A Genealogy of Gangs in Chicago

Bringing the State back into Gang Research

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Reading over the chapters in this volume is like taking a journey not only through the world of gangs, but also the different ways we understand them. It was my main purpose in writing *A World of Gangs* to challenge the existing criminological paradigm for understanding gangs and suggest that we need to think about gangs differently. This book makes solid contributions toward that goal.

Over more than a decade of studying Chicago gangs, I’ve found the classic ecological lens to be too narrow and often leads us away from making a substantive critique of political and institutional arrangements. Rather than a nose-to-the-playground focus on the processes that teenagers go through to form and maintain a gang, this essay argues for a much broader historical and political stance. In Chicago, I’ve found that one key to understanding the persistence or institutionalized character of gangs are long-standing practices of police abuse, racism, and corrupt machine politics.

I’ve found it helpful to replace the ecological frame with a concept from the study of the mafia, Salvatore Lupo’s notion of “polygenesis” (2009, 26). Lupo argues that the Sicilian mafia cannot be understood without grasping the multiple threads of structure and agency, particularly rampant state corruption. This essay applies Lupo’s approach to examine the history of gangs in Chicago. My intention, quite simply, is to argue that the concept of “polygenesis” compels researchers everywhere to “bring the state back into” the study of gangs.

I call this essay a “genealogy” because in the popular sense it is reports on successive generations of kin. But it also reflects the term in Foucault’s (1972) sense, a “genealogy” or “archaeology” that disrupts the sense of obviousness of the way “things are.” On one level, I am aiming my theoretical arrows at the “way things are” in traditional criminology. Chicago gangs may have mainly begun on the corner, but their distinct ethnic and racial pathways (note the plural) cannot be understood separately from Chicago’s corrupt political machine. To look at the “polygenesis” of gangs, means to analyze the multiplicity of economic, social, institutional, and cultural processes that have interacted to historically constitute gangs.

**I. Thrasher, Ethnicity, and the State**

The theory of “group process” or street socialization originates from Thrasher’s description of how play-groups of second generation immigrants develop into gangs. For Thrasher and the Chicago School, the problem was loss of social control of second generation immigrant kids who joined gangs, committed crimes, and acted out, at least until they got older. The ecological conception of neighborhood peer groups transforming into gangs has had enormous influence in gang research and in fact, as this volume shows, reflects gangs in China and
the UK, Los Angeles, and other cities. On the other hand, the ecological paradigm doesn’t easily fit the pattern of gangs in Indonesia, Freetown, Russia, and gangs in several more of the chapters. But what I’ve realized is that this pattern doesn’t tightly fit the experience of Chicago either.

To begin with Thrasher’s narrative, we need to note that he researched *The Gang* during Prohibition, and in the public’s mind, “gangs” meant Al Capone’s mob. “Capone,” “Torrio,” and “Colisimo” are words that never enter Thrasher’s pages, though he does mention Dion O’Bannion, Terry Druggan, and a few other Irish mobsters. Clearly, Thrasher was writing within the Progressive tradition of Robert Park and exemplified by Jane Addams who saw expansion of the social services of the state as key to solving the “youth gang” problem. To Thrasher, the mainly Italian-dominated mob of young adults, were not the object of his study, but a deviant outcome. Gangs, according to the Chicagoans, would largely dissipate as gang kids aged, as communities became more coherent and reformers triumphed over the city machine. The incipient Chicago mafia, called the Outfit, didn’t really fit this model.

But Thrasher is very aware of the influence of adults. He says that for a very few kids, “the criminal training of the gang takes hold” and he becomes an adult criminal. Thrasher admits the diverse adult outcomes of delinquent groups. Second, Thrasher is describing a generic, universal, group process that applies to boys of all ethnic groups. The Chicago School aimed at creating generalizable truths that freed social science from the chains of ethnic specificity. For Chicagoans, the traditions of the “Old World” were in the process of being overcome by a modern identity of “American,” in Chicago and all US cities. But, as I’ll show, the “group processes” of gangs differed sharply by ethnicity.

Looking at the numbers behind Thrasher’s diagram, we discover lots of adults: 243 of 1313 were Social Athletic Clubs (SACs), organized by politicians, and 192 more were mixed, adult/youth gangs. Exactly one third of all gangs were not solely juvenile peer groups. Thrasher estimated Chicago in the 1920s had 35,000 youth gang members. But he also said that there were 10,000 young adults working in organized crime groups! This is a breath-taking number, though not surprising from popular Chicago gangster lore.

The criminological reading of Thrasher thus averts our eyes from the beer wars of the 1920s to a relatively harmless, and transient group process of kids. It must be kept in mind that most of Thrasher’s 1313 gangs came and went as alienated peer groups. But, as his admission of adult influence shows, there is more to the story: some of the gangs did not go away, and it is not a central idea in Thrasher’s narrative to explain why. Thrasher’s classic text on gangs downplays race as well as ethnicity, two concepts closely tied to the state and gang persistence.

Early Irish Gangs
The history of gangs in Chicago does not begin with Polish peasants. The first gangs in Chicago were German, then Irish and, like in New York, were young adults working in volunteer Fire Departments (Asbury 1942). These young men competed with one another to get to a fire first, to put it out, then loot the ruins. The first gangs, in other words, were extra-legal adjuncts of the state. For Chicago, as in different degrees with other US cities, public office had an underside of shady dealings, unregulated gambling and prostitution that brought direct benefits to mobsters and payoffs to politicians. The etymology of the word “underworld” came from Chicago, since the city was built on a swamp and the buildings raised on stilts. Gamblers made their offices under the buildings and gave birth to a new word.

The first major gangsters were Irish: Mike “Cassius” McDonald operated gambling and prostitution and built relationships with politicians. Chicago was wide open, and from 1850-1890 was the fastest growing city in the world, shooting up from 29,000 to one million in that time. The factories were hiring, but so were the gamblers and red-light houses. Youth had a variety of career choices.

But those choices varied by ethnicity. For the Irish, their days as kings of the underworld would not survive the 19th century, largely by their own choice. By 1900, the Irish had already captured half of all civil service jobs in Chicago, particularly police and firemen. As late as 1930, three quarters of all police captains were Irish (Lombardo 2009). The Irish strategy, piloted in Boston, New York, and the East Coast, was to capture city power through political machines (Erie 1988). Thus the payoff for youthful muscle and electioneering was a city job. An old Irish police commander I interviewed talked about the wild “clubs” of his youth. When I asked him what happened to his old “gang” he thought for a moment, and said: “They all became policemen.”

Irish politicians, most famously “Bathhouse” John Coughlin and “Hinky Dink” Kenna, would make alliances with gamblers and red light proprietors. Coughlin and Kenna dominated Chicago politics by piling up vast sums from pay-offs from the vice businesses and using their graft to buy elections. The police commander of the First Ward containing the red light Levee, was always on the payroll and, when needed, police were ordered to direct traffic for the brothels and gambling casinos.

The institutionalization of the Irish street gang, like Bridgeport’s Hamburg Club of Mayor Richard J. Daley, would largely occur within the city bureaucracy. One official history (Unknown Author, u.d.) observes that by 1930:

Said to have its origins in an old youth street gang, the Hamburg Club was by this time rather a mature neighborhood organization, which functioned as a social arm of the Democratic ward organization.
The Irish Social Athletic Clubs mainly followed a political pattern, and a few institutionalized. The Hamburg Club, for example, is now over a hundred years old and is a major behind-the-scenes political power in Chicago. In the early years of the 20th century, youth in these clubs were the toughest kids in the neighborhood, and useful to politicians who needed muscle at the polling booth. Youthful Irish brawlers largely followed a pathway that led to jobs in the “Political Machine.” They conventionalized and became “respectable.” For Irish gangs, the state was not just a way out, but also a way in.

**Italians and the Outfit**

But for Italians the path differed. Most Italians were not citizens in the early 20th century, and did not have the voting power, English language, or the political moxie of the Irish. By the 1890s, Mike McDonald’s rein was over and an Italian, Big Jim Colisimo, took over as the vice king, though still dependent on the largess of Irish Hinky Dink and Bathhouse. Gambling rings were scattered throughout the city, but concentrated in the Levee, an area south of the Loop business district, abutting the Black ghetto. The Levee was part of Coughlin and Kenna’s First Ward, and was the foundation for Irish/Italian licit and illicit “boodle” or graft.

While the terms “mafia” or “outfit” are popularly used, in reality “organized crime” in Chicago originated with youth gangs from many neighborhoods. The “42 Gang,” the “Taylor Street Crew,” and the “Circus Gang” were only some of the Italian gangs that began as groups of youth, alá Thrasher, and graduated into a “Criminal Gang”. Older traditions in Sicily, like extortion by the “black hand,” were carried over to Chicago and were a culturally salient path youth could follow (Lombardo 2009).

After eliminating Colisimo, Johnny Torrio’s domination of illegal alcohol was accomplished by negotiation, violence, and corruption. Torrio was a master negotiator, and made deals with Irish politicians as well as various local crews as he consolidated his grip on bootlegging. When negotiations broke down with northside Irish-dominated gangs over beer territory, his successor, Al Capone, resorted to violence. We all know the St. Valentine’s Day massacre, which cemented Italian and Capone’s dominance of the rackets. Elections were also subject to extreme violence in Chicago, with the 1928 election even called a “Pineapple War” as bombs and assassinations guaranteed Capone’s allies’ victory.

Capone, for his part, was also a wheeler and dealer. He negotiated with the black Vice Kings who ran policy, a form of gambling, in the ghetto. “Stay out of bootlegging, and I’ll leave policy to you” he said and meant it (Thompson 2003). Capone had other business arrangements with blacks, using caskets that were sent back south for burial as a means of transporting liquor. He also loved jazz and brought New Orleans musicians, some willingly, some not, to his Chicago clubs. A black/Italian coalition made sense in politics. Big Bill Thompson,
Chicago’s Republican mayor was a buddy of Capone and a “wet,” or against prohibition. “Bill the Builder’s” anti-Irish political coalition needed black votes and he was a staunch ally of the black Vice Kings.

The success and “institutionalization” of the Outfit depended on corruption as Nelli’s (1969, p 379) history of Italian crime points: “Many Chicago policemen worked illegally and in close harmony with criminals and politicians.” Remarkably, testifying at the McClellan Committee in 1962, new Chicago “reform” Police Superintendant O.W Wilson said “Since 1919 there have been 976 gangland-type slaying in the Chicagoland area. [Of these] only two have been cleared by arrest and conviction of the killers” (Demaris 1969 64). The Outfit had literally gotten away with murder. Policemen at all local levels were bought and paid for and an honest cop never stood a chance in a system that depended on “salary supplements.” Police in Chicago, I was told by Outfit members and police veterans, had a kind of “respect” and awe of Outfit hits (see also Demaris 1969, 133). Cops also never snitched on their fellow corrupt officers. “Omerta” has been, in practice, more of a Gaelic than an Italian word. The Irish cop may have gone straight, but not that straight.

**Other Ethnic Gangs**

In the first decades of the 20th century, the Chinese weren’t numerous enough to be major political players, but Chinatown’s location near the Levee and Ghetto was a prime area for prostitution and gambling. Gangs in Chicago were an adjunct of the tongs and organized by adult leaders. As in Ko lin Chin’s (1996) study of Chinese gangs in New York, Chinese gangs “are not simply expressions of adolescent mischief,” in other words, they were not gangs of the Thrasher-type. The tongs continue to this day in Chicago, and persist through arrangements with the Outfit, local politicians, and police.

In Thrasher’s 1920s study most of the gangs were Polish, but all of these gangs have dropped out of history, as he theoretically predicted (see Diamond 2009 for a good description of Polish gangs). Poles followed their German predecessors in climbing the ladder of ethnic succession to suburban Valhallas. Polish gangs are examples of Thrasher’s norm, but it is important to see that among the major ethnic groups in Chicago, Poles are an exception, not the rule.

Gender only comes up in the early days of Chicago sociology in discussing prostitution. We know of powerful “madams” like the Everleigh sisters (Abbott 2007), but there is no suggestion that female paths to crime followed the “group process” of boys. “White slavery” cast the prostitute as a white farm girl “taken advantage of” by slimy urban pimps, but such notions were sensationalized by the yellow press and part of a racialized discourse on gender (Jones 1996). As for female gangs, if there were any in the 1920s, we don’t know much about them from Thrasher, who like most social scientists of his day — and ours — fail to analyze girls’ lives.
In Chicago, Irish, Italian, and Chinese male gangs all institutionalized. On the one hand, this is an innovative, adaptive process. In *A World of Gangs*, (Hagedorn 2008, p. 9) I summarized:

... we can begin to understand why some gangs persist for decades despite changes in leadership and police repression. Institutionalized gangs are not merely an “expendable tool...of dynamic leaders” or sustained only by profits from drug sales. These gangs are “living organisms” instilling in their members, as well as the community, a belief in the organization itself. This belief persists despite organizational performance since it is essentially cultural, not rational, and handed down as tradition through generations.

But in our narrative so far, it is also clear that the state played a major role in how Irish gangs conventionalized within the machine and Italian gangs institutionalized as “the Outfit.” Official corruption played a central role for both ethnic groups. Irish and Italians, in different ways, by the 1940s were well on their way to prosperity and fulfilling their American Dream. But the pronounced ethnic differences in gang trajectories become even more pronounced when we factor in race.

**II. Race, the Outfit, Corruption, and War**

Ethnicity for the Irish and Italians, as well as the Chinese, were central to their legal and illegal lives. St. Patrick’s Day still brings out the Hamburg Club and other mainly Catholic associations in a colorful display of Irish-American pride. The Italians too celebrate their heritage on Columbus Day, and Chinese heritage lives through the persistence of Chinatown. Each group is thankful for hard won American prosperity, ethnic success stories built on both politics and crime.

Mexicans came to Chicago in the World War I days, like African Americans, and settled into the steel mills and packing industry. We have some details about early youth gangs, but Chicago’s Mexican history was interrupted by deportations in the Great Depression of the 1930s, making gang institutionalization impossible. Hispanic gang history would revive post WWII, largely through Puerto Rican cultural clubs and youth groups and later Mexican immigration.

But while Irish and Italian gangs institutionalized, and so did the Chinese, what happened to black gangs?
More so than Mexicans, black migration to Chicago sky-rocketed in the World War I years. Unlike any other ethnic group, blacks were confined to a small area just south of the Levee, and across Wentworth Blvd. from the Irish stronghold, Bridgeport. Irish and black gangs clashed repeatedly over the use of parks and beaches, culminating in the 1919 spring murder of several black youth by Irish gangs. In July of 1919, a black youth was drowned on a segregated beach by whites and a race riot broke out that left 38 dead over ten days.

The Race Relations Commission Report (1922) found that the riots were the result of systematic discrimination and maltreatment of blacks. The riot’s length and intensity was related to the organized “drive by” shootings of Social Athletic Clubs, and the Irish Hamburgs were among the principal culprits. A mainly Irish police force sided with the whites and nearly all of the arrests were of blacks. To his dying day, Richard J. Daley refused to say what he did during those riots as a 17 year-old Hamburg Club member. In 1924, he would be elected HAA president and serve for 15 years under the sponsorship of one of Chicago’s most notorious racists, Joseph “Sonny” McDonough (Cohen and Taylor 2000). Blacks were kept in their place by armed groups with strong ties to the political machine as well as by police violence (Tuttle 1996).

Three factors combined to shape the history of black gangs, and keep them, until the 1960s, from institutionalizing. First, unlike the Irish, they had little chance to use the ladder of city hall to gain significant patronage and were not a preferred partner, like the Polish. Second, violence and segregation kept African Americans confined to the narrow “black belt” on the near southside. Real estate contracts, called “restrictive covenants,” specifically ruled out the sale of homes by whites to blacks. By 1930 these covenants covered ¾ of all homes in Chicago (Philpott 1978) The Chicago School ethnic succession model of spatial and economic mobility shattered in describing the African American experience.

But what about taking up crime as an “American way of life,” like Daniel Bell’s (1960) famous essay, and follow the “Italian road?” They tried. African Americans founded one of the largest and most profitable gambling businesses in history, Policy, or betting on a number drawn from a “policy wheel.” This business, and the Vice Kings who ran it, were major economic players in a very
poor black community. Black women also ran wheels and were involved with policy on all levels. Light’s (1977) history of vice, supporting other studies like Drake & Cayton’s (1970) Black Metropolis and Thompson’s history of the Black Vice Kings describe a flourishing business. Light points out

“The policy syndicate on Chicago’s south side employed 5,000 persons and grossed at least 18 million dollars in 1938. This sum would represent $64 for every black person in Chicago and $256 for a family of four. The median income of all families is Chicago was $1463 in 1940, so numbers gambling of blacks accounted for about 17.5% of family income. “ (894).

Further,

“Numbers racketeers have been the largest investors in black-owned business or ghetto real estate and the chief source of business capital in the ghetto.” (898)

This classic diagram by Drake & Cayton points out how policy fit into the daily workings of the Democratic machine and was routinely protected by police. Capone’s deal with the Black Policy lords kept their business protected, for the time being, from Outfit control. By the mid-1930s, Blacks deserted the Republican machine of Big Bill Thompson for Roosevelt’s New Deal and consolidation within the Irish-led machine. The king of Bronzeville was William Dawson, the powerful warlord and committeeman who worked hand in glove with the policy racket. Grimshaw (1992, 82) points out that Dawson had the power “to remove any police officers who harassed the protected wheels.” He delivered the votes for the machine candidate, and survived temporary bouts of the “illness” of reform. Policy helped keep the Democratic machine fed, while Dawson and the black ward bosses didn’t rock a segregated boat.

But what of the numerous black youth gangs? Interviews with Timuel Black, Euseni Perkins, and older gang members who were brought up in policy households, reveals what should be obvious. There was such a shortage of jobs that older black men and women dominated the runners and operators of the policy wheels. Gosnell (1966, 116) contrasts black and Italian gangs:

There are no organized gangs of Negro criminals who prey upon the public in all parts of the city.

Juvenile black gangs at the time look a lot like Thrasher’s “playgroups.” These gangs could not get a foothold in a business dominated by their under-employed elders. Housing segregation and political control kept a tight hold on youth,
whose juvenile crime rates, Shaw & McKay (1969) reported, were generally higher than other ethnic groups. Black gang life was remarkably similar to Thrasher’s descriptions, though thoroughly immersed in the city’s rampant racism (Diamond 2009). But there was no clear path for youth to follow into organized crime, or even less likely, into politics. Policy was tightly organized by the Black Vice Kings and paid off the police and Democratic machine. Black gangs of the 1940s came and went, just like Thrasher described — except segregation meant no spatial mobility and discrimination limited economic and social mobility.

The operations of the illicit economy, corruption, and violence worked together to deny any possibility of the institutionalization of black gangs, either legitimately or illegitimately in the 1940s. There never was a “Black Mafia” (for a contrasting view, see Lombardo 1999). At the same time, the Outfit flourished, even after Prohibition, and enjoyed the protection of their Irish brothers in city hall and the cops on the street.

**The Gathering Storm**

The groundwork for the 1960s institutionalization of black gangs began in a 1930s prison cell. Big Ed Jones, the principle black policy lord found himself bragging to Sam Giancana, veteran of the 42 Gang and minor player in the Outfit, of how much money Policy made. With the end of Prohibition, and before the lucrative investment in Las Vegas, the Outfit needed a new income stream (Eghigian 2006). Giancana found it, and several kidnappings and murders later, Capone’s deal to protect black policy was undone. The black policy wheels suddenly reported to Italian bosses. While there was always a weak legal economic structure for blacks, now the illegal one too disappeared.

The end of WWII saw a second major wave of African Americans to Chicago, as well as a renewed immigration of Mexicans and a new one of Puerto Ricans. Kinship groups from the same villages or areas moved into the same Chicago neighborhoods and the youth hung out together, forming Thrasher-like gangs. But the black migration was much larger and the segregated walls containing them could not hold. A west side ghetto formed and everywhere black/white conflict shaped youth experience (Diamond 2009; Perkins 1987). Whites moved out in large numbers as the black ghetto expanded. Black, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and whites formed gangs that drew on racial and ethnic cultural traditions that were a necessity in a segregated, racist city.

The Outfit ran the west side and a long series of murders of politicians and hoodlums had kept things under control for their Jewish “super-mob” politician, Jake Arvey (Russo 2006). The Chicago police had long benefitted from Outfit business. In 1950, Demaris (1969, 134) reports, a US Treasury analyst estimated that 40 CPD captains were worth at least a million dollars! William Dawson’s fury at Mayor Kennealy’s 1948 crackdown on policy caused Dawson
to plot Kennealy’s demise and install Richard J. Daley as mayor in a carefully planned coup. But this would be Dawson’s last hurrah and prove disastrous for African Americans. Both the Outfit, with their vice businesses, and the Irish, running their Democratic machine, responded to what they saw, correctly, as an inevitable black challenge.

The increasing number of black youth would form new gangs replacing their 1940s, more civil older brothers. Most formed alá Thrasher, but the two largest, the Vice Lords and Blackstone Rangers, were founded in St. Charles, the city’s juvenile prison. Gangs were proliferating in black communities that had few legitimate jobs, and were cut out of both Policy and drugs, which were still dominated by the Outfit. One Vice Lord leader said the gang took its name from wanting to take the job of “lords of vice” from whites. Interviews with both Vice Lords and Rangers who were active in the 1960s describe both violence against Italian heroin runners and negotiated deals with the Outfit for the black gangs to take over distribution of heroin. The decimation of the black Policy Kings left a void in adult leadership for the youth gangs, who were left to find their own way. The founding of multi-neighborhood “super-gangs” is testimony both to the lack of existing black leadership and the daring, innovation of the youthful gangs.

While the Outfit set up Chicago’s heroin markets through the infamous “French Connection” in Marseilles (McCoy 1972), heroin was never meant as a drug for Italians. “Not in our neighborhood” said Giancana, “but shines (African Americans) want it and somebody’s gotta supply it. It may as well be us.” (Giancana and Giancana 1992. p. 246). The long-term concentration of “opium dens” and cocaine in the Black Belt (Spillane 1998) also formed a ready-made retail outlet for the new drug, heroin and their Italian suppliers. But by the end of the 1950s, the growing strength of the black gangs meant that retail could no longer be controlled by Italians, so a deal was struck. One Outfit leader told me that the “blacks were rough” and it made sense to withdraw from retail, while controlling the supply of heroin. It was just “good business” he said.

Black gangs were taking over street level illicit enterprises in their community. On the southside, the Blackstone Rangers painted “Stones Run It” all over walls, an explicit challenge to police and the Outfit. “There will be no killing,” Stones leader Jeff Fort told police on camera, “without killing in return.” The black community, long docile and under control of the machine, was rising up and the youth were especially angry. The civil rights movement challenged the city, but also posed an ethical challenge to the gangs as black people. Selling drugs made money, which was in short supply. But it also meant harm and death to the black community.

The widespread notion that drugs in the black community was a conspiracy in Chicago appears to be historically accurate. The Outfit brought in the drugs protected by the police and then black and Latino gangs distributed them, settling for chump change. Violent struggles broke out within the gangs over
whether to sell drugs, and the police managed to conveniently jail figures like Bull Hairston of the Rangers, one of the loudest voices against Outfit control of drugs.

Police responded harshly to the Blackstone Rangers and Black Panther Party as these street organizations openly challenged white authority. The Vice Lords took a “conservative” track and welcomed police participation in multiple business enterprises. Puerto Rican gangs, some of whom invited Mexican membership, also began to grow. The Young Lords became politicized over the struggle against the gentrification of their Puerto Rican neighborhood, Lincoln Park. The Latin Kings and others allied with the YLO and worked security as well as formed ties to Puerto Rican nationalists. Mexican gangs began on the southside and grew through immigration, following the familiar Thrasher path. The Brown Berets would model radical politics, unlike today’s more machine-friendly Mexican gangs. The Latin Kings would expand to include Mexican sections and Latino gangs would form a variety of coalitions or families.

City housing policy would also give a boost to black gangs’ institutionalization. Massive housing projects were built only in all-black neighborhoods and stayed 99% black from inception until demise. Sudhir Venkatesh (2000) tells the story of Robert Taylor Homes, and how the gangs used the projects as defensible spaces for drug sales, nearly impervious from law enforcement.

By the end of the 1960s, gangs were fully participating in protest politics, roughly following the Irish path. Black gangs were meeting with the Black Panthers, and formed “LSD” — “Lords, Stones, Disciples” — to take on discrimination in hiring. A massive protest shook UIC, my own college, being built then on the demolition of an Italian community and adjacent to the west side ghetto. Italian housewives actually took to the streets, but to no avail. Italian politicians, with close ties to the Outfit, settled for patronage construction jobs. Blacks and Latinos got nothing until they fought, and then made only symbolic gains.

The rising political anger of the gangs was getting dangerous to the machine and Outfit control of drugs. What we see in the 1960s were mass movements transforming many gangs into a variety of forms: revolutionary, entrepreneurial, and cultural. These gangs were demanding to be let into the system... or else! Their demands took a violent turn on April 4, 1968, as the city was shocked by Dr. King’s assassination. On the south side, Jeff Fort sent his Stones out to cool out the community and mark black businesses as protected by the Rangers. On the west side, where Dr. King had lived while in Chicago, and home to more recent black migrants, the Vice Lords went out to beg people to not riot, but to no avail. The mayor’s “shoot to kill” order deepened the racial bitterness, ended hopes of progress for the soldiers of the streets, and presaged the coming war (Spergel 1968). Within the gangs, a major identity conflict was brewing: gangster vs freedom fighter.
A Forty-Year War on Gangs

When an angry, and politically fearful Mayor Daley declared “war on gangs” in 1969 he did not mean the Outfit, to whom he and the machine worked hand in... well... pocket. While crackdowns on the Outfit were always more words than deeds, the war on black and Latino gangs would be for real, reinforced by racism.

The war first claimed the lives of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, leaders of the Illinois Black Panther Party in a covered up assassination (Haas 2010). Bobby Gore, leader of the Vice Lords and key figure in gang transformation, was framed on a murder charge and sent to prison for 40 years. The social programs sponsored by the CVL were defunded, and the police captains who sat on their boards replaced. The job-training program of the Black Stone Rangers was eliminated and Jeff Fort prosecuted and jailed. War meant abandoning the youth outreach policies of the Chicago Area Project and considering gangs as the enemy, according to State’s Attorney Edward Hanrahan, who led the raid that killed Hampton and Clark.

“Organized crime” now meant black and Latino gangs, conveniently averting public attention from the much more powerful Outfit who was in profitable cahoots with the machine and their police. In the years ahead, Chicago’s Outfit would control Las Vegas and much of Hollywood through obedient Chicago-raised Jewish gangsters like Sidney Korshak (Russo 2006), as well as gambling, horse racing, and loan sharking. Outfit murders still were almost never solved by local officials. In fact, The Chicago Crime Commission (2007, pp. 235-7) reported that of 33 mob confirmed slayings in the 1980s, only one was cleared.

Within black and Latino gangs, the identity conflict was being settled as politics was seen as a dead-end. The gangster identity became hegemonic. For example, Blues man Larry Taylor, himself a Vice Lord, relates a discussion with Fred Hampton, shortly before his death.

"I went down to the South Side and met with the Black P. Stone Nation last week. And you know what Jeff Fort told me? ‘He's the leader of the Stones. Said I could be a rich man if I get in with their plans to sell drugs.’ “ (Taylor 2010, 89)

While the Outfit controlled many of the drug sources, others were run by Mexican families with drug networks in their homeland. Heroin particularly became a hot commodity at the end of the Vietnam war as desperation replaced the hopes of the 1960s. Black gangs began extorting drug dealers, then took over the business themselves. The large-scale incarceration of gang members in Daley’s war led to the control by gangs of prison networks, as described by Jim
Jacobs (1977). Prison became an inseparable part of the neighborhood and a place where gang membership could be reinforced, and politicized. Gang leaders corrupted prison guards and some lived a luxury life behind bars, directing gangs more safely than if they were on the streets. As I pointed out in A World of Gangs, this role of the prison closely resembles the history of gangs in Rio de Janiero and Cape Town. In Chicago, deindustrialization, beginning in the 1970s, destroyed tens of thousands of good jobs and city fathers refused to invest in black communities that were becoming increasingly hostile to the machine (Wilson 1987).

Securing profit in drug sales meant gangs needed protection from police and city officials. The “connected” police of Outfit days were older and many had retired. So a new set of cops needed to be cultivated with drug-tainted greenbacks. Since the Outfit had a monopoly on vice for many decades, the rise of multiple new gangs allowed crooked cops to bust one gang and protect another, often for private profit. In the 1970s, the “Marquette 10,” west side police officers were indicted by the US Attorney — not the city machine controlled State’s Attorney — for taking bribes from drug dealers. Pay-offs to police were often just a cost of business, as drugs and money were confiscated by police with an arrest. Venkatesh’s (2008) description, in Gang Leader for a Day, of one such routine 1990s raid where police seized drugs and money of the gang for themselves, is an old story on the streets. Police were very busy making money as well as even occasionally selling guns to the gangs.

Corruption of police continued with scandal after scandal, among them the Austin 7 where police were indicted for a variety of drug and firearm offenses. One cop, “Pacman Jackson”, was found to be throwing Vice Lord hand signs in the local police district station and turned out to be the leader of a Vice Lord faction, manipulating arrests to the benefit of his set. Even the courts were implicated in the 1980s with Operation Greylord, where 92 officials were indicted by federal authorities, including 17 judges, 48 lawyers, 8 policemen, 10 deputy sheriffs, 8 court officials, and 1 state legislator (Tuohy and Warden 1989). But while the local States Attorney was absent in the battle against corruption and ignored the predations of the Outfit, the war on black gangs was reaching fever pitch.

For example, Jon Burge, commander of the southside Second Police District, practiced torture techniques he learned from Vietnam on those he arrested. Burge has been documented as torturing more than 100 black alleged gang members in over ten years of a police reign of terror (Conroy 2000; Warden and Drizin 2009). While his tactics were well known in the black community, Burge received promotions and commendations, including an award from then States Attorney Richard M. Daley, the old mayor’s son and soon to be Mayor himself. No one from the CPD complained about Burge’s practice or torture, nor ever testified against him.
Burge's torture tactics only came to light when DNA evidence cleared several of his victims who were on death row. Burge's tactics were so widespread, and well known among police, that Governor George Ryan found that he could not determine which death row cases were marred by torture and police perjury, so he took the unprecedented step of commuting all Illinois death penalty cases to life sentences. The States Attorney's office never brought any charges against Burge, who in January 2005, Federal Appeals Judge Diane Woods said

[A] mountain of evidence indicates that torture was an ordinary occurrence at the Area Two station of the Chicago Police Department..... Indeed, the alleged conduct is so extreme that, if proven, it would fall within the prohibitions established by the United Nations Convention Against Torture.

Burge was eventually fired, but retired on a full pension to Florida. His defense costs were paid by the police union, and among his attorneys was Dick Devine, the sitting Cook Count States Attorney, who took a temporary break from his job to take part in the defense of Burge. The US Attorney in 2009, more than thirty years after Burge's first torture victim, indicted Burge for perjury: Burge slipped up and once claimed on the witness stand he had never tortured anyone. Burge was convicted of perjury in July 2010.

Such tactics of brutality and corruption have had a predictable effect on the outlook of black youth and the entire black community. Since black youth are treated as the enemy, so they see police the same way. Fear of police is widespread in black communities, not just in Chicago, and makes up a standard element in gangsta rap. From Public Enemy's target logo to Ice Tea's "Cop Killer," the construction of black youth identity is often in violent opposition to the compromised forces of "law and order." The history of police brutality, Irish racism, the flooding of the black community with drugs by the Italian Outfit, and a long police tradition "to serve and collect" (Lindberg 1998) are historical patterns that form the backdrop, and untold story, to the particular nature of Chicago's black gang institutionalization.

Chicago Gangs Today

The Irish still command political power and the descendents of Daley's Hamburg Club now run the city. The Outfit has long become "respectable," and today, like the Irish, are made up of police officers, lawyers, businessmen, and politicians. For example, one powerful alderman and city hall insider, Fred Roti, was named by the US Attorney as a "made member" of the mob. At his death, in 1991, Mayor Richard M. Daley praised Roti as a "true Chicagohan who served his constituents without regard to wealth" (Chicago Syndicate 2007).

To set the record straight, the current Mayor Daley’s friend Fred Roti was convicted of racketeering and of fixing murder trials of Outfit members. He also was cited in a federal indictment for the “pervasive” hiring in city jobs of
members of the Chinatown Outfit crew of Angelo "the Hook" LaPietra. This Outfit capo earned his nickname by hanging his victims on meat hooks. Roti also had successfully demanded that his crony, William Handhardt, be named Chief of Detectives of the CPD. Handhardt later was convicted of using police investigations to set up jewel robberies for the Outfit.

Today's Chicago mayor even has his own not so secret family ties to the Outfit. Richard M. Daley's low-key, but powerful brother and 11th ward boss, John Daley, married Mary Lou Briatta, the daughter of Louis Briatta, an Outfit gambling figure (Third Generation, ud).

The state makes war on gangs, but also uses them when convenient. The major scandal of the last few years has been the “Hired Truck” scandal, which represents the Irish machine's alliance with Latinos in Chicago, through the now-discredited and defunct Hispanic Democratic Organization. In this scandal, bribes and payoffs for city contracts were run by Daley’s Hispanic operatives and included a covert alliance with several prominent Latino street gangs.

Black gangs too have tried their hand at politics, but their efforts meet fearsome opposition from the machine. In 1994, the Black Gangster Disciples leader Gator Bradley ran for Third Ward alderman and created an organization for voter registration, 21st Century VOTE. His campaign was denounced as a cover for BGD criminality – Imagine, a crook running for office in Chicago! All the resources of the machine were successfully mobilized to stop him.

The hiring of black police officers, prison guards, and other city jobs has created a political buffer for Daley, who remembers when Harold Washington, the city’s only elected black mayor, united the black and Latino communities and defeated him in 1983. Daley has lavished funds on a small number of black ministers and has been able to defeat every black challenge while forming a strategic alliance with the fast growing Hispanic population. Black gangs are targeted as the enemy, and their penetration into politics is thwarted whenever possible.

Today the institutionalized black gangs have fractured with most of their older leadership in prison. Now outlaw factions fight with one another on the streets. The lack of “legitimate authority” in today’s gangs means less capacity to control violence and a weakened capacity to manipulate politicians. Chicago, like many cities, is seeing a sweeping re-division of space. Gentrification, closing of schools, and the destruction of housing projects have pushed the black community out of traditional areas and fractured long-standing neighborhood friendship networks, and severed local political contacts. One result of this has been violence, as displaced gang members move to already organized turf and kids confront new gang constellations in new schools. Another consequence has been the movement of the growing Latino community into black areas, and sharply increased black-Latino tensions. A long-term reduction in social services, good paying jobs, and police protection keeps the gang fires burning.
Chicago’s response to its persistent gang problem is to step up its 40-year war, complete with demonization and a new rhetoric of gangs as threats to homeland security. This has led to police arming with military assault weapons, provided free by weapons companies (Siska 2008). The war metaphor is deeply entrenched in Chicago’s police and public culture.

The loss of place for the black community (Haymes 1995) has caused an upsurge in racial solidarity, as gentrification is seen as a flimsy cover for a white take-over. Gangs are demoralized and depoliticized and look for shelter through corruption and decentralization. Barack Obama’s election instilled an unprecedented rise in racial pride, but also demobilized independent politics and mass movements and further distanced “respectable” black officials from the gangs. If one lesson from the 1960s is that social movements can be a vital force to divert gangs from criminality, chances of such a mass movement today in Chicago are slim.

III. Bringing the State Back In

The main lesson of this essay is that ecological, “group process” narratives of gangs often avert our eyes from the role of the state. I think Lupo’s notion of “polygenesis” is a useful lens for the study of gangs. Indeed, my “genealogy” of gangs in Chicago finds the state, its corruption, and racist militarization were essential components in making gangs of all ethnic groups what they are today. In Chicago, the state is in fact made up of more than legal institutions. Chicago is undoubtedly unique, but gang research in other cities also needs to explore the historical role of the state in gang formation and persistence. Research in local corruption is scarce, but often eye-opening (e.g Chambliss in Seattle, 1978). This is consistent with what Wacquant (2009b, 161) calls a “civic sociology” or, more precisely, what Davis (2008 p xv) defines as “critical gang studies.”

Traditional US criminology, particularly the study of gangs, has aimed its research and policy prescriptions at deterring, incapacitating, or rehabilitating dark skinned youth (eg. Spergel 1995). I thoroughly agree that violence and drug dealing are destructive and gang youth need to be ethically challenged and given consequences for their actions. Immediate, multiple, measures are needed to stem unacceptable levels of violence.

But criminology’s focus on gang violence has also let the state, and its own violence, off the hook. Doesn’t it stand to reason that state actions, particularly corruption and violence, would play a role in the trajectory of a city’s gangs? This genealogy is an initial attempt to use the case study of Chicago to “bring the state back in” to our research on gangs.
References


Chicago Syndicate ud. Chicago Democrats and the Chicago Mob. 


