

“AMERICAN AS APPLE PIE”: REIMAGINING GANGS AS A REPRESENTATION OF AMERICAN IDEALS

Devonn Thomas

Faculty Mentor: Brendan Roediger, J.D.

Saint Louis University

Abstract

Although gangs and the United States seem to act in opposition to one another, Americans who participate in gangs are still Americans; thus, they are susceptible to mirroring their reality in a way that still strives to achieve a distorted kind of American dream. This is because undergirding the American democratic project are the guiding ideals of family, the right to bear arms, and capitalism. Though seemingly counter to this project, gangs reify these same values. Using foundational texts on the formation of these American ideologies and scholarly sources on the impact of gangs within a society, I will argue that because gangs and America both embody the same foundational principles but employ them through different means, gang activity ought to be considered a re-articulation of American ideology. My goals are as follows: 1. Explore whether American foundational texts and gang manifestos embody the same foundational principles; 2. Illuminate the means by which both groups employ American ideology; and 3. Rearticulate the parallels between American ideology, political embodiment, and the dismissal of marginalized communities as part and parcel of the two.

Keywords: Gangs, America, Human Rights, Justice

Introduction

In the years prior to his death, my father was a family man who lived in a predominately white suburb of Saint Louis far from the city streets that raised him, but in the '90s, daddy was a thug. Back before the word was co-opted by mass media, it was a word that he wore like a badge of honor. At that time, rapper and activist Tupac Shakur's message about what thug life actually meant resonated with the light skin boy from the West Side. Tupac's "reimagining of a word that the Oxford Dictionary defines as 'a violent person, especially a criminal' into a positive attribute resonated. Tupac's vision redefined the word 'thug' into a man who triumphs over systemic and societal obstacles" (Reeves). For my father, that triumph came at a cost; he was further demonized by American society for not only

being a Black man, but being a Black man who dared to pledge allegiance not to his country, but to his brothers, fellow members of Saint Louis' Blood gang.

In 1969, during the height of the 20th century Black Power movement, Kwame Ture had a simple assertion about the role of Blackness within the U.S. According to Ture, "America does not belong to the Blacks" (Mwakikagile, 2007). From his perspective, Black people have never truly been granted citizenship into the nation wrought with anti-Black violence. Thus, to be American is to be white. Given that framework, whenever America is referenced in this text it will not be a descriptor of Blackness and other forms of non-whiteness within the United States; rather, it will embody the culture of whiteness within the aforementioned nation.

Because America never really belonged to Black people, some have relied upon collective efficacy to create a society that honors their humanity and makes room for mobility. This idea of collective efficacy, the ability of a community to solve its own social problems, offers insight into the formation of gangs and informs their structure in the modern day (Sampson).

Capitalism

That same foundation of collective efficacy is present in gang's reimagining of capitalism. Like America, capitalism has ostracized the Black community and historically treated the oppressed group like a commodity rather than merchant or investor. In Dr. Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, he argues that capitalism and the ways that Black people experience both wealth and poverty in America are inextricably tied to slavery and racism (Kelley, 2002). Because capitalism so often fails young Black people, some choose to join gangs as a reimagining of capitalism that is not reliant on wealth or racialized nepotism-- that is the ways in which people grant preferential treatment to those not only within their biological family, but, more broadly, within their race (Kelley, 2002).

This is also evidenced in Alan Seals, Ph.D's study titled, "Are Gangs a Substitute for Legitimate Employment? Investigating the Impact of Labor Market Effects on Gang Affiliation," where he considers capitalism's ties to class, race and gang affiliation (Seals, 2009). He cites and extrapolates a study by Grogger that finds that, "poor youth labor market conditions may account for the hump-shaped relationship between crime and age" (Seals, 2009). He goes on to say that, "the high incidence of black criminal offenders may be a result of the Black/white earnings gap" (Seals, 2009). What this

means is that the reason why some young, Black people resort to criminal behavior in the face of poverty is not because of some innate need to behave badly, but actually comes as a result of low economic mobility. In the way that some wealthy, young people can depend on their parents or members of their communities to procure gainful employment for them, in poor Black communities where one could go miles without seeing an opening for a job, that option just is not as available.

In response to this system of inequality, some people who live within gang-laden communities have come to rely on a cultural capital as a means of deracializing and redefining capitalism within Black communities. Alan Seals considers this phenomena in his understanding of capitalism within gang structures (Seals, 2009). He bolsters his argument using Pierre Bourdieu's work on varying forms of capital and the conditions that breed them (Seals, 2009). "Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital refers to the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, material belongings, credentials, etc. that one acquires through being part of a particular social class" (Seals, 2009). While gang members do deal in money, there is also a component of capitalism within gangs that cannot be so easily quantified. This cultural capital decides who gets to sit atop the neighborhood hierarchy. If a person has more cultural capital, colloquially referred to as swag and or swagger, then they, in a way, hold more value than someone who might lack the same level of esteem.

Conversely, capitalism has worked on behalf of Americans for hundreds of years. Adam Smith, the founding father of capitalism, had imagined a society where people worked and were paid according to their labor. He

said as much in his foundational text, *Wealth of Nations*. “The annual labour of every nation is the fund which originally supplies it with all the necessaries and conveniences of life which it annually consumes, and which consist always either in the immediate product of that labour, or in what is purchased with that produce from other nations” (Smith, 1776). Smith imagined a society where everyone who labored was paid for their work adequately so that no one would ever have to go without and each family’s household income would match if not exceed their needs (Smith, 1776). He wrote those words in 1776, a time when Black folks, whose bodies were owned by their enslavers, toiled over their master’s land day in and day out without compensation. Those barriers still exist today. Black people, on average, have lower earnings than white people; live in less affluent neighborhoods and have considerably less generational wealth to fall back on (Seals, 2009). Capitalism has always taken the side of America and left Black people to claim their own wealth by any means necessary.

Family Values

Another aspect of American culture that gangs have taken hold of is the value of family within communities. In America, family values are also given extreme importance, especially within the country’s political landscape. The Republican Party, in particular, prides itself on family values. According to the Grand ‘Ole Party’s (GOP, 2016) official website, “the family is the bedrock of our nation. When American families flourish, so too does our country. Our Party’s economic and social policies, including tax reform, education, healthcare, and the sanctity of life, should always promote and strengthen that most sacred bond” (Republican Platform, 2016). While some may vehemently disagree with the

ways that the GOP enacts policies surrounding what they call “family values,” there is little room for argument as to whether or not they prioritize it on their party’s platform.

In Scott Decker and Barrik Van Winkle’s book, *Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence*, they interview young men who are involved with gangs and asks them to speak to their perception of gangs as they relate to a familial structure. “Well we call it a gang I guess because we all stick together and stuff and if somebody disrespect us we just come and retaliate” (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). In that participant’s perception, gangs, like families, must have a foundation of loyalty. It is also important to note that the many of the respondents were young folks, in their late teens and early twenties (Seals, Image One). While some people form their loyalties as a result of a biological connection, others create that bond based on shared experiences and similarities within culture (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). Other young people may feel a similar loyalty to their sports team or student council club within their schools, but lack of adequate funding in urban schools have robbed many young Black students of that (legal) connection to each other and to a larger institution that has the resources to properly care for them (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). Another person cited within the same text defines gangs as “a large number of people period. Most of the time you with a lot of people so you don’t have to worry about getting jumped” (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). Here, the bond is built upon protection. Although there is no inherent violence within urban areas that does not exist in suburbia, there is a different kind of protection necessary for a person growing up in an area that might lack access to basic necessities, an efficient police force, or community members who

have the agency required to do the policing themselves.

This kind of community building in the midst of injustice is not new to Black Americans. Rather, reports of pseudo-familial structures within the Black community have existed for hundreds of years with some even existing antebellum Black lore. In Catherine Lee's book, *Fictive Kinship: Family Reunification and the Meaning of Race and Nation in American Immigration*, she views fictive kinship as the unifying force that has helped people of color stay afloat even as systems and institutions have routinely failed them (Lee, 2013). Given that understanding: gang's imagining of family, the implications of fictive kinship and America are all factors that cannot be divested from one another as they are all interdependent (Lee, 2013). Black people in America, more specifically Black people within gangs, have prospered for as long as they have because of the loyalty and protection that their co-created community provides for them.

Right to Bear Arms

The final value that exists both in American discourse and that of gang members is the right to bear arms. This right, as outlined in the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution, seemingly grants all American citizens the right to own guns as a means of protecting themselves. Unfortunately, Black people have been all but left out of this narrative, with their ownership of firearms being criminalized rather than accepted as one of their inalienable rights. The National Rifle Association, America's largest pro-gun lobbying group, has come under fire for their reluctance to include Black people in conversations about gun policies and ownership. This issue was brought into the spotlight in the wake of Philando Castile's murder. His story, as reported in the *New*

York Times claims that, "Mr. Castile was licensed to carry a gun and was recorded on a dashboard camera video calmly telling Officer Yanez that he had a weapon in the car. Officer Yanez told him not to reach for the weapon, and Mr. Castile and Ms. Reynolds both tried to assure the officer that he was not doing so. Within seconds, Officer Yanez fired seven shots" ("Minnesota Officer Acquitted", 2017). That case sparked national outrage as people slowly began to realize that Castile was the legal owner of the weapon that he carried, but the assumption was that he, although having been born within the United States, did not have the right to carry a firearm. That assumption is not unlike the one surrounding gun ownership within gangs. Historically, the image of an armed Black person has struck fear in the hearts of Americans. Thus, gang members have no choice but to acknowledge the way that America perceives guns when they're in Black hands. That does not stop gang members from arming themselves, though. The fact is, gang members arm themselves for many of the same reasons as white conservatives: as a means of protection against forces that threaten to wreak havoc upon their own lives or the lives of the people whom they hold closely.

Contrary Research

While many scholars argue on behalf of the notion that gangs employ a system of fictive kinship within their structure, there are others whose opinions stand in stark opposition. One such academic is Stanton E. Samenow, the author of "The Myth of Street Gang as a Family Substitute." As the title suggests, Samenow does not find any truth in the suggestion that gangs have a connection to family (Samenow, 2011). He goes on to insist that if young people just got more involved in schools and extracurricular clubs, there would be no need for gangs

(Samenow, 2011). He finishes with a comparison: people of other backgrounds (read: races) have experienced poverty just as much as poor Black people, but they do not choose to join gangs (Samenow, 2011). Much of his argument can be undone with the simple assertion that he is viewing gangs from a lens of anti-Black racism that causes him to dehumanize gang members as a way of reifying his own beliefs. Moreover, Stanton also ignores the role of underfunded and over policed school systems within many urban areas in the United States. Seals draws these associations in his text “Are Gangs a Substitute for Legitimate Employment? Investigating the Impact of Labor Market Effects on Gang Affiliation.” What Seals sees as Black people “making excuses” is actually rooted in culturally significant barriers that exist in poor, Black communities. Non-Black people do join gangs, but the circumstances affecting Black gang members is unique and ought to be honored with its own, dedicated research.

Discussion

Granting humanity to people whom society oftentimes dehumanizes is at the center of all of my research. As I began this topic, it was clear that there many texts about the role of gangs in society, but most of them were pathologizing rather than explanatory. I found, early on, that the academy has a sort of blind spot when it comes to the human experiences of criminalized people. I did not go about this paper trying to convince people that gangs were good or healthy for society, but rather to shine a light on a group of people who are so often cast aside and judged prematurely.

Limitations of These Studies

There were a few limitations in my study that may have informed the results. The limitations result from secrecy within gang

culture and lack of personal access to living gang members.

Secrecy. Loyalty is one of the primary pillars of gangs all over the world. From secret hand symbols to coded language, gangs rely on privacy in order to maintain their safety and to continue operations without interference from rivals or law enforcement. This limited the amount of access that I had to primary sources written by and for gang members. The first-hand accounts that I was fortunate enough to use were funneled through other academicians’ lens before they came to me.

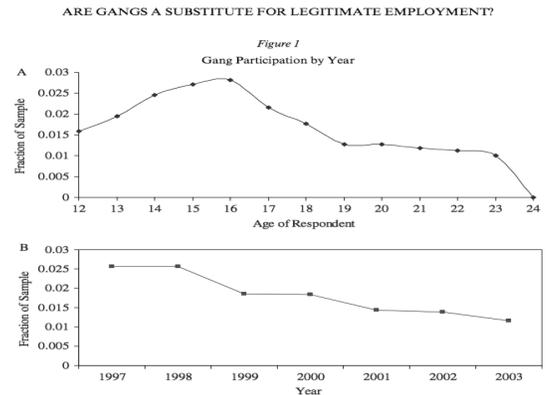
Lack of personal access. At the start of my research I figured that I could rely most heavily on the written word (books, manifestos, articles, etc), but as time went on I found that this project could have benefited from personal anecdotes from current gang members. That would have allowed me to ask questions of them that had been tailored to my research and given me the opportunity to build rapport with them. Moreover, this study lends itself to underground and possibly undercover exploration, but, understandably, that opportunity was not an option for me given the serious risks.

Conclusion

Black people have never been invited into the mythological American family. We, the bastards, in order to form a more perfect union have relied upon internal structures where we could relish in our Blackness without being suffocated by the confines of a country that has never truly taken us in. Gangs are one such structure that has existed for decades on the fringes of American society. Up until this point, much of the scholarship surrounding gang involvement has been pathologizing rather than seeking the cause of gang affiliation in the United

States. The fact is, gangs are not inherently alien to mainstream America; rather, they are uncomfortably familiar. Gang members within the United States, no matter their physical proximity to whiteness nor their dedication to the country; were acculturated into America; thus, the two, seemingly dichotomous institutions are, in fact, indivisible. With this, instead of being invited to the American table, Black people within gangs have made their own and this one, much like its predecessor, is invite-only.

Graphs



(Seals, Image One)

Table 1
Frequency of Criminal Behavior, Labor Force Participation, and School Enrollment
By Gang Affiliation

Percent	Currently in a Gang	Not Currently in a Gang
Sell Drugs?	39.54	7.01
Steal Property > \$50?	30.69	4.05
Attack Someone?	56.28	10.96
Carry A Gun?	45.43	8.95
Work?	33.16	46.07
Enrolled in School?	57.4	67.11

(Seals, Image Two)

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