



## Asphalt bandits: Fear, insecurity, and uncertainty in the Latin American city

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### ABSTRACT

This article looks at the *malandro*, the bandit of Venezuela's poor neighborhoods, as a paradoxical and hybrid figure of the urban Caribbean, a virtuoso actor of the cultures of *emergency* and *Asphalt*. Threatened by global uncertainty, postcolonial Creole cities turn to black Saints from Africa, as well as to creole gangsters from the barrio's backstreets. *Malandros* are delinquent yet consummate actors of the urban scene. At the turn of the twenty-first century, *malandros* have been thrown out of the margins to the center of society, becoming simultaneously heroes and enemies of the people. *Malandros* are crafty, but their lives are violent and they die young. Yet, they embody the shape of things to come. If the barrio reflects the violence of postcolonial urbanization, the violence of the *malandro* reflects, in an inverted image, injustice in a globalized world. These injustices are what we ought to think through and destroy.

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### R   S U M  

Dans cet article, on cherchera   montrer que le *malandro*, bandit des quartiers populaires du Venezuela, est aussi une figure hybride et paradoxale des Cara bes urbaines, acteur virtuose de la *culture d'urgence* et de *l'asphalte*. Menac es par l'incertitude globale, les villes cr oles post-coloniales remettent leur destin aux Saints noirs venus d'Afrique et aux gangsters m tis venus des ruelles du quartier, les *malandros*, d linquants mais acteurs de g nie de la sc ne urbaine mondialis e.   la fois h ros et ennemi du peuple, le *malandro* s'est retrouv , au tournant du si cle, au c ur de la soci t  et non plus dans la marge. Le *malandro* est un malin, mais sa vie est violente cependant et il meurt bien avant l' ge. Il porte pourtant « l'avenir de l'homme ». Car si le barrio refl te la violence de l'urbanisation post-coloniale, la violence du *malandro* refl te, en un motif invers  par son insoumission, toute l'injustice du monde globalis . C'est celle-ci qu'il nous appartient de penser et de d truire.

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### 1. Fear of the bandit as urban feeling

For over 3000 years the city has been the target of fantasies, obsessions, and projections of all kinds. When looking at cities, neither the sociologist nor the geographer can evade the contradictory feeling at the foundation of their inquiry: the city is both seduction and fear. In fact the city seduces *because* it inspires fear. When specialists of urban space look at the question of fear in cities, or more precisely at the creation of an *urbanism of fear* (Pattaroni and Pedrazzini, 2010), they feel compelled to embody their thought in a familiar "figure," a political character (Jasper, *in press*: 31). This avatar of the city might be a place, a person or a character that roots ideas about cities and the story of city people. In this paper our figure,

both friendly and menacing, is the *malandro*, the (male) bandit of Venezuela's tropical asphalt. Looking at him,<sup>1</sup> we shall be able to reflect upon the new global urbanism, upon an urban discourse that transforms our urban fears into urban form, into an urban space of fear that is at times bluntly understandable, and ambivalent at others. This shall be our main purpose: the discursive production of urban fear and insecurity, and the *malandro's* role in envisioning an alternative brand of urbanity.

On a global scale, albeit with a variety of local meanings, an urban culture of fear has established a figure of "evil": the gang. Although this symbol has been haunting the North American imagination for nearly a century – from the Mafia-style gang of the 1920s and 1930s (Thrasher, 1927; Wirth, 1928; Wythe, 1943) to the

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<sup>1</sup> Even if female bandits operate in the barrios of Latin America, the *malandro* character is archetypically male and macho. Moreover, the Caracas youth gangs are almost exclusively formed of young men.

ghetto gang of the 1990s (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003; Wacquant, 1992a) – it has nowadays found an “alter-modern” meaning that we may call the “tropical gang,” as seen in a few recent movies.<sup>2</sup>

The “gang” is, in our view, a gathering of teenagers and young adults that acts as a community, a support group mainly for the economic welfare, and also for the socialization of its members, for the economic exploitation of the scarce resources of disadvantaged neighborhoods, and for the protection of its members from mainstream institutions – mostly penal institutions, and also, to an extent, from family, low-end work, and church. But the gang is also an icon, a myth of urban life. Understood thus, the gang is as much a reality of our fragmented urban spaces as an emblematic figure of urban modernity, of urban fears of crime, the underclass, or inassimilable minorities. The gang embodies perceptions of the city through the prism of fear. Think for instance of the ascription of the male gender to gang members. The widely held view that (nearly all) gang members are male is more a manifestation of imagined meanings of gender, youth, community and family, meanings that are heaped upon poor, young, urban minority members. A youth gang with an all-female leadership would elicit a different reaction. Gangs are more readily *imaginable* as gatherings of predatory, unattached, disaffected young *males*.

In our understanding of modernity, we provisionally take for granted that Western modernity, as defined in Europe and North America, is but one of many shapes of modernity – if a powerful one. In the social margins of the North and West, and in the South, local means of cultural resistance have been put into place. We also postulate that these cultural expressions have not grown outside of this modernity, but rather inside of it, so that they now stand as *alternate modernities*. Therefore we affirm that the gang partakes in these *alter-modernities* that have earned some attention lately,<sup>3</sup> and that gangs have a lot to teach us about the urban aspects of alternate modernisms.

This constellation of modernities might be labeled postmodern, but we choose to stick with “modern” – with *late modern*. Not only because Western modernity has shown its limitations (if only economically), but also because “post-modernity” is riddled with lacunae of its own, particularly in the social and cultural realms. It seems that modernity has not yet run its full course (Soja, 2000). Two conclusions arise from these caveats: the gang is a prominent figure of urban modernity; in Latin America, it is a figure of alter-modernity.

Our definition of representation includes *feelings*, understood as perceptions leading to subjective understandings. On the negative side, feelings of insecurity are based, in theory, on sensations such as fear, stress, the feeling of being threatened. Such feelings can also be associated with positive emotions, when insecurity induces the satisfaction of “living on the edge.” This emotion is craved by many bandits, who invoke it to put a silver lining on their dangerous existences.

Similarly, feelings of insecurity split the gang member into a double figure, good and evil: *malandros* are “bad guys,” authors of evil deeds. They also are do-gooders at the community level, *barrio heroes* – the *barrio* being understood as the self-built popular neighborhoods of Latin American cities. Precisely, this paper will proceed from a case study of the *malandro*, the bandit of Venezuela’s poor quarters, as one such double figure: a threat to public security and a *barrio hero*, mythified into a *Santeria* “Saint” with

many followers.<sup>4</sup> As with other case studies, context gives meaning to character: postcolonial Creole cities, threatened by globalized uncertainty, driven by an urgency that rhythms daily practices and transforms daily routine into street fighting, have entrusted their fate to black saints from Africa, traditional African deities merged with Catholic saints. And, when necessary, to creole gangsters from the alleyways – *malandros* – that, even though they are local actors of a local “scene” – that is, Venezuela’s cities – will be evoked here as producers of alternate modernity in the new globalized city.

Venezuela is famous for its near-inexhaustible oil reserves and for its President. Less known is the fact that this country may be one of the most urbanized; estimates vary, but the rate of urbanization of its population hovers between 85 and 90%. Caracas, the capital city that was a beacon of opulence from the 1940s to the 1980s, has become a fragmented metropolis where two thirds of the population live in “barrios,” poor, self-built neighborhoods, situated on hillsides overlooking the planned landscape of freeways and wealthier quarters. Caracas now stands as yet another archetypal figure of urban chaos. Much of its present-day fame stems from its “insecurity”: at around 200 murders per 100,000 residents in 2009, its homicide rate contrasts even with Bogota’s 23 and Sao Paulo’s 14 (in 2007, much less than Baltimore’s 44 or Washington DC’s 36).<sup>5</sup> Caracas now vies for the unenviable title of the Americas’ most dangerous city, alongside Rio de Janeiro, Ciudad Juarez, or El Salvador’s Soyapango. According to sociologist Roberto Briceño León, Venezuela saw 19,000 violent deaths in 2009.<sup>6</sup> While this grievous situation stems from persistent poverty, Venezuelan public opinion has traditionally blamed it on *malandros*, the *barrios*’ petty criminals, and to their inordinate craving for firearms. While this view is not entirely inaccurate, it tends to disempower *malandros*, to disregard their vast capabilities.

Consequently, we choose the *malandro* as our avatar of urbanity precisely because he conveys the double meaning of urban fear. The *malandro*, as a hybrid and paradoxical figure of the urban Caribbean, is a virtuoso in a culture of emergency and asphalt.<sup>7</sup> His split persona, his paradoxical figure as both a folk hero and “folk devil,” warrants a dual look at urbanity, as both “good” and “evil,” as both seducing and threatening.

As our understanding of late modern cities seems to unravel, one of the few analytical processes remaining is the analysis of emotions arising from the use of given urban spaces, and from the encounter of given urban characters – or merely their ghosts, haunting the scene long after they left.<sup>8</sup> Hero and public enemy, the *malandro* found himself, at the turn of the twenty-first century, thrown from the margins onto center stage. His *barrio* reflects the violence of post-colonial urbanization; *malandro* violence reflects, in reverse, the injustice of the global order. The *malandro* blurs the binary vision that we have of the city, of its poor neighborhoods and their residents; the *malandro* also blurs representations of late modern cities. We believe that this blur enables us to rethink the city, not merely because it is a departure from a previous state of

<sup>4</sup> In Venezuela, in a *Santeria* tradition similar to the Cuban *Orishas*, *malandros* are entitled to their “court” (*corte malandra*), a kind of dedicated, special section (Ferrándiz Martín, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Simon Romero, “Venezuela, More Deadly Than Iraq, Wonders Why,” *New York Times*, 22 August 2010; “High Crime Rates Make Venezuela One of the Most Violent Countries,” *El Universal*, 27 August 2010 ([www.eluniversal.com](http://www.eluniversal.com), retrieved September 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Data from Venezuela’s Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, chaired by Professor Briceño León, even surpass the United States, with a population ten times smaller!

<sup>7</sup> In the early 1990s, we have called *culture of emergency* the fast-paced urban culture of the Latin American metropolis (Pedrazzini and Sanchez, 1998), a concept which led us later to *Asphalt culture*.

<sup>8</sup> On ghosts in the city, see Steve Pile, *Real Cities: Modernity, space, and the Phantasmagorias of city Life* (London: Sage, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> For instance *Cidade de Deus* (released 2002), directed by F. Meirelles and K. Lund; *Tropas de elite* (2007), by J. Padilha, in Brazil; *La vida loca* (2009), directed by Christian Poveda (then murdered by the gang he filmed), in Salvador; and *Sin nombre* (2009), by Cary Fukunaga, in Central America and Mexico.

<sup>3</sup> Alter-modernity was the theme of the 2009 triennial exhibition at the Tate Gallery.

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