Rebels without a Cause? The Street Gangs of late 1940s Toronto.

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Purpose

• To suggest that Toronto’s historic air pollution generated social pathology.
Youth Gangs in Toronto

• An established tradition pre-1945
• Youth territoriality associated with parks, playgrounds, school catchments etc.,
  • Stanley Park Gang, Park Nine Gang
  • Riverdale Park Gang
  • Christie Pits Gang
  • Withrow Park Gang
  • Gay Cats
  • Spadina Hornets
Social Work Consensus

• By 1930s a consensus established
• Strong association of youth gangs with slums, broken homes, deep social need
• Survey work by Kenneth Rogers et al, early 1940s
Mid 1940s

- Emergence of new patterns of youth misbehaviour in public space
- Spadina-College firework gangs 1946
- Kew Beach Riot - Halloween 1945
  - Zoot-suiters gather at Yonge-Gerrard
  - Window-breaking Dovercourt & College
  - 7000 youth involved in disturbances on Queen St E and an attack on the Main St police station.
Former Station 10
Kew Beach Riot:
Toronto Star 1 Nov 1945
Mid 1940s

• Lake Wilcox 22 Jun 1946:
  • Police battle for 3 hours with 500 unruly youth at a dance

• Queen & Shaw 24 Nov 1946
  • Four youth gang members trash the New Gore Vale Restaurant

• Weston Apr 1947
  • Small riot at a Masonic Hall youth dance

• Parkdale 26 Jun 1947
  • Cutter Gang attacks Bronson Gang on Sorauren Ave
Mid 1940s

• Surge in youth misbehaviour violates the social work consensus

• Gang danger not in slums, but in inner and outer suburbs, kids from stable homes, parents with a decent work ethic.

• Street gangs take on new forms:
  • Larger territories
  • Distinct dress codes, musical preferences
  • Public notoriety
Gangs of the late 1940s

- Beanery Gang
- Junction Gang
- Tipps
- Boon Gang
- Balmy Beach Gang
- Cabbagetown Boys
- And others
Dress Codes

• Beanery Gang:
  • Bomber jackets, plaid shirts
  • Zoot pants/strides, long zoot chain

• Junction Gang:
  • Drape pants, zoot suit
  • Pancake fedoras, Chicago style
Hangouts

• Beanery Gang:
  • Orchard Restaurant, later Samie’s Food Box at College & Dovercourt

• Junction Gang:
  • Pool Hall at Keele & Dundas

• Boon Gang
  • Fish & Chip shop, St Clair Ave W
Territoriality

- West Toronto industrial rail corridor the big dividing line between Junction and Beanery
- Zone of intense conflict
Territoriality

• Rogers in early 1940s:
  • 3 gangs per sq. km

• Late 1940s
  • Beanery Gang territory approx. 46 km²
  • Junction Gang territory approx. 64 km²
Territoriality

• Before mid 1940s gang clashes were localised
• Later 1940s gang clashes extend over the entire urban area and well beyond
  • Gangs stealing trucks, cars to reach distant gang clashes
  • Suburban and ex-urban dance halls, resorts, burger joints
  • Toronto gangs clash at Lake Wilcox, Musselman’s Lake, Malton, Huttonville
Territoriality

• Wasaga Beach 21 Aug 1948
  • 100 Toronto youth from Tipps and Beanery Gangs brawl along eastern beachfront.
  • 13 arrests.
  • Youths battle police for 4 hours.
Beach Scene, Wasaga Beach, Canada
TWO MEN SITTING on Wasaga Inn upstairs balcony, at left, were beaten up by about 20 gang members who rushed through hotel and fled after administering beating. Police reinforcements from as far as Barrie took four hours to clean up the riots as the teen-age gangs from Toronto ran wild, fighting each other, looting stores.
MIDWAY EMPLOYEE Eddie Stumpf said he was beaten by gang when he went to aid Mrs. Jack Lighthbourne, confronted by looters brandishing bats. Control men followed.

MRS. LIGTHBOURNE screamed for help as gang rushed to hotel to beat men.

JACK LIGTHBOURNE came to wife’s aid and chased rioting ‘teen-agers’.

ALSO beaten when gang jumped him was Victor Kehoe. Thirteen face charges.

JACK Kirshner of Montreal was beaten on balcony. Scores taken into custody.
Territoriality

• Long Branch Jan 1949
  • 60 youth riot outside an all-night restaurant at Brown’s Line & Lakeshore
  • Junction Gang vs local youth
Greater Toronto and Nearby Centres

CONVICT FOUR JUNCTION BOYS
DROP CHARGES AGAINST EIGHT

JAMES PICKETT AND JOHN O'HEARN
They pleaded guilty
Rebels without a Cause?

• A surge of unprecedented youth misbehaviour in public space in later 1940s
• Territorially extensive, highly mobile
• Strongly motivated by the agendas of adolescence
• Not slum kids, often suburban, not deprived
• Rogers youth gangs, late 1940s gangs shared the same age cohort:
  • Those born late 1920s, early 1930s
Rebels without a Cause?

• Nevin in the 1990s showed a strong correlation between rise of youth crime and the rise in automotive lead emissions
• 23-year time lag between two correlating curves
Lead Levels in Toronto

- Tetraethyl lead added to gasoline in late 1920s
- Lead emitted from auto exhaust in Toronto per year:
  - 1930: 380 tonnes
  - 1950: 1,000 tonnes
  - 1974: 1,740 tonnes
- Mid 1970s: inner suburb lead levels in soil around 500 ppm.
Rebels without a Cause?

• Toronto’s late 1940s youth gangs recruited from the first generation of youths to be exposed to tetra-ethyl lead throughout their lives.
• Came from areas with major motor traffic
• A correlation, not causality
• But distinct possibility that urban air pollution generated significant social pathology in the urban past (and present?).