

Cop Gang vs. Street Gangs

Fifth Estate Collective

Gang fever is sweeping Detroit. Everywhere the gangs are the main topic of conversation—the Black Killers, the Errol Flynn, the Coney Oneys, the Chene Gang. The cops are puffed with importance—they're the thin blue line between the hordes and the populace; the media are ecstatic—they have found a story that can be milked every day to break the monotony regularly presented; and for the average citizen: a concrete discernible reason for why Detroit is falling apart—1,000 teenage gang members.

And the threat is real—let there be no mistake. These gangs have spread terror with their brutal and brazen crimes, and although most poor communities in America have produced “juvenile delinquents,” these gangs represent a step beyond what has heretofore been experienced.

But what did they expect? Did people really think that a system like this could roll along cost free, without producing a substantial number of people having absolutely no commitment whatsoever to the official values of this society? Do they think these gangs just dropped from the sky with no cause rooted in the social fabric? It's just the chickens coming home to roost; you reap just what you sow; whatever goes around, comes around—get it?

Out of the atomized, fragmented families of the urban ghettos have come thousands of rootless young men with no future within this society, to become the Huns, Vandals and Visigoths of Detroit. And just as Attila had no “program” for Rome, the B.K.s advocate nothing for Detroit except its destruction. German students several years ago had a slogan, “Make kaput, what makes you kaput!” Destroy what destroys you as a human being. Young gang members must see all of white society, with its emphasis on civility, order, law, manners, moderation as the blatant hypocrisy that it is when compared with the distorted lives they lead. Attacks on whites, rapes, robberies become more than just the acts in themselves—they are part of an assault on a vile, hated system that has ruined their potential as humans—they love nothing but the fire.

This nihilism—with all the niceties ripped out of it—is terrifying to the core. The Situationist International (Bulletin No. 11, 1967) described it thusly: “If living is impossible, why survive? Once you are in that void everything breaks up. The horrors. Past and present explode; the present is ground zero... At this point the individual's absolute rejection of society corresponds to society's absolute rejection of the individual.”

On Monday night, August 16, white people felt safe in downtown Detroit. The presence of two hundred uniformed Detroit cops standing in groups of three, .357 magnums and 9mm pistols at their sides, leather-gloved hands gripping three-foot riot clubs, reassured concertgoers at Cobo Hall and visitors to the Norwegian tall-ship visiting Detroit that all was well. Police smiled at passersby on Washington Boulevard and handed out leaflets describing the 205-foot, three-masted Christian Radich. All was peaceful in the heart of the Motor City.

On the same evening, at the same time, people in the black districts of the city were under a state of military occupation reminiscent of the July 1967 riots. A Channel 2 reporter gave a tense “on-the-spot” report to the viewers from Kercheval Avenue on the East Side: “The streets have been cleared of people; a few small groups appeared on street corners, but were quickly dispersed by police.” All was quiet in the ghetto.

Both of these scenes represented the official reaction of the city government to a near-riot situation at Cobo Hall the night before when over 150 members of several black teenage street gangs seized the stage during a performance of the Average White Band and began an assault on the 8,000-plus, mostly white audience. What took place

was an urban horror scene at its worst: apparently at signals given by gang leaders on stage, other members began systematically robbing and beating the rock patrons. Panic reigned as the 40 Cobo security guards tried futilely to stop the attacks and the audience fled into the night with the cane-wielding assailants in hot pursuit.

Outside the hall more people were beaten, two women were gang raped, and over the following three hour period, several downtown stores were trashed and looted. The police reported 47 arrests.

Into the Last Bastion

This incident was the culmination of several spectacular displays of violence by teenage gangs with the focus of their activity far from their East Side neighborhoods, into the last Detroit bastion of white dominance—the downtown shopping district. During the July 4th fireworks display, large groups of gang members rampaged through the riverfront crowds chanting “B.K.’s, B.K. action “ (the Black Killers gang cry) and then attacked patrons at the outdoor cafe on the veranda of the Hotel Ponchartrain. A few weeks later, large gangs of youths made several daring daytime raids on downtown stores, breaking the display windows with their ever-present canes and making off, in one case, with \$25,000 in jewelry.

The response from officialdom was as one would expect: the city called back 450 laid-off police two weeks early and put 200 of them on special assignment “in a broad effort to break up the gangs” as the Detroit News put it. A tough curfew which calls for all youths under 18 to be off the streets by ten p.m. was hurriedly and unanimously passed by the Common Council and it was made illegal for an adult to refuse to show identification to police if stopped.

Just to leave no doubt in the minds of the populace as to where the Mayor’s office stood in the matter, Deputy Mayor William J. Beckham, speaking for Mayor Coleman Young (who was vacationing on an unnamed Caribbean island), called Sunday’s Cobo Hall riot an “outright, flagrant challenge to police authority in Detroit. We are beginning to take this city back again.”

Beckham declared angrily to (one can only assume) black parents, that the cops would be out in force to enforce the curfew and that “Someone’s going to be hurt, beginning tonight. Don’t let it be your child.”

The irony of this threat of police terror to the entire black community is that Mayor Young was elected in 1973 in large part due to his condemnation of the “blackjack rule” of the police. However, when a crisis situation comes to the fore, all politicians, black or white, right-wing or left, have only the rule of the police to depend on. After all, stripped of its rhetoric, government is nothing but the rule of an armed body of men.

Young’s “get-tough” policy practiced by a black mayor will affect the black community no differently than did a similar policy practiced by former-mayor Louis Miriani 12 years ago. It is the go-ahead for a racist, corrupt and brutal police force to run roughshod over the city’s 300,000 black youths not over 1% of whom, even by official estimates, are involved in criminal or gang activity.

A curfew, enforced by police terror and arrest, is the heart of a police state—state rule of the movements of the citizenry is but a step away from travel passes, visitor registration and the like. The law for compulsory identification (“Your papers, please!”) puts all individuals at the whim of State officials with arbitrary control over their movements.

Gangs in the 1950’s

Teenage gangs are nothing new; they have plagued the large cities for decades and from time to time have been the subject of official attention. During the 1950’s Detroit gangs were as plentiful as they are today and, although they didn’t have names as explicit as the Black Killers, Black Gangsters and Black Rippers, they were extremely fearsome and often reigned supreme in the communities where they resided.

The ’50’s gangs, with names that evoked no meaning to whites, such as the Ooo-Loos, the Chili-Macs, the Dap-Daddies and the mighty Shakers who ruled the East Side, were primarily concerned with petty crimes and fighting

each other. As it is today, most black crime then was practiced against the black population and was generally ignored as long as it left whites alone.

The B.K.'s and Erroll Flynn's, however, made a drastic tactical error in their bold forays into the city's last white business and entertainment district. The ruling class of the city, with its billion dollar investment in the downtown riverfront Renaissance Project, combined with the small businesses that are the most likely prey for the marauders, have no intention of letting the area slip from their grip. They are mobilizing a fight against the gangs with the police in the forefront of the attack, but including groups as varied as the Teamsters and Red Cross.

Police are Big Winners

The police particularly have had their hand strengthened in a manner they have not enjoyed since Coleman Young became the city's first black mayor in 1973. Since then, the mayor has been in a constant feud with the white police establishment over residency rules, seniority rights, minority hiring and layoffs, all of which has given him the appearance of being "anti-police," as some editorials have put it.

In reality, the police force is one of the last city bureaucracies not dominated by the new crop of politicians ushered in by the Young administration that now dominates political life in Detroit. The cops have been fighting Young tenaciously to preserve what remains of the privileges they accumulated under generations of white city administrations.

Now, the mayor and his aides, who range from ex-militants to ex-marxists and ex-professors, mouth utterances in support of the police that are indistinguishable from those of any white racist city government anywhere in the country. This new support from the mayor's office has not been lost on the police. When Young was forced to layoff massive numbers of cops several months ago, the police vehemently maintained that lawlessness would reign while the mayor insisted that it would make no difference in criminal activity.

The police have obviously won the debate (not the least because they have slacked off in their "Battle with Crime" just to make sure), and it's hard to believe that they aren't gleefully watching the paranoid citizenry shit their pants.

Now the police have what they want: the laid-off cops called back and a free hand in practicing justice on the streets complete with the sanction of liberals as well as racists. The hundreds of teenage curfew violators rounded up into police stations and gymnasiums, the latest victims of police brutality and harassment (openly reported in the media) know that the cops have won another round.

Let there be no mistake at this point: the gangs are a direct product of a society which is in a state of rapid decomposition and are comprised of individuals who are dangerous, hostile and violent. They daily terrorize citizens in the black sections of Detroit in the same manner as their one-time thrust into Cobo Hall.

While black attacks on whites are always front-page news, the continuing violence and rip-offs that are an everyday occurrence in the devastated neighborhoods of the East Side goes mostly unreported except when the Black Killers and the Errol Flynn's are shooting it out.

Support for Police Crackdown

It is more than easy to see why the seeming majority of citizens, both black and white, are supporting the police crackdown on gang activity—they are living a frightened existence. In the absence of a human community people feel they have no other option than to fall back on the mediation of the State in situations they cannot deal with themselves.

This is evidenced by a scene the night following the Cobo Hall riot when the police were out in full force to protect a concert of the Yes rock group. As 75 uniformed cops entered the arena, the almost all white audience began to applaud.

Desperation over the situation has grown to such an extent in the black community that many organizations and individuals have been echoing the call of white businessmen for the return of the STRESS police decoy squad which murdered eighteen people in as many months until it was abolished by Mayor Young when he took office.

The rule of class society and the existence of the State always contains their own rationale for their continuation. With the destruction of community and its substitution by society, where human affairs are mediated by rulers, a collapse in the ruling authority always creates a situation of chaos if alternative forms of community are not erected.

As always, the choice between criminal gangs and the police apparatus of the State is a trap: Detroit's gangsters in blue uniform with their unending history of racial persecution, murder, corruption, dope pushing and brutality cannot be a solution to the problem. But with nothing else proposed, the police will get the nod by default.

Also, a casualty of gang fever is any lessening of racism on the part of whites; in fact, it has become fashionable all over again from the man on the street to media commentators. All blacks are seen as an undifferentiated whole and portrayed as a criminal race in fearful white minds by the slanted newspapers and TV reports that fill their reality.

Nothing can be said to convince whites that the gang problem is being exaggerated to the advantage of the rule of the police because there are gangs and they are hurting people. Nothing can be said that will convince whites that the principal victims of the gangs and of black crime in general are other blacks. White paranoia is rampant and sees all blacks as B.K.'s and all whites as their potential victims.

Whites no longer ask of blacks the honkie question par excellence of the 'sixties: "What do they want?" It's clear to them now that "they" want everything and at the same time nothing. Racist rumors circulate in the white community that black gangs have killed and mutilated a white girl and have scattered sections of her body at the Fairlane shopping center; suburbanites miles from the inner-city check their supply of ammunition in case the Errol Flynns invade Warren.

It's a situation that makes people beg for the authority of the State.

No Solutions Within Capital

As this article was being discussed, a member of the *Fifth Estate* staff asked if we were going to propose a solution short of revolution that didn't involve the cops. One staff member said that since he was on the streets ten hours a day driving a cab, he much preferred the cops to the B.K.s.

The disintegration of this society and its cities will most certainly continue with harsher and harsher police repression being the only answer proposed by those who see no further than the parameters of this society—Capital has nothing else to propose. Urban gangs are just one of the numerous horrors of everyday life and it is impossible to settle one detail of our misery without making changes that would bring them all to an end.

The activity that would contest the reign of Capital in our lives, is, in the short run, the same activity that would take on both the criminal gangs and the police. A demand for a human existence will accept neither.



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