# A reputational extravaganza? The role of the urban street gang in the riots in London

## Simon Harding argues that the social networks of urban street gangs played a central role

One noticeable outcome of urbanisation and social marginalisation in late modernity is the emergence of contested cities and spaces. In these contested areas, social deprivation has led peer groups to become socialised to 'street-life' with its own codes of conduct and behaviour. In some neglected areas the retreat of the state from economically marginalised neighbourhoods has provided opportunities for other actors to now exercise authority and control and to articulate a local identity (Strange, 1996). In these socially excluded spaces, gangs increasingly act as moral authority for disengaged young people, providing entrepreneurial opportunities, protection, social welfare and 'power to the powerless' whilst operating informal spatial monopolies. Here street gangs are active social actors, offering alternative authority and social controls and for some young people acting as their 'street government' (Hagedorn, 2008).

### Late modernity
In deprived areas, 'where constructive social capital and institutions are allowed to wither, gangs emerge to fill the void' (Puttnam, 2000), the emergence of the violent urban street gang is a further outcome of late modernity in the UK (Pitts, 2010). The locales of the riots in London are all areas with recognised existing or enduring street gangs, e.g. Peckham, Brixton, Lewisham, and Woolwich. Despite this fact the recent Cabinet Office report failed to fully research this dynamic (Morrell et al., 2011).

Urban street gangs operate within their own social field which is a 'structured arena of social conflict' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The defining feature of this field is internal struggle for power and domination. Success and advancement through the gang hierarchy is achieved by accumulating *Street Capital* – an amalgam of cultural, social and symbolic capital, habitus, family links, networks, etc. It is acquired by building reputations and status and by maintaining respect within the field. Actors strategise to increase their street capital by undertaking actions such as violent retribution that will earn them respect. This social field becomes a useful lens through which to view the recent riots in London.

### Structured hierarchy
The social field of the urban street gang acts primarily as a locale of opportunity for young people to maximise street capital. It operates as a structured hierarchy supported by a network of inter-woven relationships, both intra-gang and inter-gang, including peers, extended families and neighbours. This network functions as an Internet and Reuters News channel for the gang, alerting them of opportunities to do deals, make money, provide drugs, and fence stolen goods, alongside information about rivals and relationships. Crucial to young people's lives, it operates through gossip, rumour and conversation.

Communication technology has transformed the functionality of this network with instant SMS, texting, tweeting and BlackBerry Messenger

(BBM) messages transmitted widely in seconds. Here information is traded and exchanged, meetings arranged, criminal activity negotiated to build reciprocity and trust. Network access forms substantial social capital allowing access to goods and services or crucial information, e.g. updates on gang activity. Operating as broadcaster and news channel, as the riots unfolded, it provided minute by minute exposition on the movements of police, rival gangs and street activity. Young people linked into the network, (mostly gang-affiliated) quickly established that police were largely absent from key areas. The network was then used by gang-affiliated young people to organise and coordinate street congregations.

### The social field of the gang
The initial crucible of the riots was the gang's ability to use its network to facilitate rapid organisation of interested parties. The use of BBM messaging is widely reported as a facilitative mechanism of the riots. It quickly became evident (then communicated) that the principal authority (police) had retreated from the streets in several areas, were reluctant to engage and were significantly understaffed. In the absence of the principal authority, the secondary authority of the neighbourhood, (the street gang) seized the opportunity to take control, instigating their own social norms for the night – temporarily expanding their social field. Under these conditions the social norms are overturned, new actions are both permissible and favoured. Extreme behaviours which raise reputational standing are valorised and applauded. It was gang–affiliated young people that initialised street congregations as well as scoping and targeting of stores. Others followed their lead.

### Why should this occur?
The key issue regarding the social field of the gang is that distinction is allocated to those who distinguish themselves, through violence, providing goods and services (e.g. quality drugs or quality information). Raising street capital through reputation brings instant kudos and respect. Street disorder generates

street capital and reputation through violence, 'doing mad things', throwing bricks, street rampages and open confrontation with the principal authority (police). Such events are filmed and uploaded onto social networking sites, providing instant reputational celebrity in the social field. Those filmed setting fire to shops will dine out on a massive increase in their reputation and street capital.

The riots provided a 'reputational extravaganza' (Presdee, 2000). In these upturned social norms, looting provides opportunities for both reputation and acquisition. It is less about obtaining a 50 inch Plasma TV and more about obtaining the bragging rights to having acquired one under the noses of the cops; then acquiring further bragging rights when selling it off. Such individuals will again max out their street capital.

## Suspended hostilities

By utilising their organisational networks, street gangs acted as crucibles for disorder. Once underway, the next important factor was a suspension of hostilities between gangs. Network invitations to join in disturbances were communicated rapidly and widely generating multiple invitations for engagement, often requiring inter-gang working. This necessitated the widely reported 'London gang truce' – where inter-gang rivalries were temporarily set aside. In places this allowed a suspension of 'postcoding' attacks (a 'hood pass') or suspended threat of any 'respect attack' by rival gangs. This allowed young people from different neighbourhoods to cross rival territory to congregate in shared spaces, such as Brixton High Street, without the normal fear of violent assault. This 'truce' created immediate 'risk reduction' for both gang-affiliated and non-affiliated youth to emerge and participate, providing opportunities for joint working.

## Adhesion

As gang elders used their authority to reduce risks of inter-gang violence, public spaces were now safer and open for non gang–affiliated others to participate. Clearly many non-gang-affiliated were involved in these events, (Morrell et al., 2011). Each temporarily adhered to the social norms of the street in a variety of ways:

- **Temporal adhesion**. Firstly young people shared the same habitus, i.e. similar social conditions and environments, aspirations and outlooks on life. As the social field of the gang temporarily expanded, the social norms of 'street life' were temporarily adopted by those peripheral to gang and street life. Tempted to engage by a sudden suspension of hostilities, these peripheral others could engage with reduced risk to themselves.
- **Relational adhesion.** Those on the gang periphery also seized this attractive opportunity to generate street capital with local gangs or to raise levels of respect amongst their peer group. With the doors to stores now opened by local gang members, many now felt empowered to grab a TV and thus demonstrate their own street credentials.
- **Emotional adhesion.** Those aware of their lack of power in society then used the street disturbances to facilitate their rage against the state. Looting or destruction acts as emotional sanctions against the state, the bankers, the government, the police or the local community shops that exclude them by selling goods beyond their economic means.

## Apprehension

The Ministry of Justice Statistical Bulletin (2011) identified less than 20 per cent of those prosecuted as gang-affiliated. Paradoxically, this supports the argument proffered here, for several reasons:

- Some gang-affiliated young people did not trust the 'truce' and thus stayed away or operated behind the scenes.
- Gang-affiliated young people are more experienced in criminal activity, e.g. moving stolen goods through pre-established networks. Put simply, they were not caught.
- Non gang-affiliated young people

do not have access to the network and have experienced difficulty in fencing multiple stolen goods, including attack from street gangs and police raids.
- Unaware of CCTV locations and police tactics, and inexperienced in criminal activity, they often failed to cover their faces.
- Operating outside the gang codes of conduct, they are also more likely to be 'grassed up'.

Thus Ministry of Justice statistics only reflect those apprehended and prosecuted, not necessarily all those participating.

The 'gang truce' generated new opportunities for partnership working across rival gangs bringing new entrants into the gravitational pull of the gang. The looting and criminal activity undertaken was determined by the social field of the gang - essentially purposeful and mindful – not mindless. As the UK urban street gang evolves, these recent events may yet mark a further evolutionary step. ∎

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