Gang talking criminologists: A rejoinder to John Pitts

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Abstract

In ‘Reluctant Criminologists’, John Pitts (2012) attacks his critics on the criminological left by arguing they deny the reality of gangs and the destructive violence they occasion, and are beholden to an ideological position that holds that the gang is not nor should be a legitimate object of criminological enquiry. He concludes by restating his thesis that gangs today are both real, dangerous and constitute the new face of youth crime. As one of those subject to his critique, here I develop a rejoinder in two parts. I begin by repudiating the critique of gang denial. The article concludes by taking issue with the justification Pitts produces to substantiate his thesis. His thesis and those of his followers, I argue, is flawed on evidential, epistemological and methodological grounds.

Key words: gangs, gang talk, gang talkers, violence, street culture.

IN THE LAST decade, the UK has found itself under attack by urban street gangs which are apparently on the rise and everywhere around us. They have, or so it is claimed, armed themselves with various ‘new weapons of choice’ ranging from rape to ‘weapon dogs’, have evolved large corporate structures, are forcibly ‘recruiting’ members, and constitute a serious threat that we need to get ‘real’ about. This is the case at least according to British academic John Pitts (Pitts, 2008) who together with his followers, has identified gangs today as ‘the new face of youth crime’. Though it would appear that his work has been well received by some members of the practitioner community (but by no means all), his work has not been that well received by the wider criminological fraternity, many of whom (myself included), have considerable difficulty accepting these sensational claims. In his paper ‘Reluctant Criminologists: Criminology, Ideology and the Criminal Gang’ (Pitts, 2012), he reflects on why so many of us refuse to accept his vision of this, the UK gangland thesis. As Pitts sees no problem with his vision, the problem, at least as he conceives it, must lie with his critics.

He could, of course, have made direct contact and asked people like me to elaborate on our differences. Instead, he brings his powers of deduction to bear in order to discern the reasons that lead us, in his words, to ‘deny’ the reality of the gangs and indeed their very existence as a legitimate object of criminological enquiry. As a member of (again, in his words) the ‘hard left’
category of deniers, in what follows I will develop a rejoinder to his paper.

Let me begin by summarising the arguments Pitts presents against us. He begins by trotting out the left realist argument which holds that the critical left ignore the reality of crime and its impact on communities because they romanticise the youth cultures they would do better to condemn. Despite the fact that Phil Scraton is not, nor would consider himself to be a gang expert, he is nevertheless singled out as an exemplar of this position. Such ‘left idealists’, Pitts argues, ‘wash their hands’ of the real violence gangs perpetrate.

As I could hardly be criticised for romanticising street violence, having spent my career as a criminologist writing about it, Pitts adopts a different line of attack. I deny the reality of gangs because I am, apparently, a latter day Leninist beholden to a political position which holds that gangs cannot or should not exist as an object of critical enquiry (Pitts, 2012).

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’ (Pitts, 2012: 32).

Pitts develops his attack further by launching a somewhat bizarre, not to say, ad hominem attack on Deleuze and Guattari, based upon the fact that I had suggested in an article that their work might just be relevant to gang research. Pitts is having none of this. The work of Deleuze and Guattari have nothing of consequence to teach latter day criminologists. Their work, Pitts observes, is difficult to read which leads him to the conclusion that this must be because they have ‘fallen under the spell of postmodernism’ and taken too many drugs. He concludes this sophisticated demolition, including of one the twentieth century’s greatest philosophers, by noting that although their work has been wholly ‘discredited’, people like me think them worth citing. The implication is that my judgment is suspect on all counts.

He rounds off his attack by reiterating again his version of the Gangland UK thesis. Gangs are on the rise; we have never seen anything like it before. As part of his justification he cites as fact that, even in cities like Derby, which, he intones, has never had a history of gang land violence, violence perpetrated by gangs is booming. The proof, he concludes, is overwhelming.

Let me begin by addressing the critique that my colleagues and I deny the reality of gangs, 350 or so of which are currently bringing misery to the streets of London. At least, that is according to police statistics amassed using a definition which, as Pitts points out, he was instrumental in developing.
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 (Centre for Social Justice, 2009 cited by Pitts, 2008: 27).

But wait a moment; let’s look at this definition again. Yes it was produced by the right wing think tank The Centre for Social Justice, and yes, with John Pitts as an adviser. But if you look at the opening clause this was taken directly (without citation) from the definition of gangs that Tara Young and I developed for the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) three years before.

A relatively durable, predominately street-based group of young people who see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is integral to the group’s identity (Hallsworth and Young, 2005: 66).

Quite how the authors of a widely cited definition of gangs come to be defined as gang deniers, given this, I find difficult to understand. We also helped the MPS define peer groups and organised crime groups in order to create a more complex heuristic of group based deviance. Unfortunately, with all attention now focussed on urban street gangs, this fact appears to have been conveniently forgotten in a world where everything group related is now conflated into the word ‘gang’.

In our original report on gangs for the MPS (where we developed our definition – Hallsworth and Young, 2005), subsequently updated in a report for London Councils produced in 2011 (Hallsworth and Duffy, 2011), we are very clear that gangs exist that fit the terms of our definition. However, we qualified this by arguing that most groups (including many defined as ‘gangs’) might better be described as volatile peer groups. The lesson of this: be careful about the labels you use. In both reports we also emphasise the fluid and amorphous properties of gangs.

With Dan Silverstone, I went on to examine the gun related crime routinely being explained as ‘gang related’. As we established, while gangs were responsible for some gun crime, they were by no means responsible for most (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009). Instead of evoking the spectre of the ‘gang’ to explain gun crime, we studied instead the cultures of the gun users, distinguishing in so doing between the world of professional criminals and a more fluid and amorphous street culture we termed ‘on road’. More recently, I have argued that we need to focus precisely on the imperatives that shape street culture (as opposed to gang culture) if we are to understand both street violence and why gangs behave as they do (Hallsworth, 2013). This is not the argument of a gang denier but someone who wants to put gangs in their place.

In part, the problem I have with gang talkers like Pitts is that they overstate the significance and novelty of the gang. In effect, they create a fetish of it. On the other hand, I am not convinced


that the violence currently blamed on gangs is by any means all gang related, nor do I believe that the permissive application of the term ‘gang’ to explain events as disconnected as sexual violence, the drugs trade, riots, ‘dangerous dogs’ and gun crime, is remotely helpful or accurate. Such arguments reflect more the fantasy life of gang talkers, not the truth of a violent street world whose complexity escapes such reductive reasoning.

Nor am I remotely convinced by the argument that gangs represent the ‘new face of youth crime’ and I repudiate this argument on the basis that groups that fit every element of whatever definition of gang you want to deploy, have been a longstanding element of working class culture; a point I develop in my own auto-ethnography where I reflect back on my experiences of growing up between the 1960s and 1980s (Hallsworth, 2013). A period of my life played out against a social setting populated by groups with names like skinheads, teds, grebos, boot boys, hells angels, all of whom were capable of extreme, collective, violent activity. To claim that the explosive violence that groups like skinheads were capable of was less violent than the urban street gang identified by Pitts today, I find absurd. For much the same reason I find some of Pitts’ claims justifying the gang as the new face of youth crime difficult to accept. Take, for example, his claim that gangland violence is now making itself felt in cities like Derby which never had a previous history of gang violence. Is he really asking us to believe that a working class town born out of the crucible of the industrial revolution never had territorially affiliated groups of street fighting young men? As Pearson argues, such reasoning not only displays ‘historical amnesia’, it has all the hallmarks of living in what he terms ‘the infinite novelty of the moment’ (Pearson, 2011: 20).

The problem, as far as I see it, is not that gangs have suddenly arrived where once they were not present, my take on the argument is that they were always already there; they were always an inevitable and inescapable feature of street life in most working class areas. Given this, what I find intellectually interesting, is how and why a perennial feature of street life became identified as the ‘new face of youth crime’.

To get to this, however, you have to go where gang talkers like Pitts do not go. You have to consider the potent symbolism with which the term ‘gang’ is saturated; you have to examine the structure of gang talk itself; and you have to consider how this has developed by examining the deviance amplification spiral with which it has been connected. Last, but not least, you have to study the vested interests of gang talkers and the developing industry of which they are a part. To a degree it would appear that Pitts does (albeit belatedly) recognise some of this when he writes:

"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 racialising (Pitts, 2012: 31).

The problem with Pitts and his gang talking colleagues is that they do not consider that the exaggeration and distortion, and not least processes of racialisation, that clearly form part of contemporary gang inventory, are worth examining. Worse, nor are they capable of recognising how far gang talk and the tropes around which it is organised is reproduced starkly in their own work. Let me evidence this further. Gang talk is by nature a paranoiac discourse predicated on the assumption that new subterranean hordes are mobilising against the good society (Hallsworth, 2013). In this discourse, gangs are always becoming more corporate, always larger, invariably arming themselves with what gang talkers like to refer to as ‘new weapons of choice’. In this gang-talking lexicon, they always reach out to invade new territory, always engage in ever more horrendous crime. Even the most administratively inclined American gang scholars today recognise that the stereotypes underlying this teratology are myths (not least being the claim that the gang today is large and characterised by a vertical bureaucracy and complex division of labour). Pitts and co., however, simply and unquestionably accept the stereotype and try to pass it off as science. It’s not so much the case that they capitulate to control discourse (the gang has arrived, it’s taking over, mutating and arming itself etc), they are net producers of the fantasy. Clearly ignorant of the history of gang talking stupidity, it appears to be their destiny simply to reproduce it. And so Pitts discovers ‘super articulated gangs’ (Pitts, 2007; 2008); Toy, gangs that resemble contemporary corporations with boards of governors (Toy, 2008); Harding, gangs capable of orchestrating riots (Harding, 2012); and Firman, gangs populated by inveterate rapists and ‘gang banging mother fuckers’ (Firman, 2010).

Reading their work it becomes clear that every object lesson critical scholarship has to offer is lost on them. Not least the lesson which tells us that you cannot engage with deviant groups independently of looking at their social construction as such. The problem here is not just the flat ontology they work with but their failure to recognise, let alone consider, the epistemological and methodological challenges that researching groups like gangs invariably throws up.

Let me explain what I mean. The street world is a place where mythology is rampant (see Van Helemont, 2013). This raises huge problems when it comes to distinguishing gang truths from fictions. It is made even more difficult in a world where those who live gang lives, live them in very different terms to those deployed by control agents to characterise them. But the world occupied by control agents is itself a space where mythology and fantasy life abounds. Indeed, in control settings where knowledge deficits abound, where gang intelligence (if indeed it can be called such) is incredibly dubious, where dubious labels such as ‘gang affiliation’ are permissively deployed; fantasy life invariably becomes the replacement discourse. And this, I think, helps explain why gang talk takes hold so easily among the control fraternity. It works to make difficult chunks of complex reality legible and manageable. It puts the world of the street into convenient bureaucratic
categories which control agents believe they can manage and control. More than that, gang talk provides a false but intuitively plausible narrative that everyone recognises (of course they are getting bigger, more organised, more dangerous etc).

As an example of what I am talking about here, consider these research findings derived from a small project we conducted in Birmingham in an area regarded as ‘gang afflicted’. When we interviewed police officers about the gang situation in the area, front line officers by and large found gangs to be responsible for most crime. They saw gangs everywhere. Intelligence officers found far fewer gangs. The young men we interviewed didn’t think gangs were that big an issue. Indeed, though viewed as gang members they did not define themselves in these terms. A Home Office accredited ‘gang expert’ told us we were wasting our time as there were no gangs present. Some officers claimed some longstanding gangs were meanwhile transmogrifying into organised crime groups ‘recruiting’ from ‘feeder gangs’ (whatever they are) while ex members of the gangs they were talking about denied they even existed today. I have to admit that I was ultimately unable to work out how many gangs there were; as evidently different people had very different perceptions of the same reality. Lacking any sense of uncertainty, however, Pitts feels able to map gangs with absolute precision even to the extent he can give them risk scores (Pitts, 2008).

Whereas critical ethnographers like Conquergood (1994) and phenomenological thinkers like Katz (Katz and Jackson, 1997) recognise how myth and fantasy intersect in the production of the gang, this lesson is starkly lost on Pitts and his followers who unquestionably accept any and every evocation of the gang they are presented with and who, unsurprisingly, reproduce fantasy life as gang reality and truth.

In this process, common sense goes out of the window. Take, for example, one of the claims now being routinely made about gangs today, namely that they now number groups in their hundreds. Where I wonder do they all meet? Do they hire out the local council chamber? Take another claim Pitts makes, namely that around a third of gang members are forcibly recruited – ‘reluctant gangsters’ to use his terminology. To test this hypothesis, in recent research conducted in Birmingham, we asked various young men defined as ‘gang affiliated’ a set of questions designed to tease out how they formed. Unsurprisingly, they knew each other because they grew up together and shared a common history and biography. They were at heart what Tara Young and I long ago termed peer groups. They had no real leaders and when questioned about issues such as ‘recruiting’ members or ‘forcing’ people to belong to their group, they simply looked at us incredulously. Why, they asked, would you make people join who you wouldn’t be able to trust in the event of trouble? Ever in search of the sensational truths in which gang talk trades, Pitts and his followers invariably ignore less sensational but perhaps more plausible interpretations. In the process, often exceptional events become treated as the norm while absurd exaggerated claims are taken at face value. This, not least, by way of an example, goes for claims made by Rota such that gangs ‘rape mothers’. A claim advanced and widely reported but with no supporting evidence (Firman, 2010).
The problem here is that whereas critical ethnographers, and not least cultural criminologists, carry with them a sense of epistemological doubt, the Pittites are incapable of such introspection and reflection. They remind me in this of western safari hunters walking out to shoot big game without ever once considering that any of this might be remotely problematic. And so it is with these gang talkers. They walk out into the urban jungle already knowing what it is they will find; then return having netted their prey which funnily enough fits every American stereotype in the gang talking cannon.

Another recurrent problem with the gang talk people like Pitts produce is that it draws on the ontological assumption that the radically informal groups that populate the street world can be comprehended by imposing upon them the conceptual categories used to define the operational properties of formal organisations. And this leads them to invariably corporatise the street world of gangs in what I would consider a wholly problematic way. And so gangs are described in terms that attribute to them elaborate divisions of labour and vertical control structures in what is presented as a pyramidal organisational unit. This (very American not to say ‘arboreal’) stereotype of the corporate gang is then compounded by using a variety of corporate terminology to further denaturalise the world of the street. Instead of spontaneously forming, gangs have ‘recruitment strategies’, they ‘groom’ would be victims, members undertake ‘promotion routes’ (career pathways) and engage in ‘branding strategies’ conducting ‘impact assessments’ as they go.

The reason I originally evoked the work of Deleuze and Guattari was precisely because they recognise the ontological and epistemological fallacies inherent in this mode of reasoning. In a nutshell you cannot comprehend the life of informal organisations like gangs by imposing upon them arborescent categories that define formal organisations. Informal organisations such as gangs require a different ontology, and not least epistemology, if we are to understand a street world that runs along very different lines to that of corporations. In Deleuzian terms, such nomadic life requires a ‘nomadology’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988), not the formal sociology of organisations in which gang talkers like Pitts trade.

A final reflection on Deleuze whose work, as we have seen, is repudiated by Pitts on the basis of the devastating critique that their work is difficult to read (he simply does not get it) all because they have taken too many drugs. Foucault writing in his forward to Deleuze and Guattarri’s ‘Anti Oedipus’, famously defined the twentieth century as ‘Deleuzian’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977). Habermas, who Pitts invokes to criticise Deleuze, expends considerable effort debating with Deleuze (see Habermas, 1987) as indeed more recently does Žižek (2004). In criminology, Deleuze’s work on the emerging ‘societies of control’ has been hugely influential on the writing of criminologists such as Haggerty and Ericson (2000), Katja Aas (Franko Aas, 2005), and McGuire (2008). Pitts’ _ad hominem_ attack, considered against this, does not warrant the label ‘critique’, he is simply being pedestrian.
Finally, to return to Lenin and the Party line I am apparently obligated to follow, let me conclude by making the following very obvious observation. John, it might have escaped your attention but there is no Leninist Party. There is, consequently, no party line to follow. You are right in one thing however. Yes, I do view the state as malevolent and many state agents as dangerous fantasists. Gang talkers of the world, yes, you too fall into this category.

References


