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Youth Gangs between Crime Control and Social Inclusion: A Critical Examination of Competing Paradigms in Italy

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Abstract
This article critically examines the competing paradigms that have shaped the study, representation, and governance of youth gangs in Italy. Drawing on a wide body of criminological, sociological, and ethnographic literature, the paper contrasts the dominant criminological paradigm—rooted in classical traditions of social control and risk management—with the constructivist and cultural approaches that emphasise the role of social exclusion, identity negotiation, and resistance in the formation of youth street groups. The so-called baby gang phenomenon in Italy provides a revealing case study of how public discourse, media narratives, and official data converge to construct youth groups as threats to public order. This construction, in turn, legitimises repressive policies and emergency legislation, often at the expense of preventive and inclusive social measures.

Keywords: *Youth gang; Immigration; Criminalisation; Resistance; Constructivism; Social control.*

1. Governance through Fear: Media Frames, Migration, and Youth Gang Narratives in Italy

Unlike in the United States, where the study of gangs has deep historical roots dating back to the Chicago School (Thrasher 1927), in Italy the phenomenon of youth gangs has followed a different trajectory. For a long time, these groups were considered alien to the native urban social fabric. Only in the early 2000s did the issue begin to attract the attention of public discourse, institutions, and scientific research. This shift coincided with rising social alarm linked to migration processes and the perception of urban insecurity (Dal Lago 1999; Maneri 2009; Saitta and Palidda 2010).

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Italian criminal law still lacks a specific offence category that directly addresses youth gangs. This is despite widespread awareness that juvenile deviance almost always takes on a group dimension. The role of peer groups in adolescence is central. Adolescents tend to spend time together and to engage in most of their actions collectively (Emler and Reicher 2000: 266). However, such group-based deviance generally does not suffice to define these groups as gangs. This is primarily due to the absence of self-identification as a gang and the often fluid and spontaneous nature of these groups.

Today, the prominence of youth gangs in public discourse and sociological research can largely be explained by media narratives. Since the 1990s, media coverage has increasingly linked issues of security and crime, often using alarmist and emergency-driven tones. Youth gangs have become a perfect synthesis of these intertwined concerns. The social anxiety surrounding (in)security, which reached Italy with some delay, found additional resonance in the growing and increasingly settled presence of foreign nationals. This includes a notable increase in the number of minors. These minors have been caught in an intensified process of criminalization. This mirrors similar dynamics affecting adult migrants, where their presence is predominantly associated with crime (Censis 2002: 23).

The perception of migrant youth as a potential threat to social order has consolidated in a changing social and cultural context. The previous culture of indulgence, protection, and exculpation has gradually eroded. This culture had long influenced both the penal system and youth social policies. It prevented young people from being viewed as a problematic group or associated their behaviour with danger, risk, or violence (Crocitti et al. 2013:166). When young people are both foreign and male, social perception increasingly reflects an "anxiety of assimilation" (DeWind and Kasinitz, 1997: 1097).

Episodes of urban violence involving foreign youth in northern Italian cities at the end of the 1990s received significant media attention. Reports on so-called *baby gangs* often lacked proper contextualization. These accounts reinforced the conflation of migration control and public security (Melossi 2015). A "stable media mechanism for producing fear" (Dal Lago 1999: 73) emerged. This mechanism found legitimacy in political debates and criminal policy choices. The media played a decisive role in constructing the image of so-called *baby gangs*. This English term is common in Italian media narratives but is not used in English-language sociology. Media representations have framed the presence of foreign youth as a public order and security problem (Maneri, 2009; Dal Lago, 1999).

This issue extends beyond crime reporting. The media, as agents of secondary socialization, contribute to creating stereotypes and interpretive frames. These directly shape collective perceptions and policy choices (Cohen, 1972; Hall et al. 1978). Italian media have progressively built a journalistic genre centred on gangs and *baby gangs*. This media representation constitutes the main context through which Latin American youth and adolescents are perceived (Queirolo Palmas 2006: 10). The media narrative constructs an imaginary where migrant minors are seen as potentially dangerous solely because they are "foreign". The dominant narrative focuses on emergency and critical aspects. It tends to intensify in response to specific events, creating a sense of continuous crisis. Little space is left for discussion of inclusion opportunities (Osservatorio di Pavia, 2024). The label *baby gang* emerged in a climate of growing anxiety over immigration and urban security. This label has influenced not only media portrayals but also institutional responses and public policies.

Within this context, Italian sociology began to engage with a phenomenon long studied in the United States, since Thrasher's pioneering research in Chicago (1927). The

Italian academic debate on youth gangs remains marked by a dichotomy between two opposing paradigms. The first is more traditional and closely aligned with media narratives. It focuses on deviance and views adolescence as a "pathological" and therefore "at risk" stage. The second is inspired, at least in part, by subcultural theories within sociology of culture and critical criminology. It examines youth conditions, lifestyles, habits, and behaviours, including deviant ones. As Prina (2019: 47) observes, the distinction lies between "an external gaze, focused on what gangs or youth groups do, and an internal gaze, focused on what they are."

These two approaches reflect broader divisions in the sociology of migration. One adopts a realist stance, relying on data and statistics to study and measure crime (Barbagli 1998). The other sees official data as the product of social construction processes of deviance, shaped through primary and secondary criminalization, and therefore as an object of study in itself.

This article aims to critically examine the emergence and development of these two analytical paradigms in Italian research on youth gangs, or more precisely, on what is labelled as *baby gangs*. It explores how media frames, political rhetoric, and academic approaches have interacted to produce specific representations and institutional responses. In this context, the term *baby gang* is considered both a social construct and a tool of governance. It contributes to the criminalization of migrant youth and reinforces broader dynamics of exclusion and control.

2. The Mainstream Paradigm and Definitions in the Study of Youth Gangs

The mainstream paradigm in the study of youth gangs is based on the assumption that these groups represent an objective and measurable form of collective deviance. Such deviance is seen as identifiable through consistent structural and behavioural characteristics. From this perspective, research focuses primarily on the criminal activity of youth gangs, which is regarded as their defining feature. Knowledge production relies heavily on statistics and, more generally, on official and institutional sources. As Feixa (2020: 63) notes, the gang is conceived as a "phenomenon bound to crime and socio-dependence, to which the response must be repression."

The North American tradition has played a decisive role in shaping this paradigm, both in the United States and in Europe. From the 1980s onward, amid significant shifts in crime control policies and criminological studies (Garland 2001), mainstream gang research gradually sidelined the cultural studies that had gained prominence in the preceding decade. The etiological study of crimes committed by group members—and of how group characteristics correlate with criminal behaviour—came to replace the qualitative ethnographic approaches that explored the social contexts in which gangs formed.

In this context, Malcolm Klein (Klein et al. 2001), when launching the Eurogang project, pointed to one of the key barriers to understanding youth gangs in Europe: the widespread tendency to deny the existence of gangs on the basis that they lacked the structural solidity of U.S. models. According to Klein, this so-called *Eurogang Paradox* stemmed from Europe's reluctance to label as "gangs" youth groups involved in illegal activities, due to their more fluid and informal nature compared to American gangs. This highlighted the need for a shared operational definition that would enable systematic international comparison.

Klein proposed defining a youth gang as "any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity" (Klein and Maxson 2006). This definition implies that crimes committed by gang members are not isolated acts of violence but rather frequent occurrences deeply embedded in broader social structures. However, there remains significant controversy over how these structures should be defined—whether in terms of ethnicity, rivalry, socioeconomic strain, or political oppression. Moreover, this definition does not clearly distinguish gangs from other violent groups, subcultures, friendship networks, or forms of organised crime. In fact, depending on local social conditions, all of these elements may fall within the definition's scope.

Despite these ambiguities, the Eurogang framework has underpinned numerous studies in both the United States and Europe. Researchers have gathered data on incidence rates, organisational structures, cultural contexts, and prevention policies (European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research 2021). Similarly, the U.S. federal definition, adopted by the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement, identifies a gang as an association whose purpose, at least in part, is to engage in criminal activity. Such associations use violence or intimidation to achieve their criminal objectives, and their members commit crimes or acts of juvenile delinquency—offences that, if committed by an adult, would constitute criminal acts—intended to enhance or preserve the group's power, reputation, or economic resources.

In Italy, a recent study (Transcrime, 2022) sought to map the phenomenon of youth gangs through interviews with key informants. These gangs were defined as groups involved in criminal and deviant activities, including brawls, assaults, bodily harm, bullying, disturbances of the peace, vandalism, theft, and robbery. The study found that most of these groups were composed predominantly of Italian youths. Groups with a majority of foreign members were less frequent and were mainly concentrated in northern and central regions.

The research explains this phenomenon as an attempt by young people to compensate for the absence or dysfunction of relationships with families or educational institutions, within a broader context of socioeconomic disadvantage. Additional contributing factors include difficulties in social relationships and challenges to inclusion, particularly in the case of gangs with foreign roots. In such cases, gang membership appears partly driven by the need for young people to assert themselves within a society in which they do not feel fully accepted.

3. Critiques of the Mainstream Criminological Paradigm in Youth Gang Studies

Although the mainstream paradigm offers institutions a reassuring and immediately operational interpretative framework, it has not been immune to criticism from the scientific community. A first area of critique concerns the implicit assumption that official data provide a neutral and objective representation of social reality. Several scholars have warned of the limitations and ambiguities inherent in this approach. The data provided by institutions are the result of selective practices and of primary and secondary processes of criminalization (Melossi 2003; De Giorgi 2010; Ferraris 2021): foreign minors, in particular, are more exposed to police controls, more frequently reported, and less protected in judicial proceedings compared to their peers.

This generates a systematic distortion that fuels the statistical overrepresentation of foreigners in deviance-related phenomena and contributes to the construction of a stereotyped and artificially alarmist image of youth gangs. Such an image, in turn, serves to justify repressive measures that do not always correspond to empirical realities.

A further, related level of critique concerns the stigmatizing and discriminatory effects produced by the uncritical adoption of the realist paradigm. By using terms such as "baby gang," the media and institutions foster public discourse that systematically associates youth deviance with immigration. This creates an implicit equation between ethnic origin and dangerousness (Maneri 2009; Binotto and Martino 2004) and obscures the social and cultural dimensions of youth groups, which cannot be reduced to mere categories of deviance or threats to public order (Feixa 2020). The emphasis on the pathological nature of youth groupings undermines understanding of their cultural dimensions and identity-building functions.

Brotherton and Barrios (2004) have shown that gangs are not merely sites of deviance production. They also serve as spaces of resistance, solidarity, and identity construction for marginalized youth. The criminalization of marginalized youth groups fails to consider the positive functions these groups may play in terms of mutual support, identity formation, and resilience in the face of social exclusion. The dominant narrative thus obscures the diversity of youth experiences and legitimizes interventions that often reinforce the very mechanisms of marginalization they claim to address. Ethnographic research conducted in Italy and other European contexts (Queirolo Palmas and Torre 2005; Selmini and Crocitti 2018) highlights how migrant youth groups often act as spaces of socialization, identity development, and symbolic resistance to discrimination and urban segregation.

By focusing primarily on repression, the mainstream criminological paradigm overlooks the transformative potential of these experiences. It also hinders the development of genuinely inclusive and participatory policies. As Wacquant (2001) observes, the obsession with security and urban decay ends up concealing the structural roots of marginality and reducing urban governance to the policing of poverty. This process of constructing an "internal enemy" reproduces long-standing exclusionary logics that serve to consolidate security policies and legitimize repressive measures. The realist paradigm lends itself easily to instrumentalization within emergency policies that, far from addressing the root causes of youth deviance, limit themselves to punitive and short-sighted interventions.

Despite these criticisms, the mainstream criminological paradigm has continued to exert a strong influence on public policies and media representations of youth gangs, both in the United States and Europe. The model has sustained a security-oriented imaginary that has justified repressive interventions, emergency laws, and urban surveillance strategies. These measures have often been implemented without any real assessment of their social impact or their consequences for local communities (Simon 2007; Garland 2001).

In the Italian context, this paradigm has been embraced and adapted since the early 2000s, particularly in connection with the media and political construction of the so-called *baby gang* phenomenon. This has occurred in a political climate marked by emergency discourse and security policies targeting migration. The adoption of the *security decrees* and, more recently, the "Caivano decree" (Pulito 2023) are paradigmatic examples of how the social alarm built around *baby gangs* has been translated into extraordinary legislative

measures. These measures are often lacking in solid empirical foundations and a long-term strategic vision.

4. Youth Groups as Sites of Identity, Resistance, and Socialisation

The second line of research is based primarily on qualitative and ethnographic studies. It seeks to broaden the scope of inquiry to include the biographies and experiences of young people who are part of informal groupings, in order to provide a contextualised and nuanced reading of a complex social reality. Unlike the opposing paradigm, this perspective views the gang as a social organisation whose goal "should not be to avoid group membership but rather to eliminate violent behaviours and to value its cultural and identity-claiming components" (Feixa 2020: 63). Through a constructivist or cultural approach, these formations can be understood within broader processes of social exclusion, identity negotiation, and resistance. Qualitative and ethnographic research is employed to illuminate their internal logics (Brotherton and Barrios 2004; Feixa 2020).

From this perspective, the definition of "gang" or "baby gang" is primarily seen as an external label, often imposed by institutions and the media, rather than an objective social reality. The central question thus becomes how certain youth groups come to be constructed as problematic or dangerous through discursive dynamics and practices of control (Hallsworth and Young 2008). The focus shifts from *what gangs do* to *how they are constructed as gangs*. Brotherton (2008) rejected the concept of the street gang in favour of the term "street youth organisation," particularly with reference to groups in which criminal activity is not dominant or coexists with community and pro-social initiatives. Such groups, he argued, are: "A group formed by young people and adults belonging to marginalized social classes, which provides its members the construction of an identity of resistance, an opportunity for individual and social empowerment, a voice of challenge to the dominant culture, a refuge from the tensions and pressures of daily life of the neighborhood or ghetto, as well as a spiritual enclave where sacred rituals can be generated and exercised" (Brotherton and Barrios 2004: 23).

These groups offer hospitality, support, protection, identity, and sociability in a discriminatory and marginalising social context. They can thus be removed from the criminalisation process through which they are often seen and described as criminal gangs. Even antisocial behaviours may be read as symbolic expressions of non-conformism, transforming "a mark of marginalisation into an emblem of identity" (Feixa 2020: 20). Such groups function as spaces of agency and cultural production through which collective solutions for adaptation are sought. Studies on London's mixed-heritage youth (Back 1996) and Central American maras (Rodgers and Muggah 2009) highlight the complexity of identity trajectories and the role of youth groups as sites of symbolic resistance, solidarity, and meaning-making.

Territorially confined to the suburban peripheries of cities and socially constrained within the most disadvantaged strata, foreign youth thus seek to reclaim public space in search of an identity that public discourse often seeks to pathologises. As Brotherton and Barrios (2004) observe, an alternative to the security paradigm can be founded on recognising street organisations as forms of resistance and resilience.

In the 1960s, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, drawing on Gramscian concepts of hegemony and subalternity, initiated influential studies of working-class conditions. It examined youth subcultures as pockets of counter-hegemonic resistance to the dominant order. The focus shifted towards the ways in which emerging forms of political militancy—particularly involving youth, students,

ethnic minorities, and the forms of action, mobilisation, and organisation they adopted (such as student militancy, protests, extra-parliamentary groups, urban uprisings, arson attacks, and housing movements)—were defined and labelled (Benvenga and Rinaldi 2020: 24). On this basis, research began to consider gangs as a cultural practice rather than as criminal groups, adopting predominantly ethnographic approaches.

Unlike in the English context, the approach that identifies street groups as sites of socialisation and identity recognition—and defines youth groups as a "community of peers," composed of young people who share similar experiences of disadvantage and marginalisation and who find within the group a space for recognition and identity construction—has been developed in studies of Latino youth in Spain and Italy and of Arab youth in France (Selmini and Crocitti 2018).

In the constructivist and critical analysis of youth groupings, comparative experiences from Europe and North America offer valuable insights into how institutional practices and public policies contribute to constructing the "gang issue" and sometimes sustain its persistence. In Italy, the constructivist paradigm gained ground in the 2000s as a counterpoint to the dominant security narrative. Studies such as those by Queirolo Palmas (2006; 2010) have shown that the so-called *baby gang* phenomenon is more the product of media and political framing than the expression of a genuine organised crime problem. This creates a spiral: the alarmist media frame produces social alarm, which legitimises repressive policies that increase control over migrant youth groups, making them even more visible as targets of intervention.

Similar dynamics have been documented in France and Spain, where studies of the *banlieues* and *barrios* (Mucchielli 2008; Feixa 2020) show how peripheral youth groups are often seen solely as threats, obscuring their identity and cultural dimensions. In the UK, Hallsworth and Young (2008) describe "gang talk" as a public discourse that produces gangs more than it describes them. However, a limitation of such studies lies in their comparability. Since these are studies of specific groups in given urban contexts, it is difficult to generalise the findings or extend them to forms of socialisation in other settings.

5. Conclusions: Rethinking Youth Gangs: Paradigms, Policies, and Social Inclusion

Over the years, the study of youth gangs has attracted increasing interest, as evidenced by major projects following Eurogang. These include the *International Self-Report Delinquency Study (ISRD)*—probably the most comprehensive longitudinal juvenile self-report study—the *EU Street Violence* project on violence committed by youth groups in public spaces, and the *Transgang* project, founded in 2018 by researchers at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona.

In Italy, the debate on so-called *baby gangs* has developed around two main interpretative paradigms. The first, rooted in classical criminological tradition, focuses on identifying and repressing the risks posed by youth groups. It relies on official quantitative data and an objectifying view of deviance, assuming a direct and measurable link between deviant behaviour and threats to public order (Barbagli 1998). This paradigm, applied to the Italian case of *baby gangs*, has become the dominant interpretative framework at the intersection of criminology, public policy, and media discourse. Its strength lies in offering an immediate and operational reading of the phenomenon: the gang is defined as a

concrete threat to public order, to be identified, monitored, and repressed through instruments of social control.

However, this approach presents numerous theoretical, methodological, and practical limitations. The label *baby gang* is often applied to highly heterogeneous realities, ranging from informal peer socialisation groups to genuine networks of petty crime, without sufficient analytical distinction (Queirolo Palmas 2006). This has produced terminological confusion that makes it difficult to distinguish between occasional deviance, peer socialisation practices, and actual forms of organised crime (Binotto and Martino, 2004). As a result, repressive policies are often endorsed that risk failure in the long term and contribute to the stigmatisation and self-segregation of youth groups (Smithson, Ralphs and Williams 2013).

One of the most problematic aspects concerns the reliance on institutional data, which, far from being neutral, reflect processes of social selection and political decision-making. As Fassin (2013) points out, policing and the statistics it produces contribute to creating the reality they claim to measure: "Policing is not simply a mirror of crime, but a creator of crime as a category of thought and action" (p. 284). This observation fully applies to the Italian context, where the figure of the *baby gang* is often the product of an interplay between selective policing practices, media narratives, and political strategies.

The result has been a shift of focus from social and inclusion policies to repression and containment. This shift has impoverished public debate and weakened prevention strategies grounded in understanding the social and cultural causes of youth marginality (Wacquant 2001). The realist paradigm has thus become the dominant interpretative framework, with a strong emphasis on official data and statistics as tools for identifying, describing, and containing juvenile deviance (Barbagli 1998). These policies are part of a broader context of penal populism, where youth deviance is managed through the expansion of criminal law and zero-tolerance logic (Anastasia, Anselmi and Falcinelli 2015).

By contrast, the constructivist paradigm draws on interactionist and cultural perspectives (Becker 1963; Cohen 1972; Brotherton and Barrios 2004). It sees youth groups as products of social and symbolic processes and as responses to experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and marginalisation (Queirolo Palmas, 2006). This approach also highlights the role of institutions and the media in constructing representations of deviance and generating moral panic.

While the classical criminological paradigm offers immediate and reassuring operational responses for public opinion and institutions, it tends to oversimplify the complexity of the phenomenon, overlooking internal group dynamics and the social conditions that generate them. By contrast, the constructivist paradigm calls for deeper analysis, though it is sometimes criticised for underestimating the real risks associated with certain violent behaviours. As Selmini and Crocitti (2018) argue, we should move beyond a "single model" of gang or youth group (Feixa 2020: 102)—often identified with the criminalising model that dominates the American tradition and serves, even as a point of distinction, as a reference in sociocriminological literature on youth group sociality.

It is more useful to acknowledge the multiplicity and complexity of street group forms. We should continue to problematise the factors underlying the formation of youth groups, their internal dynamics, their interactions with peers and other generations, and their protest and resistance practices. These can include deviant and violent behaviours, but such elements may combine along a continuum, at the extremes of which lie delinquent gangs on one side and recreational groups on the other, with "a plurality of hybrid groups"

in between (Feixa 2020: 102). Certainly, an integrated approach could draw useful elements from both paradigms: the criminological paradigm's capacity to measure and compare phenomena, and above all, the cultural perspective's ability to capture complexity and specificity in relation to the structural social processes that fuel marginality. Such an operation is possible only by interrupting the short circuit that sees media representation, political discourse, and often scientific research converge in a criminalising and repressive approach.

This implies a shift in perspective: from control to participation, from repression to prevention, and from an obsession with security to the promotion of citizenship rights. It entails moving beyond emergency logic in favour of relaunching social policies aimed at reducing structural inequalities, ensuring equal educational and employment opportunities, and supporting families on paths towards inclusion. This can be achieved through community mediation programmes, school and work inclusion projects, co-designed social initiatives, and the strengthening of local networks, with a focus on empowerment and participation. A shift in policy and research focus would entail recognising youth groups not merely as problems to contain, but as actors engaged in cultural production and resistance. Understanding the spatial and temporal embeddedness of youth practices allows for more nuanced interventions that respect their agency and social significance (Feixa, Leccardi and Nilan 2016).

Such interventions can help rebuild social ties, promote youth agency, and reduce conflict by recognising the social and cultural aspirations of the young people who form groups and youth gangs, seeing them as agents of social and cultural transformation. In a context of pervasive security obsession, security becomes the overriding horizon of public policy, and criminal law expands at the expense of social policy. Youth marginality, far from being addressed at its structural roots—such as educational inequalities, housing precarity, or ethnic barriers—is reduced to a question of public order (Wacquant, 2001).

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