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# Developing a Context for Change in Gang Affected Neighbourhoods. Exploring Synergies and Discords at Micro and Macro Levels

Dr. Paul Andell,

*University of Suffolk, Waterfront Building, Neptune Quay, Ipswich, IP4 1QJ, UK*

*[Tel:+441473338338](tel:+441473338338), [Email P.andell@UoS.ac.uk](mailto:P.andell@UoS.ac.uk)*

**Abstract:** *The paper suggests that there are similar values ie. economic success and a culture of consumerism embedded in both the legitimate and illegitimate economies. It discusses possible micro and macro interventions to reduce the strains that arise from the blocked opportunities in attaining shared values. At a local level the paper discusses an action research model to develop social capital; in the broader context the paper discusses the redistributive potential of the circular economy to facilitate interventions which reduce harms.*

**Keywords:** Gangs; drug-markets; relative-deprivation; strain; circular economy; social inclusion.

**JEL classification:** O17

## Introduction

In January 2015 an action plan to implement a “circular economy” was adopted by the European Commission to support transitions towards less wasteful growth across the European Union (EU). The EU hopes to shift governance, regulation and businesses towards a more sustainable direction by minimising waste and making better use of assets. In doing so it is hoped that companies will be given opportunities to grow “sustainably” to provide jobs to facilitate better social integration (EU Commission 2017).

All economic models shape and are shaped by social and cultural practices which can be inclusive or exclusive (Sayer 2004). Andell and Pitts (2009, 2013, 2017) have developed localised interactive models of action research which are inclusive of the experiences and knowledge of young people, professionals and other stakeholders in responding to gang related crime in affected neighbourhoods. One of the main aims of this work is the social inclusion of young people through the formal economy.

The paper will examine some of the synergies and discords apparent in building social capital from the bottom up in the micro social sphere; and developing sustainable economic policy from the top down in the macro social sphere. Investigating the differing

mechanisms which have impacts on the dimensions of each social reality has significant challenges due to the interwoven nature of the different levels and dimensions of social reality (Layder 1997). However, what we can do to initiate a process which identifies some of the key mechanisms that sustain the problems to be addressed and begin to counter some of these mechanisms in a cyclical fashion through action research.

The paper utilises a recent example of empirical action research regarding street gangs and draws on the efforts to curtail young people's involvement in the expansion of the illicit drugs trade (Andell and Pitts 2017). While the paper provides some localised ideas for sustainable solutions to counter human suffering in gang affected neighbourhoods it also seeks a broader explanation of the redistributive potential of the circular economic model and questions its utility for social justice in relatively deprived communities.

## **1. The Backdrop of Relative Deprivation**

According to the European Union (EU) funded GINI project (2010) widening inequalities exist in all EU member states. In countries with higher income inequality the poor tend to be less politically involved and so their interests are not well represented in democratic decision making. The New Economics Foundation (NEF) report that that wealthy elites tend to accumulate political influence as well as resources. They suggest that economic inequality in the UK,

*...is at dangerously high levels with the richest 1% of the population owning more wealth than the poorest 50% put together. Households in the bottom 10% of the population have on average a net income of £9,277, while the top 10% have net incomes over nine times that (£83,897). Most people who have power and resources also have a sense of entitlement to what (they think) they need to live a good life, and they can use their existing assets to make sure they get it – good schools and healthcare, decent homes, rewarding employment, a secure income. Beyond the comfortably well off, any such confidence is either very fragile, or absent altogether. Social justice cannot be achieved when that sense of security is so unevenly distributed (NEF 2017).*

Inequality and relative deprivation not only run counter to the aims of a circular economy but has pernicious effects on crime rates. Brown (2001) has examined the importance of relative deprivation and its relationship to crime. He points to early strain theories such as Merton's (1938) Anomie and Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) Opportunity Structure Thesis, which relates relative deprivation to crime through social strains. Later empirical research has explained the processes by which the strains of societal values are turned into feelings of strain in the individual (Broidy and Agnew 1997, Hoffman and Miller 1998). These later studies show involvement with delinquent peers is an important variable for explaining how experiences of general strain are turned into individual delinquency. Control theories were developed in opposition to strain theories, Brown maintains that these types of theories and their related empirical work would also benefit from paying attention to relative deprivation as a causal variable in the breakdown of control. Brown (op cit) further relates the centrality of a sense of relative deprivation to the left realist analysis of crime. It is argued by left realists that this sense is the result of unlimited aspirations and blocked opportunities which are embedded in late modern culture and capitalist political economy. This is summed up by Lea and Young (1993) as an "excess of expectations over

opportunities". Later more culturally focused work by Jock Young (2007) points us in the direction of social exclusion and the importance of a sense of being someone. Young observes:

*"... the acute relative deprivation forged out of exclusion from the mainstream is compounded with a daily threat to identity: a disrespect, a sense of being a loser, of being nothing, of humiliation."*

Winton (2014) citing Young's analysis of social exclusion and crime summates,

*"This, in turn, it is argued, leads to the formation of exaggerated identities of resistance, formed not through vertical oppositions (with the rich) but, rather, through the amplification of horizontal divisions (based on gender, ethnicity, territory, etc.)"*

Identities of resistance can be acutely demonstrated through membership of street gangs (Hagedorn 2007). He argues that one of the characteristics of late modern life is the proliferation of armed young men involved in the alternative or illicit economy. Hagedorn (op cit) points to the failures of the legitimate economy as a causal force which predicates the formation and sustainability of street gangs.

The development of street gangs and their involvement in the drugs business are reported as having pernicious and harmful consequences for vulnerable communities (Andell and Pitts 2017) and have a negative impact on the potential economic development and regeneration of the neighbourhoods in which they are located (Lupton et al 2013).

Hagedorn (2008) suggests that gangs are becoming a permanent fixture in an increasingly urbanised world. He argues that the existence of armed gangs of young men are becoming the norm rather than the exception and he makes three main points diverging from traditional criminology: gangs are becoming a permanent presence in socially excluded poor neighbourhoods; gangs are a result of globalised economies and gangs can be found in the spaces where the system of distribution of resources has failed. If this is so we may need to take a fresh approach in order to rethink our policies and interventions to deal with what Arup (2016) calls "negative externalities".

## **2. Policy Pendulums of Denial and Repression**

Some have argued that urban street gangs are not a new phenomenon (Pearson 1985, Davies 2008, Hallsworth 2013), others report rapid global and local developments that give rise to worrying new changes in group youth offending, (Pitts 2008, Hagedorn 2008, Harding 2014, Andell 2015, Andell and Pitts 2017).

It is acknowledged that there are many adolescent groups across Europe engaged in relatively harmless misbehaviour and the term 'gang' is sometimes over-used in popular discourse to describe them. In this paper a definition of street gangs is used which was devised in the UK for the policy paper *Dying to Belong* (Centre for Social Justice, 2009):

'A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who (1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, (2) engage in a range of criminal activity and violence, (3) identify with or lay claim over territory, (4) have some form of identifying structural feature, and (5) are in conflict with other, similar, gangs'.

Different knowledge bases or philosophical positions are used in defining approaches to urban street gangs. These can be demarcated in terms of idealism, naive realism and critical realism (Matthews 2013, Andell 2015). Some criminological scholars have questioned the existence of gangs in the UK (Hallsworth and Young 2008). Arguably their analysis utilises a constructivist epistemology which does not separate the observed reality of gangs from ideas about them. This type of analysis may lead to a non interventionist approaches which do little to alleviate the strains in relatively deprived neighbourhoods.

It is suggested that the earlier ideas outlined above which led to policies of gang denial in the UK (Youth Justice Board, Fitzgerald et al 2005) gave way to gang intervention work which originate from the U.S. (Andell 2015). These approaches are heavily informed by empirical research which could be termed naive realist (Matthews 2013). As the observed behaviours fail to discern the causal powers which sit below the observable experience of gangs. Policy transfer of ideas about gangs from the US have sometimes led to short term overly repressive interventions rather than addressing root causes of gang formation and membership. For example interventions such as “gang call-ins” (Kennedy 2008) have resulted in accusations of racial profiling and coercion (Centre for Crime and Justice 2015). A significant problem appears to be over generalisation of what constitutes a gang and who constitutes a gang member.

Matrices and risk tools are often utilised in identifying gang membership and in the deployment of gang interventions. These assessment aids are used to numerically order risk factors. Often this is done remotely from the neighbourhoods in which the behaviours and attributes occur. Subsequently the meanings which risk attributes carry are often misinterpreted or absented and therefore explanatory power is lost (Pitts 2001, Matthews 2013, Andell and Pitts 2017). This can result in net widening and mistargeted enforcement (CCCJ 2015) which sometimes leads to the loss of human potential through the involvement of young people in the criminal justice system. It can be argued that this approach does little to build effective solutions and can exacerbate problems in neighbourhoods (Edmonds et al 1996, Andell and Pitts 2017). Therefore a more meaningful approach needs to be developed in capturing data, assessing problems and devising interventions.

A critical realist approach to gangs assumes that unobservable structures (patterns of relations and roles) cause observable events (gang behaviour). This suggests a reality of gangs independent of theories about them. In this paradigm our theories about the world are historically, socially and culturally situated and always partial. Not only do gangs change in space and time but also so do our representations of them. At this moment in time arguably our best ideas about gangs involve social structures which have push and pull factors acting in conjunction with culturally enmeshed individual limited choices. The pushes of social exclusionary factors such as institutional racism and unemployment act in consort with pull factors of excessive consumerism. These strains may be conducive for some to choose to adopt the “gangsta lifestyle” of hyper masculinity for recognition and respect. Our ideas about gangs are partial and fallible and this demands a methodological pluralism which involves local stakeholders when researching them. Andell and Pitts

(2009, 2013, 2017) propose cyclical interventions through an action research methodology which provides for real-time assessment and evaluation of problems and interventions.

### **Developing New Approaches**

It can be argued that linear intervention models such as simple enforcement as a response to crime can contribute to human wastage as often young people become embroiled in cycles of gang life and prison (Wacquant 2008). In models of a circular economy waste is reduced in the “technical cycle”, whereby human intervention is used to recover and recreate order, by utilising three main principles; to preserve and enhance natural capital, to optimise resource yields and to foster system effectiveness (Webster 2017). We suggest a “social cycle” be added to the economic model with a central principle to build social capital to reduce human wastage. Social capital relates to social cohesion, networks and connectiveness. Bordieu refers to social capital as,

*the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992)*

He provides a model to understand the human capacity for coping under immense social change. He observed the interrelation between social structures and habitus and analyzed how different dispositions respond to changing demands. We have touched on the negative impacts of social capital in the formation urban street gangs above, however, Ideas of social capital can also be utilised to positively assist young people reach their potential.

Social capital can be seen as a community resource that gives access to opportunities, in learning and employment which can lead to social improvement. Social capital can be embedded through group processes of social pedagogy which give a critical awareness of the systems and institutions that promote or hinder progress (Ginwright et al. 2005).

Boek (2011) argues

*Policy and practice need to build on the situated activity of young people and not erode it. Enhancing young people’s existing social capital is achieved by building on their existing resourcefulness, strengthening their existing support networks, opening up new horizons and creating access to new resources within a strength perspective. Institutions need to enhance resiliency and positive risk taking, nurture trusting relationships with significant others and enhance young people’s outlook on life.*

In order to assist young people fulfil their potential with the assistance of institutions both micro and macro changes need to take place. The social capital of community networks needs to be enhanced and empowered and the redistributive potential of economic models needs to be enacted.

### **3. Methodology in the Micro**

The in responding to gang crime it can be argued that single intervention models such as enforcement can be an ineffective and a wasteful use of valuable resources. Moreover isolated enforcement can contribute to human wastage as often young people become embroiled in cycles of gang life and prison (Wacquant 2008). In models of a circular

economy waste is reduced (Webster 2017). In a similar manner we suggest a multi-modal approach which includes “social intervention cycles”. Social interventions include building positive social capital to enhance opportunities for gang involved young people in the legitimate economy to reduce human wastage. This replaces the social capital gained from gangs (Deuchar 2009) and relates to social cohesion, networks and connectiveness.

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Boek (op cit) further argues,

*Policy and practice need to build on the situated activity of young people and not erode it. Enhancing young people’s existing social capital is achieved by building on their existing resourcefulness, strengthening their existing support networks, opening up new horizons and creating access to new resources within a strength perspective. Institutions need to enhance resiliency and positive risk taking, nurture trusting relationships with significant others and enhance young people’s outlook on life.*

Bourdieu (1992) observed the interrelation between habitus and social structures and analyzed how different dispositions respond to changing demands. He provides a model to understand the human capacity for coping under immense social change. In order to assist young people fulfil their potential it may be imperative to influence both micro and macro spheres. In other words, at one level the social capital of community networks needs to be enhanced and empowered and at another the redistributive potential of the economy also needs to be enacted.

Sayer (2004) suggests that the economic cannot be understood in abstraction from the social and the cultural. He argues

*...markets and associated economic phenomena both depend on and influence moral/ethical sentiments, norms and behaviours and have ethical implications.*

This brief analysis of interventions in the micro appears to suggest the current approach to gangs’ research adopted by Andell and Pitts, which relies on building social capital, has some synergies with the ideas of social transformation in the circular economy. However exploration of the circular economy’s potential for institutional change through redistribution to reduce actual and perceived inequalities needs to take place before the approaches can be declared complimentary.

#### 4. Questions for the Macro

Arup (2016) in describing the circular economy argues that,

Minimising negative externalities is a core aim of the circular economy. In the built environment these include climate change, water, soil, noise and air pollution. They also include less tangible impacts on human and animal welfare, health, employment and social equality.

The focus of Andell and Pitts' (2017) work is the improvement of equality through the reduction of crime and social harms using social pedagogic practices. This could be classified as reduction of negative externalities. However a provocation would invite further analysis of the core aims of the circular economy in order to counter "human wastage" by building a more moral economy (Sayer 2010) which is socially just (Pettifor 2016).

Some have argued that sustainable growth in the circular economy masks and reproduces the exclusions that are intrinsic to economic systems in late modernity. It is argued that rather than reducing waste sustainable growth encourages the increased consumption of "ethically produced" goods whose waste has deleterious effects on the environment. In this model the only alternative is zero growth fought for through the re-politicisation of the debate (Valenzuela and John 2017).

A less idealist and more social democratic alternative for sustainable development have been suggested by Raworth (2017) in her model of the "doughnut economy". She reworks the purpose of economics and discards 20th Century fixations with growth of GDP. Raworth sets out an environmental ceiling of "nine planetary boundaries", which she argues to exceed, would result in unacceptable environmental degradation and potential tipping points for Earth systems. She sets out inner social and outer ecological boundaries in a doughnut shaped graphic representation that encompasses UN agreed sustainable development goals for human well-being. Rayworth (op cit) describes a new economic model to enable a life of dignity and opportunity for the world's population. The model includes critical environmental issues such as a stable climate, clean air, a protective ozone layer, thriving biodiversity, and healthy oceans; as well as concurrent issues of a social short fall of inequalities in income and wealth.

Similarly, Palumbo (2013) suggests the recent Europe 2020 Strategy is mainly focused on improved growth and success measured in terms of GDP. Palumbo (op cit) argues that it is important to develop strategies from beyond the GDP perspective, which gives consideration to the wider dimensions of quality of life. He mentions that growth should not be prioritised over education, health status, social relations, and civic participation. He argues that measurement of GDP,

*...does not measure sustainable development, quality of life, human and social capital and well-being. Nor does GDP differentiate between activities that have a negative or positive impact on society and the environment.*

Coppolla (2016) suggests that there is a direct relationship between rising debt, rising money supply and rising GDP and suggests that growth is only possible with further debt as our monetary system is debt based. He goes on to suggest,

*Increasing wealth requires that a large (and growing) part of the world's population is indebted. When one population reaches debt saturation point – they cannot or will not take on any more – those who want to create financial wealth move on to another, less indebted population. Rising debt for many, rising wealth for a few. Rising inequality. Globalisation reduced inequality between countries, but not within them. Within countries, inequality both of wealth and income is rising.*

Beyond aspirations for the use of new technology, design and a desire to reduce waste, little detail has been fleshed out on the moral or redistributive aspects of the circular economy and how we might reduce inequalities. These fundamental questions need further exploration in order to avoid local and international strains which have significant costs to human existence.

## **5. Feelings of Social Strain**

If intra-national inequality increases then so do international social strains. Commenting on the reasons for Brexit both sides of the political divide expressed disappointment with EU economic policy. Forbes the US business magazine asserted,

*Opponents of the EU argued that it is a dysfunctional economic entity. The EU failed to address the economic problems that had been developing since 2008... for example, 20% unemployment in southern Europe (July 5th 2016).*

On the opposite side of the political divide, UK Left wing economist Paul Mason had little better to say about EU economic policy, writing in the Guardian he suggested,

*The leftwing case for Brexit is strategic and clear. The EU is not – and cannot become – a democracy. Instead, it provides the most hospitable ecosystem in the developed world for rentier monopoly corporations, tax-dodging elites and organised crime (16 May 2016).*

Brexit shock and disappointment currently resonates with uncertainty around the country for those on both sides of the remain/leave divide. The economic perceptions outlined above are grounded in social relations and bounded in culture. Many explanations are still being pondered over and many positions have shifted (including those of Government Ministers). The mix of the real, the actual and the experienced swirl together in an apparently unfathomable situation. Was that vote at that particular time due to perceived unfair treatment in the public housing sector or real unfair housing costs in the private sector? Was it the lies and false promises of increased funding for the NHS or experience of bed shortages due to austerity cuts? Was it the lived experiences of food banks debt and joblessness or the perceived fecklessness of benefit claimants migrants, refugees and asylum seekers? All of these reasons are located by and subject to what appears to be a developing small island retro cultural context of stiff upper lip and go it alone mentality. More generally this has been signified by ubiquitous Dads Army type slogans of “Keep Calm and Carry On”. The embeddedness of economic policy within social experiences and cultural practices which prompted the leave vote now threatens future international co-operation in Europe. In developing the circular economy across the EU it should be borne in mind that policies which engender doubts and experiences which can be exploited in narrow nationalistic terms need replacing with hopeful new ideas for human well-being and policy road maps for social inclusive progress.



## Conclusions

It appears that both macro and micro economies are intrinsically linked and mirror each other in consequences of strain. What may reduce the growing pains is research and policy with clear standpoints that reaches beyond the cycles of unlimited aspiration and blocked opportunity. Policy which is founded on the belief that understanding of the mechanisms which produce material and cultural domination could lead to a realistic program for collective actions in both the micro and macro spheres. Therefore, there is a need to further discuss the causal social and political mechanisms that result in widening inequality and to engage in public discourse. In the micro, the application of theory led approaches which enhance social pedagogy can empower local communities to address anti-social behaviours which can stifle economic and social change. However in the macro, questions remain regarding the potential of the circular economy to curb excesses of wealth creation for the few that results in debt for the many.

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