



Creating Insecurity Through Youth Street Groups and Applying Security for Control and Governance. A Case Study of Barcelona Latin Kings

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Abstract

This paper is based on an ethnographic study of the arrests and the subsequent trial and sentencing of a group of Latin Kings and Queens from Barcelona between 2015 and 2020. We analyze the actions carried out by the police, judicial institutions and media to reestablish the “hard handed” discourse in relation to these youth street groups in a time of crisis and precariousness. The concept of a “space of youth street groups” is used to construct a tool for mapping the agents who interact with these groups and the position they occupy in the social space. The interactions between these agents in Barcelona configure a new form of security governance through the creation of subjective insecurity and the promotion of punitive policies against youth street groups.

Introduction

The “youth street groups”¹ in recent Spanish history have become a strange subject that position themselves or are positioned in different places within the social space (Bourdieu, 1985). Thus, in the last fifteen years these groups have been labeled in the academic literature as sectarian groups (Botello and Moya, 2005), criminal organizations (Kazyrytski, 2017), forms of psychological compensation (Aparicio and Tornos, 2009), public enemies (Queirolo Palmas, 2017), valid agents for mediation and conflict resolution (Feixa et al., 2019) and cultural associations (Feixa et al., 2006, 2011). Different institutions at different

¹ We intentionally avoid speaking about “gangs” because of the implicit stigmatization that the concept itself has had in the academic and social world due to the linkage of the term with violence and delinquency. Following Brotherton and Barrios (2004) who speak of “street organizations”, and emphasizing the youth component, we use the term “youth street groups” to move away from this stigmatization (Feixa et al., 2019). We considered the definition of “troublesome youth groups” (Decker and Weerman, 2005) and removed the intrinsic criminal component.

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times have changed the way they intervene with these groups, oscillating between the primacy of “zero tolerance” and the possibility of mediation, depending on the political situation (Feixa, 2015; Queirolo Palmas, 2014). Although the approaches have differed, they generally have in common that their goal is to eliminate, reduce or remedy the phenomenon of ‘gangs’ (Aparicio and Tornos, 2009). These approaches have also led to a change of roles in the agents who interact with or against the groups. The police, social workers and the legal system, among others, have all adopted different roles and protagonisms depending on the specific moment and the general approach to the phenomenon (Feixa and Andrade, 2020).

Outside the political sphere, the media have chosen either to pay these groups exaggerated attention or overlook them completely, to stigmatize them or, to a lesser extent, highlight the ‘positive’ social and community functions that they have (Thompson et al., 2000). Alarming news about the violent nature of these groups, large raids of their meetings, collective trials, institutional insertion processes and mediation projects with young people have produced specific images of these groups for society (Feixa et al., 2006; Varona Gómez, 2011). All this directly conditions the perception that society has of them. This ultimately produces a specific impact on citizens, so that society also reacts to these groups and reinforces the position established in the social space (Feixa et al., 2019; Ballesté, 2018).

The context in which each of these visions and interventions unfolds is important for understanding the underlying interest in endowing these groups with a specific social position in relation to other types of discourses. It is not by chance that the appearance and disappearance of these groups from the public scene, the interest in some groups or in others at each juncture, and the rereading of their practices and discourses are conditioned not only by specific political changes but also by economic and socio-political issues of national or supranational dimensions.

Therefore, the present work has a triple objective: first, to understand the reasons for this different positioning of youth street groups within the social space of Barcelona (Spain). This will allow us to explore and decipher which political, institutional and social agents have intervened with or against these groups, and with what interests and under which perspectives. Second, to build and operationalize the theoretical and methodological tool of the ‘space of youth street groups’, a category that will allow us to understand what position each group occupies in each historical moment by understanding the agents that interact with them, the agents that create images about them and the way these agents relate. Third, to relate the image constructed around these groups to the actions taken in relation to them through the function that insecurity fulfils as a form of government and neoliberal control in the twenty-first century, aimed mainly at youth groups, particularly those of migrant origin.

Methodology and Contextual Framework

This research is part of the TRANSGANG project,² which is a multisite ethnography carried out in 12 cities in Southern Europe, North Africa and the Americas. Here, we present specific data from the fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2021 in the city

² [Transnational Gangs as Agents of Mediation: Experiences of conflict resolution in youth street organizations in Southern Europe, North Africa and the Americas (TRANSGANG). European Union: HORIZON-2020, European Research Council - Advanced Grant [H2020-ERC-AdG-742705]. PI: C. Feixa. 2018-2022. Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona.]

of Barcelona, including 12 interviews, 400 h of participant observation, 6 focus groups and 4 life stories, all with the young members of the groups and stakeholders (Feixa et al., 2020). The study is based on the understanding that youth street groups are spaces of socialization and are not exclusively defined by the possible criminal component of their activities (although these may be present). Therefore, the fieldwork and analysis of the general research are focused on understanding what social functions these groups fulfill. Some of the research questions are centered on understanding: (1) how these groups are defined and explained from within (by the members themselves) as well as by other external social agents such as the media, institutional politicians, the police, and the judicial apparatus, among others; and (2) how, depending on this definition, specific images of these groups are created (from 'public enemies' to recognized social agents), which also makes it possible to understand the forms of action taken toward them (from hard-handed to mediation policies) and which social and institutional agents carry out (Ballesté, 2022).

Here, we focus on a case study: the analysis of a macro-trial for a criminal organization that took place in December 2018 of 23 alleged members of the Latin Kings group arrested in a raid that took place in June 2015. The sentence was made public in January 2020. This article is based on observations in field diary format made during the trial, an interview with one of the defense lawyers for a member of the accused group, several interviews constituting the life story of a Latin Kings leader, the analysis of the local media, and the analysis of legal and police materials (accusation, police investigation and judicial sentence).

Although the study is of a local case, which took place in Barcelona, and of a specific group, the Latin Kings, the tools used can serve as a model that can be extrapolated to research the situation of youth street groups in other geographic contexts. The evolution of this group in the city of Barcelona has certain parallels with the evolution of the Latin Kings in New York, as explained by Brotherton and Barrios (2004), in relation to the criminalization of the group, as well as with the process of legalization of street gangs in Ecuador outlined in Brotherton's study (Brotherton and Gude, 2018).

Likewise, this specific case of Barcelona makes it possible to historically construct the evolution of the actions in relation to these groups. In the mid-2000s, the local government promoted a process of constituting these groups as youth associations (Feixa et al., 2006, 2011). A process that had high worldwide recognition as an alternative path toward inclusive policies on gangs focused on mediation with groups, culminating in the constitution of two youth associations based on street groups: the *Organización Cultural de Reyes y Reinas Latinos de Cataluña* (2006) and the *Asociación Cultural, Deportiva y Musical Ñetas* (2007).

This process of institutional mediation with street youth groups occurred through cooperation between different local and regional institutions. Thus, while these associations were formed through the intermediation between these youth groups, the Barcelona City Council and academia as a negotiator between the parties (Feixa, 2016), in parallel the police approach to the phenomenon also changed. Between 2004 and 2011, the Mossos d'Esquadra (Catalan police) implemented policies of prevention, mediation and dialogue with these youth groups to mitigate the problems of violence that had been occurring in the city and the region by creating the internal group: the Unit of New Organized and Violent Youth Groups (NGJOV). These policies included a dialogue between the police and group leaders to avoid fights or confrontations between different groups (for example, over territorial disputes or fights in leisure spaces), a reduction in the impact of police actions on specific crimes in order to avoid group macro-arrests (for example, by focusing the

investigation of drug trafficking crimes on the specific individuals involved), and also a commitment to a dialogue process between the police, group members and other social/political agents.

In short, this whole process led to the groups being recognized institutionally and socially through the formation of associations. They therefore became visible and had access to resources that promoted the social characteristics of the group (from the organization of sports championships and musical projects, to various training courses) (Feixa et al., 2011). Moreover, police intervention based on mediation represented a paradigm shift in dealing with these groups, moving from a ‘hard hand’ or ‘zero tolerance’ model of large police raids and mass trials, to dialogue with young leaders to prevent violence, and individualized prosecution of the crimes committed. The entire process was also known as the *Modelo Barcelona*, as we will detail in the following section.

However, around 2011 this policy was abandoned with the change of police focus and the implementation of ‘hard handed’ strategies by the same police division (which changed most of its police officers). This occurred in parallel with the arrival of the crisis and political changes in the city in 2011, which also had the effect of ending the associative process and recognition of the groups by the institutions.

Repressive policies to eliminate these groups have been applied repeatedly in different countries, such as El Salvador (Wolf, 2017), the USA (Brotherton, 2002) and the UK (Williams and Clarke, 2016). We can observe many similarities between the charges brought against group members under the criminal definition of criminal organization in the Spanish context and the Joint Enterprise policies promoted in the UK. This type of judicial and criminal policies, initially devised to combat mafias, allows the police and the judicial apparatus to charge group members jointly simply because they are members of a youth street group. Even if the criminal act was not carried out by all members, this policy allows all members to be charged based purely on their association with the group. This, in addition to seeking the ‘criminal’ elimination of the group, has led to the persecution and criminalization of racialized youths (Williams and Clarke, 2016). The judicial and police process studied here is integrated into these changes in action and allows us to observe some of the consequences of the return to the ‘hard handed’ policy.

Youth Street Groups and Insecurity as a Form of Government

The last two decades have been marked by a quasi-total economic, political and social hegemony of the neoliberal model (Brenner et al., 2010). In countries like Spain, this neoliberal implementation has meant a readjustment of the role and form of the State, which has increasingly lost its redistributive component to become the main guarantor, through austerity programs, of the market’s demands (Horvat et al., 2014). In addition, these reconfigurations, forged through successive economic crises (Fontana, 2011), have modified the value of work for a large part of the working classes (Castel, 2009). The result has been constant flexibility of working conditions (Harvey, 2004), an increase in precariousness in various aspects (Lorey, 2016) and an increase in poverty (Graeber, 2018). It is therefore a question of understanding neoliberalism not only as a political and economic framework, but also “as a way of organizing life that understands inequality and competition as the main drivers of the social” (Lazzarato 2008, in García and Ávila, 2015: 16).

The increase in inequalities has led to a polarization of poverty that is explicitly manifested in specific areas. In Barcelona, life expectancy between neighborhoods, such as

Ciutat Vella (78.1 years) and Les Corts (83 years), differs by 6 years (Bartoll et al., 2018). The distribution of average income by household in 2017 also shows the differences between neighborhoods in Barcelona and l'Hospitalet del Llobregat (second largest city in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona³): neighborhoods such as Ciutat Vella (Barcelona) (25,523 euros), Florida and Les Planes (L'Hospitalet) (25,055 euros) contrast with Sarrià and Sant Gervasi (Barcelona) (65,517 euros).⁴

Beyond the geographical issue, the crises, austerity and cuts in the Welfare State have intensified inequalities in intersectional terms according to gender, racialization, social class, and age, among others. These inequalities often lead to the creation of marginal areas segregated from the rest of the city, which concentrate poverty, high unemployment rates and a larger congregation of the racialized population. It is in these specific spaces where inequalities become more marked and where a large part of the interventions are centered, both in terms of security and control, as well as social policies. At the same time, the structural characteristics of these marginalized neighborhoods also allow us to understand why these groups appear in these areas (Barton et al. 2021), either due to the involvement of young residents of the neighborhood or the presence of the group in public spaces.

These structural changes produced by the economic crisis have also affected the social emergence of youth street groups, as well as the different types of interventions with them and the different images that have been produced (Williams, 2015). All this makes it possible to explain the move from the so-called *Modelo Barcelona*, a policy of prevention and mediation with youth groups in times of pre-crisis expansion (Feixa et al., 2006; Queirolo Palmas, 2014), to a new position focused on increasing repression and criminalization. Or, in other words, it has meant moving from the predominance of the 'left hand' (in charge of social functions) of the State as the main political relationship with these groups to the 'right hand' (in charge of implementing the new economic discipline through judicial and security measures) to apply punitive policies (Queirolo Palmas, 2017).⁵

Following Wacquant (2008), we can interpret that this growth in inequality and poverty is directly related to the empowerment of prisonfare as a form of government. This has led to a 'criminalization of poverty' through the application of punitive policies against insecurity (García and Ávila, 2015; Wacquant, 2009). At the same time, this primacy of prisonfare shows, in our case, a common field of intervention with youth street groups focused on disbanding 'gangs' and the criminalization of these.

This insecurity can be understood as a form of government and control that is defined through objective and subjective criteria (García and Ávila, 2015). It would no longer be a question of ending crime, but rather of seeking to separate it from the social conditions and structural inequality that are its cause (Wacquant, 2007, 2009). Crime (or the perception of it) becomes a situational issue, and therefore, must be dealt with so that it does not obstruct the normal functioning of the market (García and Ávila, 2015). It is this subjective dimension that is installed in the citizenry and serves as an excuse for expanding police

³ It is the region adjacent to the city of Barcelona; it is made up of 36 municipalities and a total of 3,239,337 inhabitants (42 per cent of the total population of Catalonia).

⁴ Atlas of income distribution by household. National Institute of Statistics, 2019.

⁵ In 2010, there was a reform of the Penal Code in Spain which expanded the criminal categories. Until then, the figure of the illicit association was mainly applied to terrorism, which required proving that the group's main purpose was to commit crimes and that it had a structure for that purpose. With the new code, new figures were added, such as the criminal group and criminal organization, which did not require so much evidentiary effort, being applied mainly and systematically to youth gangs, especially to the so-called Latino gangs.

intervention in insecurity and for the dissolution of community ties that had once acted on existing inequalities. For García and Dávila “peripheries, migrants, poor and young (...) have been produced as the scapegoat that allows channeling fears in the face of neoliberal biographical uncertainties and rehabilitating the social order of segregated inequality through the multiple and daily police interventions in the neighborhoods” (2015: 26–27). This relationship between the increase in precariousness and poverty, the dismantling of the Welfare State, and the enhancement of the image of insecurity, can be used as a basis for understanding the different ways of treating and representing youth street groups.

These processes have similarities with what Cohen (2011) explained in his theorization on how the press and the institutions of social control construct a ‘moral panic’ about certain social groups and on how the mechanisms for conferring the label of ‘popular demons’ work. Thus, among the elements that stand out in this political production we find: the creation of an oversized social threat, the justification of forceful hostile actions to put an end to these groups, the production of both this threat and the ways of acting by the media and the political and institutional elites, an exaggeration of the dangerous functions of these groups, and a volatility in this moral panic (which appears and disappears from the public scene) (Cohen, 2011; Canelles, 2008).

These theories also allow us to understand, on the one hand, the construction of the insecurity that we previously explained to be a form of government; and, on the other hand, the appearance and disappearance from the public scene of the moral panic linked to the groups studied here. In the specific case of Barcelona, this image of ‘demons to be eliminated’ flooded the discourse and institutional actions on gangs when they first appeared (early 2000s). This vision then somehow disappeared into the background in the implementation phase of the Modelo Barcelona (between 2006 and 2011). However, this vision has reappeared in recent years and is the current perspective. The case analyzed here, which is linked to the police, judicial and media action against a group of Latin Kings in Barcelona between 2015 and 2020, is revealed to be a part of a process of recovering the moral panic that had remained hidden.

Finally, in order to understand how these processes work, it is necessary to analyze which social agents relate to these groups and with which interests. The concept of a ‘space of youth street groups’ (Feixa et al., 2019) helps us to understand what position the groups occupy at each historical moment in terms of the interrelations they have with other agents or structures, such as the police, the law, the prison, the school, the academy, or the media, among others (Queirolo-Palmas, 2017). The position of the groups within the space is marked by the greater or lesser recognition that these groups have as valid social agents, which is related to the differentiated approaches to the phenomenon between right and left hand policies. All this has contributed to the emergence of insecurity as a form of contemporary control that focuses on a particular ‘social problem’ to enhance subjective insecurity. This insecurity is fed by the public appearance of these ‘public enemies’ both in the media and through the actions of the police and law, and which serves to solidify the application of punitive policies in times of increased social inequalities. Next, through the case study, we will observe how all these processes work in an interconnected way.

The “Criminal” Triad: Judicial, Media and Police Systems

The oral trial of a macro-case against several members of the Cultural Organization of Latin Kings of Catalonia (the legal faction of the group) began in the Provincial Court of Barcelona on December 3, 2018. This trial, which lasted a total of twelve days, sat twenty

men and three women in the defendant's bench under the accusations of belonging to a criminal organization (as a participant or promoter), crimes of threats and mistreatment (related to fights between members), obstruction of justice (for conflicts with the police), theft, attempted murder and crimes against public health for possession and sale of narcotic substances (both for possession of small amounts of these substances, as well as for an accusation of international drug trafficking between Latin America and Spain). The charges were distributed unequally among the defendants, but the common thread in all cases was that of belonging to the 'criminal organization' of the Latin Kings of Barcelona. This aspect greatly increased the sentence requested in terms of years.

Six of the defendants were in preventive detention until the date of the trial because narcotic substances were found on them during their arrest as well as other evidence of small-scale drug trafficking.⁶ The others, including the leader of the group, spent more than three months in preventive detention after their arrest and were later provisionally released when the judge considered that there was not a sufficient risk of flight. This process of detention and pre-trial imprisonment, even if it was only for a few months, had very negative consequences for the personal lives of the detainees. For the leader of the group, waiting for trial after having been provisionally imprisoned was experienced with "a lot of uncertainty and with the worry of going back in [to prison]." As he explains, "sometimes I started to think that I would prefer to stay inside all that time because it is time that counts [if he is finally found guilty] (...) If there is anything worse than going into prison, it's getting out and then going back in."⁷

The origin of the trial dates back to June 5, 2015, when the Catalan police carried out a macro-raid consisting of 13 house searches, which ended in the arrest of 28 people, of which 23 were brought to trial. This operation was carried out in eight areas of the Barcelona Metropolitan Area, particularly in traditionally working-class neighborhoods, such as those previously mentioned, in Barcelona and l'Hospitalet del Llobregat. To give an example, the raid destroyed the house that the leader was renting and, as a result, he lost his home and created a problem for the rest of the people living there.

The operation had a very high media coverage. The main newspapers and televisions in Spain made headlines about the dismantling of the gang and the arrest of the 'leader' of the organization: "The Mossos destroy the legal faction of the Latin Kings" (Oms, 2015, 10-06-2015), "29 Latin Kings legal faction (members) arrested on trafficking charges: Gang leader among those arrested for extortion, assault, drug trafficking" (El País 2015, 10-06-2015)⁸ and "The Mossos detain 28 people from the legal branch of the Latin Kings in Barcelona" (RTVE Agencia, 2015, 10-06-2015).⁹ Most of the news that referred to this police operation highlighted the fact that it was the group's legal "façade." The raid consolidated the end of the so-called Modelo Barcelona and the return to hard-handed policies.

⁶ Although the legal maximum stay in pre-trial detention is two years, those cited here spent almost three years from the time of their arrest. This is due to the delay in the start of the trial because of the current collapse of the Spanish judiciary. In specific cases that are considered serious, this period can be extended. If convicted, these years of imprisonment are subtracted from the years of the sentence.

⁷ Leader of the Latin Kings Barcelona and the person with the most accusations in the trial. Interview conducted in Barcelona on January 8, 2019, after the trial ended.

⁸ https://elpais.com/ccaa/2015/06/10/catalunya/1433917791_173419.html.

⁹ <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20150610/mossos-detienen-23-personas-operacion-contra-banda-latin-kings-barcelona/1159606.shtml>.

Moreover, somehow, all these headlines confirmed the end of a specific form of relationship with these groups. Along these lines, one of the defense attorneys explained,¹⁰

(...) It is a time (...) after several years and [of] having to respond to the issue of the perception of security, [usually] they tend towards a hard-handed position. And these types of operations come into this heavy hand, which expands at the same time that the entire part of prevention, of social intervention that could give better results is cut back (defense lawyer).

In turn, these news items also highlighted the arrest of the alleged leader of the organization. This made a direct correlation between these groups and the functioning of the hierarchical criminal organizations that depend on a leader who controls all their activities. This personification, added to the fact that the accusation was elevated to the level of a criminal organization, reinforced the idea that the group had been formed with the main purpose of committing crimes.¹¹ Contrary to this image, the wiretaps carried out by the police, which were the basis of the entire investigation, show that the group was in the process of breaking down into different subgroups that did not answer to a single leader.

As it was later demonstrated in the trial, the only accusations against the leader of the organization, and which led to the accusation of all members of belonging to a criminal organization, were based on a mixture of very unclear evidence: some telephone conversations in which he participated and where he talked about discussions with other members, the statements of certain protected witnesses who changed their versions of their statements between the police headquarters and the trial, and the police investigations based more on explaining the functioning of the group, its structure and practices in terms of a specific imaginary of the ideal 'gang' than on specific evidence of the investigation.

In addition, the media boom generated by the raids gave a dimension to the events that placed them in a position of particular relevance within the criminal events of the city. This broad media impact had the purpose of reinforcing this idea of subjective insecurity and, at the same time, verifying that the institutions were working well and protecting the citizens. The judicial scheme, the police action and the media coverage jointly introduced the social image of a group dedicated to criminal activity, with internal hierarchies and negative practices that could constitute a social danger. This was used to construct an ideal of insecurity that would justify both the police actions and the subsequent judicial measures against the group, which also solidified the idea of social moral panic. As an example, most of the confiscations made in the police macro-raids were of objects that demonstrated that the accused were members of the group (from books, to flags or necklaces, to other types of symbols). Beyond seizures of small amounts of drugs (some for personal consumption), the police investigation aimed to demonstrate that the group was a criminal organization based on these objects that would prove the existence of a hierarchical group.

¹⁰ Defense lawyer for one of the accused in the trial. Interview conducted in Barcelona on January 30, 2019, after finalizing the trial.

¹¹ "For the purposes of this Code, a criminal organization is understood to be the group formed by more than two people with a stable character or for an indefinite period of time, who, in a concerted and coordinated manner, distribute various tasks or functions in order to commit crimes" (Article 570 bis of the Penal Code).

The Trial: Prosecutors, the Defense and the Final Indictment

The entire police investigation, which had been carried out years before the arrests, was built around this idea of a criminal organization. For this reason, the evidence of more or less minor crimes was collected through a police operation of wiretapping, monitoring and analysis of social networks. In line with the conclusions of the police investigation, both the investigating judge and the prosecution determined that this evidence demonstrated the existence of a criminal organization. This all led to a request for generalized penalties of more than a decade in prison for the detainees and about twenty years for the alleged leader. The leader said about this whole process, "It's when you're in bed and you go to sleep, so that's when it gets inside your head. Your mind. And even if you really say, 'I'm innocent deep down,' you know what I mean? Deep down I haven't done anything, I don't deserve to be sentenced to 25 years, that the request is for 25 years (...) I was already living with that uncertainty, I tell you, of being anxious every day. But I continued to support myself. I joined a gym, I dedicated myself to work, I went out with friends, to distract myself and all that. Then the day of the trial was getting closer, I was getting really nervous. My heart was getting smaller and smaller."

In the 2018 trial, this rapport between the police, the prosecution and the order of the investigating judge was made clear. To this was added the appearance that the entire process had had in the media. The three systems (justice, police and the media) constructed the account of why these groups existed and what activities they carried out. During the days of the trial, the police officers who were part of the operation, witnesses who belonged or had belonged to the group, visual witnesses of certain events, and police experts began to testify and submit to questions from the prosecutor, the defense lawyers and the judges. The majority of the police officers answered the lawyers' questions with expressions like "I don't remember," "I refer to what the record says" or "that was a long time ago." They stated that the time distance between the arrests and the trial made it impossible for them to remember the facts. This clashed directly with the format of the accusation, since, beyond some evidence, the rest was based on the police investigation and on what they had determined in order to be able to justify the idea of a criminal organization.

Most of the police officers summoned to testify had been members of the special unit of the Mossos d'Esquadra. Only a few of the policemen, who had held a position of responsibility within the unit, gave an in-depth answer to the questions that were put to them and explained how the group was constituted. Faced with the defense attorneys' attempts to demonstrate the weakness of the evidence, these policemen made a thorough explanation of the internal organization of the Latin Kings. One of these police witnesses defined on several occasions the activities and rationale of the Latin Kings as "physical assaults, territorial occupation, criminal activities and internal hierarchy" (excerpt from a field diary from the third session, 12–05–2018). One of the defense lawyers stated in an interview,

In the end, the most important part of the trial was the police statements. When they declared, it was very clear how (...) they were depicting an entire super-organized structure. Everything was very clear: the functions, the roles... but the evidence? They were not asked about the evidence. (...) I sometimes had the feeling that we were on a [TV] show instead of a trial. (...) But the fact is that even some of the defense lawyers were being eaten by the police. (...) One [lawyer] assumes the responsibility that you are going to have to break things down. And we [the lawyers] did it with another partner and me mainly. And the police were doing more or less well, but when it was our turn and we began to raise evidence and ask ques-

tions based on “Okay, but how many times [have you been able to verify that the Badalona chapter is] a criminal organization?”. This was also one of the things I used for irony. That the episode of the leader in Badalona basically involved two people. What the defendant and his partner were accused of was that one day a person stole a mobile phone and [it] ended up at her house, and that she went down and gave the mobile phone back to the person. In other words, was this the clear evidence that the Badalona chapter existed? (...) And then from there you say “No, because [the leader] gave orders and when someone didn’t obey them ... He applied violence ...”. But when asked directly: “Okay, [do] you [have proof of that]?” I don’t know for how long, but I think they were doing a follow-up and wiretapping for about 6 months. (Defense lawyer).

Therefore, the policemen’s interventions, guided by the prosecutor’s questions, focused mainly on building the internal world of this group. They explained the practices, forms of organization, connections between groups and hierarchical structures (“literature,” as defined by the defense attorney). This explanatory framework constantly introduced the idea of an organized, solid structure with the capacity for coordinated action. The same police officers made constant references to how criminal activities were controlled by the leader. However, when it came to supporting the content of the accusations with evidence, there was a large discrepancy between the entire explanation about the group’s activities and what was really found. A clear example of this was seen in the trial session on the 4th of December. While much of the prosecution and police accusation was based on the transportation of a box by a group member that supposedly contained drugs for sale, once the lawyers asked about the interception of the box and the contents found inside, the police officers testifying stated that they had never intercepted it nor checked what was inside.

This is a perfect example of the police discourse based on a pre-established idea of what a gang is. In the trial, different police officers, when questioned by both the prosecution and the defense attorneys about specific events in their investigation (specifically a fight between members and an attempted robbery), responded by avoiding the specific events in order to relate, sometimes very repetitively, the general structure of the gangs, their organization/leadership and the criminal activities they carry out. All of this was done from a constructed narrative that was not supported by evidence. This situation, although on a smaller scale, is very similar to the stereotypical bases on which, as Hagedorn (2022) points out, gang members are often tried in the USA, and which, in cases such as the RICO prosecutions against gangs, are also racially biased (Woods, 2012).

In the trial itself, we can see how, with the help of the police files and the prosecution, the idea of a criminal organization was constantly reinforced. Although they were more or less minor crimes, by presenting the group as a hierarchical and unified entity, ignoring all the mediation activities they had done previously, the accusations against individuals were extrapolated to a group issue. This, ultimately, justified the accusations and also the presence of a leader at the top of the hierarchical order. The defenses, for their part, sought to overthrow this idea of criminal organization by isolating the few criminal events for each individual and demonstrating the organizational non-correlation between criminal activities. Below, the defense attorney explains a fragment of the trial where a police officer was a witness responding to the lawyers:

Lawyer: How many times was [the leader] seen in El Clot [neighborhood of Barcelona]?

Police testimony: Never.

L: What do you mean, never? But you didn’t follow up...?

PT: No.

L: On how many occasions did (an accused woman) talk to [the leader]?

PT: As far as we know, none.

L: How many times did the [other group member of another chapter] talk to [the leader]?

PT: None, because they were at loggerheads and weren't talking to each other.

L: Okay.

PT: But, no, no, no, no. The information was passed through other people.

L: Okay. From whom?

PT: We don't know...

L: So, what evidence do you have that [the leader] was involved in drug trafficking?

PT: No, no. There is no evidence that [the leader] is linked to drugs."

The Sentence: Acquittal and Media Silence

In contrast to the media reaction after the raids, the media paid almost no attention to the trial. There were no journalists among the public in the courtroom. The lack of media interest meant that the process did not appear in the news, which confirmed a total disappearance of interest.

The sentence came a year later, on December 30, 2019. The result was a drastic reduction in penalties and the elimination of a good part of the crimes, including belonging to and leadership of a criminal organization. Six of the defendants who were in preventive detention and who, therefore, had already spent up to three years in prison, were sentenced to crimes of injury that commuted to days deprived of liberty. A few others, accused of minor crimes against public health for trafficking or possession of illegal substances, were sentenced to pay fines of between 7 and 35,000 euros and serve prison terms of between 1 and 3 years, although they did not go to prison. The vast majority of the remaining group, including the alleged leader, were acquitted of all charges. With this, the entire argument around the idea of a criminal organization completely fell apart. This argument had been worked out five years earlier in the police investigation, in the raids, in the investigating court, and in the prosecution, and had been represented in the media. However, the final sentence, like the entire trial, did not appear in any relevant media.

The media's changes in interest show how this empowerment of subjective insecurity functions and the political purpose it has. Thus, the visibility of the 'criminal group' at the time of the arrests served to show that good police and institutional work could detain society's public enemy. The subsequent lack of interest in both the trial and the sentence corroborate this idea of governing through insecurity, to which the defense lawyer also referred:

In the end it has to do with (...) punitive populism as a phenomenon that will always be based on an emotional issue, the feeling and the perception of insecurity, which will always be very great because people have insecurity in their life, but in a broad way, with a lot of things (...). In other words, only what has to do with the insecurity part related to the crime becomes visible. It's not visible that people are insecure because they cannot make it to the end of the month. And if they rob you in the subway and it gives you a feeling of insecurity, they also take it for the worst because if they steal 100 euros, that's what will happen [you won't make it to the end of the month]. This entire situation in the end is easier to blame on those below you than

on those above you. And in that construction downwards and in the categorization of what are the problems that generate insecurity, I think [the issue of youth street groups] clearly appears (Defense lawyer).

This duality between the construction of citizen insecurity, which is far from representing a high volume of criminal data in the city,¹² and the validation of increased security and hard handed policies as the only tool to face this insecurity, is not based on a volume of real crime. Most of the time these policies are based on actions that seek to show a political image of security and control of public order. As the defense lawyer explains, “in reality, an operation of this type for any government is a profitable operation. Why is it a profitable operation? Because they are telling the public that they have caught the bad guys. The ones you think are the bad guys.”

For that, the disparity of media attention between the macro-raids and the final trial/sentence symbolizes the idea of the creation of a subject in the collective imaginary that is criminalized and blamed for social ills (moral panic), even more so in a situation of crisis and growing precariousness that clearly affects the younger populations of peripheral neighborhoods. It was not so important whether the accusation was true or false and what was the final judicial sentence, but rather it was important to make the ‘evil of these groups’ explicit in their first arrest and thus generate the image of insecurity as the main tool for increasing social control.

Roots, Causes and Patches

The previous sections reconstruct the entire police investigation and the judicial case that started in 2015 and ended in 2020 against a faction of the Latin Kings of Barcelona. This has given us an in-depth vision of how the police investigation was constructed, what role the media apparatus played and how these impacted the judicial process. The particular emphasis on the legality of group membership made it possible to verify the end of the Modelo Barcelona while publicly showing the change in institutional strategy in relation to ‘gangs’, that is, the return to the hard handed policies. This ended the time of prevention and a search for mediation with group members themselves, to arrive at what Wacquant (2015: 35) includes as one of the characteristics of punitive policies against “social groups trapped in the margins”: the “end of indulgence” of antisocial behavior and the lack of concern for possible causes. This change of course is also explained by the leader:

(...) I tell you that I feel like I’ve been used, you know? Because we really wanted to integrate ourselves so we could use public spaces and the young people didn’t have to be in the parks, so they could use the social centers and all that. But what was the use of it all if in the end... a year or two years went by and they let go of our hand, and they left us like that now. So, it’s like [in the] end that what they wanted was “let’s let them be visible and then when they are visible, we’ll know where they are and we’ll get them”. And now they aren’t a legal organization.

¹² In 2016, there were 0 sentences per criminal group, 6 in 2017 and 11 in 2018 out of a total of 868, 920 and 1000 sentences for public order issues (Data extracted from the official reports 2017, 2018 and 2019 of the Provincial Prosecutor’s Office from Barcelona). The crime of “criminal group” is integrated into the classification of crimes against public order, hence the comparison.

Now they're a criminal organization. So I say, why do they give you the opportunity if then they are going to fuck you? Do you know what I mean?

In turn, the accusation of criminal organization dismantled the possible vision of the phenomenon of youth street groups as a social issue that is linked to different situations: a feeling of community and belonging, and establishing networks to cope with marginality and poverty, among others (Brotherton, 2015; Feixa et al., 2011). Thus, the phenomenon was reduced to a matter of public order and criminality, emphasizing the security and almost hygienic need to end the phenomenon and normalize these 'unruly' behaviors. At no point in the entire process (police, media or judicial) was reference made to other social functions that the group had or that some of these functions had been promoted during the mediation phase of the Modelo Barcelona. On the contrary, it can be seen how the three areas fed into each other throughout the process. The large raids, images of seizures and detainees allowed the media to visualize the group in a criminal way, which ultimately also socially supported the accusation of a criminal organization in court.

Through this coordinated intervention of hard handed strategies from the three fields, this youth street group was positioned as one of the main sources of insecurity. This, in turn, relegated them even further into the periphery of the social space. The entire connected procedure constructed an image of insecurity that was produced by a group of young migrants from peripheral neighborhoods. An insecurity that, beyond justifying the change in punitive strategy, also stigmatized young people belonging to these groups in the eyes of the rest of society.

There has been a whole criminal drift in general towards certain groups or groups that are annoying, to apply the criteria of criminal organization in what could be called a process of expansion of criminal law by applying criteria of the enemy's criminal rights. Not only for political opponents, but also for certain social groups, and, in this case, youth gangs have become an enemy against whom it is worth expanding the penal code and praising it in some way (Defense lawyer).

The media, in turn, played a key role in spreading the idea that the group produces insecurity. These different media approaches between the raids and the trial sentence allow us to link the above-mentioned strategy with the idea of enhancing that subjective insecurity. If we look at the surveys carried out by the Barcelona city council itself, we see that in 2015, insecurity was the main problem for only 4.3 percent of the population. In 2018, that figure increased to 21 percent, and reached 29.1 percent in 2019. In this sense, the leader explains the biased image that the police and the media gave of the group:

[The policeman] never talked about activities like the training workshops that we did through the [Barcelona] City Council. Workshops that [for] many of the "hermanitos" (little brothers, members of the Latin Kings and Queens) [from] were a way to find work, you know? But nobody talked about it. (...) The *Mossos* did not mention that they themselves came to give us a mediation course. Why? So, (...) I also felt that impotence on that day and said "fuck". But of course, they're not interested in the good things. As I said: the press is like the press. (...) [For] the press something like this doesn't sell. No, it's because it doesn't sell anything. But if you say "we have caught the tough Latin Kings. On the legal side", like it was when it came out, its normal that it will sell.

Conclusions

The judicial apparatus, the police and the media have been, in this ethnographic example, the agents that have orbited the so-called youth street groups. Specifically, the interrelation between them when it comes to constructing a story and attributing a series of characteristics to the group, has had clear effects on the perception that society has of these young people. Thus, the accusation of criminal organization, the police investigation itself and the request for very long prison sentences, as well as the group's appearance in the media, position this group in a peripheral place of the social space. All this allows us to define how the space for youth street groups works. That is, it is possible to see both the social place they occupy and the different agents belonging to other fields that delimit that specific positioning. However, this occupied position is not fixed, but rather depends on how the groups or agents who hold normative power act on them. A position that, for its part, also depends on the ability of these groups to 'have their own voice' and to be recognized as valid social agents.

Not only the positioning, but also the actions of these agents have served to fill the group's role with content, leaving no room for them to show their own characteristics. With this, attention to the specific causes of the situation of marginality that these young people often experience is relegated to a last space, while they are used as a political tool for managing the growing conflicts in peripheral neighborhoods resulting from neo-liberal adjustments.

Faced with the situation of increased vulnerability that exists in the working-class and marginal neighborhoods of the city, creating a public enemy (Queirolo Palmas, 2017) on which to place the blame for social problems makes it possible to consolidate the government through insecurity (or the umbrella concept of prisonfare). An insecurity that is mainly subjective since, as we have seen, the result of the trial was the practical acquittal of all the accused and the volume of crimes in the trial was very small compared to the total volume of crime in the city.

This police and judicial operation, as a specific ethnographic example, beyond making it possible to define some of the constituent agents of this "space of youth street groups," serves to determine how, based on the government policy (hard handed versus mediation), youth groups are positioned in a more or less peripheral place in the social space. In the present case, the differences between the stigmatizing overexposure of the 2015 police raids and the invisibility of the acquittal in 2019, reveal the changing position occupied by the groups and the disparate interests in the different relationships with them.

Finally, the way the police acted, the prosecution's and the investigating judge's petition to incriminate them as a criminal organization, and the appearance and disappearance of these groups in the media promote the idea of government through subjective insecurity. The group has been used to give specific images at specific times. The group's criminal image, which in this case coincides with the return of hard-handed policies, serves to make them a scapegoat to take the blame for a large part of the increasing problems in the poor neighborhoods of the city and its metropolitan area.

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