Introduction

In the 1960s and 1970s, groundbreaking research conducted by the Birmingham School changed the way we think about working-class youth by deconstructing the notion of subcultural deviance and bringing issues of resistance to the forefront of the analysis. If its early work emphasized the agency and potential for resistance of working-class youth, in a subsequent publication, Stuart Hall and his co-authors would shift their focus to the culture and institutions of social control of which those youths are the (un)privileged targets. While those theoretical and empirical interventions remain relevant for the field of gang studies, most mainstream, US-based criminologists have tended to neglect the Birmingham School’s valuable insights.

This chapter reviews some of the main contributions of the Birmingham School, starting with the intellectual foundation on which it was built and then focusing on its work on subcultures and the subsequent publication *Policing the Crisis* (PTC). The goal is to present some of the main ideas developed by the authors affiliated with the Birmingham School and to show how those can inform the work of scholars studying gangs from a critical perspective.

The origins of the “Birmingham School”: working-class culture as opposition

In 1964, Richard Hoggart founded the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. While the CCCS – which is usually considered the birthplace of cultural studies (Turner, 2003; Gelder, 2007) – remained active until 2002, it published its most influential work under the leadership of Stuart Hall, who directed it between 1968 and 1979.

As Hall himself (1980: 16) explained, the CCCS was greatly influenced by the seminal work of Hoggart (1992/1957), Williams (1983/1958) and Thompson (1966), who, together, represented the “original curriculum” that formed the Birmingham School’s theoretical foundation. Hoggart and Williams both challenged the dominant, highly elitist paradigm of the time that tended to associate “Culture” with the middle and upper classes while discarding working-class culture as being insignificant and irrelevant. While both authors shared a certain nostalgia towards a “golden age” of working-class culture supposedly corrupted by the rise of the mass-consumption society, their work brought attention to the working-class culture’s
vitality rather than its presumed conformity and passivity. Without embracing the Marxist notion of class antagonism, Hoggart argued that a sense of “community” constitutes one of the most essential features of working-class culture which, following a “us” versus “them” division, sees bourgeois society, its institutions and representatives, as “strange and often unhelpful” (1992/1957: 53).

Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* built on the themes developed by Hoggart and Williams but approached them from an overtly Marxist perspective. Driven by his ambition to develop a “history from below,” he shared their objective of putting the working class at the center of his analysis. His goal was not only to rescue the working class from the dustbin of history but to restore to its members a sense of agency of which most historical accounts had deprived them. By doing so, he challenged the dominant narrative that portrayed the working class as the victim of history to recast it in the role of the maker of history.

Even though he put greater emphasis on the relationship between modes of production and working-class cultural formations, he shared Williams and Hoggart’s focus on working-class culture. As he famously put it, “class is a cultural as much as an economic formation” (Thompson, 1966: 12). However, he departed from their respective analyses by considering “culture” as a privileged space where class struggle takes place.

Thompson followed the Marxist tradition that insists on the relational nature of class structures and contends that one of the most essential features of the working class is that it exists in a position of subordination vis-à-vis the capitalist class which, in turn, relies on a wide array of mechanisms - both material and symbolic - to maintain its dominant position. The novelty of Thompson’s analysis is that it defined working-class culture as being of an intrinsic oppositional nature. For him, working-class culture constitutes an alternative way of life through which the proletariat is able to subvert and oppose the norms and values of bourgeois society. This approach represented a challenge to the orthodox Marxist view that tends to discard culture as a secondary matter, a reflection of determining economic structures and a space whose revolutionary potential is seen as marginal at best. By centering his analysis on the subversive nature of working-class culture and by stressing its importance in fomenting working-class resistance, Thompson followed the path traced by Gramsci, overturning the traditional base-superstructure relationship.

Under Hall’s leadership, the Birmingham School would expand the theories of Hoggart, Williams and Thompson to develop a new field of subculture studies which became the Center’s hallmark. Similar to the three aforementioned authors, British working-class culture thus occupied a privileged topic of inquiry. Following Thompson’s work, the Center emphasized the oppositional nature of working-class culture which, for the CCCS’s members, constituted one of the most primordial areas where the working class could “win space” (Clarke et al., 2006/1975: 35) against the prevalent hegemonic order. The Birmingham School also challenged Hoggart’s negative vision on working-class culture in the post-war era. While Hoggart lamented the rise of the mass consumption society for having turned the vibrant “full rich life” of working-class culture into a superficial “candy-floss world” (1992/1957), Hall and his colleagues developed a different view of this phenomenon, seeing it as a site for new possibilities of symbolic resistance.

**The Birmingham School and “subcultures”**

**The transformations of the post-war context**

The CCCS’s interest in working-class subcultures can be seen as a direct response and challenge to the dominant discourse of the post-war era in Britain. In 1957, in a context of economic
The Birmingham School and gang studies

growth and increasing purchasing power, Conservative Prime Minister Macmillan argued that the country was experiencing “a state of prosperity such as we have never had . . . in the history of this country,” concluding: “most of our people have never had it so good” (Evans, 2010). It was also asserted that this new affluence was occurring at a time of broad political consensus between the two traditional political parties of the United Kingdom as the Tories and the Labour Party both agreed that a strong welfare state and a mixed economy constituted a vigorous model of socio-economic development. It was also professed that social conflict and class antagonism would wither away from British society. Commentators claimed that, as the working class was becoming increasingly similar to the middle class, the very notion of “social class” had lost all relevance. The Center’s work responded with a virulent critique of what its members considered a complete “social myth” (Clarke et al., 2006/1975: 17).

While the Birmingham School acknowledged that the post-war era was indeed a time of substantial change for the British working class, Phil Cohen (1980/1972) and others argued that the change was of a very different nature compared to the dominant discourse of affluence, consensus and bourgeoisification. For them, the post-war era was one of “social disorganization” (1980/1972: 66), and they argued that processes like the restructuring of the urban landscape, the disintegration of the “traditional working-class family” and changes in the country’s economic structure had deprived the working-class youth of the work-centered, communal dimension that defined their parents’ culture. The working-class youth of the 1960s was coming of age at a time when the “social cement of the community [was] in a state of crisis” (Cohen, 1980/1972: 70). In Clarke’s words: “they were the ‘dispossessed inheritors,’ they received a tradition which had been deprived of its real social bases” (2006/1975: 81). Suffering, on the one hand, from the destruction of manufacturing jobs and, on the other hand, from their inability to fully enter the new mass consumption society, the working-class youth of the 1960s “had the worst of all possible worlds” (Cohen, 1980/1972: 70).

It is in this context of change and instability that working-class subcultures emerged at the crossroads between “the familiar and the novel” (Hebdige, 1988/1979: 77); part of century old tradition of working-class resistance but taking new forms reflecting the specificities of the particular context in which they arose.

Resistance through rituals: subcultures and symbolic resistance

The connection between the cultural and the material or, in Marxist terms, between the superstructure and the base, is made explicitly clear by the members of the Birmingham School who insisted that, through culture, social groups “give expressive form to their social and material life-experience . . . culture is the way, the forms, in which groups ‘handle’ the raw material of their social and material existence” (Clarke et al., 2006/1975: 4). Thompson’s influence is unmistakable in this. Like the British historian, the CCCS focused on working-class subcultures as spaces of resistance, arguing that through the development and maintenance of their subcultures, members of the working-class youth are engaged in “the struggle to win symbolic and physical space from the [dominant] institution[s] [of bourgeois society] and [their] rules” (Wills, 2016/1978: 26). This vision builds on the notion of hegemony developed by Antonio Gramsci.

For Gramsci, hegemony relates to the capacity to create a new “common sense,” to make appear as natural what are essentially particular class interests. Located in the realm of ideas and culture, it hides the exploitative reality of capitalism and the unequal power relations on which it rests, reframing them in a way that obscures and reifies their oppressive nature: “thus the unequal extraction of surplus value in production appears as ‘a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work’” (Hall et al., 2013/1978: 195). By creating a sense of what is “natural” and by defining the
field of possibilities – that is, what is feasible and desirable for society as a whole and the role that each social group is supposed to play in this grand narrative – hegemony creates the necessary conditions for the preservation of the status quo and the maintenance of existing structures of domination. Ultimately, stressing the importance of consent over coercion, it creates an environment which ensures that, from a working-class perspective, “unfree conditions [are] entered freely” (Willis, 2016/1978: 120).

However, this hegemonic order is, by definition, unstable. Due to the internal contradictions of capitalism, cracks frequently appear in this ideological construction, the oppressive nature of the system becoming increasingly apparent. As a result, the hegemonic order has to be constantly recreated and consolidated, opening up space for working-class resistance and contestation. It is through this lens of cultural resistance that subcultures have to be understood. They constitute what Hebdige (1988/1979: 19) defines as a “symbolic violation of the social order.” While the subcultures studied by the CCCS were quite diverse, they all fulfilled the same functions for its working-class youth members.

At a time when the sense of “community” central to the crumbling parent culture was being lost, to belong to a subcultural group can be seen as an attempt to recreate this sense of “togetherness” and solidarity characteristic of working-class culture. This point is made particularly clear by Clarke (2006/1975: 80 emphasis in the original) in his study of the skinhead movement: “skinhead style represents an attempt to re-create through the ‘mob’ the traditional working-class community, as a substitution for the real decline of the latter.” Until the mid-1960s, work was the pillar of working-class identity in industrialized countries. It was “the main orientation point, in reference to which all other life pursuits could be planned and ordered” (Bauman, 2005/1998: 17). However, with the rise of the mass consumption society and the decline of traditional blue-collar jobs, work and the workplace lost their centrality and their role of incubators of both individual and collective identity. As a result, consumerism gained in importance in defining one’s identity (Miles, 1995, 1998; Winlow and Hall, 2006).

The more collective aspect of working-class community in the production-centered phase of capitalism tends to be contrasted with the rise of extreme individualism characteristic of consumer capitalism and its associated service economy. In that sense, the mods, the teds and the punks that captured the Birmingham School’s attention were seen as a way to maintain this sense of community, in opposition to the extreme individualism of late capitalism.

The CCCS challenged the largely negative view that intellectuals like Hoggart and the Frankfurt School held regarding mass culture and mass consumption. Rather than seeing the working class as passively conforming to the messages of the “culture industry” and submitting to its ideology, the Birmingham School focused on the subcultures’ potential for resistance. Subcultures are based on the subversion of the taken-for-granted symbolic signs associated with consumer goods. Ultimately, the punks, the teds and the rockers and the members of other subcultures are engaged in a dramatic and performative struggle over meaning. As Hebdige (1988/1979: 18) wrote, “‘humble objects’ can be magically appropriated; ‘stolen’ by subordinate groups and made to carry ‘secret’ meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination.” By insisting on the working-class youth’s ability to subvert the social and symbolic meanings of consumer goods and to ascribe to them a new “cultural substance” that better reflects their own vision and semi-autonomous position in the world, the Birmingham School shed light on the power of agency of the actors they studied, moving away from the pessimistic vision of passivity that characterizes the Frankfurt School.

Hebdige (1988/1979) borrowed Lévi-Strauss’s concept of bricolage to describe this process of symbolic appropriation, but he also drew attention to the fact that subcultures can also become
The Birmingham School and gang studies

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The Birmingham School and gang studies

The Birmingham School co-opted and their subversive potential neutralized. This is particularly true, since, as styles, subcultures are essentially commodity centered. Indeed, Clarke et al. (2006/1975: 42) remind us that subcultures only emerged as a result of increased disposable income for working-class youth and the rise of a new consumer market targeting those same youths. Consequently, while subcultures are able to subvert the original meaning given to consumer goods, the result of such bricolage can eventually be reintegrated within the mass consumption society, diffusing its subversive potential. For example, the Sex Pistols, once a source of revulsion among the “decent” British middle class, have gone through the full circle, from being regarded as dangerous deviants by mainstream society to being fully integrated into the capitalist corporate entertainment culture. The ability of the capitalist system to successfully defuse and absorb what were originally acts of symbolic subversion helps us understand why the members of the Birmingham School were both optimistic and pessimistic about the transformative potential of the symbolic resistance offered by subcultural movements: “the cycle leading from opposition to diffusion, from resistance to incorporation encloses each successive subculture” (Hebdige, 1988/1979: 101).

The relative pessimism of the Birmingham School

Ultimately, it could be said that subcultures are a prime example of the kind of social bulimia described by Young (1999: 86), and which refers to the double process of “cultural inclusion and social exclusion.” More fundamentally, it appears that the members of the Birmingham School were torn between recognizing, and celebrating, the symbolic resistance offered by subcultures while, at the same time, lamenting the very fact that this resistance remained confined to the symbolic realm. As Hebdige (1988/1979: 130) summarized it: “no amount of stylistic incantation can alter the oppressive mode in which the commodities used in subculture have been produced.” While subcultures allow the working-class youths to “win space” and resist the dominant hegemonic order, they fall short of altering the capitalist relations of production that constitute the root cause of oppression.

Following Gramsci, Willis (2016/1978: 174) reminds us that “the cultural is part of the necessary dialectic of [capitalist] reproduction.” Consequently, by rejecting the dominant, hegemonic cultural order, working-class youths engaged in subcultures do offer a form of resistance against capitalism. However, in the context of late capitalism, it seems like symbolic resistance represents a lesser threat to the dominant system. As noted previously, capitalism is a highly resilient system, able to accommodate subversive forms of symbolic resistance and to “commodify dissent” (Frank and Weiland, 1997; also see McGuigan, 2009).

Nonetheless, what subcultures and their “symbolic violation of social order” demonstrate is that the capitalist hegemonic order is never secured but is always contested, reminding us that “we have the logical possibility of radicalness” (Willis, 2016/1978: 175). However, the Birmingham School seems categorical that as long as this potential for radicalness is contained within the symbolic realm, the response offered by subcultures against capitalist exploitation “[is] fated to fail. . . . They ‘solve’, but in an imaginary way, problems which at the concrete material level remain unresolved” (Clarke et al., 2006/1975: 35, 37). A similar mix of optimism and pessimism transpires in Willis’s study Learning to Labour. How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs (2016/1978). On the one hand, the author applauds the “working-class lads” he is studying for developing a counter-culture which opposes an educational system that does not address the needs and interests of working-class kids. On the other hand, he also points out that, by fully rejecting the opportunities for cultural capital formation offered by the educational system and by deriding all forms of intellectual labor, the “lads” also limit their options for upward social mobility, condemning themselves to a life of unskilled manual labor, a quintessential form
of labor exploitation under capitalism. Consequently, “the counter-school culture becomes an always provisional, bare, skeptical yet finally accepting accommodation with the ‘status quo’” (145). Subcultures could then be seen as an example of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1973), creating the conditions that consolidate their members’ subaltern class position and creating a self-perpetuating cycle in which working-class kids keep getting working-class jobs. While some CCCS members have pointed out that the prospects might be more promising for “the girls” (McRobbie and Garber, 2006/1975; Powell and Clarke, 2006/1975), it does seem that, overall, “there is no ‘subcultural career’ for the working-class lad, no ‘solution’ in the subcultural milieu, for problems posed by the key structuring experiences of the class” (Clarke et al., 2006/1975: 35). Let us now turn our attention to the ways the Birmingham School’s work on subcultures might inform the field of critical gang studies.

Subcultures and gang studies

As mentioned earlier, CCCS members were at pains to place the subcultures they were studying in the specific context in which they emerged. The same caution should also apply to gang scholars. Rather than studying gangs as if they existed in a vacuum, it is essential to take into consideration the specific context in which each gang appears and subsequently evolves.

As Brotherton (2015: 11) notes, gangs should be understood as “a social phenomenon that is said to emerge within the ebbs and flows of social, economic and political currents over time”. Gang research in this vein can be seen in various contributions, from the work of Jensen (2014) and his emphasis on the legacy of territorial segregation in South Africa to Zilberg (2011) and her analysis of the impact that US immigration policies have had in El Salvador. This kind of work allows us to better understand the various cultural and structural forces at play in each situation and of which the gangs are both a product of and in response to. Only by paying attention to the social, political, economic and cultural environment which shapes each gang can we avoid the pitfall of pathologizing gang formation and activities. As the Birmingham School reminds us: “to blame the actions of individuals within a given historical structure, without taking that structure itself into account, is an easy and familiar way to exercising the moral conscience without bearing any of its costs” (Hall et al., 2013/1978: 181 emphasis in the original).

Furthermore, if we want to follow in the Birmingham School’s footsteps and develop a true “history from below,” it is essential to not only “plac[e] the gang in history . . . [but to also] contemplate the gang with history” (Brotherton, 2015: 14 emphasis in the original). Gangs, just like subcultures, are not fixed; they have their own history. One has to know their past in order to understand their present. For example, when Hebdige (1974) analyzes the tribulations of the Rastafarian/Rude Boy subcultures, he traces them from colonial Jamaica to the streets of London. Brotherton and Barrios (2004) undertake a similar endeavor, studying the various traditions and influences that molded the transnational gang of the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation, from Puerto Rico and Chicago to New York City. It is in this groundbreaking study that Brotherton and Barrios provide their own definition of what constitutes a “gang,” a highly loaded term that they avoid, preferring the label “street organization” that is devoid of pejorative connotations:

> group formed largely by youth and adults of marginalized social class which aims to provide its members with a resistant identity, an opportunity to be individually and collectively empowered, a voice to speak back to and challenge the dominant culture, a refuge from the stresses and strains of barrio or ghetto life and a spiritual enclave within which its own sacred rituals can be generated and practiced. (p.23)
This definition could very well apply to the subcultures studied by the CCCS. By highlighting the gang’s ability to offer its members a space of resistance against the dominant culture, Brotherton and Barrios follow the path set by the Birmingham School. They reject the emphasis put on illegal activities and stress the gangs’ counter-hegemonic potential. What is more, since subaltern classes exist in a state of cultural domination, gang membership can be seen as fulfilling the same basic functions as belonging to a subculture. Borrowing from Bourgois (1995), it could be said that those who join the gang are “in search of respect.” Ultimately, one of the most essential aspects of the gang, like any subculture, is that it recreates the sense of community and togetherness characteristic of working-class communities.

The communal dimension of the gang was highlighted early on (Thrasher, 1927) and has continued to be confirmed with such frequency that it could recently be affirmed: “although scholars, policy makers, police, and community organizations seldom agree on their approaches to gangs, there is one thing on which they do agree: When it comes to gangs, it is the group that matters” (Papachristos, 2013: 49–50). The importance of “territoriality” on which most gang scholars concur, some pointing out that “for [Chicano] gang members [of Los Angeles] the word for gang and neighborhood is identical” (Moore, 1978: 35), was also a defining feature of subcultural studies (Clarke et al., 2006/1975; Jefferson, 2006/1975; Clarke, 2006/1975). As Cohen (1980/1972: 74) put it, “territoriality is thus not only a way in which kids ‘live’ subculture as a collective behavior, but also the way in which the subcultural group becomes rooted in the situation of its community.”

Just as the CCCS debunked the most alarmist accounts about subcultures, showing that “doing nothing” and “passing time together” constitute one of the most important aspects of belonging to a subculture (Corrigan, 2006/1975), critical gang scholars have shown that being in a gang is not so much about “terrorizing honest citizens” but about “hanging out in the ‘hood” (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Conquergood, 2013/1994; Zilberg, 2011). It seems undeniable that for youths experiencing high levels of marginalization and discrimination from mainstream society, spending time among peers, donning the same clothes – in short, “reppin’” (Conquergood, 1992, 2013/1994 – represents a form of empowerment and a way to “win space” for the young gang members: “cultural space in the neighbourhood and institutions, real time for leisure and recreation, actual room on the street or street-corner” (Clarke et al., 2006/1975: 35). Conquergood has been at pains to underscore those various dimensions in his illuminating research on gangs (1992, 2013/1994, 1997).

While the dominant discourse about gangs insists on their supposedly intrinsic brutality and disrespect for human life, Conquergood shows that notions of love, respect and solidarity are at the center of gang culture. Drawing attention to the material and symbolic oppression from which the marginalized youths, predominantly ethnic minorities, who constitute the bulk of gang members suffer, he concludes: “against a dominant world that displaces, stifles, and erases identity, the homeboys create, through their communication practices, a hood: a subterranean space of life-sustaining warmth, intimacy, and protection” (Conquergood, 2013/1994: 248). Similarly, through the use of graffiti – which he defines as “counterliteracy” (1997: 354) – gang members are able to reclaim a sense of ownership over the “hoods” in which they have been segregated and subjugated to the degrading effects of over/under-policing which continuously reassert their status as second-class citizens (Rios, 2011). Overall, Conquergood insists on the counterhegemonic nature of gang culture, which rejects the prevalent individualism of bourgeois society. Along with Brotherton (2008, 2015, 2020; Brotherton and Barrios, 2004), he is one of the scholars who has gone to the greatest lengths to challenge the dominant accounts on gangs by developing a critical “history from below,” thereby restoring a sense of agency to gang members. The influence of the Birmingham School in this critical research agenda is indisputable.
However, despite the similarities between gangs and the subcultures that fascinated the Birmingham School – to some extent, “gangsta culture” has also gone through the same cycle of incorporation into the mainstream (Kelley, 1994; Hagedorn, 2008) – an important difference relates to the material nature of those two phenomena. While subcultures constitute a form of escape and symbolic resistance for working-class youths, they do not offer any material solutions to their economic exploitation. The economic opportunities available to the segregated youths of the American inner-city neighborhoods are even more restricted than those of their British counterparts, mostly due to the extreme racial discrimination faced by African Americans and Latinos (Massey and Denton, 1993; Wacquant 2007). Already constrained in a position of extreme marginality, the residents of the American ghettos were hit particularly hard by deindustrialization and the rise of the service economy (Julius Wilson, 1997). In this context, gangs offer unique opportunities to address the material needs of a population ostracized in economically deprived neighborhoods (Sullivan, 1989; Jankowski, 1991). The gangs’ economic appeal became all the more striking with the rise of international drug trade. Following Merton’s classical typology (1938), gang members could be seen as innovators, seizing the opportunities provided by a lucrative business to increase their material well-being (Bourgois, 1995; Contreras, 2013). This situation led several authors to ponder the risks of social reproduction that weigh on gang members involved in such highly criminalized activities (Hagedorn, 1988; Bourgois, 1995; Macleod, 2009).

However, recognizing the material incentive associated with gang activities does not negate the notion of resistance. As the limited opportunities available to the working-class youths of the American ghettos are clustered in the most demeaning sectors of the labor market, refusing to submit to the dictates of the market, which reduces those youths to the most exploitable and disposable type of labor, can be seen as a form of resistance. This is the line of argument followed by Hall et al. (2013/1978: 380) in Policing the Crisis (PTC):

> the hustler was the product of the combination of racism and unemployment. But he also provided one of the few positive role models for young blacks on the block: one of the few not cowed by oppression, not tied to daily grind of low-wage poverty.

It is this other major publication of the Birmingham School which is the topic of the next section.

**Crime, moral panics and social control**

**Policing the Crisis**

Along with Resistance through Rituals, PTC is arguably the second most important contribution of the Birmingham School. As Hall and his co-authors wrote in the second edition of the book, the two publications “are two sides of the same coin” (2013/1978: xi). If Resistance through Rituals focused on the forms of symbolic resistance developed by working-class youths, PTC sheds lights on the culture and institutions of social control of which those youths are the (un)privileged targets. Using the so-called British “mugging crisis” of the early 1970s as their case study, the authors investigate both the processes through which a deviant act can turn into a “moral panic” and the function that moral panics can play in capitalist societies. In other words, the analysis shifts from the deviant act itself to the social construction of, and social reaction to, said act.
PTC starts by debunking the alarmist narrative around the “mugging crisis” in the United Kingdom, showing that this so-called “crisis” did not reflect an abrupt change in crime patterns as claimed by the various institutions – media, police, courts – fueling the moral panic over mugging. Having demonstrated that the so-called “mugging crisis” had no real material basis, they proceed to deconstruct the social meaning of the word “mugging”.

The term emerged in the United States in the 1960s and came to embody a wide range of social anxieties revolving around the “Black ghettos.” At a time of growing political consciousness and organization among African Americans, and in a period marked by rising civil unrest, “mugging” became associated with an alleged threat to the “American way of life.” When the “mugging” label crossed the ocean and arrived in Britain in the early 1970s, it carried with it the images and social representations associated with the term in the United States. Transposed in the British context, “mugging” continued to be equated with rising poverty, growing racial tensions, unruly youths, loss of traditional values, banalization of crime and violence, and the undermining of law and order. In other words, “mugging” came to give substance to a latent feeling of social and moral crisis. Similar to what had occurred in the US, “mugging” was primarily associated with racial and ethnic minorities. At a time when Black youths were increasingly being defined as “problematic,” they soon came to be portrayed as “potential muggers.”

Focusing on its social construction, Hall et al. examine the ideological and social functions of crime. Following Durkheim’s classical theory on the boundary-setting function of crime (1982/1894), the Birmingham School argues that crime plays a central role in our societies. Seen as a violation of the rules that organize life in community, crime is typically conceptualized as the quintessential offense against society. By breaking the law, the criminal excludes himself from society. Punishing him then serves as a sort of communal healing, a cathartic endeavor which reaffirms the social cohesion of society. Portrayed as a blind evil that affects society as a whole, rather than any social group in particular, “crime allows all ‘good men and true’ to stand up and be counted . . . in the defence of normality, stability and ‘our way of life’” (Hall et al., 2013/1978: 148).

Crime thus plays a vital ideological function in capitalist societies as it reinforces the myth of a cohesive society marked, not by unequal power relations, class antagonism, patriarchy, and racism, but by an essential division between “criminals” and “law-abiding citizens” of all backgrounds. This vision of a cohesive and consensual society is one of the most important features of the dominant hegemonic order: “it is what makes the rule of the few disappear in the consent of the many” (Hall et al., 2013/1978: 213). The direct result of this ideological construct is to deny the necessity of bringing radical changes to the status quo. Tensions and conflicts might very well exist in society, but the punishment of criminals is presented as a proof that the existing institutional settings offer effective solutions to resolve social issues.

In PTC, the CCCS members demonstrate how the imposition of the “criminal label” on a specific social group partakes of a broad project of social control. By making certain behaviors illegal and labeling their perpetrators as criminals, the state is able to build a tight controlling net over potentially problematic social groups; those who would only “have their chains to lose and a world to win” (Marx and Engels, 2017/1848: 103) in a radical transformation of society. The association “mugger/Black youth” allowed for increased levels of surveillance and state control over second-generation immigrant youths at a time of rising political consciousness and challenges to the system of racial oppression that had maintained them in a subaltern position within British society. More than thirty years after the publication of PTC, Alexander (2010) would develop a similar argument about the “war on drugs” being disproportionately waged
against African Americans, demonstrating that, under the guise of universalistic appeals to “law and order,” the law can be mobilized effectively for targeted efforts of social control.

One of the most important contributions of *PTC* is that it analyzes the criminalization of certain social groups from the standpoint of a crisis of hegemony. A crisis of hegemony occurs when the gap between the ideological constructions deployed by the dominant classes to legitimize existing unequal power relations and the intrinsically exploitative nature of capitalism becomes so wide so as to pose a threat to the status quo. The internal contradictions of the capitalist system become so pronounced that the subaltern classes come to reject, and rebel against the hegemonic “common sense.”

As noted previously, hegemony is most effective when consent outweighs coercion for the maintenance and consolidation of the status quo. Yet, when the very foundations of the system are considered to be in danger, when social instability is on the rise and class struggle threatens to take a more overt and confrontational turn, the state – which in Gramsci’s theory of “integral state” is the central space where “historical blocs” of ruling classes are formed and the hegemonic order established (1971) – will deploy its coercive power to resolve the crisis. This shift from consent to coercion represents one of the most salient features of a hegemonic crisis: “the masks of liberal consent and popular consensus slip to reveal the reserves of coercion and force on which the cohesion of the state and its legal authority finally depends” (Hall et al. 2013/1978: 214). In the British case, as the post-war “we never had it so good” discourse was being increasingly discredited and challenged, it gave way to alarmist warnings that the “British way of life” was being threatened by gangs of muggers. Radical measures, it was argued, had to be implemented to avert this danger. A new “law and order” discourse emerged, legitimizing increasingly repressive measures as the only solution to save the “honest citizens” from the “hoodlums” wreaking havoc in the country. Hidden from view as long as consent prevails, the Leviathan state and its monopoly on legitimate violence rises again, curtailing civil liberties and deploying its repressive fist to supposedly protect society from those who terrorize it.

However, even when coercion becomes increasingly necessary to ensure the maintenance of the status quo, this shift must be perceived as legitimate by a substantial part of the subaltern classes. If this were not the case, an increase in repressive measures might potentially trigger a backlash of rising dissent rather than its diffusion (Francisco, 1996). It is in this context that moral panics become all the more important to gather popular support for repressive measures.

With the mass media playing a central role in this process, moral panics, and the mechanisms of exaggeration, distortion (Cohen, 2002/1972) and convergences (Hall et al., 2013/1978) on which they rest, aim to construct the image of the “deviant other,” which comes to be identified as the source of all evil in society. Moral panics fulfill the essential functions of maintaining boundaries between “us” and “them” and building consent for the criminalization of the “other” (Erikson, 1966; Cohen, 2002/1972; Young, 2011). The overall objective of a moral panic is then to: 1) build consensus for the state’s shift towards coercion, 2) scapegoat and criminalize a specific social group which is seen as the source of the crisis and 3) divide the members of the subaltern classes and distract them from the real, structural causes of the crisis.

Building on those ideas, *PTC* makes the case that the “mugging crisis” represented, above all, such a moral panic organized to respond to the crisis of hegemony at play in the UK in the early 1970s. The authors also show that race played a central part in the manufacturing of the ‘mugging crisis’. In that sense, *PTC* constitutes a great contribution to the century-long debate which, from Du Bois (2007/1935) to Roediger (2007) and Alexander (2010), has shown that race and its associated “wages of whiteness” have always played a crucial role in dividing the working class along racial lines, a fundamental feature which facilitates capitalist reproduction.
In the following section, we will see how the ideas developed in *PTC* remain relevant for the field of critical gang studies.

**Gang bangers and muggers**

From Phoenix (Zatz, 1987) to Sydney (Poyting et al., 2001) and Vancouver (Katz, 2011), gangs have frequently constituted a prime target around which moral panics are organized. Presented as such a moral panic, *PTC* exposed the “mugging crisis” of the 1970s for what it truly was: a political project which, in a context of crisis of hegemony and corresponding shift from consent to coercion, scapegoated young Black men as the source of all evil in society. This strategy was used to divide the working class along an “us” versus “them” dichotomy and to redirect working-class anxieties, away from the internal contradictions of capitalism, and to a specific social group whose economic deprivation and ethnic composition made it a “perfect target.” Forty years after its publication, the authors’ invitation to shift our attention from “the deviant act . . . treated in isolation to the relation between the deviant act and the reaction of the public and the control agencies to the act” (Hall et al., 2013/1978: 21) remains more pertinent than ever. Indeed, the same principles identified in the “mugging crisis” continue to be at play in the many consecutive moral panics organized around gangs since then:

(1) the identification of a specific issue of concern; (2) the identification of a subversive minority; (3) ‘convergence’, or the linking, by labelling, of this specific issue to other problems; (4) the notion of ‘thresholds’ which, once crossed, can lead to an escalating threat; (5) the prophecy of more troubling times to come if no action is taken . . . ; and (6) the call for ‘firm steps.’

(Hall et al., 2013/1978: 223)

Donald Trump’s presidency in the United States is a case in point. Negative views about migrants have played a central role in Trump’s political program and discourse, both on the campaign trail and once elected to the White House. Scholars who subjected his speeches to rigorous discourse analysis (Degani, 2016; Kreis, 2017; Liu and Lei, 2018; Sclafani, 2018) all reached a similar conclusion: “Trump uses an informal, direct, and provoking communication style to construct and reinforce the concept of a homogeneous people and a homeland threatened by the dangerous other” (Kreis, 2017: 607). As he infamously put it in his speech announcing his presidential bid:

> The US has become a dumping ground for everybody else’s problems. . . . When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. . . . They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.

(Washington Post Staff, 2015)

Following his election, Trump frequently used gang violence as a strategy to build popular support in favor of his highly punitive migration and deportation policies. Between his inauguration in January 2017 and his 2019 State of the Union speech, he publicly referred to MS-13 more than 160 times (Miller, 2019). Time and again, Trump has maintained that the violent acts committed by MS-13 gang members, whom his administration officially defines as “violent animals” (White House, 2018), are a direct consequence of the supposedly permissive approach to border control of previous administrations. Contending that
his government’s migration policies aim at “protecting the freedoms of law-abiding Americans, . . . [by] going after the criminal gangs and cartels that prey on our innocent citizens” (White House, 2017), Trump (2018) has argued that “the scourge of MS-13 and other transnational criminal organizations will not abate until our Nation’s borders are fully secure and those who seek to harm us are no longer able to exploit loopholes in our broken immigration laws.”

The idea that illegal immigration, of which violent gang members supposedly represent the most glaring illustration, is the source of all the plights faced by the United States — “reduced jobs, lower wages, overburdened schools and hospitals, increased crime, and a depleted social safety net” (Trump, 2019) — has been one of the most important features of the Trump administration. There is, of course, a great irony to this discursive and political strategy, and not only because it fails to recognize that the United States had already entered an era of “mass deportation” during Barack Obama’s presidency (Golash-Boza, 2015). More fundamentally, it is oblivious to the fact that, as Zilberg (2011) demonstrates, transnational gangs like the Mara Salvatrucha, Trump’s favorite target, are a direct consequence of the same kind of punitive policies that the Trump administration advocates. Documenting the transnational implications of national security policies, Zilberg (2011: 130) concludes that “transnational formations like La Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street Gang are a somewhat ironic result of nativism and its work to criminalize immigrants.” In other words, the very gangs that Trump presents as the most important reason for implementing harsher deportation policies might actually never have seen the light if it were not for . . . the implementation of harsher deportation policies in the United States. Of course, the Birmingham School teaches us that those factual elements have little significance when it comes to the social function that “muggers” or “gang members” fulfill for the maintenance of the status quo.

Muggers and gang bangers both represent the archetype of the “dangerous, racialized other,” a subhuman figure marked by their pure evilness and against which the “rest of us,” the “decent folks,” should unite. And as Baker (2019) pointed out: “an us-against-them political strategy has been at the heart of Mr. Trump’s presidency from the start.” To be sure, this chapter is not trying to make the case that gangs do not exist or might not pose some serious issues for the communities in which they reside. Rather, following the line of inquiry developed by the Birmingham School, it contends, along with Zatz (1987: 30 emphasis in original), that if we shift the analysis away from the gangs to critically investigate the role that they fulfill from a social control perspective, the key issue becomes the “social imagery of . . . youth gangs, rather than their actual behavior.” From this perspective, it appears that visions of unruly, violent youths of color threatening social order all coalesce in the figure of the Chicano gangs which have regained such high visibility in the discourse of the Trump administration. They represent the perfect boogeymen against which mainstream society can unite, diverting attention from other, more damaging, issues of capitalism. As noted previously, this is particularly true in times of crisis of hegemony. As Brotherton (2020) summarizes it:

the gang as one of society’s chief enemies, has a ubiquitous presence, becoming a key “floating” signifier in policing and regulating public and private spaces, all of which relate to protecting, reproducing, and reinforcing race/ethnic and class structures in the service of wealth and capital accumulation.

In conclusion, if the Birmingham School’s work on subcultures can inform the field of gang studies by inviting scholars to move away from the more pathologizing approaches and to develop a more critical perspective emphasizing agency and resistance, PTC sheds light on
another dimension of the “gang phenomenon,” focusing on notions of social control and crisis of hegemony. While criminalizing gangs and designing moral panics around them play a crucial role in the consolidation of the status quo and the division of the working class, innovative measures like those implemented in Ecuador have fostered increased social inclusion for young gang members traditionally treated as social pariahs (Brotherton and Gude, 2018). In fact, moving away from punitive approaches might be a way to liberate the transformative potential of subcultures identified by the Birmingham School and to “transform [gang] activity into activism” (Zilberg, 2011: 156 emphasis in original).

References


The Birmingham School and gang studies


