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TITLE

The Gangs of Lyari: precarity and possibility amidst an urban gang war in Karachi, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

The social sciences have long studied the social form of ‘the gang’ (Thrasher 1927; Rodgers 2017). ‘Gang’ epistemology converges on a few key features. It links the social form to urban contexts of socioeconomic marginality. Furthermore, the gang is linked to youthful machismo, the “subjective” effervescent ooze of systemic violence, alienation from the social ‘normal’, and participation in informal, and illicit economies.

In the working-class neighborhood of Lyari, Pakistan, the ‘gang’ satisfies most of these normative criteria defining the category gang. In the recent past, more incidents of urban violence resulting in fatalities were attributed to Lyari's gangs than were to the Taliban insurgency. This facet of the gangs in Lyari is much publicized by state and media.

However, ethnographic data suggests that the average gangster’s quotidian life confounds expectations. Gangs appear to have ‘infiltrated’ local government and are fighting the city’s mayor tooth and nail to get better roads, healthcare, education and water for Lyari. Gangsters are the loudest voice for girl’s education; some moonlight as polio vaccinators. Others are patrons of the arts and sports. How does one reconcile the ‘violent monster’ of discourse, the marginalized youth of sociological/criminological texts, and the gun-toting ‘gangster’ by night who drives ambulances by day?

Drawing on ethnographic research in Lyari, this paper argues that contemporary urbanity produces social forms that mimic classical categories, but perform widely differing and context-dependent social functions. They force us to re-evaluate the efficacy of analytical frameworks that privilege causality/category over social process/relations.

Most significantly, in a world where the urban precariat of the postcolony is doomed to embody the dialectic of surplus humanity and infrastructural labor; the gang allows one to reconsider frameworks that cannot accommodate the perils and possibilities of emergent social formations that embody the contradictory nature of contemporary urban life.