



Tribute to John Hagedorn: In Honor of a Radical Humanist

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The following keynote address was given on April 1, 2024 at the event “Honoring the Life and Work of John Hagedorn” hosted by the Great Cities Institute at the University of Illinois Chicago campus. John, a longtime member of the Critical Criminology Division died on October 31, 2023, at the age of 76.

Thanks to the organizers for inviting me and to Mary Devitt for making the suggestion. I’m very honored to be here with you on this important occasion. I am also happy to be here among my colleagues and comrades who have supported the work of John and myself for so many years.

I’m going to spend my allotted time discussing some of John’s multi-faceted work and what I consider some of his major contributions to the field that he and I have spent much of our academic careers developing, i.e., critical gang studies (Brotherton and Gude 2021a, b). But before I do, I just wanted to describe to you my first meeting with John although I’m not sure he would remember it.

It was at the American Society of Criminology conference in Miami in 1994. John was presenting his work with his team on New Jacks when I entered the room. I knew his work from our Homeboy gang project in San Francisco under the direction of Dan Waldorf who often spoke highly of John’s *People and Folks* text (Hagedorn 1988). Dan saw John as a comrade in the field, someone who “got the story right” as he put it. I also remember a few occasions walking into our office with Dan and John discussing our findings on the phone. I should say Dan’s conversations with John were a striking contrast to his dealings with another gang researcher, Malcolm Klein, whom Dan disliked for a number of reasons.

Anyway, there John is, sitting in the middle chairing the session and encouraging his younger field workers to strut their stuff, then gave the final summing up. John was dressed in a tropical-type shirt and wore a big gold chain around his neck. I thought immediately this might be a dude I could get on with. John spoke articulately and somewhat theatrically, which I also enjoyed. And the room, in turn, reacted enthusiastically to his delivery and content. After the meeting I approached him and told him I liked what he had to say and that I was with Dan’s team. He greeted me warmly. Then I said something like, “You know, of course, you’re right about deindustrialization and what these kids are facing with the rise of gangs making total sense given these historical circumstances, but John...why aren’t you calling for socialism as the answer?” John looked at me somewhat bemusedly,

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“Yeah, you’re right, maybe next time.” Of course, I had no idea about his experience with Chinese Stalinism at that point!

After that we stayed in touch, and then some years later, in 2001, I co-organized the “Globalizing the Streets (Flynn and Brotherton 2008) conference in NYC, which he took a lot of interest in. I’m sure he relished the thought of attending a conference which Mayor Giuliani tried to ban and committed to give a talk on his work that would become his *World of Gangs* book in 2008. Following that in 2002 he invited me to Chicago for the Gangs in the Global City meeting where I first met Jock Young, Joan Moore, and John Pitts. So, John came into my life at an incredibly propitious moment, not just intellectually but also socially, helping me to see how I could join a community of scholars. These engagements and networks seem to be serendipitous, but they’re not because you’re always looking to find fellow-travelers, and John excelled at making those connections.

In short, his authenticity and honesty, directness and commitment to unbounded radical research goals were a breath of fresh air, confirming that there could be a place for folks like me in this strange, highly competitive world, where the rites and rituals of the striving middle-class professional were the norm. In contrast to the careerism and individualism that prevailed, especially at these conferences, here was someone who wasn’t interested in the presentation of self, someone who didn’t mince words, called people out, stood by his principles, and challenged you to argue otherwise. As he writes in his welfare book, “we have to struggle, to experiment, and then sum up our experience for others” (Hagedorn 1995:5). And so, I guess it’s fitting that at the end of this 30-year relationship I got to publish his last work—a text with that extraordinary passage¹ on its penultimate page where John in his inimitable way faces up to his physical demise—“who would do this?” I wondered when I first read it... John would.

The Humanist Gaze

Running through all of John’s work is his inexhaustible commitment to humanism. It’s there in his first book as he demolishes the stereotypes of gang members and their groups, it’s there in his dissertation work on the welfare system in Milwaukee, it’s there in his interpretation of the global gang phenomenon, and its ever-present in his last work as he puts the lessons of his scholarship on trial, up against the arguments and predispositions of prosecutors and judges, before the skepticism of juries, and as a slither of hope for the adjudicated and their defense lawyers. “*We might not make it to the mountain top,*” John intones, “*but we find purpose in that we don’t stop trying.*”

Starting in his early work in *People and Folks*, John reminds us that much of the gang literature is out of date, a lot of it referring to a period before WW2. Few researchers, he found, were examining the contemporary everyday lives of gang members or paying attention to the social, economic, or political contexts of the subcultures being largely theorized. He wondered aloud: what explains this absence in the literature? It is an important question

¹ John states on page 202 (Hagedorn 2022): “As I wrote this book, I felt an uncomfortable affinity for men facing the death penalty. I am at the end of both my career and my life, to my surprise having made it to my seventies. In the past few years, I’ve been hit by a car and enjoyed my first Flight for Life helicopter ride and emergency surgery. I’ve suffered a silent heart attack and stroke. I have diabetes. I’m facing my own death sentence, which will take place in the not-so-distant future. My court cases, in a way, are like facing my own date with death. I know I’m going to lose, but what do I do as the fatal hour approaches.”

and speaks to the lasting power of certain governing paradigms and perhaps to researchers who coast on past endeavors, comfortable in their tenured positions in academic enclaves still able to patrol the borders of the discipline and its sub-specializations. He also posits it is because the mainly white, middle-class research community does not have access to the “deviants”? Or perhaps those who do are loath to shed such light on their respective communities, all too aware of the tropes historically promulgated by outside forces. Think of Bill Bratton arriving in Los Angeles and announcing on his arrival one year after 9/11 that the main terrorists America should be worried about are, well you know:

Most of the city is extremely safe, Bratton said. “But there is not enough appreciation for the destructive nature of gangs and the image the rest of the country has in some parts of the city. In the long term, gang violence in the city will destroy the city. It is in their [good neighborhoods’] interest to get into this fight.” He goes on, “gangs are homeland terrorism...they (DHS) need to be preoccupied with the internal war on terrorism as well (Garvey and Winton 2002: ?).

With a media industry long given to racist and anti-working-class portrayals of those at the lower end of the social hierarchy that in turn fed an assortment of moral entrepreneurs happily echoing the dire scenarios of policing agencies, it is hardly surprising that white supremacy post-Jim Crow retained its legitimacy. Angela McRobbie (McRobbie and Thornton 1995) of Birmingham School fame reminded us that life in an endless stream of moral panics makes it difficult, perhaps impossible, to make the case that many realities are, well, a social construction. Of course, all this has to be understood in the context of making life in a post-truth society where policing the crisis, governing through crime, and violent overthrows of elected bourgeois democratic governments are the new norms and discussions of what a fascist America might look like are nightly news items. Bearing in mind, of course, that it was back in 1908 that Jack London (London and 2006) wrote his dystopic novel the *Iron Heel* that first predicted such a future or what might happen when the oligarchs run riot.

John thus took the view, not unlike Bourgois (1995), that condemnations of Blackness and Brownness notwithstanding, social scientists were obliged to do this research. Their job should be to deepen our own and the public’s understanding of these phenomena and that it is imperative not to stay silent about the prevailing conditions in such communities so long waiting for their American Dream and pyramid of needs to be even partially met. Otherwise, the discursive terrain is left unchallenged to those whose race and class interests do not lend themselves to anything approaching an objective analysis, or as Hinton (2016) asks, “how exactly did the war on poverty become the war on drugs?”.

Hence, as Spinoza taught us, “our task is not to laugh or cry but to understand” and John continued in this vein, continually asking the hard questions and doing his best through collaborative methodologies to compare his findings to the research from the pioneering work of Thrasher to more recent renderings of Miller, Spergel, Jacobs, and others. In his summary, he concludes that there’s a bit of everything going on but nothing that might “typify” the gang sufficiently to function as some catch-all generalization to solve the definitional issue. Hence, he argued that all gang research should be highly contextualized, which can only happen if researchers roll their sleeves up and collaborate with the subjects and objects of their studies in a relationship that I have come to see when done well as dialogical, similar to the principles adopted by Freire in his revolutionary work on literacy (Freire 1970).

Thus, using Joan Moore’s (Moore and Garcia 1978) questionnaire from her Los Angeles investigation, he collected interviews with the aid of his partner, a former gang member

and long-time community resident, with the “top dogs” of Milwaukee’s multiple street groups that revealed voices that until then were mostly absent from gang social science. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) were using data from the 30 s with their theories of opportunity structures, Miller (1958) was still similarly basing his lower-class cultural pronouncements on work from bygone years, and Cohen (1955) never entertained the influence of race for his reflections on reaction formation. Unfortunately, John did not mention Hirschi’s (1969) Hobbesian concepts of social bonding, all based on surveys in a few Berkeley high schools with no actual field work or pain-staking interviews deemed necessary. This ideological sleight of hand, so readily adopted in endless research on the gang Other with funds gladly doled out by the likes of the National Institute of Justice, still finds little pushback. David Matza once talked about how Hirschi “blew him out of the water” at Berkeley which I can only understand with the help of Gramsci.

Theoretically, of course, John took William Julius Wilson’s (Wilson 1987) findings as his cue, employing the concept of the “underclass” to explain and situate the corrosive impacts of deindustrialization on the mobility prospects of his subjects. While observing up-close their lived social isolation and heightened levels of relative deprivation, he saw and heard loud and clear what it looked and felt like. The narratives that emerged from these deeply pathologized social actors showed how their subcultures, now fast becoming phantasmagorical objects through the omnipresent processes of social, legal, and political Othering (see Muñiz 2022), emerged and formed over time. Their communities were fragmented and undermined by one-way bussing, they didn’t have the hope of learning to labor like many of their parents, but they also wanted to be part of a family, and while some have played their parts “in the mix” they had little in common with organized crime, now an all-too-common trope of the FBI and the widespread use of RICO² in gang cases.

No, they were not brothers from another planet, nor were they genetically programmed super-predators. As John aptly notes, in contrast to the criminalizing projections of the social control industry, they also were far from the militaristic formations depicted in policing manuals now being disseminated widely within the nation’s precincts. Alas, John’s sorely needed corrective on the lived realities of our inner-cities and the myriad street organization formations did little to impede the passage of Democratic President Clinton’s Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, the largest crime bill in U.S. history and, as many have argued, a major factor in the carceral tsunami that became the prison industrial complex.

This commitment to a radical humanistic criminology continued in his critique of welfare services and underscored his more recent project as an expert witness- a role that I have also taken on for the past 17 years (Brotherton 2018). In this work there is no hiding behind the abstractions of scholarly debate or thick descriptions of “low lives” at the margins. Quite the contrary, it is all front-line stuff, fulfilling a role requiring the endurance of often long and contentious cross-examinations by lawyers trained in adversarial legal argument, energetically responding to the fictions of gang-related police trained to honor blue lines of defense and judges who are variously disposed to upholding the basic principles of U.S. law, i.e., innocent until proven guilty.

Despite such experiences, many of which were clearly emotionally shattering, he remains convinced that the system can work if we remain resolute, principled, imaginative, and firm in our conviction that decisions of life and death can be significantly influenced

² RICO stands for the Racketeering Influencing and Corrupt Organizations Act of 1970.

by solid social scientific evidence presented within a framework that is understandable and credible. Much of this evidence comes from the subjects' life histories and only emerge from interviews which rely on the skills to probe, engage, analyze, test, and empathize. It also involves collecting a wide range of archival sources all part of what Mill's (1959) called our sociological craft. With so much riding on these "evidences" and their interpretations we also have to pay attention to the performances both within and without the courtroom. I have likened deportation proceedings to Artaud's theater of cruelty (Brotherton 2014), for the settings, unspoken rules and rituals, agendas (written and unwritten), self-presentations, intentionalities, and subjectivities are crucial contributions to this extraordinary drama involving the state, its bodies of armed men, its various representatives and apparatuses, its legal codes, carceral logics, methods of punishment and, of course, the subject/object(s) of its internal and external methods of social control. As we approach the denouement, it is clear that so many lives will never be the same, and for some, there may be no life at all.

John admits that the prejudices and prefigurative images in the heads of the players might not be overcome but, at least with our specialized knowledge and epistemological acuity we can win some and lose some. Surely this is better than settling for a foregone conclusion. However, far from displaying any idealism or magical thinking he likens his efforts to the myth of Sisyphus as interpreted in Camus' existential renderings. He compares his own perhaps absurdist urges to continuing to push the rock up the hill because, well, who else is going to do it? And anyway, how can we sit by and let things stand? This decision to recognize and to accept the different moral imperatives to intervene is with us all the time. But seen through an existentialist lens isn't it also a way to revolt, to engage in an act of refusal, by arguing against business as usual in the cause of freedom? For me, this deep regard for moral character and fiber are present in all John's work, demonstrating a courage and an integrity to speak out against injustice and social harm both large and small. As James Scott (1985) reminds us, socio-political resistance comes in many forms, from sabotage on the shop floor to disruption of capitalist production relations to fighting for a moral economy against the diktats of rural landlords. Today we face many threats in our respective institutions of higher learning to freedom of speech both in and outside the classroom, with this moral imperative to speak out never more important.

Nonetheless, like me he sees too many in our occupation staying out of the fray, keeping their heads below the parapet while sitting comfortably in privileged positions, carefully tending their reputations. Although many have the means and skills to make a difference they have no "voluntad" or "ganas"³ to do so. When I came into the profession, I remember presenting to folks who frequently had a contrary perspective to my own but were higher up the totem pole. The comment most often uttered after my presentations was how "passionate" I was about the work, as if it were a failing. What they really meant was that the research was too political, too ideologically suspect or worst of all how I rejected the scientism of orthodox positivism, i.e., "where are the numbers, the graphs, the survey results?" Why don't I call on the *datasaurus*⁴ to boost my validity?

³ In English this might be translated as "will or desire."

⁴ *datasaurus* is a term used by Jock Young (2011:15): "The *datasaur*, *Empiricus Abstractus*, is a creature with a very small head, a long neck, a huge belly and a little tail. His head has only a smattering of theory, he knows that he must move constantly but is not sure where he is going, he rarely looks at any detail of the actual terrain on which he travels, his neck peers upwards as he moves from grant to grant, from database to database, his belly is huge and distended with the intricate intestine of regression analysis, he eats ravenously but rarely thinks about the actual process of statistical digestion, his tail is small, slight and inconclusive."

Gratifyingly I never saw John yield to such conventional arrogance and the often accompanying qualities of intellectual opportunism and pusillanimity. Rather, he seemed to enjoy the dueling aspects of this struggle for empirical and theoretical clarity. Meanwhile the many students he has mentored who have come my way all speak of his example both in the field and in the classroom and how he modeled for them the various qualities of an activist scholar. He showed that it was not just rhetoric. Isn't that also what Rosa taught us?

The Globalist Gaze

John's collaborative work with Dowdney (2004) et al. was pivotal. He travelled widely, spending time in the Global South that brought him face-to-face with the dimensions of the immiseration Marx had long called a law and inevitable product of capitalist production relations and exchange that had been taking place, especially since the widespread adoption of neo-liberal economic doctrine and its complementary security state policies and practices of structural violence. It was no coincidence that we saw a global increase of both prison and deportation populations, basically the surplus populations of the working-class, to complement the neo-liberal counter-revolution—what Jock Young referred to as the exclusive society (Young 1998). Meanwhile, Davis (2005,) was warning of the planet of slums now a *fait accompli* while also forecasting the environmental devastation of California made inevitable by the profit motive in private property development. So many of the world's youth now faced these dystopic futures, living within intricate urban borders, defensible spaces, as John called them, where security services were absent except for sporadic operational invasions to keep the natives on their toes. Demands for basic services usually went unheeded by corrupt and/or mismanaged local authorities hampered by a country's indebtedness either to Western banks or increasingly the Chinese state.

Poverty was the norm, not just the relative but the absolute kind, with mobility a possibility only for those who emigrated or who could have usually shortened lives in organized crime groups using gang members as their foot soldiers. What are these youth supposed to resort to, asked John? What happens to their adolescent dreams, hopes and imaginations? Who or what are their role models? What does their culture consist of and where does it come from? How does the drug trade function now that the U.S.'s misbegotten war on drugs has been a spectacular \$47 billion per year failure (Drug Policy Alliance 2024)?

To ask the questions is almost to answer them, as theories of deviance amplification can be readily applied to country after country where the IMF orders its supply-side strategies (both economic and militarily) to be adopted without a social, economic, or moral thought given to the roots of the transgressive behavior in these criminogenic environments. In response to the massive cuts in social expenditure, the end of price supports to key foodstuffs and fuel, the thinning and often the destruction of state ministries and institutions for the benefit of the poor, the decimation of public health provisions and the curtailment of educational opportunities at all ends of the spectrum...you get a debacle as seen in Ecuador since approx. 2017. It is one of the most extreme examples of just how bankrupt our national and international ruling classes are in their perpetuation of a global system of super-exploitation of labor and natural resources. Please don't be under the impression that the lessons of that country' are just for the global south for how does a country with arguably the world's most sustained drop in homicide turn into its opposite within 5 years? It was the site of the most successful policy of gang social inclusion attempted anywhere (Brotherton and Gude 2021a, b), but after the counter-revolution the very measures that

helped Ecuador to be known as the island of peace, i.e., its legalization of street organizations in 2007, instead have been charged with being the source of the sweeping invasion of organized groups from the Sinaloa cartels to the Albanian mafia. Somehow this brilliantly enlightened policy that is the conceptual opposite of *mano dura* and its variants and implemented through empowerment mechanisms, new opportunity structures, cultural supports, and anti-defamation laws to prevent moral panics is now spun as the major reason behind Latin America's bloodiest prison riots in its history, with some 600 inmates slaughtered in an orgy of medieval vengeance. The following account of the situation in Ecuador comes from a field researcher and former leader of the "Masters of the Street" in Ecuador.

In the last 5 years, neighborhood, urban, youth organizational structures (be they gangs, armed groups, gangs, etc.) have undergone important changes in their position and structure in Ecuador. In fact, many have disappeared, and the vast majority have been absorbed by large local and transnational criminal organizations.

As the state's control structures in prison and criminal affairs were weakened, while ministries and institutions were reduced and dismantled, large criminal organizations found their opportunity to control drug dealing, human trafficking, prisons and territories in a hegemonic manner. This is the case of urban youth organizations known as gangs in Ecuador, which were absorbed or taken over by local criminal organizations that in turn respond to alliances with transnational criminal organizations or cartels.

To understand the global turn in gang development John turned to Castells, Sassen, Young, Wacquant, and Davis to inform his analysis, seeing how financialization and global corporate capitalism were rapidly reconfiguring our built environments through further marginalizing the poor then explaining away the violence done to them with reference to some amoral rationalizations about "economic externalities." This all follows from policies courtesy of the Washington consensus, imperial actions that include the destruction of the welfare state and ensuring that hyper-repressive paradigms on gangs become the default position of so many governments. Hence, we need to be constantly reminded that *mano dura* flows from the zero-tolerance logics of New York City. Meanwhile, a network society was leading the marginalized to create cultural communes and resistance identities in the absence of any form of legitimacy for those power structures designed to keep the poor within and behind the expanding carceral systems of social control.

John's work in this area helped us all to move away from our parochial vistas and into thinking about a world that had yet to be made, one that couldn't be done without the "wretched of the earth." The bulk of globalized gang policies and practices were and still are advocating the opposite.

Conclusion

Before I conclude I just want to say how honored I am to share these thoughts with you but, of course, lament the fact that I'm not doing it here with my ole comrade and never will again. I should also tell you that remarkably our career trajectories turned out to be quite similar. We both came from earlier engagements with revolutionary politics and did not start graduate work till later in our lives, though John did start college not long after high school while I went to work in factories and didn't get to university until I was 25. But when we did write our dissertations it wasn't about gangs at all. I wrote mine on the sociology of education and about why kids would drop into a school and graduate when 50% of

the other students dropped out while John, of course, wrote about the state of the welfare system in Milwaukee, his hometown. Two dissertations quite different from the majority of our work on gangs though obviously related. And then, when we did get into the gang research, we both turned away from orthodoxy to very similar scholarship, making the turn toward the global gaze, and even ended up doing expert witnessing albeit in somewhat different areas.

So here we are...gathering to salute the person who produced this extraordinary body of work and his lifetime of commitment to the causes of social justice. In my view, the best way to honor him is to carry on where he left off. As John wrote at the end of his last published work: "I'm tired now and may need to rest more often than before. But this book is written to encourage others to find their place in the choir and sing the song of justice as loudly, as melodiously, and for as long as they can." So, let's all pledge to take our place in that choir and, where possible, to walk in John's footsteps. Thank you for listening.

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