

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

John M. Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture*. Foreword by Mike Davis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 216 pp. \$US 24.95 hardcover (978-0-8166-5066-8)

In *A World of Gangs* John Hagedorn departs from previous approaches to gang research that focus on local contexts by offering a fresh approach to understanding the presence of gangs in a global context. He shows that conditions of poverty, enduring inequality, and racial and ethnic oppression in various locations around the world have led to gang formation. Hagedorn argues that globalization has led to a retreat of the state and its role in providing adequate employment, services, and security. This has led not only to abysmal conditions but also a decline in faith in governments' ability to provide "progress" and protection in the global economy. This faith has been replaced by a "demoralization" and a distancing from the morality and culture that once guided behaviour. For Hagedorn "demoralization" spells hopelessness for economic and social mobility in tandem with recognition of the permanence of oppression and racism. In these situations of demoralization and distrust of the state people begin to create protective racialized and religious identities to defend themselves and their community from the fears and "injustices of globalization." It is within these contexts that Hagedorn outlines how youths become attracted to gangs and the identity they provide.

Hagedorn details how in some areas gangs have come to replace the state in fulfilling community economic, security, and service needs while providing members subcultural symbols, rituals, and traditions. Often in response to state officials' coercive attempts to subdue them as they evolve into local social movements, institutionalization takes place as gangs develop complex organizational structures that allow them to adapt to changing environments.

Throughout the book Hagedorn takes issue with previous attempts to categorize and define gangs and argues that one needs to broaden the examination beyond unsupervised peer groups and explore more institutionalized forms. He critiques the static portrayal of gangs in previous work and outlines various examples of how unsupervised peer groups can metamorphose into religious and ethnic militias, political parties, organized crime groups, and revolutionaries.

Hagedorn's central argument is that gang researchers have failed to recognize the importance of music in gangs throughout the world and suggests that without exploring the music one cannot understand or address the gang problem. He argues that in the global era the importance of culture is significantly stronger than in the past. For Hagedorn culture reproduces and reflects structural conditions but can also be a powerful transformative influence. Rap and hip-hop are viewed as central to a "culture of rebellion" and the development of resistance identities based on street experiences. Hip-hop constructs an oppositional identity while providing meaning and self-recognition for those in unpromising environments. The gangsta rap version of hip-hop provides "the power of negativity to keep on living in the awareness of ghetto conditions that are unlikely to be improved by governments, business, or liberal whites." The music articulates gang members' anger and their "defiance of the white man's system." The music has been adopted in other global locales and melded with local musical preferences to create home-grown versions of hip-hop that communicate to the listener the anger and issues of that environment. Hagedorn is also quick to point out the contradictions in the music, and its appropriation and exploitation by the music industry, reinforcing racial stereotypes. These "studio produced" violent, misogynist gangster identities have also influenced how gang members view themselves, leading to insidious harm and ruin in poor communities. He argues that the gangster identity is now being defined by record company executives with "twisted imaginations."

Hagedorn's analysis leads to policy suggestions that focus on incorporating gang members into social movements and assisting them to work for their own and their community's benefit. Issues such as police brutality and gentrification (which he calls the "secret war over space") have great potential for attracting gangs into social action. He argues that community-based movements need to move from the exclusion and vilification of gang members to inclusive and cooperative social action based on non-violence. Yet, this may not be the most important strategy. Instead, Hagedorn argues that the "resistance identities" constructed in hip-hop need to be acknowledged as it is from them that different social movements potentially uniting youth can be successfully fostered.

The review of the effects of globalization, the examination of the global commonalities leading to gang formation across many urban locations throughout the world, and the recognition of the various and constant changing forms that gangs can take are among the book's strengths. This approach forces one to look beyond local and individual explanations. Comparison of institutionalized gangs in Chicago, Rio de Janeiro, and Cape Town demonstrates commonalities while retaining the richness

and uniqueness of each local response. The case study of Chicago, historically comparing the development and outcomes of different ethnic and racialized gangs and responses to gentrification is extremely insightful, and provides researchers with a valuable historical framework for understanding gangs. One is left wanting equally detailed analyses of the other locations.

The analysis of the importance of music also provides interesting insights. Hagedorn's focus on resistance identities and the contradictions within the music should be pursued by others studying gangs. Although some of this is similar to work done on youth subcultures by British sub-cultural theorists years ago, the examination of hip-hop, the incorporation of more recent theoretical insights, and the relevance of music to gangs makes for contemporary relevance. Hagedorn is to be commended for his policy implications and his candid hope in what he recognizes is an uphill battle. His novel suggestions direct researchers and community members to a potentially rich resource for political action. On a more critical note, throughout the book Hagedorn attempts to distance himself from past theoretical approaches to understanding gangs. While his critiques have some validity, theoretical dismissals should not be accepted uncritically. Nevertheless, they challenge researchers on gangs to work beyond current theoretical perspectives and to examine theoretical work outside of criminology while re-examining past understandings to assess possibilities for retention and integration.

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