

Street Weapons Commission – London
Professor Simon Hallsworth

Cherie Booth (Blair)

Well hello, Professor Simon Hallsworth of London Metropolitan University. Now... you hate the word 'gang', and think we shouldn't be using it so carelessly here in the UK. Can you tell us why?

Professor Simon Hallsworth

It's a very powerful term first of all. It's a term when people [INAUDIBLE], it explodes a series of other kind of connotations are actually picked up not least seeing its, well its history in America. It's not a neutral descriptive that somehow just explains the world out there, you know. It's a term that sorts of signifies some evil that's outside there, some evil that's organised and

confronting the good society, you know. It makes the problem of the streets a problem of evil outside us. Not, as we might also want to see a problem of the way that society organises itself to produce the outsiders that confront it. So it's a very dangerous term. It's also a term which is too easy. It's slack. People can say it's a way by which control agents try and make sense of a

complicated street world. And by imposing upon it often it does not possess. And the problem with the streets is not least a problem of its volatility. The problem with the street is the problem its actually lacks coherent organisation. If the violence was more organised it would not be quite as volatile as we tend to see it in this case of the United Kingdom, and that not least is confirmed

when one looks at Russia or a research we've not least conducted in Russia, which shows you can have violent sub-cultures that ritualise their violence, that organise their violence. It's the disorganised nature of the violence which is a real concern to me.

Cherie Booth (Blair)

So what is the reality then?

Professor Simon Hallsworth

The reality is kind of much more of a disorganised violent street world that's out there. It's

populated by an array of actors. I would never deny that there are not things called gangs. We can come back to how we might want to define that. But the actors are on the street are replete with defined individuals. There are real gangsters out there on the street. People that in

a parlance with the street, live their lives on road, by their wits, that use violent self-assertion to get what they want. People might in the legal economy because the formal economy will not deliver what they require to achieve status and respect that they believe they deserve, as we all do. And I think that the street it also full of kind of different loose networks. I mean most of

the kids you talk to you on the street, they don't talk about gangs, you know. [INAUDIBLE] when you hear control agents talk about wannabees and soldiers and complex divisions of neighbour, initiation ceremonies, recruitment strategies, they don't talk like this. You know, they inhabit fluid organisations. Not the kind of organisations that control agents inhabit.

The

trouble with control agents, they like to imagine the streets as if it's like a mirror image of their own organisations. And it's a long standing history of doing this that goes all the way back to the Middle Ages to be honest. And the trouble is by trying to impose upon the street a coherence it does not possess, instead of understanding the street and its violence, we create a

fantasy of the street. The trouble is is the fantasy of street then starts to shape the control response. We think we're dealing with organised gangs. We ran for organisation gang suppression programmes. Meanwhile, the problem of the street is elsewhere.

Commissioner

You have a healthy scepticism in my view about enforcement. And in what you've presented to us you take a structural approach, particularly in relation t causes, and how as a result of those causes these groups form within society. Having regard to that, what would you say are the things that the government should be seeking to do, I mean accepting that the police would enforce the

law etc., what should the government attempt to do in relation to the existence of these desperate groups of young people, engaged in such violent behaviour within communities?

Professor Simon Hallsworth

Mm. Well the first thing I think is that if we want sensible policy solutions we have to begin with a sensible understanding of the nature of the problem. So my first point is simply let's understand the problem in all its complexities. You start talking of gangs then invariably you move towards gang suppression and that might not be appropriate. Well, yes, you will then look

to the great incarcerated United States for solutions, which, unfortunately, is what the government is doing and lots of other people. So I think we need to sort of like soberly understand what the nature of the problem is. Now I think we should listen to the kids on the street. They talk about going on road. All that means is a way into a world where violence, life in the informal economy is part of what life is to them. It's their negative, often destructive

response to the contradictions they face being materially excluded from an exclusionary society. Now the question is it seems to me if you want to get to understand what the policies should be, we need to think well, what forces are propelling them on road. What are the forces attraction that lead them to want to be on road? Talking to some gangsters, to them, you know, this is

the life where they experience sovereign freedom. This is where they experience some break from the sort of like the hurdles, the barriers they face at every point in their life. So what are the forces that throw people down and we gotta work out how we can stop people from being thrown on road. We gotta understand how we can prevent people being attracted to what life is

on road, and that's difficult, because when you're faced with the possibility of sort of making life in finding assertion and worth through violence, through robbery, you've gotta find something better perhaps than what is provided as an alternative. Some people on road, people involved in these violent street cultures they wanna get out. What are we doing to help pull them out?

Yeah? And more than that, what are we doing to cement their life back into it? And this is a real problem. We've spoken to some people, they've clearly got serious behavioural difficulties. They've been processed through the criminal justice system and prison does not work, it screws them up. They go and they're back on road. They desperately trying to cling out, they're

trying to work their way out, and they're coming up against all sorts of obstacles. How can we do something for them? A few years ago I was working with Brian Paddick in Brixton when the street crime kind of, everyone was talking about street crime. The probation service then did a service into the living conditions of its clients, and it was catastrophic, and I

think you would see that repeated across the country. So you've gotta do something because not least the guys that come out, the older people on the street will provide criminal tutelage to younger people already being excluded as well. The ultimate key though I think lies in trying to create a different kind of approach to the one I think we have. I think unfortunately

we borrow too heavily from America. I think we borrow too heavily from what constitutes its way of dealing with its problematic poor youth, and that is naked repression. It locks them up. It mounts para-military operations against the streets. It talks zero tolerance. It criminalises and it imprisons. And unfortunately we've got prison numbers going through the ceiling and

that is a seed bed where gang culture, if you wanna call it that, will take root. We will produce the very monster we already think we fear. I think we need to need to sort of try and get some sense of what our social democratic foundations are because I think they have been lost. We need to start looking towards Europe. We've gotta start re-thinking about what the central

principles are that guide our kind of society, which I always thought was a commitment to social justice, a commitment to inclusion and unfortunately we're drifting in a way of exclusion and a repressive management of poverty.

Commissioner

Can I ask you what your model, what your preferred model would be in Europe? You've just mentioned Europe which when looking you said not as America but at some places in Europe. Where would you look in Europe as a better model to follow?

Professor Simon Hallsworth

Okay. I mean a couple of points. First, after having looked at issues around youth violence now for most of my academic career, I come away sometimes perplexed at the relationship

we have with children. We idolise youth and sometimes to madness, but at the same time, the British are extraordinarily afraid of young people. We demonise them recurrently. We criminalise them

recurrently, and I don't think you find quite that sense on the continent. You don't find quite that sense of looking at kids as a suspect community, and of course, you know, I do believe in that labelling theory. You treat people as suspects, they start to respond accordingly. They will wear their hoodies. They will be defiant. Let me give you a practical solution. I mean a great

thing happened this year. I was invited over to Genoa, at the behest of the university there to talk about the British situation, but also to look at what the Italians were doing to manage their growing gang menace. Now, like many other countries like Spain and Italy, have recently seen a massive growth in migration coming not least from Latin America. Part of that has brought over

a lot of Equadorians and South Americans, and they've brought gang culture with them. They've brought the multi-Latin kings and queens nation. They have brought the [NIETA] and these groups have formed not least as a kind of defensive response to what these young men feel as kind of naked exclusion in the societies they've migrated to. Now what's very interesting

in the case of Milan, they got a visit from an American gang specialist and following that the city launched a massive crackdown campaign on the gangs.

Commissioner

You're using the word 'gang's. Is there any reason why you should declare them as gangs and not declare...

Professor Simon Hallsworth

No [INAUDIBLE] never disputing there are not things called gangs. My problem is by trying to reduce the problem of the street into the gang that's when it gets problematic. The gang is part of the puzzle. Let's not see part of the puzzle as the whole picture. So back into this issue. There were real gangs here. They have a very collective sense of themselves as an organisation, but what was interesting is in Barcelona and Genoa they know recognise these groups as social movements, as cultural movements, as something you work with. I listened

to this beautiful testimony from the head of the Almighty Latin Kings and Queens Nation in Barcelona. It was incredible. He talked about coming to Spain equals as a cold country. How

it's only in the face of what he felt was pre-suppression that he helped and felt obliged to help get involved in the Almighty Latin Kings and Queens. But then he said it was never my... I never saw it as my business to be involved in violence. Violence came as part of a necessary adaptation. The group was always bigger than its violence. Now the authorities there recognise this,

you know, where kids get together, when they show so... collective efficacy in the midst of anatomising individualistic winner takes all society, you know, we need to work with those kids. Take them as they come. And that is a completely different approach than you find in America.

Cherie Booth (Blair)

But I don't quite work out what practically they did then?

Professor Simon Hallsworth

Well the argument was this is an interesting trade off, practically, is to say that well... in Milan they just used the iron fist. Yeah? In Barcelona...

Cherie Booth (Blair)

What did they do in Barcelona?

Professor Simon Hallsworth

In Genoa, they recognised the groups as cultural movements, formally. They signed almost a sort of declaration admitting them as such. In other words, they said we are part, you are part of us, you're part of the community, yeah? You're not a demonised outside. In other words, they tried to bring them in.

Cherie Booth (Blair)

And then what did they do?

Professor Simon Hallsworth

And then what they do is they sat and worked with them, they try and promote culture, they try and... in other words, the aim here is to try and see them, rather than seeing them as outside the circle of the community, they see them as the community. And that echoes a completely different set of ethics and principles than you find in the repressive responses that have prevailed in America.

Cherie Booth (Blair)

What, so you get them to bring the weapons in then?

Professor Simon Hallsworth

No, you try and negotiate with people so they don't take up weapons as a negative, destructive response to the predicaments they face living life shaped by poverty and ghetto.

Commissioner

If I could pursue my original question when I asked what is your preferred model? Is Genoa your preferred model in Europe to follow?

Professor Simon Hallsworth

Absolutely, yeah. And the other side of it if you want... let's not say I'm some bleeding heart liberal that says if people commit crimes, target the crime. If someone takes a knife to somebody, target that individual. Someone creates a street robbery, use your existing array of sort of safer streets policies to take them out. But, you know, so tackle the crime, don't tackle the group. If

groups are there, try and work with them, try and build them in. And of course it's not these programmes are not possible in the case of the United Kingdom. There are some brilliant programmes around. The question is is where are we putting our eggs? Are we putting our eggs in the inclusion basket? Or are we putting too many of them in the repression basked? I wanna suggest we do the latter.

Cherie Booth (Blair)

Thank you, Simon. That's explained that very clearly, I think. Thank you.