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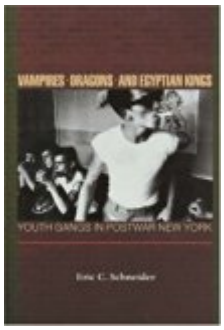

Eric C. Schneider. *Vampires, Dragons and Egyptian Kings: Youth Gangs in Postwar New York.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999. 318 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-00141-8.

Reviewed by Jennifer Trost

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Public concern with juvenile crime and its increasingly violent nature has prompted many politicians to reconsider American policy and institutions for juveniles. As many communities struggle to understand recent juvenile violence, Eric Schneider's new book about the lives of young men in New York City who joined gangs after World War II offers insight into their motives. Schneider explores the meaning of belonging to a gang and suggests that the lack of economic opportunity in the post-war New York economy led many working-class young men to turn to gangs and the streets. He analyzes the relationship between the formation of gender identity and gangs, specifically the ways young men used gangs to define themselves as men. The gang members' emerging masculinity and identity combined with a youth culture to create a volatile mix of alienation and violence.

Schneider suggests a tight link between changes in the post-war New York economy and its effects on working-class masculinity. He traces the effects of the growing service economy, urban renewal, suburbanization, and migration of African-Americans and Puerto Ricans to New York. These developments set up competition for residential space, jobs, and resources. Schneider is less concerned with the ethnicity of gang members because important geographical boundaries, what he calls "defending place," reflected residential segregation and were the basis of early post-war gang organization. Ultimately all these young men, regardless of their race or ethnicity, were subjected to the same frustrations brought about by the emergence of a service economy that offered them little economic security. These young men, Schneider suggests, turned to gangs because they were denied meaningful roles in the urban labor market and, in order to assert their masculinity, they turned to the streets and gained power through public reputation, a code of honor, and use of violence to establish authority. Chapter Four, "Becoming Men: The Use of the Street in Defining Masculinity," is the heart of Schneider's argument. He writes, "Young men who rejected the demands of these principal sites of adolescent socialization [school, labor market, family] found in street gangs the opportunity to win power, prestige, female adulation, and a masculine iden-

tity." (p. 107) He shows that African-Americans and Puerto Ricans experienced humiliation and subordination at school, demeaning casual labor at work, and lack of role models and stability in their families. He examines municipal responses to gangs and social workers' attempts to mediate among them to reduce violence and deaths. He does not attempt to calculate the incidence or rate of violence or count the number of gangs or gang members. As a result, Schneider's book would be of great interest to a variety of readers.

Schneider's book addresses three related fields: juvenile justice, gender studies, and urban history. Even though young men have committed the overwhelming majority of juvenile crimes in America, the understanding of their motives has not matched scholars' ability to simply quantify their behavior. *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings* attempts to explain not only the development of gangs after World War II but more importantly their meaning to the members and how gang members interpreted post-war changes as they came of age. Schneider builds on the work by social historians of childhood and adolescence such as John Modell and Steven Schlossman who have captured the voices of children and their families as they established their identity or encountered justice institutions. Schneider's conclusions also complement those of historians who examine the relationship between gender and crime. Estelle Freedman and Mary Odem argue that reformatories and juvenile courts regulated femininity and sexuality, while Schneider argues that gangs symbolized the breakdown of a masculine identity based on economic independence. Finally, Schneider shows how post-war gangs resulted from suburbanization and the decline in manufacturing that left behind many working-class African-American and Puerto Rican young men. Thus, urban life contributed to a rise in crime rather than inhibited it.

The personal stories and everyday lives of these alienated youth reflect the richness of Schneider's sources. He uses personal interviews with former gang members, autobiographies, gang workers' field notes, comments by gang members in studies by social workers, academic studies, newspapers, district attorney files, state supreme court records, and mayoral papers. These sources lend themselves neatly to his life-course approach and enable him to show how joining a gang coincided with emerging identity, how gangs offered surrogate families and schools, and why boys left gangs as they grew older, got married, or tired of watching their friends die. Schneider's study confirms what many criminologists have found, that young men "age out" of a life of crime. This finding is particularly important at a time when many states have reduced judicial discretion and the juvenile system increasingly diverts juveniles to the adult system.

Schneider's attempt to link working-class masculine identity with the market and gangs is more intuitive than definitive. Some of the gang behavior that Schneider ascribes to working class youth also applied to middle class youth. Single-sex peer groups, strong identification with peer culture, and sexual assault of women were not unique to the working class. A code of honor, concern with public reputation, and use of violence to establish masculinity were, of course, not unique to gangs in post-World War II New York. Schneider's argument is similar to Bertram Wyatt-Brown's about the Old South in which chivalry, dueling, and highly sexualized challenges worked together to maintain hierarchy and masculinity. Indeed, these extralegal, ritualized methods of establishing authority continued in the New South with the surge in lynching and vigilante justice in response to economic depressions and fears of black independence. These expressions of masculinity were neither explicitly working class nor urban. Finally, very few of the young men in Schneider's study actually used the language of masculinity. But again, Schneider is more con-

cerned with the motives of the young men and not with counting their behavior.

Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings is useful for anyone interested in adolescence and violence, gender studies, or urban systems. It also serves to explain the changing meaning and functions of gangs during the 1950s, 1960s, and, to a lesser extent, the 1970s. Although Schneider is careful not to say so, the implication of his argument points out that justice policy aimed at individual gang members or violent juveniles themselves may be futile, because the problem lies within the labor market or national drug policy, not necessarily alienated individuals. This would be a tough message for policy-makers to address. Although Schneider says that as a result of the drug trade, modern gangs have become economic rather than social organizations, the solution remains nonetheless the same: help for those at the bottom of the urban economy.

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