
Book Review: *Divide & Conquer: Race, Gangs, Identity, and Conflict (Studies in Transgression)* by Robert D. Weide

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When you hear the term “gangs” what is it that comes to mind? Los Angeles is notoriously known for its subculture of gangs and subsequent gang violence, from the likes of Crips co-founder Stanley “Tookie” Williams as well as Sylvester Scott, who is credited with the advent of the original Blood gangs. Popular media is obsessed with stories of these gangs and its members— whether in sensationalized reports on Fox 11 News or fictionalized stories playing out in TV shows or box office movies, like *Boyz in the Hood* or *Colors*. Such portrayals become in fact dehumanizing by reinforcing a narrative of depravity instead of recognizing the reality that gang members are among “the most marginalized, demonized, and criminalized population in America and throughout much of the capitalist world” (Weide 2022:7-8). This insider participant observation ethnographic case study serves as an in-depth look into the humanity and nuance of the lived experience for *Sureño*-affiliated, Crip and Blood gang members in Los Angeles.

Robert D. Weide, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Sociology at California State University, Los Angeles. Weide teaches various courses on the history of anarchy, criminology, and critical theory on the intersectionality of class, race, and gender. He is also an expert witness on cases involving gangs in which he is summoned across the country to present his knowledge in numerous, and often high profile, cases. As uplifted from his biography in the introduction of the book, Weide’s heritage includes that of his father being an ethnic Kurd born in Iran, as well as being of half-Prussian and half-Russian descent on his mother’s side. His birth name is actually an Iranian surname with Kurdish tribal affiliation, but during his youth, Robert’s parents chose to legally change his last name to Weide – in reflection of his maternal grandfather’s Prussian roots – to protect him from the intended violence targeted at ethnic Middle Eastern and North African people at that time. Coupled with growing up

in the West Los Angeles area, as a teen he was a member of a street gang comprised of childhood friends and fellow ‘taggers.’ Weide is passionate about looking past labels of identity based on race and the assumptions of how people should conduct themselves solely on physical appearance.

Though this book is an ethnographic research project about gangs, it also serves as a cohesive overview for the evolution of the race concept and its modern manifestation through identity politics and ethnonationalism ideology. As explained by Weide, gangs are both the epitome and antithesis of the surplus labor population whose existence fuels the capitalist power play of “divide and conquer” to keep the working class stuck on in-fighting, to detract them from ‘rising up’ and overthrowing the ruling class. Weide notes:

It is no accident that the prior use of the word *gang* in the English language was in reference to a group of workers, whereas by the turn of the twentieth century the word has been transformed into a negativistic slur used to demonize and criminalize workers whose labor is no longer useful to capital. Gang members represent not just the lower class, but, moreover, the permanent underclass of American society – what Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels called the lumpenproletariat, unable to identify the cause of their material deprivation and therefore unable to focus their rage against those whose unimaginable wealth is possible only at their expense. (2022:8)

Therefore, modern gangs often attract the surplus labor population that capitalism forcibly keeps unemployed to depreciate the value of the workers. However, this often leads to gang members becoming the antithesis of a surplus labor population because they have found a way outside of traditional employment constructs to make money and might not be willing to fall in line with the constricting atmosphere of brick-and-mortar capitalist businesses. One way the ruling class still contributes to gangs is through the perpetuation of the race concept and its self-fulfilling mechanism of creating division between in-group and out-groups by doubling

down on ethnonationalism affiliation. These identity politics create an internal system of unconscious reinforcement through gang members fueling the myth of both threat and incompatibility divided along racial identities.

Divide & Conquer is an engaging read that starts from the ground up. The introduction sets the tone for Weide's personal experience with gang-related killings and leads to his desire to conduct an ethnographic research study on gangs in Los Angeles. The first chapter chronologically explores the historical foundations of ethnonationalism and identity politics through what Weide deems the three pillars: capitalism, the race concept, and nationalist ideology. The second chapter deconstructs identity through theoretical foundations, emphasizing anarchist theory to critique ethnonationalism and identity politics. After establishing this framework, the rest of the book details *Sureños*, Crip and Blood affiliated gangs throughout Los Angeles County.

The third chapter explores the invisible wall of division created between these gangs by their different cultures and identities. Chapter four closely examines how gangs can be unintentional identity police by reinforcing racial bias and boundaries through their rivalries, primarily in jail facilities. This idea is explored even deeper in chapter five through the narrative the police and the media create about tensions amongst rival gangs being so-called race wars, with direct citations for case studies of racialized conflicts. Chapter six focuses on transracial gang members who cross the boundaries of race identification and effectively proves that the concept of race does not necessarily hold up in actual practice. Then chapter seven details the resilient progress that respected gang leaders acting as peacemakers made in 2019 to create a cease-fire between warring gangs while also detailing the resistance working to keep up the elite power to divide and conquer the marginalized people groups. Finally, the conclusion wonders if the future will be one of reform or revolution.

This book is solid from cover to cover. I (Taryn) was first introduced to this book by taking Weide's class in the Fall of 2022 at Cal State LA: SOC 3480 Sociology of Class, Race/Ethnicity, and Gender. His chapter laying out the interweaving history of capitalism, racism, and nationalism is an amazing and accessible

collection all in one place. Building on that strong foundation, Weide uses his expertise to create rapport by tapping into different sides of his personal history and current interests when interviewing *Sureño*-affiliated, Crip and Blood-affiliated gang members as well as a handful of law enforcement officers specifically overseeing gang enforcement. Overall, Weide personally conducted formal interviews with sixty-seven *Sureño*-affiliated gang members, thirty Crip and Blood gang members, and seven gang enforcement officers. It is impressive to see someone having such success spanning these three groups that are usually violently pitted against each other.

Divide & Conquer is a revolutionary piece of research literature that should hopefully serve to open the mind of anyone willing to read it. This book is highly recommended for anyone curious about Los Angeles gang culture, even if they have not been to Los Angeles, to understand some of the dynamics of the subculture that exists. Weide's approach proves that holding space with empathy allows even the most stigmatized and marginalized to express themselves in ways that showcase their humanity. Cultural understanding is the key to overcoming the systems in place that divide and conquer through defaulting to an "otherizing" mentality of those perceived as different. Everyone has a reason for what they do; instead of immediately writing people off by their appearance, seek to hear one another out. If everybody did that, there might just be unification in making sure everyone is being supported and cared for day to day.

REFERENCES

Weide, Robert D. 2022. *Divide & Conquer: Race, Gangs, Identity, and Conflict (Studies in Transgression)*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.