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FOREWARD: *Reading John Hagedorn*

Symptomatic of a more profound fallacy, the Library of Congress bibliographic system makes the subject 'street gangs' a subset of 'social pathology,' when the accurate classification should be 'urban history, street politics.' Gangs, in the most straightforward sense, mint power for the otherwise powerless from their control of small urban spaces: street corners, slums, playgrounds, parks, schools, prison dormitories, even garbage dumps. For poor youth lacking other resources, these informal spatial monopolies, if successfully defended and consolidated, provide some measure of entrepreneurial opportunity as well as local prestige and warrior glamour. Gangs also frequently act as neighborhood militias to police public space, enforce (or resist) ethnic and racial borders, and, thereby, control access to jobs and housing. Although most gangs are ephemeral alliances, a few endure as charismatic icons of local identity; membership then becomes an intergenerational rite of passage, resonant with patriotic pride ("military service for the 'hood, same as my daddy," an L.A. OG once told me). If some gangs are vampire-like parasites on their own neighbors, others play Robin Hood or employer of the last resort; most combine elements of both predation and welfare.

The genealogy of gangs, broadly construed, is almost coeval with the history of urbanism; and despite the current identification of street gangs as the sinister seeds of organized crime and terrorism, they have also been the building blocks of big city machine politics from Republican Rome to Prohibition-era Chicago. The great gangs of the Roman hills, who controlled the city's grain supply, were a plebian power to which even Caesar had to defer. In the city states of Renaissance Italy, a millennium later, artisan gangs rollicked, rioted, and occasionally revolted. The famous fighting gangs of New York in 1840s and 1850s - along with their Siamese twins, the volunteer fire companies - constituted the grassroots of Jacksonian democracy in the city and provided street armies for both Tammany Hall and their 'Know Nothing' opponents. Indeed, American gangs were often the proletarian version of Skull and Bones or Beta Theta Pi –

with some alumni ending up at City Hall as well as on death row. Thus the most powerful political boss in modern U.S. history, ‘hizzoner’ Richard M. Daley, began his irresistible ascent in the Chicago Democratic machine as a gang chieftain and racist provocateur during the 1919 riots.

Gangs, in other words, are as ancient as the hills of Rome and as American as the spoils system (if not apple pie). If they share a generic logic – the informal ownership of the street through a local monopoly of force – their actual histories and *raison d’etres* across time and space are incredibly diverse and unpredictable. Yet it has been the overweening ambition of modern American criminology and allied social science sub-fields to reduce complex realities and largely unexplored histories to simplistic pathologies. Despite all the pseudo-scientific mumbo-jumbo – survey questionnaires, regression equations, behaviorist models, and the like - gang research in the postwar era (with a few honorable exceptions) only embellished the stereotypes originally brought to the slum by the charity reform movement of the 1850s: a fundamentally moralistic critique of poor people’s inherent predisposition to crime and disorder. If the 1950s burnished classic studies with new theories of teenage rebellion and the 1960s shifted emphasis from individual delinquency to deviant subcultures, the overall methodology of ‘gang studies’ through the early 1980s remained rooted in Victorian values, obsolete social science, and self-reproducing paradigms that took little cognizance of dramatic structural changes in urban life.

Although this traditional criminological approach saw itself as scrupulous and empirical, it was hopelessly entangled in mythology and wishful thinking, especially in its fetishism of laws and norms in lieu of any realistic theory of urban politics and inter-group conflict. Research on gangs, moreover, was largely driven by episodic, media-incited outbursts of public hysteria over sensational killings or outrages; consequently, research budgets and agendas were (and are) heavily shaped by the priorities and biases of law enforcement and youth services organizations. The *a priori* consensus was that most street gangs were the urbanized equivalent of primitive tribes, recruited from broken families and disturbed psyches, pursuing essentially nihilistic objectives.

Sociological generalization, moreover, supplanted any investigation of gangdom's evolution since the nineteenth century. By the late 1970s, library shelves were groaning under the weight of monographs purporting to reveal the mysteries of adolescent street culture and *la vida loca*, yet most of the research was entirely ahistorical and wildly ignorant of the integral roles previously played by gangs in big city politics and European-immigrant economic mobility. Although race was prominent in psychological explanations of delinquency ('damaged Negroes,' 'underprivileged Mexicans,' and all that), few studies paid any serious attention to institutional racism, the continuous warfare over neighborhood boundaries, or the oppressive function of the police in minority areas. Moreover, with the exception of William Whyte's famous participant-observer study of a North Boston street corner in the 1940s, most researchers depended upon interviews with cops and probation officers, newspaper stories, welfare and school surveys, and, occasionally, the testimony of 'informants.' In the latter case, the typically anonymous gang member was briefly quoted to substantiate one of the researcher's contentions or generalizations, but never allowed to expound an opinion or present a point of view at any length. As with other primitive peoples, inner-city youth were not deemed to possess a rational eloquence.

All the more striking, then, when John Hagedorn in 1988 published his revelatory study – *People and Folks: Gangs, Crime and the Underclass in a Rustbelt City* – in co-authorship with Perry Macon, a founder and 'top dog' of the Milwaukee Vicelords. The book began with a blistering critique of the geriatric authority of academic 'gang experts,' some of whom had not done any real fieldwork in decades, yet claimed to have a privileged understanding the culture of the streets. As Hagedorn put it, there was "too much theory, too few facts," and he implied that gang studies had become part of obscurantist law-enforcement discourse that impeded any objective analysis of the destructive social forces at work in American inner cities.

The immediate context of *People and Folks* was national hysteria about the supposedly epidemic spread of Los Angeles and Chicago-based 'supergangs' into their respective

Western and Midwestern hinterlands. According to *Time* magazine, ABC News, and the National Association of Chiefs of Police, the big-time gangsters were systematically colonizing African-American and Latino neighborhoods in other cities as part of a rapacious business plan to build new markets for crack cocaine sales and other criminal activities. Authorities warned that the spores of these outside gangs tended to grow in hothouse fashion, quickly overwhelming local law enforcement resources: Milwaukee was often cited as a prime example of a peaceful city ‘invaded’ in the early 1980s by teenage imperialists from Chicago.

In fact, as Hagedorn and Macon convincingly demonstrated in their reconstruction of the genealogy of Milwaukee’s gangs, the “outside agitator” or “export” theory of gang growth was mostly bogus. Although some former Chicago gang members did arrive in the Wisconsin metropolis during the early 1980s (usually because their families were desperately trying to move them out of harm’s way), the real impetus for gang growth was indigenous: a 28 percent Black unemployment rate, failing schools, persistent racial discrimination, and a hostile police department. The cross-town busing of Black and Puerto Rican students (supposedly in the name of desegregation) also inadvertently fostered gang affiliation by casting kids adrift in hostile schools far from their old neighborhoods. If the early 1980s breakdancing cliques and school-based gangs dubbed themselves as Vicelords or the Cobras, it was not because they had been recruited as franchises of the Chicago supergangs, but simply because they wanted to appropriate some of the latter’s subcultural celebrity. (The urban anthropologist Mercer Sullivan later corroborated *People and Folks’s* findings in New York City: what the press and police hyped as a gang invasion by L.A. Bloods and Chicago Latin Kings was “primarily a re-labeling of existing local rivalries.”)

In the same fresh, iconoclastic spirit, Hagedorn and Macon also reexamined the contrasting stereotypes of gangs as irrational cabals of damaged children or highly lucrative drug mafias. What they found in Milwaukee, instead, were the ruins of once cohesive blue-collar communities; a post-industrial misery of unemployment and frustrated ambition living next door to yuppie greed and conspicuous consumption.

In the wake of deindustrialization, it was increasingly difficult for inner-city youth to ‘graduate’ from their teenage associations into traditional working-class breadwinner roles; gang membership, as a result, tended to become more like a permanent vocation than a social phase. Gangs, in turn, more intensively cultivated subsistence crime, especially drug hustling, but the neglected neighborhoods and housing projects of Milwaukee evinced little of the fabled narco-wealth celebrated in the boasts of Compton rappers or depicted in movies like New Jack City. “Drug sales for most gang members,” observed Hagedorn, “are just another low-paying job – one that might guarantee ‘survival,’ but not much more.” And unlike those indispensable foot soldiers of machine politics, the violent Irish gangs in turn-of-the-century Milwaukee or Chicago, the Black and Puerto Rican gangs like the Vicelords had no access to traditional spoils or patronage resources.

The gang renaissance of the 1980s, in other words, was less like a vast conspiracy or anti-social epidemic, and more like a shrewd but spontaneous adaptation of ghetto survival strategies to the hard, cold realities of the Reagan era. Certainly the Chicago and Los Angeles supergangs provided post-Horatio-Alger definitions of power and success for the aspiring grassroots, but, as Hagedorn and Macon repeatedly emphasize, the key preconditions for the gang resurgence arose out of local histories of economic restructuring and community defeat. (Law enforcement and penology also adapted to the same bleak topographies, but with much more lucrative results; indeed, their vested interest in the overlapping wars on drugs, gangs, and terror have become almost as entrenched and unreformable as the military-industrial complex.)

Twenty years on (and in a 1998 revised edition that takes account of the radical impact of soaring cocaine sales upon Milwaukee gangs), *People and Folks* remains an essential guide to clear thinking about street culture and the wages of injustice. It founded what might be called ‘critical gang studies’ and gave new hope to all of us who despaired at the lurid caricatures and urban myths passing for social science. Hagedorn and Macon also undoubtedly influenced that minority current of American documentarists and writers who have tried to represent inner-city people coping with life in our post-

industrial cities as rational actors and disenfranchised citizens rather than as demons from the ‘hood or romanticized outlaws. I don’t know if others would agree with my sense of affinity, but I keep *People and Folks* next to Richard Price’s 1992 novel of the Newark projects, *Clockers* (made into a movie by Spike Lee), and I think of their book every time I watch an episode of David Simon’s *The Wire* (HBO) - the closest thing to Emile Zola on the tube.

While his collaborator, Perry Macon, spent most of the 1990s entombed in something mislabeled as a ‘correctional’ institution, John Hagedorn was fighting for reform inside the Milwaukee County child welfare bureaucracy; his compelling account of his experiences - *Forsaking Our Children* (1995) – countered a mountain of lies about welfare reform and Clinton-era social policy. Likewise his edited anthology with Meda Chesney-Lind – *Female Gangs in America* (1999) – shot down more conventional wisdom with its fascinating case-studies of gender politics within different gang subcultures. More recently from his new base at the Chicago campus of the University of Illinois, he has worked with Bobby Gore, the legendary 1960s leader of the Lawndale Vicelords, in reconstructing the sinister story of how the Daley machine and ultimately the Nixon administration sabotaged every effort by radicalized Chicago gangs to transform themselves into legitimate community organizations.

These remarkable studies of the impact of economic restructuring and post-liberal social policy upon communities of color in the Midwest clearly deserve the same scholarly laurels as those awarded to such classic works as William Whyte’s *Streetcorner Society* (1943), St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton’s *Black Metropolis* (1945), and William Kornblum’s *Blue Collar Community* (1975), but many criminologists regard Hagedorn as too dangerous a figure to seat at the high table of academic honor. Their recoil from his work, of course, is quite understandable, since he prefers to consort with street kids instead of cops, runs a famous grassroots website (gangresearch.net) that averages over 2 million hits per month, and excavates social histories that refute law enforcement dogma. On the other hand, anyone interested in urban issues from a progressive perspective—especially activists and academics who are tired of post-this-and-that jargon and yearn for

serious, well-researched ‘ground truth’ – will find an intellectual feast in this cycle of work.

A World of Gangs, however, transcends any academic genre: this is a book, quite frankly, that everyone needs to read and discuss, especially those, like my 13-year-old son, who are inheriting a divided world that my generation failed to reform or make more just. Hagedorn provides us with the first synoptic view of the myriad warrior nations and street governments that have arisen in the concrete deserts of neoliberalism.. The globalization of gang violence to the ends of the earth - from the housing projects of Nuuk (capital of Greenland) to the mean streets of Ulan Bator and Vladivostock - is one of the most striking and misunderstood phenomena of our time. Since the first edition of *People and Folks* was published, the debate about the ‘gang problem’ has migrated from the front page of the local newspaper to the columns of *Foreign Affairs*, from the neighborhood police station to the Pentagon. In the last year, gangs staged an extraordinary semi-insurrection in Sao Paulo, fiercely battled United Nations troops in Port-au-Prince, were massacred by the police in Nairobi, Tegucigalpa, and Buenaventura (Colombia), and provided an excuse for the mayors of Los Angeles and New Orleans to demand federal intervention. Similarly, the violent spectres of two huge transnational gangs – Mara Savatrucha (MS) and !8th Street – now haunt Washington D.C. as well as San Salvador, Tegucigalpa as well as Los Angeles.

Hagedorn argues that the global gang is part of the continuum of crime and revolt that defines the new horizon of geopolitics. Indeed, from the standpoint of the abandoned and betrayed youth in our ghettos and *favelas*, we are all living in ‘failed’ states, and we should not be surprised by the angry social combustion that accompanies the new gilded age. His careful case-studies highlight numerous social fractures and historical inequalities that have converged to create *A World of Gangs*, but savage capitalism (that is to say, the kind of ruthless, untrammled marketplace celebrated both in *The Wall Street Journal* and gangster rap) remains the crucial substratum. Street gangs mirror the inhuman ambitions and greed of society’s trendsetters and deities even as they fight to the death over scraps from the table of the international drug trade. But Hagedorn,

characteristically, also finds hope in the contradictory values of outlaw youth - selflessness, solidarity, and love amidst cupidity and directionless rage – and he maintains the hope that a culture of resistance will ultimately prevail over the forces of self-destruction. Whether one shares his optimism or not, he makes a compelling case that the future of the world will be determined on the streets of our cities.

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