



**Youth street gangs: a critical appraisal, by David C. Brotherton, New York, NY, Routledge Press, 2015, 228 pp., US\$44.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780415856294**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Youth street gangs: a critical appraisal**, by David C. Brotherton, New York, NY, Routledge Press, 2015, 228 pp., US\$44.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780415856294

It is not customary to begin a book review with a discussion of the appendix of the work in question, but David C. Brotherton's *Youth Street Gangs: A Critical Appraisal* is far from an average book. Brotherton's research makes a significant contribution to the literature on youth street gangs and the ways in which we should approach and understand these phenomena. Additionally, however, *Youth Street Gangs: A Critical Appraisal* also develops substantial methodological and disciplinary insights. So, this review begins with an appraisal of the book's end: a dialogue between the street researcher – the book's author – and the revered, rebellious and irresistible (and sadly missed) theorist Jock Young.

Traversing a range of subjects – from the 'soft city' to 'dangerous and subjugated knowledge' – Brotherton and Young collectively make the call for a cultural criminology; one that points to, amongst several qualities, awareness of the intensity of experience and an appreciation of how identity is interwoven in acts of transgression (p. 204). This appendix covers only 20 short pages, but there is much to digest. I found the discussion of the character and nuance of the cultural criminologist's 'attentive gaze' to be of particular interest. In this discussion, Young provides an account of the 'mediated nature of reality in late modernity' which necessitates two claims: firstly, subcultures cannot be studied apart from media representations and, secondly, ethnography and analysis are intertwined (p. 199). Brotherton follows Young by highlighting how, despite a broad research vista and an endless fascination with both the obvious and the opaque, the cultural criminologist may capture 'only a slice of the lived reality' (p. 199). Ethnographic researchers will probably appreciate Brotherton's tentativeness to describe the results of one's research as 'findings', and commend the attempt to submit the emerging representations from research back to those who fall into the attentive gaze in order to improve accuracy and accountability (p. 200). From methodological and disciplinary perspectives, I would wholeheartedly recommend reading the appendix to this book before diving into Brotherton's own contribution, particularly as it provides the reader with an understanding of the overall cultural criminological endeavour. Nevertheless, one must also recognise that the reader will most probably have selected this book on the basis of its central subject matter: youth street gangs. It is to Brotherton's substantive research on this topic that this review now turns.

Prior to its illuminating appendix, *Youth Street Gangs: A Critical Appraisal* comprises of an introduction, seven core chapters and a conclusion. The introduction serves two purposes. Firstly, it fulfils the routine task of providing an overview of the structure of the book. A short synopsis of each chapter is provided, allowing the author to weave together common threads and signpost the broader narrative developed throughout. Secondly, and more interestingly, the introduction also shares with the reader the frustrations felt by Brotherton: from the stresses of his time as a secondary education teacher in San Francisco – dealing with students from marginalised communities who would 'drop

out' and 'drop in' – to his later disillusionment with the 'tropes in gang studies' (p. 2) and the emergence of an industry that pathologised the gang phenomenon in the United States and beyond (p. 3). Brotherton's humble approach here – 'I make no claims that this effort somehow amounts to an authoritative version of the critical perspective on the gang' (p. 4) – belies the significance of his contribution to this field. This introduction successfully draws the reader into both Brotherton's world and the field of cultural criminology, and provides a solid grounding for the reflexive nature of the analysis that follows.

Moving beyond the introduction, the first two chapters are best considered collectively as they represent two histories that must be understood if one is to critically appraise the youth street gang phenomena. Chapter one focuses on the importance of history in understanding gangs. The title of this first chapter – 'Gangs and the community' – counterposes two social groupings that are frequently considered as oppositional. Gang activity is often viewed as *anti-social*, with detrimental and deleterious effects on community life. In contrast, Brotherton's approach here emphasises the need to ground gangs in space, time and social setting; reinforcing his claim that 'it is difficult to see the gang outside of the making of the community from which it comes' (p. 15). This approach allows Brotherton to explore the intersection of gangs with race, class and gender in communities, as well as the roles of the state, global structures and local dynamics in the creation and persistence of gangs. Chapter two considers the history of the perspectives used to, at least partially, explain the continuing proliferation of gangs in everyday life. This second chapter moves to discuss the 'divergent gazes' of the gang literature. Following Young, Brotherton considers gazes to mean the theoretical lenses through which scholars explore the micro, meso and macro processes of deviance construction and control.<sup>1</sup> In tracing the theoretical positions that have influenced his outlook, Brotherton outlines four main 'clusters' of theory: Chicago School; sociological humanism and anomie; the Hobbesian alternative; and social reproductionism (pp. 28–29). One should not assume that Brotherton treads lightly here. His treatment of the pathologising turn in the academic rendering of the gang – which he considers Hobbesian and locates primarily in the United States – is both critical and astute. Brotherton contends that this fixation disregards both class and political economy, and instead privileges individual pathways, choices and the 'ever-troubling prevalence of criminal transgressions by the almost naturally criminogenic lower orders predictably found in the same criminogenic environments' (p. 43). This immediately sets a challenging tone that Brotherton maintains throughout this book.

The following four chapters flit seamlessly between substance and reflection and form the beating heart of the work. Chapter three challenges traditional definitions of the gang as comprising of transhistorical figures within a bounded social ecology, and develops the 'resistance approach' that has been characteristic of Brotherton's work. Importantly for Brotherton, resistance is manifest not only in social action, but is also a process that is ongoing in thoughts and emotions. Such a humanising approach is not particularly indicative of how some sections of the public, the media, the political classes or (Brotherton would argue) the academy have previously approached the subject of street-based youth gangs. Chapter four develops the methodological tools that Brotherton indicates are required to study the gang critically. A 'critical gang ethnography' promotes a 'more consciously reflexive and political orientation to the praxis of gang ethnography', and one that seeks to avoid ethnography as a 'social scientific safari' (p. 82). Through the ever-productive lens of 'moral panic', chapter five indicates the linkage between the construction of folk-devils and the allocation of the resources of social control. However, Brotherton presents a multidimensional approach here. Gangs and

gang-members may be the subject of symbolic 'othering' as part of moral crusades against poor and minority communities, but they also have become a commodity to be bought and sold. It is argued that how gangs are 'imagined', and by whom, is central to understanding the proliferation of gangs across space and culture. Chapter six, titled 'Reflections from the field', provides the opportunity for Brotherton, and thus the reader, to revisit the sites and populations that have featured in the author's research over the past 20 years. The most profound claim made in this chapter concerns state control of young people in deprived areas. Brotherton claims that such control may not be linked to any propensity or proclivity towards interpersonal violence, but instead has been deployed to limit the self-organisation of young people and silence the voices of political injustice (p. 142).

The seventh chapter, and the last before the book's conclusion, consolidates the claim of the need for a critical gang studies. In this chapter, Brotherton details what he considers to be the five main themes that are useful in approaching the subject of gangs from a critical perspective. These themes are social citizenship and transnationalism; the intersectionality of the gang; gangs and the politics of space; the culture of gangs; and gangs, violence and the political economy. Perhaps, the most significant, and refreshing, feature of Brotherton's manifesto here, however, is the deprivileging of violence, with the author offering only 'a brief discussion of the topic that most gang studies begin with' (p. 162). Dismantling the profound linkage between gangs and violence is a bold but worthwhile endeavour, and *Youth Street Gangs: A Critical Appraisal* offers much to fill the vacuum that is left by extracting violence as the defining feature of 'the gang'. For example, the issues of gang culture and street-life/prison-life, as depicted by Brotherton, may, in fact, be more significant than violence when seeking to understand gangs in a global and comparative perspective. In relation to the latter, Brotherton argues from a critical perspective that 'the politics of space is intrinsically linked to the politics of security and the emerging role of the state in late modernity' (p. 155). Indeed, the politics of space is not limited to 'the street' as a site of cultural production and resistance. The prison, for example, is an important site that is 'frequently omitted' (p. 155) and, culturally, Brotherton recognises how there are 'few street gangs today whose members do not utilize social media to broadcast their reputations or claim their space in the virtual world' (p. 156). In *Youth Street Gangs: A Critical Appraisal*, there is a clear willingness to engage with space beyond the street, whilst recognising the street's importance in the politics of youth gangs.

The conclusions drawn by Brotherton, before his enlightening dialogue with Young, are provided against a positive (but not positivist) outlook. Brotherton believes that there is a dissonance between today's students of youth gangs and much of the existing gang criminology, the latter of which avoids engaging with both culture and politics. The defining characteristic of this book, and perhaps its greatest feature, is its distinctive voice. Brotherton is clearly present in this work, taking it beyond previous pathologising accounts and into the realm of political critique. In *Youth Street Gangs: A Critical Appraisal*, Brotherton writes with a degree of knowledge, clarity, honesty and integrity that can be mercifully rare in much of mainstream criminology. This is not to say that his work is beyond criticism. The section on the commodification of gangs, for example, was perhaps a little shallow. One could also suggest that the emergence of a Bourdieusian approach to understanding gangs in the cultural criminological canon<sup>2</sup> may have been worthy of deeper, explicit consideration at some point, although perhaps the recent development of such approaches may have precluded such a discussion. Additionally, and even though it is essential to both the theoretical endeavour and the research itself (to the extent that they can be separated at all), the visible nature of Brotherton in the analysis

may also be unpalatable for some. Nevertheless, when considered as a complete piece – appendix and all – *Youth Street Gangs: A Critical Appraisal* is essential reading to anyone with an interest in the past, present and future of gangs and the new directions and developments in criminology.

### Notes

1. Young, *Criminological Imagination*, 50.
2. See Fraser, *Urban Legends*.

### Bibliography

- Fraser, A. *Urban Legends: Gang Identity in the Post-Industrial City*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
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**Urban legends: gang identity in the post-industrial city**, by Alistair Fraser, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, 270 pp., £65 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-19-872861-0

‘The gang’ has become a global phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> This is not only because gangs employ modern technologies and methods of communication and transportation to plan and organise transnational criminal activities but also because the root causes (e.g. poverty and inequality) of gang formation have become increasingly similar due to global economic convergence. The logic of ‘global gang’ encourages researchers to explore the global nature of gang activities and generate a universal definition of gangs regardless of clear cultural, political and historical divergence. In this context, local meanings and understandings are neglected.<sup>2</sup>

*Urban Legends: Gang Identity in the Post-industrial City*, authored by Alistair Fraser, offers an ethnographic analysis of how youth gangs in Glasgow – Scotland’s largest city and Western Europe’s ‘murder capital’ – persist over a century in spite of social, economic and political change. It presents new theoretical approaches and principles to study youth gangs, locating gang identity within specific socio-economic, cultural and geo-historical contexts. Fraser emphasises the importance of comparative approach in the study of gangs in a global context and highlights ‘the critical mediating role of the city in shaping configurations of gangs’ (p. xxvii).

Fraser identifies five distinctive characteristics of Glasgow – persistent inequality, territorial identity, violent masculinities, neighbourhood nationalism and economies of crime and justice – that are closely associated with the rise and persistence of youth gangs in the post-industrial era. The introduction of these characteristics constitutes the wellspring of the global and comparative gang research, enabling researchers to examine similarity and difference between the Glasgow case and gangs in other cities.