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"Are we a family or a business?" History and disjuncture in the urban American street gang

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After 1987, in pool halls and city parks, high school football games, storefront churches, youth centers, and other sites where police presence was minimal, high-ranking leaders from Chicago's largest African-American street gang "Nations" began meeting to discuss the latest period of change in their respective associations. Adorned in jewelry and expensive designer clothes, and transported in luxury cars, the leaders left little doubt that underground commerce was at the heart of the gang's activities. In between discussions of collective exigencies, most of which centered around management of their crack-cocaine trade, members "signified" with stories of failed or successful money laundering, new opportunities for investment, or a recent commodity purchase. Crack cocaine had arrived in the city and, with it, lucrative profits for a twenty- and thirty-something class of young black men living in the poorest neighborhoods. The involvement of gang members in the burgeoning underground trade was by no means ubiquitous: not all of Chicago's neighborhood gangs were entrepreneurial, nor did all members of the successfully commercial groups earn revenue that could support conspicuous consumption – in fact, the majority earned slightly above minimum wage.[1] However, such activity was without precedent: organized entrepreneurship was an atypical venture for many of these thirty-year old gang families.

The historical novelty and the uneven distribution of their outlaw capitalism created antagonisms and produced new challenges for the respective gang federations (i.e., among members of a single neighborhood faction and between factions sharing the same gang title). Each now had to manage the growth of "defiant individualist" tendencies among their members,[2] rooted in monetary gain, and ensure that street commerce did not threaten organizational cohesion. Jealousies among members were rife as historic allies accused one another of cheating or

price gouging; on occasion, members of a local faction – putatively "brothers" – fought with one another (sometime fatally) to secure their individual capacity to profit in underground markets. For each of the major citywide gang families, including the Disciples, Kings, Saints, and ViceLords, bi-monthly meetings of respective neighborhood-based "set" (faction) leaders to exchange ideas and suggestions for best leadership practices were becoming more common.

In these higher-level managerial discussions, leaders confronted the *raison d'être* of the gang, which was no longer certain in the face of the members' newfound entrepreneurial interests members. "Are we a family or a business?" asked Cleaver, a youthful twenty-five year old member of the "Black Kings Nation" (BK), one of the city's largest gang federations. As the leader of one neighborhood "set," Cleaver wondered aloud in a meeting of several dozen BK set leaders and their superiors to which ideal he should orient his practice: were the Black Kings to be a "family," as their own literature and oral history proclaimed? If so, then members within any single neighborhood BK set and those in all BK sets in and around Chicago were "brothers," i.e., fictive kin mandated to cooperate with one another and to forgo any competition that threatened the capacity of BK Nation to maintain a forceful presence in their neighborhoods. Perhaps the Black Kings were a "business?" If so, then members should take seriously the incentives to compete with one another for "rank" (authority) in the Black Kings' drug distribution hierarchy; as businesspersons, an individual's self interest would be paramount, as witnessed by some leaders who pushed their subordinates to outperform one another in terms of revenue gain.

Cleaver's confusion over the Black Kings orientation was shared by other leaders and rank-and-file members, all of whom watched as the organization experienced a collective metamorphosis. The citywide gang federation had left behind the skein of a youth group involved primarily in social activities, minor crimes, and delinquency. They began to resemble an organized criminal network, interested more in consolidating their position in the city's crack-cocaine market. Once a disparate collection of neighborhood sets, with loose ties to one another and with little collaboration, local Black Kings factions were now part of an integrated hierarchy that had eerie resonance, structurally and in spirit, to a corporate franchise in which members held offices and specific roles, and each constituent set was tied to the overall organization through trademark and fiduciary responsibilities. The other large gang families in the city appeared also to be moving in

a "corporatist" direction.[3] The aura of corporatism was no less than a total change in the *modus operandi* of the gang, one that had rewritten the rules of involvement, reconstituted their identity and social relations, and offered different incentives, risks, and benefits for membership.

These changes were not restricted to the gang, but were reflective of shifts in the social and economic order of American society in the 1980s. Although the gang was "socially isolated" from certain social institutions,[4] the gang and its evolving corporatist mien could not be entirely divorced from a number of critical social developments taking place in the Reagan era. The Black Kings had seized upon corporate ideology at the dusk of the "Fordist climacteric."[5] Their members were following their consumptive urges precisely at the time in which free market ideology and the romance of the "bootstrap" mentality had produced a new phenomenal form of late capitalism, namely the individual yuppie who consumed with conspicuous and ferocious intent. The gang's own increasingly lukewarm and erratic embrace of their political lineage – that of youth mobilized for grassroots concerns – in favor of material gain was a sign of the times, what Adolph Reed perceptively called the "triumph of the commodity form over insurgent black politics." It is the objective of this essay to reconstruct briefly the trajectory of the revanchist gang and the reconfiguration of Chicago's "gangland" and, in so doing, to recast the contemporary street gang and its position in the American social order.

Ethnography in Chicago's gangland

The gang is *de jure* a criminal actor, however, an analytic framework centered on transgression and norm violation – currently in vogue in "street gang studies" – risks missing some of the most interesting attributes of the changes to this modern day outlaw capitalist. It provides little analytic purchase by which to understand the gang's recent corporatist turn and the consequences for members who labor together to realize shared objectives – however much they may flout moral conventions and break ethical and legal codes in the process. In moving away from the criminological paradigm, we extend the arguments of several scholars and reframe the corporatist turn as a problem of social action and historical change within a marginalized, and socially de-legitimated, organization.[6] Our objective is to address two aspects of the growth and development of petty accumulation among Chicago's gangs: How did the shift toward illicit revenue generation

reconstitute the mechanisms by which the gang maintains cohesion and sustains individual involvement? In what ways did the ideological shift from "family" to "business" resonate with systemic shifts in the American social order in the post-Fordist period?

In pursuing these two inter-related lines of inquiry, we argue that street gangs are far more dynamic than ordinarily conceived, both in terms of the outlook and motives of their constituent members and, at the level of the organization as a whole.[7] Paraphrasing anthropologist John Comaroff, their dynamism may be understood as a "dialectic of articulation between a local system and its encompassing context,"[8] that is, as the interplay of internal generative tensions within the gang and movements at the level of "system." "Inside" the gang, as opportunities for illicit revenue generation opened up in the 1980s, the organization stood as a heterogenous composite of individuals with varying biographies, relationships to social institutions, and personal interests, the sum of which manifested in cleavages within the membership vis-à-vis outlook and orientation to collective action. At the same time, the "surface socio-cultural arrangements, politico-relations, [and] ideologies" in America were themselves changing, one outcome being the polarization of the ghetto economy into menial employment and equally inhospitable underground work. The juncture of these two movements may be seen in terms of the means by which the gang struggled to ensure its collective integrity and reconfigure its place amid a changing metropolitan landscape. As members debated and fought with one another to reconstitute the organization's mission as either familial or corporate, one witnessed not simply the arrested development of "underclass" youth, but the byproduct of post-Fordist restructuring and the ascension of the corporatist ideology in American society.

A full portrait of this period of social transformation in Chicago's "gangland" would exceed the scope of this article. The analysis concentrates on the practices of one of the city's largest and predominantly African-American gang organizations, the Black Kings.[9] Since 1989, we have been conducting ethnographic observation of this gang closely, while observing the changes and behavior of other Chicago gang families at a relatively greater distance. The essay begins with a brief rendition of the changes in Chicago's gangland from the late 1960s until the mid-1980s. Greater attention is given to the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the authors had the opportunity to observe firsthand the means by which the Black Kings were coping with the rise of underground entrepreneurialism. Ethnographic-based information

gathered during this period provides the bulk of the data presented below and most of the observation occurred in the concentrated poverty and working-class neighborhoods in Chicago's SouthSide as part of another research project.[10] The approach departs from orthodox social scientific methods because we introduce data that are not common-place, and may be unprecedented, in the study of street gangs: namely, the financial records maintained by the gang itself. An ex-gang member who thought that two academics might be interested in "how the gang works on the inside" provided for us the "books" of one Black Kings street gang set – an account of the gang's underground activities (specifically narcotics and extortion) over a period of four years.

From petty delinquent to "supergang"

Amid the cacophony of outrage and accusation that surrounds the contemporary American street gang, basic aspects of the organization's activities remain opaque. In public discourse, the "gang and drug problem" – the 1980s popular moniker for a resurgent mass ghetto-based youth movement – has become a convenient means to subsume an array of practices involving ghetto youth that had varying social and political valence, ranging from conspicuous consumption, to rap music production, to organized underground mercantilism. What, precisely, these developments had to do with gang activity has not always been well articulated. If, during the 1980s, law enforcement agencies and the media that relied on their information were at the forefront in painting an alarmist canvas of metropolitan "ganglands," social scientists were equally culpable by neglecting to provide critical scrutiny of these portrayals with their own research and commentary. By the dawn of the 1990s, only a handful of researchers confronted head-on the public mythology of the morally-reprehensible outlaw capitalist overtaking American inner cities. Among them, several scholars questioned the conflation between the rising drug trade and the expansion of street gang activity within U.S. metropolitan areas.[11] However, with little systematic effort to observe the gang members in their habitat and with the dominance of a criminological paradigm as opposed to a sociological focus on structure, practice, and consciousness, academic knowledge still can do little better than counter the mass hysteria with tentative appraisals and speculative comment on the ascension of gangs into dominant positions in the urban underground market. By piecing together the life histories and recollections of the members of the Black Kings gang federation, and by drawing on the handful of studies that

have examined shifts in street gang activity over time, it is possible to reconstruct something of the process by which the gang arose to assume an entrepreneurial, and eventually a corporatist, guise after the 1970s.[12]

The relation between the gang and mainstream institutions

At the root of most narratives of recent street gang changes lies the observation that gang members' relationship to mainstream institutions changed significantly. Their shifting work experiences in both legitimate and underground labor markets have been well-documented by the so-called "underclass school" of gang research. These scholars ground the corporate turn of the gang in the restructuring of American economies, a process that offered little for urban minority youth and young adults apart from poorly paying, "dead-end" jobs in the service sector. De-industrialization created cities of "truly disadvantaged" populations and, in so doing, closed off an avenue of exit – the blue collar industrial and manufacturing sector – through which youth had departed from the gang and (re)entered the societal mainstream.[13] This argument is confirmed by the life histories of senior Black Kings members whose formative period of gang involvement occurred well before the onset of the crack-trade in the mid-1980s. This cohort tended to work in the industrial labor force or aspired to a mobility path grounded in small-business ownership, a skilled trade, or blue-collar factory labor. However, for members whose socialization into the Black Kings occurred later, the field of opportunities had changed. Their work experience reveals short stints – typically, several months – in unskilled positions, including food preparer, office cleaner, and day laborer. They shared with their elder counterparts a tenuous relationship to educational institutions, most dropping out of high school, but they differed because of their inability to locate income outside of menial service-sector work during their youth. This shift in gang members' relationship to the labor market in the 1980s certainly does not account for the organization's overall corporate turn, but it is a necessary backdrop because the gang's metamorphosis into a commercial outfit partially satisfied the income needs of an unemployed and alienated youth and young adult population.

Changes in work and educational involvement among gang members were accompanied by a reconstituted approach to street gangs by law enforcement agencies, the courts, and city, state, and federal legislative

bodies. A legal and law enforcement strategy, sometimes referred to as a "law and order" campaign, involved a shift from liberal programming intent on reintegrating street gang members into mainstream institutions to "gang suppression" tactics aimed at destabilizing gang networks and jailing members *en masse*. To elaborate, after the New Deal era, the objective of government human service agencies and advocacy and community-based organizations was to harness the eventual "disillusionment" [14] of aging members with a battery of social workers, reformed ex-gang members, and probation officers. As members aged, and grew intolerant of the risks of gang involvement, the social work community responded by channeling these manifest frustrations with support, counsel, and assistance, the ultimate aim being to reintegrete members into the labor force and their communities. Such services had almost disappeared during the 1970s as the gang became involved in more violent criminal activites and as the winds of support for liberal state programming shifted. The urban gang member's public profile became that of "criminal" and, in step with post-Fordist welfare retrenchment, the network of social work, medical, vocational development, and educational agencies once responsible for administering to urban youth declined in use and public support.

This dismantling of welfare state provisions took place in parallel with an invigorated policing apparatus designed to eradicate urban gang activity. [15] The expansion of the state's enforcement-based approach was composed of general policing agencies as well as specialized narcotics and gang intelligence bureaus. The subsection of the Chicago police force designated solely to gang-related issues was fully operational by 1969. The first of its kind, it quickly became a model for other large cities. Continuing as a trend setter, in 1978 Chicago police merged their gang intelligence and narcotics agencies, even though the gang was a minor player in the local narcotics markets. [16] A plethora of anti-gang measures were deployed, including mass arrest and high-bail tactics (in which the objective was to remove gang members from public streets and to persuade individual members to become informants), heavy surveillance and infiltration, and municipal ordinances and state statutes that inhibited gangs from occupying public spaces and institutions (e.g., streetcorners and parks, schools). It is worth noting that this tide of anti-liberal feeling had manifested well before the gang had taken its most prominent commercial steps and so cannot be explained as a necessary or logical response to the gang's involvement in illicit entrepreneurial activity. Instead, the sentiments must be rooted in the creeping disdain, among traditionally liberal American middle-class

constituents, for the predicament of urban minority youth and for the use of state intervention to remedy inner-city inequities.[17]

By the start of the 1970s, the urban-based law and order movement had manifested in the large-scale incarceration of minority youth[18] – some were documented gang members, but other youth were involved in progressive causes such as Black Panther Party activities or black nationalist movements. This influx created administrative nightmares for prison officials responsible for maintaining social order in prison and gang affiliations became a convenient means by which they could carry out their duties. The gang was allowed to continue operating and members retained their connection to their ghetto neighborhoods; in turn, prison officials successfully used gang divisions to control inmates and deter unified mass protest. As gang leaders worked intimately with prison guards, wardens, and other security personnel, a perverse quid pro quo system emerged based on the constituent ties of enmity and alliance among gang federations.[19]

In Chicago, the argument that a lengthy incarceration period for local gangs provided an impetus for their subsequent growth and development into "supergangs" is not without merit, but it is difficult to render sharply. It is fairly clear that once having been integrated into the overall system of discipline and compliance behind prison walls, the gang was a noticeable source of psychological support, protection, and access to resources and opportunities for inmates. Many gang leaders remained close to prison officials and a system of mutual exchange arose whereby officials and guards bestowed favors to gang leaders who in turn helped to limit rioting and rambunctious activity – the collaborations between gang members and prison officials were often impromptu and tended to lack any overarching rationale beyond the resolution of immediate exigencies. For much of the seventies, gang leaders continued grassroots organizing in prison, in activities such as educational workshops and recreational programs in which they had been involved at an earlier date on ghetto streets. The gang was a beacon around which inmate life was organized, thus there was little doubt as the 1980s dawned that large numbers of incarcerated minority youth were identifying themselves with one or another major street gang family in Illinois – if only for protection and peer support.[20]

The ties among members of the same gang "family" and among different families were effectively strengthened by the end of the decade as paroled members returned to ghetto streets and formed loose ties to

their "brothers" in different neighborhoods as well as to those remaining behind prison walls. The relations were primarily symbolic and there was little evidence to indicate that, by 1980, gangs of different neighborhoods were actively collaborating in social, political, or economic activities. Most researchers acknowledge that the longer-term, and perhaps unintentional, consequence of 1970s incarceration was to facilitate the expansion of street gang networks; prison provided a ready pool of recruits and a central hub at which members in different neighborhoods met and formed relationships. However, few are willing to concede the specter of street gang contagion put forth by local and state law enforcement agencies at the time, that claimed gangs dominated drug trafficking through cross-neighborhood, purposive collaboration.

Prison played a critical role in the infrastructural development of Chicago's largest gang federations and, to varying degrees, the organizations reinvented themselves when most of their leadership was incarcerated. For example, the Disciples strengthened their cross-neighborhood ties in the city's SouthSide and subsumed their disparate leadership into a central administrative body. The Black P Stone Nation reconstituted themselves as El Rukn, a religious organization with ties to grassroots Islamic centers in Chicago (cynics argued that this move was designed to take advantage of prison rules affording religious groups the freedom of association). And, networks of other gang families, such as the Latin Kings, Black Disciples, ViceLords, and so on, formed links across ethnic lines (typically Latino-black associations). These multi-ethnic supergang factions divided themselves into two large camps, the "People" and the "Folks." The twists and turns of the Black Kings street gang federation – what members call "BK Nation" – reveal in somewhat greater detail the effect of institutionalization on affiliated youth.

The growth of Black Kings Nation

Of the approximately one dozen Black Kings "citywide leaders" who were in command of all metropolitan BK gang activity in the early 1980s, each was imprisoned during the earlier decade. They had earned their rank in BK Nation during their tenure in a State of Illinois penitentiary and nearly all of them returned to Chicago's streets between 1978 and 1983 to command local BK sets. These leaders developed an overarching administrative apparatus, a "Central Leader-

ship," that claimed authority over all **BK** members in the Midwest. This group remains in existence, hovering between one- to two-dozen individuals, and continues to influence **BK** activities throughout state penitentiaries as well as on streets in Cook County (in which Chicago is located) and nearby Midwestern towns.

When the leaders created this directorate, neither they nor the membership had a clear sense of how the local **BK** sets across the city would interact with one another (and with their leaders). Indeed, the initiative to create this structure appeared motivated by the wish to replicate the support systems that the gang had served during their incarceration by enabling members to remain in contact with one another as they left prison. However, leaders also wanted to secure their own authority over the proliferation of Black Kings sets across Chicago before another power base formed. The goal was not necessarily to make the gang into a cohesive entrepreneurial organization and activities of members remained social – either mundane or based in inter-gang fighting. As Tim Tomlins, one of the founders of the Central Leadership, stated,

> "A lot of this was just about niggers in prison doing their thing. It ain't easy in there, you got to have protection or you die. But, you know, when we was leaving out [of prison], it was like we was alone, didn't know nobody. Some of us needed to make our money, yeah, but that was just for folks like me, you know, top dogs back then. Hell, most niggers just wanted to talk with each other, see friends and shit. The [cross-neighborhood interaction] started because we wanted folks to get together, spread the word that prison was hard, man. You know, we needed to stay together with the shorties on the streets. Teach them."

The diffuse sense of purpose among Tim Tomlins and other **BK** leaders who created the Central Leadership is reflected in the leaders' lack of precise information about the activities of **BK** sets in each of the neighborhoods in and around Chicago in which they had a presence. It was an open question whether the establishment of a partly imprisoned, partly freed leadership body would translate into a cohesive organization that could direct activities over a large geographic area, such as the city of Chicago. And, apart from continuing social ties forged in penitentiaries and continuing to cast one's identity as "BK," it was not clear exactly why this centralized managerial unit was needed nor why the newly-freed leaders needed to bring groups together across the city and Midwest.

When commands from imprisoned leaders on the Central Leadership to their local affiliates were given (and these were relatively infrequent), they could include a request for a local set to take over a neighboring territory, eliminate in-fighting within the "set" (i.e., faction), or join with an affiliated set in a war or a social activity. Such orders were rare, however, and there was little in the way of the large-scale underground economic activity around which centralized management and monitoring might have been helpful. These directives reached the rank-and-file by way of recently released and paroled gang-affiliated inmates who were given a mid-level rank ("regional leaders") and who effectively served as liaisons between the imprisoned leaders and those on the street. This communication network reinforced the aura of the prison because the regional leaders would often return to their neighborhoods and demand that existing BK leadership recognize their authority to command all BK activity. Released inmates did not appear as a wholly antagonistic force since they were returning to familiar communities and peers. They regaled the street recruits with tales of prison life. A gang lore developed based in the lives of notorious imprisoned leaders about whom the rank-and-file knew little except for their exploits behind cell walls. Even into the early 1990s, it was common to find released members narrate tales to large, watchful rank-and-file audiences concerning events such as prison treaties, riots, and power plays of leaders behind bars. All of this was imprinted onto the minds of the "shorties," i.e., the younger, adolescent and teenage members and, in this manner, the Black Kings created a collective memory of their organization in which incarceration appeared as a moment of consciousness raising and self-determinism for individuals. The prison experience became another page in street gang mythology.[21]

By the early 1980s, the Black Kings gang comprised two ideal-typical members. In any neighborhood-based Black Kings faction, an older, young adult segment might be present, many of whom had some history of tenure in prison and involvement in serious crimes. As Michael, an older member who was in his early twenties at the time, reflected,

> "You had two kinds of niggers when I got out of prison: folks like me, we had kids, you know we needed to eat. See it was all about drinking, maybe a little stealing or selling dope, it was rough, so the gang was really something to help us get by."

For this cohort, the gang was equally a base of social support and a source of sporadic revenue generation. Peers might work together to

sell narcotics and plan an auto theft or burglary operation. The gang as a whole did not collectively organize such entrepreneurial activity. Michael continued by describing the other membership segment ("shorties") as teenagers who engaged in petty delinquent activities and for whom the gang was largely a social network.

> "Other folks was really young, you know, shorties. They just hung out next to us, but they was chasing girls. These niggers wasn't really crazy, lot of them would leave, come back [in the gang], you know, it was just fun. Wasn't about surviving [for them], like it was for us. They was like our baby brothers or something, you know."

"Shorties" could have a tangible connection to community-based institutions, such as schools and churches, albeit such ties might nevertheless be strained. Unlike their older counterparts, however, few participated in organized criminal activities that yielded underground revenue. Older members had the most active involvement with Black Kings members outside of their neighborhoods as well as with the overarching Central Leadership.

The overall authority structure of the citywide Black Kings organization also showed a two-sided profile. The highest-ranking tier – inclusive of the Central Leadership and their delegates, the regional leaders – comprised both imprisoned members and those on the street. Members of this body would meet with individual neighborhood-based factions throughout the city primarily for social reasons, such as a cross-neighborhood collaboration or a participation in a gang's basketball tournament; however, they also had instrumental ties with the older members of local sets with whom they were involved in relatively small-scale illegitimate economic ventures. Below the Central Leadership stood the leaders of each neighborhood faction, a highly diverse group that were teenagers in some areas, young adults in others. Despite a centralized leadership, the neighborhood-based leaders had considerable autonomy to plan activities and run the affairs of their BK set without consulting the higher-ranking leaders. Any fear of rebuke by their superiors would result only if they were unable to control their rambunctious younger members, if they explicitly violated a code or by-law (such as stealing from or harming another Black Kings member), or if they could not prevent a takeover attempt from a rival street gang family (a rare practice because members joined gangs in areas where they lived, so subsuming another area held little interest). Overall, a vertical-hierarchical structure was in place with two tiers, a Central Leadership that retained the right to direct citywide

activities of the Black Kings and that occasionally dethroned local leaders for transgression of BK laws and, a large pool of neighborhood BK set leaders who varied in their age and interest in gang activity.

Nearly all of the older BK leaders recall that the need to regulate the economic activity of BK members arose once entrepreneurial activity reached a wider segment of members. In the words of one leader, "more niggers couldn't find no work, so they was humping [working illegally] on the street [with other BKs]. That's when problems started happening." This period was one of transition for the Black Kings because the basis of the affiliation among members was shifting in accordance with the emergence of a dichotomous member pool and a two-tiered leadership structure. That is, before this time, the role of the entrepreneurially-motivated member was not a source of tension for the collective because of the rarity of commercial pursuits within the gang. The basis for individual identity and, relatedly, the methods for ensuring group cohesion remained rooted in various collectivist ideologies that had formed in the Civil Rights era (In their thirty-year existence, the Black Kings, and their counterparts in Chicago, the Disciples, ViceLords, and El Rukn, have documented part of their history orally and in written pamphlets – what members refer to as their "lit"[erature].) An exemplary phrase that BK members recite, and that is passed on to each generation, reads, "Black Kings brothers must join as one to resist the oppression that faces all black youth. With this oath you have found a new family, a brotherhood that will always be with you...." The oldest and most commonly-used words that BKs use to describe their relation to one another are "family," "brotherhood," and "nation." In other words, historically the Black Kings have understood themselves via the principle of fictive-kinship in which the Black Kings are a second family for black youth. This family is not necessarily a substitute for the nuclear or extended household, but a collective whose members are tied by personal bonds and shared circumstance. Second, the gang is the collective embodiment of their own individual alienation from broader social institutions and, therefore, is a politicized collective. The politicization of identity is multi-valent and can manifest at times in a vision of resistance against the state ("BKs must resist the brutality of the police and the government"), a declaration of the specificity of the black American condition as non-bourgeois *qua* non-individualist ("BKs will survive only if they do not act alone and understand that we are all for one, one for all...") and, a more amorphous sensibility that being black is effectively being a non-citizen ("BKs understand that America will never accept the black man...").

These ideals would eventually be called into question as individual, self-interested entrepreneurship became prominent in the mid-1980s. One period of self-reflection and scrutiny appeared to have occurred before the arrival of crack cocaine in Chicago (circa 1986). Growing sectors of the young adult membership were not finding meaningful work opportunities. The experience of gang involvement now lacked a historic avenue of exit. As a contrast to the media and law enforcement's portrayal of Chicago street gangs as heavily immersed in narcotics trafficking at the turn of the 1980s, the turn to underground trades appeared as the pursuits of a small, disenfranchised and older member pool. Their practices may have had some public visibility but this attention tended to overshadow the continued function of the gang as a largely peer social-support base for thousands of teenagers and youth living in impoverished communities.

This formative entrepreneur class, small but increasing gradually, was known as "independents." As one member of the Black Kings Central Leadership stated in reference to the early 1980s.

> "Lots of these cats, these independents was what we called them, they started making cash, [their] heads got big, you know, they thought they ran the show and shit. We [in the Central Leadership] had to slow them niggers down, make sure they knew they was part of a family. Wasn't about doing your own thing."

"Independent" was a term that referred to the relative disassociation of the entrepreneur from the gang. Few such outlaw capitalists merged their ventures into the Black Kings, for example, nor did many redirect personal revenues to the organization's coffers.

The presence of independents was of some concern to BK leaders who wanted to ensure group cohesion. For example, "independents" tended to reduce their involvement in the gang's social activities once they became mercantilists; this created a pull effect on younger members who would also withdraw from social activities to commercial ventures. That such an unflattering appraisal of a successful entrepreneur might occur is indicated by the BK active enforcement of penalties for members – regardless of rank – who allowed their "defiantly individualistic"[22] pursuits to overtake their involvement in group activities. "I know it's hard for you to believe," said Jason Johnson, a member of the Central Leadership from 1980 until 1991. "But, you couldn't get full respect if you was just about making money back then. It was like you had to show that you was helping BK Nation. Lot

of BK's don't even know this, but its still a violation [of group codes] to make your money and don't help nobody else." Most "violations" were incidents in which BK entrepreneurs who sold drugs refused to donate part of their revenue to their respective BK set. This provoked anger among the higher-ranking leaders because it eliminated a source from which to extract dues, thereby reducing their own personal salary augmentation. The most common punishment was physical abuse – a beating at the hands of other members – coupled with monetary fines.

From 1982 until 1986, roughly the period of heightened street gang entrepreneurial activity in Chicago before the arrival of crack cocaine, an "independent" entrepreneurial BK class had created several internal tensions. As one leader noted, the opportunity to earn illicit revenue was proving attractive to large segments of the rank-and-file, and the question for the leadership was not whether to continue along a commercial path, but how best to move the BKs in that direction.

> "There were just too many niggers making money. And, shit, I was in State-ville [penitentiary] getting it on, so you know these niggers on the street was getting it on too. No way you could stop it, so we just tried to deal with it. But, I ain't gonna lie to you, man, it became all bout the money real quick, ain't nobody give a damn no more about nothing else."

There was a divide among young adult members – the majority in their twenties. One segment had demonstrated a clear interest in pursuing street-based mercantilist opportunities; another was either indifferent to underground economic activity, unable to find opportunities for entering this sphere, or simply interested in the social aspects of gang membership. Individual sets were beset by infighting as the two groups of individuals fought for control at the local level. Some dissolved entirely, given way to takeovers by rival gang families who then moved into the neighborhood.

Another tension arose from the highest-ranking Black Kings members – the regional leaders and the citywide leaders on the Central Leadership – who were taking a greater interest in the actions of the neighborhood-based BK sets, often issuing orders to local factions to become involved in drug trafficking or suffer the replacement of their leaders with BKs from other parts of the city who would fulfill this mandate. The divided hierarchical authority structure had not been a source of dissension when superiors visited local sets primarily for social reasons. However, as these leaders offered explicit directives to initiate trafficking or engage in fighting, for example, they encountered

either resistance on the part of local sets or they discovered a motley crew incapable of carrying out collective action. The interaction of local sets with regional and citywide leaders was still unclear and in dispute. A related tension concerned the sphere of authority of the neighborhood-based leader – who until that time had considerable discretion to plan the activities of his set – and that of the citywide leader who increasingly subsumed more local activity under his wing.

These and other areas of discordance within the Black Kings Nation would be exacerbated after 1986, when crack entered the Chicago narcotics market and offered the ghetto dweller far greater opportunities for illicit income generation. By that time, the BKs and other "super-gangs" had a clearly reconstituted collective guise, namely a metropolitan-wide network of youth and young adults with sporadic interaction and a makeshift two-tier hierarchical structure of authority and control that afforded a collective identity. However, by no means were these supergangs consistently able to direct a commercial enterprise nor were they even business-like in their approach. The introduction of crack-cocaine, the processed or "cooked" version of powdered cocaine, would be a significant turning point for their collective growth: some supergang federations adjusted to the expanding market, using their makeshift vertical-hierarchical organizational form to traffic narcotics across widespread geographic areas, while others retained a territorially-expansive skeletal network but remained ineffective as mercantilists or as initiators of any other group activity for that matter. Aspects of the BK's transition to corporatist activity are addressed below, but it may be worthwhile to address the specificity of crack-cocaine trafficking that helped to bring about the organizational realignment.

Crack-cocaine offered a much more intensive and addictive high compared to powdered cocaine, and one that sapped the mental, physical, and emotional energies of its user. Whereas powdered cocaine tended to require a substantial purchase (typically a gram sold for $100), a bag of crack might cost $5 or $10 and it could be processed easily in any kitchen. Thus, crack was more amenable to the resources of an impoverished clientele and users purchasing the commodity did so often, some returning to their dealers several times a day as money, interest, and supply permitted. This type of exchange – frequent sales, each for a small amount – generated high-volume trading and required numerous sites of trade, which could range from street corners, open-air markets, and public spaces (parks, arcades) to hidden areas (backrooms, alleys) and private places (residences).

In concentrated urban poor spaces where demand for crack was high, the distribution necessitated an adequate number of street-based traffickers willing to occupy public and quasi-public spaces of exchange and interact with a continuous pool of anonymous clients. Two paradigmatic distribution schemes arose in American cities. In dense metropolitan areas, such as New York City, localized drug "crews" anchored sales: a sales force of three to six persons, based in a highly restricted geographic area (sometimes only one block or one sales "spot"), with few lateral connections to other crews, and who received their goods from a supplier who sold to many crews (and who also had few organizational ties laterally to other sellers).[23] In Chicago, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, and other less dense cities, the supergang's tree-like organizational structure proved to be a second distributive mechanism: local gang sets with familiarity of social dynamics in their respective "turf," with sufficient size to sell across several city blocks or more, with social networks to other community actors that protected their trade, and with access to higher-ranking leaders *cum* suppliers that enabled them to meet growing demand. In the Midwest broadly, the supergang's vertical-hierarchical organization that had sedimented by the mid-1980s proved to be the circulatory system through which commodities flowed, orders were relayed, and management of a large metropolitan street-based trade occurred. Unlike the "drug crew" model, this set of relations tied together multiple neighborhoods, enabling the centralized management of crack trading over a large territory such as Chicago.

The Black Kings' adjusted to the new economy of scale by realigning their internal relationships. Before crack-cocaine had arrived, illicit mercantilism among select persons in the local BK sets was loosely governed by regional and citywide leaders who tried to ensure that the individualistic endeavors did not threaten collective "unity."[24] With the arrival of crack, the Central Leadership actively met with local sets to ensure that they met the local demand for "product," and that their own personal coffers were lined with the revenue of the crack trade (see below).

Not all of the city's historic supergangs replicated the BK's path by mobilizing their collective network and putting into place an apparatus for adequate management of a drug trade. The factors determining the eventual metamorphosis of any particular supergang into a commercial outfit were complex. For example, the BKs and the Black Disciples thrived because of strong centralized control based in prison.

However, the large-scale police interdiction effectively dismantled the organizational structure of some gangs (e.g., the "El Rukn") and poor centralized control and high member turnover plagued others (e.g., the "Mickey Cobras"). The multiple trajectories are themselves not easily discernible given the lack of adequate historical data and a full account would exceed the scope of this article. At this point, it is sufficient to note that the introduction of crack-cocaine required a new economy of scale in narcotics trading and, to realize the new transportation and communication exigencies, in several major cities the vertical-hierarchical supergang structure proved to be an adequate administrative apparatus.

For organizations that were attempting to harness the demands of the crack market and realize lucrative revenue, it was not an easy step to move from social delinquent to outlaw capitalist. The tensions outlined above in the Black Kings, including the variance in interest, motive, and orientation to gang activity among individual members, did not disappear. Most pressing for the BKs would be the need to address an ideological confusion among members who felt the gang was still primarily a social-political organization – what, in BK lore, was called "family" – and those who wanted the gang to proceed forcefully into the new arena of "business." This ideological difference would be played out on many levels. Members struggled to understand whether they were "brothers" or competitors. BK sets found themselves operating as social supports and sales units: Should they compete with other sets for economic supremacy or cooperate whenever possible? Each principle could promote different responses when, for example, a set called upon others for help in times of crisis. The individual BK set leader also struggled to reconcile his multiple roles as promotor of collective cohesion, franchise manager, guardian of younger black men, and mentor. These differing functions and identities would have to be resolved, to some degree, if the organization was to continue as a cohesive unit.

The new American franchise?

By the late 1980s, the predilection for illicit entrepreneurialism among the "independents" had made its way to the rank-and-file member, old and young. The spread of commercial energies created a new orientation to gang involvement and, in so doing, disrupted some of the historic methods by which the gang ensured collective cohesion. The Black Kings had adjusted to the pervading entrepreneurial mood by

revamping their organizational structure citywide, but this was not always a product of forethought and some of the shifts were the result of unintended actions. Irrespective of the precise motive, it was clear that the accelerating demand for crack had promoted a shift in manner by which BKs managed their drug trafficking, namely from a quasi-oligopolistic governance to a more corporate variant.

If the move away from familial and oligopolistic governance was driven less by a well-thought out plan to instantiate corporate principles (of competition, depersonalized authority, etc.) it was certainly affected by the conscious desire of the Central Leadership to ensure receipt of the revenue being generated at the street level by the BK sets. Reminiscent of the fervor exhibited by movie icon Gordon Gecko, the yuppie protagonist of *Wall Street* who justified corporate restructuring with the mantra "greed is good," the Central Leadership demanded that all BKs yield to them a share of drug revenue. Out of this desire to recoup crack-based profits, they effectively instituted a franchise model, organizing the Black Kings drug trafficking network in the manner of a fast-food establishment, where each set ("franchise") could control their own pace of sales and their wages, but each had to compete with other BK sets in a highly bounded economic sphere. Each set is equal by decree and entitled to the full benefits of membership in BK Nation – e.g., they can call on other sets for protection and leaders' rhetoric directs individuals to treat members of other sets as they would their own "family." However, with more sets actively involved in the drug trade, each neighborhood-based faction vied with others in BK Nation through their respective financial portfolios. The competition was not trivial. Leaders of financially successful sets have a greater chance for promotion to the Central Leadership board; they are entitled to the "best product" (i.e., the highest quality cocaine); and, if supplies of "product" are scarce, their needs will be prioritized over lesser performing sets. The franchiser, which is the Central Leadership, receives a monthly payment (i.e., the "tribute") and can call upon BK gang sets to assist other sets that may be engaged in war with the Black Kings' many rivals.

In practice, the "franchisee" model cannot be applied uncritically to the Black Kings. The state obviously does not recognize the organization as legitimate, there is no state-enforced contract to protect the rights of each party and, perhaps most important, although there is some reciprocity between local sets and the citywide directorate, there is also a clear extortionary component to the relationship: the Central Leadership may enforce payments through physical violence and

monetary fines and, they often punish local leaders who attempt to break free from the BKs or switch their allegiance to a rival nation. In our study, those sets who proclaimed independence have been severely punished – some members have been killed – and those who appropriate another gang's "colors" have typically been subject to shootings and continuous harassment. Moreover, since each set must buy goods from a supplier who is sanctioned by the BK Central Leadership, local set leaders are limited in their ability to be compensated for any relative status disparities. In this manner, a strong element of centralized planning had been retained in the overarching BK restructuring into a corporate mode.

With the exception of gangs in public housing, BK sets control areas roughly of ten to twelve square blocks. In the mid-1980s, the citywide leaders demanded that local BK sets/franchises usurp control over underground economic activity from many other actors, including non-gang affiliated entrepreneurs, neighborhood block club presidents, commercial store owners, and politicians who may have regulated hidden income. Thus, in numerous areas, the BK's have monopoly regulatory power over numerous activities that include car repair in parking and vacant lots, gypsy cab service, sales of all illicit goods, vice and weapons trading, and gambling. Most BK sets have evolved a four-tier membership class. The titles are assigned to offices, not to particular persons, and they are hierarchical in terms of power, status, and remuneration. There is a leader who directs gang operations and usually provides capital to purchase drugs wholesale; an officer body includes a treasurer, enforcer (who is in charge of administering punishment to gang members for group transgressions and, more generally, for "normalizing" members),[25] and runner (who picks up goods from the supplier); a class of "foot soldiers" that is responsible for the majority of street-level distribution; and, the younger rank-and-file who await entree into the foot soldier category. The gang is monitored by a "regional leader" who observes the activities of approximately one-dozen such BK sets.

The colonization of local underground markets by the Black Kings was part of an overall rise of individualistic attitudes among the rank-and-file. A self-interested preference for illicit earnings was prevalent, one that appeared not as a "ghetto-specific" outlook, i.e., a cultural attribute singularly unique to the black urban poor, but as a vision fully compliant with dominant corporate-based ideologies of individual self-worth and identity. Specifically, members spoke of their

gang affiliation and their drive to earn income in ways that resonated with representations of work in the mainstream corporate firm. Many approached involvement as an institutionalized path of socioeconomic mobility for down-and-out youth, not simply as a refuge from the available low-paying work in the mainstream but as an avenue in which to craft one's identity and realize dominant values based in consumption, monetary accumulation, and individuality. As many members from the older generation are quick to point out, the ideals of commitment, loyalty, and the principle of fictive-kinship that defined member-member relationships had seemingly given way to the notion that one's "brother" was also a competitor who stood in the way of material gain and promotion to a leadership position. Gang involvement had become subsumed under the trope of a *career*.

> "It's about doing something for me and my family, taking care of them."

> "I'm building me a future, you dig, I'm working my way up and gonna be making big money."

> "It's work man, you go out there everyday and hustle."

The three quotes are testimonials of youth (18–24 years of age) who were experimenting with the street trade (as opposed to mainstream labor markets) in order to become self-determined providers.

The idealized understandings of corporate activity that rank-and-file members share is a contemporary version of what Lee Rainwater once called the ghetto-based vision of the "good life." In BK members' career aspirations there may be allusions to the corporation itself, but more often their outlook is framed by a perception of the type of life that "people who make it" are leading. Just as their knowledge of the Mafia derives from highly-polished narratives such as *The Godfather* as opposed to an understanding of the role of organized criminal enterprises in communities and specific sectors of capital, so too are their notions of corporate activity formed primarily through popular media. It is glorified conspicuous consumption and a lifestyle conventionally tied to American yuppies (and buppies), that undergirds their visualization of the "good life." Gang members see corporatism in the stark contrast of lived space in the metropolis, between their own impoverished spaces and the better-serviced suburbs and central city communities where "everyone's driving the Lexuses" live. As two youth Black Kings members noted independently,

> "I want to have me a car man, you know, have my shit on, live in a nice place where all them people working downtown live, you know, you ain't got no trash on the streets, everyone's driving the Lexuses and the Benzes. You think they come back to this shit [he says pointing to the housing projects in which he resides]. Fuck no, nigger! They ain't worried about getting no heat, no food on their plate. I'm tired of hustling man, want the good life."

> "You ever been to the suburbs man? It's boring as hell, but it's nice 'cause they all working, they ain't worried about niggers shooting at night. It's like I always tell you, you got to have a paycheck. You ain't made it man until you get that fat check. [You mean you want to make a lot of money?] No, it ain't about the money, 'cause I make more money than most of those niggers. It's like, you got to have the bank account, you know, so you can get the house, take care of the family, you know, all those things man. I can't get that shit slanging [drugs] on the corner."

Secondarily, impressions of the corporate lifestyle are formed through passing contact in the downtown offices where many members work as service workers or general operatives (and where many deal narcotics to middle- and upper-class clients).

The approach to gang involvement as a career, while derivative of the "greed is good" mentality that saturated American discourse during the Reagan era, is buttressed at the street level by the perceptible ladder of organizational mobility that confronts the aspiring member at a young age: at the bottom is the rank-and-file who claw for the pecuniary revenue and status distinctions that accompany day-to-day trading; above, there is a small officer body, of whom the BK "set leader" has supreme authority. Above the set leader stands a "regional leader" who members see on occasion at their set meeting, local basketball tournaments, dances, and gatherings; these regional leaders answer to a citywide leadership of (incarcerated and freed) older members who constitute the "Central Leadership." Each level of "BK rank" is embodied in persons who carry specific authorities and rights, and who exhibit particularistic signifying practices. These consumptive pursuits vary from consumption (of varying grades of cars, jewelry, and clothing), which characterizes all members, to the leaders' orchestrated displays of girlfriends, wives, and partners who are similarly adorned with the requisite accoutrement of this ghetto leisure class. This public signifying of masculine identity proves to be a powerful symbolic practice reinforcing the gang's aura as a parallel track of corporate-style personal development for those (young men) otherwise blocked from accessing the yuppie lifestyle. Although the practical likelihood of any single member moving up this ladder of mobility is small,

against a background of limited mainstream opportunities, it remains a powerful attraction.

The franchise model is also not far afield from the subjective perceptions of BK set leaders who were in power after the late 1980s. As Kenny, one of these newer and younger leaders, stated,

> "It's all a business now, you dig. Now, it's just about making money. You know, if you don't make your [payment to the Central Leadership], you're going to pay for it. If your shorties [foot-soldiers] ain't selling, it's a violation and they're going to get beat. You could be all together and shit, but if you ain't making money, you get no respect and they find someone else to come in and [take your position]."

However, whereas the reconfiguration of individual sets into franchises appeared to be a product of both happenstance and the self-interestedness of the city's highest-ranking BK leaders, the new gang *leader* appeared to be a product of deliberate action on the part of the Central Leadership. A leader arose to direct BK sets in the late 1980s who resembled a CEO or a sales manager more than a patriarchal family head. In fact, states Michael (a Central Leadership member and an architect of the BK's franchise framework), in areas where they perceived crack-cocaine sales to be high, the Central Leadership forcibly replaced those neighborhood set leaders uninterested or incapable of forging successful drug trafficking operations with those more dedicated to commercial endeavors: "What can you say, if you wasn't making money, you was out, you was just in our way. We were looking for the new jack." Many of the "new jacks" [new leaders] were young, brash street traders, who, as Michael went on to state, "rose up real quick because they made so much money slinging [selling drugs]. [They] didn't know a lot about what gangs was all about, you know the political things we do, the way we try to be a family, you know, the way we take care of shorties."

The feeling among local gang leaders that one is partly a franchise owner is conditioned by a micro-managing Central Leadership that, by the late 1990s, was exerting considerable pressure on local sets to develop protocols for ensuring that economically productive members are easily identified and rewarded. The Central Leadership also promotes competition among gang sets, hoping that neighboring factions will continually try to outpace one other in terms of sales revenue. The competition has also manifested in recognized status differentials among sets in the eyes of the Central Leadership; certain sets receive the first allocation

of drug supplies, others are the first to be invited to regional conferences and congresses. And, for the set leaders, success in this competitive arena – which is grounded in sustained, high levels of revenue generation – may someday win a promotion to the Central Leadership.[26]

The shift into a corporatist mode was not a seamless process for the Black Kings – or the other supergang families. Particularly for the local set leaders who must coordinate the actions of several hundred members with divergent interests and relationships to the gang, the new orientation posed considerable difficulties. For example, neighborhood leaders receive conflicting and sometimes contradictory mandates from their superiors. At the end of the 1980s, many local leaders could recall an era where the BK Central Leadership did not intervene actively in the affairs of each set. They resented the new relationship in which the regional leaders assiduously monitored their affairs and revoked some of their autonomy.

Especially for the older set leaders (late twenties and older), the gang's shift from political activities and redistributive equity to "making money" is stated as a lament. Socialized into the BKs through prison tenure when the residues of black nationalism inflected gang mobilization, they decry the absence of a patently political race-based agenda among most of the city's gang members – in their Nation and others. As one thirty-three year old member said in 1991, "We ain't helping niggers no more, ain't helping black folk. It's fucked up [that] you in a gang and you just in it for yourself, just for the money. You ain't doing shit for your people." These senior members express frustration over the inability to exit the gang by locating well-paying "legit jobs" and many refuse to see drug trafficking as other than a temporary solution. They decry the fact that "gangs" became "businesses" and that BKs competed among themselves in the drug market. As Carl Tee, a forty-three year old ex-BK set leader, explains, some refused to partake of the new corporate ideology and withdrew from the gang entirely.[27]

> "You just started thinking of the shit more like a business. It's like we had to sell this much, you know, what do they call it, quotas for each month. They wanted to make it a violation [punishable offense] if we wasn't into selling and shit. It was crazy man, that's when I got out, 'cause if I wanted to make money, shit I would have worked for some white boys downtown, you know? So, that's when I started my plumbing business."

For Carl, the pressures to earn revenue compromised the use of the gang for social and political support. For other such senior members,

factors promoting their withdrawal could also include the inability to tolerate the risks of drug trading and the need to find more reliable income for their households. Perhaps most common was a frustration over the disjuncture between the promises of corporate gang membership and the lack of tangible benefits. As Larry, a thirty-three year old BK set leader said in 1991, comtemplating his decision to leave the gang and find mainstream employment:

> "We all just tired of [dealing dope]. It's like you just don't know if you gonna be shot tomorrow. You could be in jail, shit they could kill your family. Who wants that shit? My family don't need it. When you're young, you just think about all the money you're going to make. Man, I see it in their eyes, these younger cats think they're going to be rich. But, it ain't like that. Only a few people making it like that, you dig? I got to get out, but the money helps, man, helps my family survive. It's about survival around here."

As both Carl and Larry observe, the sense of disillusionment that occurs routinely for gang members as they age is inflected in particular ways for those who age in the *corporate* gang and, in particular, for who assume leadership roles. Much of their pessimism may be traced to the familial versus business ideals that tug at members. That is, on the one hand, they are told by their regional leaders to evaluate a member's progress by his ability to earn money. In practice, this means that they should promote *intra*-set competition among their members and create incentives for individuals to tolerate the risks of the drug trade and outperform one another as salespersons. On the other hand, they are also told by their superiors to foster "unity" and inculcate loyalty among their membership – which is related to the first dictate since the gang must act in a relatively unified manner to reproduce a drug-selling venture at the community level. While the two ideals are not necessarily contradictory, in the corporate gang where members have joined both for peer affirmation and for part-time employment, the emphasis on sales revenue can result in fewer resources being given to social activities and personal affirmation. Thus, members who do not gravitate toward entrepreneurial activities, and who desire social support, may find little else in the gang to sustain their involvement. In this manner, BK set leaders must continually recruit individuals to ensure a steady supply of street-based sellers. If leaders cannot attract new members, they will be summarily replaced. Devon, a member of the Central Leadership, spoke to the importance of recruitment in the context of the gang's quasi-charitable practice of organizing recreational tournaments for neighborhood children:

> "Look man, you see it happening in business everyday. Why you think we any different? If you can't bring in [the money], you ain't no good to us.... You see, you can't be doing all the other things – basketball tournaments, helping out families and shit – if you can't sell your shit. Money man, if you ain't bringing the money, how are you good for what we trying to accomplish? Who do you think is giving this [basketball tournament for children]? Costs money, nigger, for all this.... If you can't show us you can lead an organization, you can't bring in people. You gonna have to leave, we'll find someone who can get niggers to join us, and there's a lot of niggers out there."

In this manner, the capabilities of the set leader are evaluated both by his willingness to realize the collectivist ideologies of the gang – e.g., ensuring that rank-and-file memorize and follow by-laws – as well as by his ability to increase the set's monthly drug revenue.

"Are we supposed to be a family or a business?" asked Cleaver, a youthful twenty-five year old leader of a small set on the city's West Side, during a meeting of set leaders with their regional leader. "I can't figure out what these niggers [who are leading us] are asking. Shit, sometimes they be all about creating unity, but they come by each month for their two grand and if I don't pay, my ass gets kicked." Cleaver resembles many leaders, young and old, for whom the two competing bases of solidarity – family versus business – both can serve as principles to mobilize and coordinate the action of the general membership, despite the ostensible move by the Kings Nation overall into a corporatist framework.

The 109th Street bookkeepers

Some Black Kings leaders have chosen to monitor closely their set's financial activities as a response to the perceived ambiguity in the criteria used to evaluate their progress. In fact, there are several Black Kings sets that are recognized as *overly* "business-like." These are sets that, to varying degrees of diligence, maintain tallies of individual sales performance, incidents of fighting, and numbers of arrest, injury, and death to members.[28] Among the city's BK membership, there is widespread acknowledgment that leaders who institute such self-surveillance are healthy competitors but, in accordance with the family-versus-business tension, many are quick to attribute less lauded motives. The most critical members argue that the leaders who maintain records are self-serving, concerned with showing off their acumen to higher-ranking leaders in hopes of securing a promotion and ignoring "familial"

responsibilities such as providing aid to other sets. Some members disparage the bookkeepers by accusing them of earning more money than they record; the "books," then, allow them to deny their extra income to regional leaders, thereby limiting the amount of street tax ("tribute") that they must pay to the Central Leadership. Perhaps the most direct explanation for bookkeeping comes from Billy Wilson, the leader of the 109th Street Black Kings, who experimented with several methods of tracking, including using computer financial software:

> "A few of us that went to college. We ain't dumb niggers so, you know, we just use what we know. We gotta be careful 'cause [our superiors] always want to get more [money] from us. Shit, they find all sorts of excuses to whup our ass. Or, shit, they even kick us out, put someone else in 'cause we ain't making enough money. So, you know, I got it all down and they can see it, you know, they can't say I ain't been making nothing, 'cause it's all down on paper, man, right here."

Maintaining such records is dangerous, particularly if law enforcement discovered the "books," but many BK leaders argued that they would prefer jail to the possibility of indiscriminate and possibly violent punishment by their superiors for failure to manage a successful drug trade.

The records BK set leader Billy Wilson maintained are summarized in our recent *Quarterly Journal of Economics* article. Billy's treasurer tallied the gang's activities on notebook paper, documenting the earnings of different members, the overall revenue of the group, and other attributes of their enterprise. The bookkeeping is not a perfect record of their commercial activities – for example, several months in the four-year period are absent and some of the gang's economic activities – e.g., the sales of marijuana – are not recorded. Nevertheless, the existence of the data set reveals the extent to which a business attitude has infused some Chicago gangs.[29]

As Billy Wilson organized the financial activities of his set, he constructed a general dichotomy between costs (e.g., extortion, wages to individual members, salaries of officers) and revenue streams (e.g., drug sales, street taxes of underground entrepreneurs). He also made finer distinctions within each, such as payments to higher-ranking gang leaders versus payments to families of deceased gang members. Costs may be divided into wage and non-wage expenses. The purchase of crack is the single geratest non-wage expense, the second being the monthly "tribute" paid to the Central Leadership (roughly 15 percent

of the gang's total revenue). The set also pays money to the families of members who are killed (approximately $5,000). Other significant expenses include the payment to subcontractors ("warriors") who assist the gang during "wars." They are typically ex-gang members with tenuous labor force participation and reputations for bravery and skill in the use of firearms.

In Billy Wilson's set, members' wages are not a direct function of individual performance, as in a commission or piece-rate scheme. All foot soldiers receive the same wage per month and officers' wages vary by position. Interestingly, unlike many gangs, in this set the rank-and-file who sit one step below the foot soldiers pay dues into the gang – not the foot soldiers who are actively earning money from drug sales. This is exceptional but by no means unique: many leaders ask their youngest members to pay dues in order to develop a sense of belonging and, conversely, to cultivate the expectation that the gang is indebted to them and must meet their own personal needs (which for rank-and-file would be identity and peer support).

The findings regarding wage structure suggest several interesting parallels to the mainstream corporate firm. Our finding affirms available research suggesting that gang members do not earn very high salaries[30] by revealing the skewed wage distribution of street-level dealers: "foot soldiers" earn menial wages compared to the few who have managed to attain leadership positions (officers and the leader). The typical foot-soldier earns less than $2,000 per year in "on-the-books" income, while selling twenty hours per week, and even after taking into account supplemental narcotics sales, his hourly wage remains less than $6.00. The officers of the gang work 30 hours per week on the average and, unlike the foot soldiers, they usually do not hold another job in the mainstream economy. Their wage is estimated at $7.70 per hour. This is slightly higher than foot soldiers but far short of the leader's income, who received (on average) $63,000 annually during our period of study.

The highly skewed distribution mimics to a great degree the disparity in the mainstream corporate sector.[31] For foot soldiers, the benefits of street versus service-sector work – the labor market option available for most ghetto youth – include work with one's peers and self-determination vis-à-vis setting one's hours of work and leisure. There is some peer group censure regarding "fast food jobs" and other service-sector employment, but many foot soldiers *do* work in service-sector employment and weigh the relative benefits of each as they age through

the gang.[32] In our observations, any particular individual's exit from the gang into the mainstream is dependent not only on available opportunity but also on the willingness to enter what some call "the office world" and the consequences for identity, self-determination and peer status that follow.[33]

Outlaw capitalism reconsidered

The essay has examined the rise of a corporatist ethos among several large Chicago street gang families, one in which the orientation of the gang toward commercial activity is defined by proto-business principles. These included a vertical-hierarchical administration, the infusion of rational management procedures (although not to the exclusion of charismatic authority), and rules tied to office as opposed to person. It would be naive to equate the illicit entrepreneurialism of marginal urban youth with that of state-sanctioned commerce. The gang, after-all, is a socially illegitimate actor that must enforce its own contracts and that cannot enter formal circuits of capital and property. In writing the historical development of the Black Kings gang, our point has not been to suggest that categories applied to the mainstream firm should now be transposed uncritically onto the gang. That modern street gang factions have adopted a corporate guise is significant from our perspective because of the chronology of its occurrence and the ways in which the new orientation shaped the experience of gang involvement for members, for the surrounding community, and for the society at large. Our aim has been to steer the study of the urban poor away from a "ghetto-specific" focus on internal properties of inner-cities, that presumably generate surface phenomenal forms, to a study of the social relations among the poor and larger social-institutional spaces. Specifically, we have written the contours of change and continuity in Chicago's gangland as a set of movements rooted in the transformation of American society *en toto*, not just the lives of gang members or their communities of residence.

Using the movement of the American ghetto as a vehicle to document larger societal movements is not an entirely accepted scholarly practice. Whereas some scholars have also documented the ties of inner-city spaces and the wider world, such as the effects of hyper-consumerism, the retrenchment of the welfare state, and the growth of a disenfranchised "underclass" populace, most do so at the level of society and culture writ large. Few have monitored this relationship with an eye

toward local social organization. In fact, since the postwar era, one may say that representations of the urban poor have privileged the differences and cultural peculiarities of this populace over similarities and relations.[34] The struggle to realize dominant ideologies – indeed, politics and consciousness in general – have been given far less priority and the hegemonic understanding of social action has turned into a social physics in which the poor "adapt" in mechanistic fashion to structural constraints. Following this analytic path, everyday life can easily become subsumed under the tropes of "social disorganization" and "dysfunctionality," both of which emphasize the inability of the ghetto poor to act normatively, rather than the struggle to live according to the ideals of the wider world and the ways in which identity and action reflect and inflect these labors.[35]

Framing the gang as a diverse, internally unstable group that must continually reach consensus in order to act in a collective manner is a first step toward a "relational" perspective that approaches human subjectivity by "attend[ing] to the historical processes, that through discourse, produce ... experience."[36] A tendency in street gang studies, and research into the urban poor in general,[37] has been to eclipse variation of attitude and outlook. However, even a socially de-legitimated entity such as a gang cannot not be viewed as a monolithic entity. In any one gang, there may be competing and conflicting understandings and expectations of gang activity that circulate. Collective action, then, is a social achievement in which agents with differing conceptions of the gang's practices must either reach a working consensus or a proportion of the membership must concede to the vision of a recognized leadership body. Even within a successful drug-selling gang there will be divergent beliefs held by members; some will prefer social activities and participate in economic activities minimally and reluctantly, while others will try to detour the gang away from recreational pursuits and into new markets and new underground economies. The pull of different ideologies may also be located within the same person so that the system of predispositions that orient action – "habitus" in Bourdieu's terminology – may reflect varying and possibly discordant cultural structures.[38] Thus, not only should gang commerce be viewed as a collective achievement, but each individual's involvement is provisional, subject to change as she or he ages. The result, as March and Olson write in their critique of rational-choice models of collective action, is a "garbage can" mode of leadership and decision making in which preferences are not always well articulated beforehand, objectives collide, and solutions spontaneously emerge.

If the gang's commercial activities must be viewed as social achievement, at once contingent and requiring a minimal degree of consensus, the question remains as to the ideals that shape the gang's cohesion (or inhibit it) and the manner by which these ideals arise. This essay has argued that the only historical period in which the gang acted as a collective mercantilist was in the 1980s; moreover, it did so under corporate principles. Both of these developments were inextricably linked to broader social transformations that included a number of structural and ideological movements commonly associated with the Reagan era, but which had their seeds in the immediate post-Civil Rights period. It is hardly ironic that the gang's new proto-business guise coalesced during the era of Reaganomics, when the fetters of corporate advancement were being removed for legitimate corporations, whether this manifested as overhauling governmental regulation or an ideological embrace of self-interested gain.

Certainly, this essay affirms the argument of scholars who have argued that the move of large urban street gangs into underground economies is shaped by the lack of opportunities in other economic spheres. However, by itself, this view is insufficient to explain the timing of the gang's turn to entrepreneurial activity (in the 1980s), the reasons for its surface appearance as corporate – as opposed to an oligopoly, for example – and the dominance of the gang in the crack trade in some cities, not others. Explaining the occurrence requires an account that integrates movements such as internal leadership struggles and the role of various "collectivist ideologies" in determining the gang's ability to organize social activity, as well as endogenous changes already mentioned.

The bridge from the "peripheral" street gang to the "core" of modern America must also be historical, rooted in the nexus of two historical dynamics, that of the local system and the wider world. This essay has examined the "dialectic of articulation" at two levels, that of the members' consciousness of their activities and the organization's attempt to cultivate cohesion. On the one hand, gang members may be alienated from several mainstream institutions, but they share with other citizens a continuous engagement with dominant representations of economic behavior. Their understanding of *homo economicus* is formed through exposure to popular discourse and media advertisements, through their experiences working in central city offices and, through participation in conspicuous consumption practices. Many leaders also see the process of "giving back to the community" as part of the corporatist ethos and

so they approach churches, residents, businesses, and social-service agencies with proposals for cooperative or philanthropic ventures. It is this set of predispositions that motivates their decision to participate – whether simultaneously or alternatively – in mainstream and illicit markets and to tolerate the risks and incentives of the street trade. Similarly, the gang's collective embrace of entrepreneurial activity in the eighties – which was largely an individual pursuit beforehand – was born out of internal and endogenous shifts. The traditional collectivist principles through which the gang could act as a unified entity – namely "family" and "brotherhood" – became less meaningful as the aspirations of young adults turned sharply to that of replicating the yuppie model of social mobility. But this transition was itself rooted in the disenfranchisement of its young adult members from the labor market as well as the group's institutionalization in American jails and prisons – the latter being a direct product of the state's simultaneous retrenchment of social services for at-risk youth and its accelerated use of law-and-order techniques.

If such interplay between the gang and the wider world may be demonstrated, it is not altogether fanciful to suggest the ghetto may be a perspective from which to view the changes in the larger society. As anthropologist Richard Fox wrote, once scholars locate heterogeneity within the ghetto, they rest content to form an anthropology of the excluded population "rather than use it as an insight into the nature of industrial cities in their societies" (1977: 143). Following Fox's observation, this study of the street gang should not only direct our attention to the diversity, contingency, and complexity of social life within the ghetto, but it should be as firm a foundation as any other on which to write an anthropology of America.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. Steven D. Levitt and Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, "The Financial Activities of an Urban Street Gang," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (2000).
2. Martin Sanchez Jankowski, *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
3. The earliest, though un-systematic use of the corporate metaphor is Carl S. Taylor, *Dangerous Society* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1990).
4. William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner-City, the Underclass and Public Policy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).
5. See Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream* (London: Verso, 1983).
6. John Hagedorn, *People and Folks: Gangs, Crime, and the Underclass in a Rustbelt City* (Chicago: Lake View Press, 1988) and Joan W. Moore, *Homeboys* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978).
7. Irving A. Spergel, *The Youth Gang Problem: A Community Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Malcolm Klein, *The American Street Gang: Its Nature, Prevalence and Control* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
8. Page 146 in John L. Comaroff, "Dialectical Systems, History and Anthropology: Units of Study and Questions of Theory," *Journal of Southern African Tribes* (1982): 145–172.
9. Names and locating information (streets, city) have been changed to ensure anonymity in accordance with human subjects requirements that regulate this research project.
10. Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).
11. Malcolm Klein writes that the corporate gang predates crack (*American Street Gang*, 134).
12. Hagedorn, *People and Folks*; Jankowski, *Islands in the Street*; Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Crack-Dealing in El Barrio* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Felix Padilla, *The Gang as an American Enterprise* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univerity Press, 1992). Jeffrey Fagan, "Gangs, Drugs, and Neighborhood Change," 39–74, in *Gangs in America*, C. Ronald Huff, editor (Newbury Park: Sage, 2nd edition, 1996).
13. "Changes in the structure of the economy may have been largely responsible for the entry of gang members, as individuals and cliques, into drug trafficking. Changing labor market conditions in the 1960s and 1970s, especially the decrease of low-skilled manufacturing jobs, made it difficult for older gang youth to find legitimate employment and leave the teenage gang. Economic survival and the illegal drug economy created pressures to develop the youth gang as an economic base of opportunities as well as social status" (Spergel, *Youth Gang Problem*, 45).
14. Padilla, *The Gang as an American Enterprise*.
15. Jerome G. Miller, *Search and Destroy: African-American Males in the Criminal Justice System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), see 76–78.
16. See Padilla, *The Gang*, for a discussion of shifting law enforcement strategies in Illinois and Davis (*Prisoners of the American Dream*) for an engaging discussion of the growing "social conservatism" among the American electorate in the 1980s.
17. Clarence Lusane, *Pipe Dreams: Racism and the War on Drugs* (Boston: South End Press, 1991).
18. Miller, *Search and Destroy.* Katherine Federle and Meda Chesney-Lind, "Special Issues in Juvenile Justice: Gender, Race and Ethnicity," in *Juvenile Justice and*

Public Policy: Toward a National Agenda, Ira Schwartz, ed. (New York: Lexington, 1992).

19. James Jacobs, *Stateville* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978).

20. Michael J. Olivero, *Honor, Violence and Upward Mobility: A Case Study of Chicago Gangs During the 1970s and 1980s* (Edinburg: University of Texas, Pan American Press, 1991).

21. Support for the thesis that extended incarceration might have played a facilitating role in the gang's eventual ascension into the drug trade may be seen in the relationship that the BK central leadership body formed with security personnel within jails and prisons. As indicated, the instrumental ties between gang leaders and prison leaders probably centered around the latter's need for compliance and the prisoners' own aim to procure basic amenities, retain a semblance of personal dignity and autonomy, and thereby construct a relatively hospitable environment. For the BK leaders, an early use of the contacts with prison security agents was to transport goods and communicate messages between their cells and the wider world. News of family members, directives to gang members on the street, and small allotments of narcotics could all pass through a prison guard and reach an inmate; similarly, inmates could relay requests for goods or services to families via these correspondents. Not surprisingly, the gang leader exercised some sway over such circulation and the use of such liaison became a point of contention among rival gangs. "I could get you whatever," said Jason Johnson, "but, you had to be [a] BK.... It was the guards, you know, that we had to get on our side, because these niggers could get anything for you, I mean anything. So, it was like, you just fought to get them on your side, all the [gangs] were fighting over these cats." As BK members involvement in drug trafficking increased around 1980, the guards became both an avenue for the imprisoned BK leadership to transport illicit goods into prison and, eventually, to issue orders to the street-based members. "Let's say you needed to make sure you was getting your share [of the drug revenue]. You just paid this [prison guard] fifty bucks to tell a [neighborhood gang leader] to give your momma five hundred bucks each month.... See, lot of us, when we got out we had cash. We came out and we just controlled shit because we never let these shorties get away, you know, start doing things without us knowing." As this leader explains, the use of guards could also help them to regulate the underground activity and ensure that that imprisoned inmates (specifically, their families) could receive a share of the revenue being generated.

22. Jankowiski, *Islands in the Street*.

23. See Bourgois, *In Search of Respect*, for the social organization of drug trafficking in New York City.

24. They also had to ensure citywide leaders that younger members ("shorties") would graduate from high school before engaging in violent activity or drug sales. Although the secondary school rule remains in effect, as one elder leader, James, explains, it is rarely enforced: "[Central Leadership] don't really make folks do all that political stuff no more. When I was starting up, we was hanging with each other. You know, I ain't saying we was angels or nothing, but if you was not in school, you got in trouble. People don't know this, but we was buying each other food, you know sharing and helping each other. We sold drugs, but a lot of us was political so we was really careful you know, to make sure the folks who was coming after us didn't forget about that, you know 'cause a lot today just see the money, it's only money that counts."

25. Disciplining occurs through embodied practices that include corporal punishment,

acclimating members to sales "shifts" and other temporal dissections of the work-day, and teaching proper uses of consumption to "signify" (group identity, gang membership, masculinity). The enforcer is also responsible for organizing the gang's defenses against rival sets, typically those that lay claim to adjacent spaces (some sets assign the latter set of duties to a "security officer").

26. Promotions in general may be the product of several factors including leadership ability, capacity to earn revenue, and the ability to follow the gang's codes and written by-laws. However, an individual may also win praise for bravado and courage, whether during a formal "war" or a spontaneous altercation on the streets. The corporate gang, then, operates somewhat like Albert Cohen's "subcultural" gang of the mid-twentieth century, wherein members must simultaneously display conformist behavior while signifying their rebellious temperament. We note, how-ever, that the dialectic of rebelliousness and conformity is different for foot soldiers than for the gang leader: the foot soldier is not assumed to be a disciplined body, i.e., a fully-molded member who understands the appropriate moments for displays of bravado; his exploits and outbursts will be tolerated much more so than those of the leader. The leader must demonstrate to his superiors a form of controlled rebelliousness: in battles, he must control his own emotions, while remaining a source of energy, spirit, and motivation for the fighters he commands; he must be willing to inflict physical punishment, sometimes through sustained violent beat-ings, but not be so intolerant that members eschew involvement altogether; his set will be judged by their fearlessness, their willingness to take over new territories and to fight rivals, but also by their capacity to sustain a peaceful, "low-profile" economic operation.

27. This is an interesting parallel to a contrast commonly given by non-gang affiliated residents whereby "gang wars" are differentiated from (contemporary) "drug wars"; the basis of the former could include attempts to overtake territory, petty jealousies, and recreational contests that "turned bad," whereas the latter conflicts center on petty accumulation disputes such as price undercutting.

28. That organized criminal entities maintain some record of their activity is not novel. Law enforcement routinely use the "books" of such entities in their indictments. Typically, however, such records reflect the investment portfolio of the leaders or relations of extortion with individuals and businesses. In recent federal trials in Chicago of one large African-American family, public reports indicated that prosecutors used information kept by the gangs to record their financial activities.

29. A fuller discussion of the records appears in Levitt and Venkatesh, "The financial activities of an urban street gang." Additional data are available from the authors.

30. Peter Reuter, Robert MacCoun, and Patrick Murphy, *Money from Crime: A Study of the Economics of Drug Dealing in Washington, DC* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1990). Scott H. Decker and Barrik Van Winkle, *Life in the Gang: Family, Friends and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Felix Padilla, *The Gang as an American Enterprise.*

31. Jennifer Reingold, "Executive Pay," *Business Week* (April 12, 1997): 58. George Baker, Michael Gibbs, and Bengt Holmstrom, "The Wage Policy of a Firm," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 109/4 (1994): 921–153.

32. Stated in terms of an ideal-typical trajectory, as foot soldiers assume greater personal and familial responsibilities, they grow attentive to opportunities for sustained income generation with minimal risk of injury, arrest, and death; if they perceive that street-level distribution in the gang will not afford a specific trajectory of social mobility that fulfills basic needs and provides continuous status enhance-

ment through in-group promotion, they will search more actively for mainstream employment and reduce their involvement in the gang.

33. Existing studies also suggest that drug trades expose individuals to greater levels of violence, increasing their chance of injury and death – an observation that is also supported by our ethnographic observation. In our sample, we recorded an annual death rate among gang members to be 4.2 percent, more than 100 times the national average for African-American males in this age group. For the gang set whose financial records we analyze, each member has a 25 percent chance of dying if he remains a member of the gang over a four-year period and if all members stayed the same during that time. On average, a drug seller could expect 0.59 wounds (virtually all from bullets) and 1.43 arrests per year.

34. The ethnographies that established this trend are Ulf Hannerz, *Soulside* (New York: Columbia University, 1969), and Lee Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls* (New York: Aldine Press, 1971).

35. Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "Three Pernicious Premises in the Study of the American Ghetto," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (July 1997): 341–353.

36. Joan W. Scott, "Experience," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, editors (London: Routledge, 1992), 26.

37. A noteworthy exception is Elijah Anderson, *Streetwise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

38. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 87.