Borderlands – Postcode Warfare in Contemporary Urban Britain

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'Borderlands acknowledges the edge of systems and the hinterland between places and social classifications: they are areas of flux and sometimes conflict.'

The *borderland* is a specific phenomenon relative to the mapping of all people's histories; a non-place, a place between places, somewhere neither here nor there. Countries, communities, nations and religions are all subject to points of overlapping, places where two or more positions are occupied often in an uncertain and occasionally violent state. The nature of the border is an exacting one, specific areas where one activity; belief, way of doing things, comes to an end and where another totally different one begins.

'Imagine there's no countries,
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too'
Famous words indeed but once you strip away the rhetoric of the late sixties what we actually have is *'Imagine there's no borders'.*

Borderlands usually occupy a defining position in the minds and hearts of the populous to which that border is significant, proof if you like that there is an edge to the world we know. It is as if the world is still flat for many of us as you can only go so far before falling off every thing you understand and trust, beyond that *'there be monsters'* as the old shipping maps would once declare.
Of course ones relative position in the big scheme of things is a matter of birthright and therefore chance rather than social engineering, never-the-less the random nature in which we are thrown into society at birth usually has a long lasting and significant effect on ones passage through life. Opportunities and the overall experience of an individuals life is governed by this moment and from that point on we are; northern, southern, black, white, rich, poor, east, west.
After the second Great War the world took a stock of such horror and made an effort not to repeat previous failures. Once more maps were redrawn new territories decided upon, hopeful that the new era would provide a safe and stable environment for all who resided in it.
Strange then that we find ourselves immersed in a new and rampant territorialism once more with one of the most alarming and undeniably worrisome issues of

post 20th century contemporary society being the proliferation of gang activity across the urban centers of the industrialized nations.

Gangs and gang culture are not new. The Vikings came across to rape, pillage and settle on our shores one thousand years ago, they were a most excellent and efficient gang of sorts. Since then we have had hundreds of fighting factions, regional wars, religious and political emergence and new social structures to negotiate in order that we may call ourselves British.

The state of inner city youth.

As I write this there have been 26 confirmed gang related murders on the streets of Britain this year. Most of which have occurred amongst the 14–20 year old age group and the majority of these have been in the black community. Just why the Uk's black youth appear to be embroiled in running turf wars with one and other is a matter for separate debate and one which I am not able or committed to comment on. The Metropolitan Police initiative 'Operation Trident' designed to address issues of what have become to be known as 'black on black' killings in the capital, has had some effect on the problem in so far as many of the significant older individuals involved in gun and drug related crime have indeed been incarcerated. The result however has been to cause something of a vacuum at the top of the ladder of criminal activity allowing younger individuals to graduate more quickly in the absence of the older members, this in turn has resulted in more frequent and more random acts of violence being committed.

Undeniably much of this activity augments itself around the drugs trade. This has always been the case and will remain so. What has emerged alongside this though is the critical role of organized gangs in perpetuating the situation through increased levels of violence.

The initial model for many of the UK gangs stems from the Original Gangsters, [OG]. From Jamaica and the Caribbean. During the 1980s several major players in the cocaine smuggling business sought out new opportunities in the UK and found a lucrative market amongst the rich city kids of the square mile as well as the blossoming club scene. Supported by members of the Jamaican community who had settled earlier, easy pickings were to be had and much money could be made. This led eventually to all out gang warfare between the Yardie [1] gangs of London, Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow as the new criminals came toe to toe with the existing underworld, who incidentally were slow to capitalize on the booming cocaine trade leaving the way partially clear for the new guns to move in and take over.

What began as straightforward social issue of drugs and the illegal supply thereof has mutated into something quite different. Certainly much of the recent spate of killings has had something to do with a given areas control of the drug trade, but that has now taken a back seat in the order of priorities amongst many individuals engaged in gang activity. The new objective is peer group 'respect', a

respect earnt through hard nosed terror, and the defining feature of this demand is turf.

Out of the 21 killings on the streets of London this year every single one has been perceived [rightly or wrongly] as having a link with gang affiliation.

It seems that the modern English idea of the gang has as much to do with your postcode as it does anything else. This dominance of ideology is an import from the US where for years the decaying project estates of major urban areas have seen consistent under funding from central government and in some cases a complete pull out of social services. This has led to an almost total breakdown of lawful society in favor of a more individual approach to the matter of survival. Much of this reality has been articulated in the musical ideosyncrasities of rap music, the power, the money, the cars, the chicks and the 'bling' held tantalizingly close to a nations underprivileged youth, there for the taking if you have the balls and a Mac 10.

Here in the UK however our social support system is still [arguably] functioning, rank poverty although prevalent and on the increase according to the governments own statistics is nowhere near as fundamentally debilitating as it is in the US. Why then are we seeing the emergence of gang culture in accordance with the experience of the US? again I am not qualified to comment but suffice to say it is.

The killing of 10-year-old Damilola Taylor in a stairwell of the north Peckham estate in 2000 witnessed the nation awakening with a jerk to the realization that children as young as that were involved in a frightening reality in the heart of our cities. It had been suggested then that the UK would see a mushrooming of American style gang activity along the lines of the infamous *Crips* and *Bloods* disputes of Los Angelis and latterly the rest of the US. The police and community groups were slow to take up the challenge and have arguably been left on the starting blocks as far as addressing the situation early enough to do much about it taking root. Just as in the states, once it has permeated the psyche of a nations youth it would appear extremely difficult to debunk.

Postcode lottery

According to one UK web site [www.gangsinlondon.com] it is estimated that right now there are approximately 180 active gangs in the greater London area. Each of these is denoted specifically by the postcode in which they are resident. The most notorious gangs unsurprisingly radiate from the most deprived areas with Brixton, Peckham and Battersea in the south, and Walthemstow, Hackney and Tottenham in the north seeing the lion's share of gang activity. Ordinarily these groups operate within the confines of their respective postal areas but the occasion to put down a rival gang is almost always seized upon in the current climate.

My own experience of gang activity has been informed by my tenancy in the heart of one of these districts, Peckham, south London. I lived for 10 years in the

shadow of the public library in Peckham, the last place Damilola Taylor was seen alive on CCTV as he was followed out of the building by a group of older youths minutes before being fatally attacked. I became aware that the library compound had become the hub of the gang activity in the Peckham area.

A recent channel 4 documentary [Guns, Knives and Broken Lives – July 2008] highlighted the situation with compelling interviews from existing south London gang members. One spoke of the rivalry between two adjoining postal districts, SE 15's *Peckham Boys* and SE 14's *Ghetto Boys*. The interviewee discussed the situation maintaining that were he to catch the number 436 bus half a mile down the road he would be in mortal fear of his life, When asked by the interviewer why this was he replied that the violence between the two areas had gone on for so long that neither knew why it had started and therefore neither knew how to cease the rivalry, 'its just how it is' he said.

On November 4, 2006, Eugene Attram aged 16, was stabbed to death in a fight involving up to 60 youths in Lavender Park, Wandsworth, south London. Eugene was a member of the Battersea based 'Stick 'em Up Kids' [SUK] gang who along with 14 other members had traveled up to Mitchem on the number 217 bus to 'tag' a rival TZ gang [Terror Zone] territory.

The act of 'tagging' [defacing the postal reference code found on the end of every street sign in the greater London area] is regarded by all London gangs as an act of all out warfare. It is this activity that resulted in the mass gang fight that culminated in the death of this young man, not drug related, not business related, not previous 'beef' related, simply writing ones own postcode over that of another's, on a municipal street sign. The willingness of young men to defend to the death what they see as their rightful property is unquestionably related to the poverty in which many of them find themselves. To fight for a street you don't own is a distinctly poignant reminder of the lengths that many young men will go to in order to 'belong'. The notion of belonging is *the* central factor in gang psychology. In the seminal book *Gangs and Society* [2] the authors dissect the underlying features of youth concerns in the US and apply the findings to those gang models prevalent today.

Seemingly we in the UK are already some way down the path experienced by American law enforcement agencies during the 1990s and early 00s. It is with great interest that they reveal that in one case a markedly different trend is emerging from the prison and street gangs of Los Angeles.

Gangs as a positive social force.

In the late 1970s a group of rural Hispanics, mostly Mexicans, incarcerated in facilities across the Texas penal system started to affiliate themselves with one and other. Partly as an instrument of defense against prison persecution from other gangs inside the system, the ALKQN was formed and its influence and ideology quickly passed through the prison system and onto the streets.

The *Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation* as it is properly known is the first significant organized gang that has essentially bucked the trend of antisocial

behavior in favor of positive grass roots activities within their own cultural quarters. Their central aim is to uplift the Latin people, reinstall self-respect and act as a force for positive change in their shattered communities. Puerto Ricans, South Americans and Latino gangs were the first to ravage their own communities in the 1980s by flooding the streets with cheap cocaine and heroin. The devastation that followed in areas like Los Angeles, New York and Chicago became the benchmark which many industrialized cities soon followed. After years of spiraling destitution it is only now that a new direction is being sought and members of ALKQN regard self respect through positive behavior, investment in ones own community and the expulsion of antisocial behavior in their community as the central goal. That is not to say that criminal activities are no longer carried out by elements of the ALKQN, rather a peaceful coexistence and gradual integration of societies rules be implemented.

This is significant in many respects as it defines a new approach to gang membership based on a socially minded set of concerns rather than individual gain and if this is the new model of gangs then once the old guard of greedy selfpromotionalists are either 'aged out', jailed or killed, perhaps we are set for fewer borderlands in our contemporary urban communities, progress indeed.

[1] 'Yardie', [gangster term for yard meaning the area which an individual runs illicit activities from; his or her '*yard*' derived from the commonly used term *back yard*]

[2] Gangs in Society - Louis Kontos, David Brotherton and Luis Barrios
Columbia University Press – 2003 ISBN 0-231-12141-5