, Race on the Agenda (ROTA).

Flood, M. (2009)'The Harms of Pornography Exposure Among Children and Young People', *Child Abuse Review* Vol. 18: 384–400, published online 2 November 2009 in Wiley InterScience (www.interscience.wiley.com) DOI: 10.1002/car.1092.

Goldson, B. (ed.) (2011) *Youth in Crisis: Gangs Territoriality and Violence*, London: Routledge.

Gordon, R. (2000) 'Criminal Business Organisations, Street gangs and 'Wanna Be' Groups: A Vancouver perspective', *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*,Vol.42, No.1.

Gregg, (2010) *Politics-Based Policy, New Labour's Family Intervention Projects*, London: Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, Kings College.

Habermas, J. (1981) *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hagedorn, J. (2008) *A World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture Minneapolis*; University of Minnesota.

Hallsworth, S. (2011) 'Gangland Britain? Realities, Fantasies and Industry', Goldson B. (ed.) *Youth in Crisis: Gangs Territoriality and Violence*, London: Routledge.

Harding, S. (2011) *The Role and Significance of Social Capital and Street Capital in the Social Field of the Violent Youth Gang in Central Lambeth*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Bedfordshire.

Kitsuse, J. (1962) 'Societal Reaction to Deviant Behaviour: Problems of Theory and Method', *Social Problems 9*, Winter, pp. 247-56.

Klein, M. (2008) 'Foreword', van Gemert F., Peterson D. and Lien I. (eds.) , *Street Gangs, Migration and Ethnicity*, Cullompton: Willan Publishing.

Lea J. and Young J. (1984) *What is to be done about law and order*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Lemert, E. (1967) *Human Deviance: Social Problems and Social Control*, New York: Prentice Hall.

Lenin, V.I. (1905) '*Freedom to Criticise and Unity of Action', from Lenin Collected Works*, Progress Publishers, 1965, Moscow, Volume 10, pages 442-443.

Liazoz, A. (1972) 'The Poverty of the Sociology of Deviance: Nuts, Sluts and Perverts', *Social Problems*, 20, Summer, pp. 103-20.

Matthews, R. and Pitts, J. (2007) *An examination of the disproportionate number of young black men involved in street robbery in Lewisham*, Lewisham: Children and Young People's Directorate and Lewisham's Youth Crime Group.

Matthews, R. and Young, J. (1992) *Issues in Realist Criminology*, London: Sage.

Matza D. (1969) *Becoming Deviant*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Metropolitan Police Service (2012) *The Trident Gang Strategy*, London Metropolitan Police Service

Murray, C. (1984) *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950–1980*, New York: Basic Books.

Palmer, S. and Pitts, J. (2006) 'Othering the Brothers: Black Youth, Racial Solidarity and Gun Crime', *Youth & Policy*, 91, pp. 5-22.

Palmer, S. (2009) 'The Origins and Emergence of Youth Gangs in a British Inner City Neighbourhood', *Safer Communities*, Vol.8 Issue 2. April.

Pearson, G (1983) *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears*, Basingstoke:MacMillan.

Pitts, J. (2003) *The New Politics of Youth Crime*, Lyme Regis: Russell House.

Pitts, J. (2008) *Reluctant Gangsters: The Changing Face of Youth Crime*, Cullompton: Willan Publishing.

Pitts, J. (2011) 'Mercenary Territory: Are Youth Gangs Really a Problem', in Goldson, B. (ed.) *Youth in Crisis: Gangs Territoriality and Violence*, London: Routledge.

Ringrose, J., Livingstone, J., Harvey, L. (2012) *A Qualitative Study of Children,Young People and 'Sexting': A Report Prepared for the NSPCC*, London: NSPCC.

Scraton, P. (2007) *Power, Conflict and Criminalisation*, London: Sage.

Silverman, J. (1993) *'Crack of Doom'*, Bidford-on-Avon: Headline.

Sokal, A. Briemont, J. (1998) *Fashionable Nonsense*, London: Picador.

Spergel, I. A., and Curry, G. D. (1993) 'The National Youth Gang Survey: A Research and Development Process', in A. Goldstein and C. R. Huff (eds.), *The Gang Intervention Handbook* (Champaign, IL: Research Press pp. 359–400).

Taylor, I. Walton, P. and Young, J. (1973) *The New Criminology*, London: Routledge.

Valkenburg, P. and Peter, J. (2007) 'Online communication and adolescent well-being the stimulation versus the displacement hypothesis', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4), article 2. http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue4/valkenburg.html

Weitzer, R. and Kubrin, C. (2009) 'Misogyny in Rap Music: A Content Analysis of Prevalence and Meanings', *Men and Masculinity*, 19.

Wright Mills, C. (1957) *The Sociological Imagination*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Young, J. and Matthews, R. (1992) *Rethinking Criminology: The Realist Debate*, London: Sage.

Youth Justice Board (2007) *Groups Gangs and Weapons*, London: Youth Justice Board.