

Ruth, Inventing the Public Enemy

Introduction

“An attempt to understand mass media images and the culture that produced them”

Study concerned with the “meanings of crime” and how they offer a better understanding of interwar culture and its values

Why was the invented gangster a compelling figure? What messages did he convey and values did he promote?

Image of the “Public Enemy”

- successful in a competitive, highly organized business
- a model of stylish consumption
- flouts law and established behavioral codes, esp in area of gender
- resolutely urban and an enthusiastic participant in urban culture
- assaults traditional social restraints

The underworld “dramatized the development of an impersonal, highly organized, consumption-oriented urban society” (2)

Pursues individual goals within and alongside the large organizations of a modern society

[+] People develop cultures to make sense of and control the social facts they encounter in their daily lives.

Gangster performs a useful function:

Gangster helps Americans shape, understand, and master the changing world around them. Gangsters confront the urban society they epitomized. They personalize complex social changes for a public still adjusting to the city and mark boundaries for acceptable behavior

Members of the Native Born Middle Class is preoccupied with shift to an urban society; they are suspicious of the city but drawn to it because of economic change and have access to political and cultural power; they want to impose their vision of order on the chaos of the new urban, industrial society → How to live with the city?

The gangster represented a reformulation of long-standing concerns for a new cultural context, one more receptive to urbanism

Attempts to “cope” with the city were often cultural, not political

Media created gangsters establish new categories to delineate respectability and millions of Americans welcome the guidance.

Chapter 1 THE USES OF CRIME

Criminals are fundamentally different or fundamentally the same as everyone else

Broader question is one of **identity** –

- What makes us who we are?
- Are PEOPLE fundamentally different or fundamentally the same? What made them different? What made them the same?
- What is the role or status of the individual in the new mass, mechanized society (“face in the crowd”)?
 - Has mass society – nationwide markets and huge corporations – rendered the individual inconsequential?
 - Ad men: if you buy our product, you’ll stand out in the crowd

Troubling questions.

We see that such concerns expressed through the figure of the gangster are more broad based – some people are more concerned about the behavior of the poor, rather than their criminal behavior specifically.

Possible Answers.

- environment doesn’t matter (eugenicists, scientists); environment is determinative (progressives)
- free will doesn’t matter (determinists); free will is determinative (moralists)
- criminal “type” blurs with criminal “class” – reflecting racial, ethnic prejudices – “shifty” Jews; “thuggish” Slavs
 - anti-immigrant sentiment draws on fear of criminal “class” being those of inferior “race”; conflation of “crime” and “ethnicity”
- if environment doesn’t matter – society has no responsibility to improve the surroundings the criminal inhabits; instead, society must rely on experts to “cure” or house deviants
- World War I linked to criminal behavior – both symbolize individuals’ loss of agency [↔]
- The rise of cities is **linked** to criminal behavior and powerlessness -- man adrift in a complex world [↔]
 - Immigrants pulled from peaceful, orderly rural villages into the “nervous maelstrom” of the city lose control of their lives

- Link: crime → individual powerlessness → urban complexity (rapid onslaught of modernity)
- society divided into experts and non-experts (“experts” rely on science to uphold middle class values and mores and guide the “lower orders” who have lost control)
- Moralists say criminals are no different than “normal people.” They have agency and make bad choices – they shirk their moral responsibility
 - Moralists’ attacks on determinists takes on the tone of a populist attack on self-proclaimed experts and elites; anti-theory – one only needed common sense to understand human behavior, expertise meant nothing
 - Moralists say determinists undermine individual accountability – the basis of morality
- Hollywood portrayals of criminals reflect moralists’ philosophy – criminals look like “us” and can be anywhere (though they’re often ethnics and minorities)

The study of criminals is a projection of the debate over the new morality and the culture that produced it

- New morality based on consumption erodes the work ethic and fosters crime; it breaks down middle class values and families – self-indulgence/self-expression rather than self-discipline
 - Social changes have caused moral declension
 - The city embodies/fuels these social changes
 - Democratic, expressive families from the urban, pleasure seeking middle class overly concerned with consumption are the problem → no discipline, self-control, or respect for authority leads to crime
- Moralists see World War I differently than determinists:
 - “Far from driving helpless individuals to lawlessness, war corroded the values of culpable free agents.” (32)
- People must take responsibility – determinists have seduced people into believing that have no responsibility
 - Determinists believe criminals must be “housed,” segregated, and, if possible, rehabilitated; moralists believe they should be punished until they accept responsibility
 - Moralists believe punishment will deter ALL people from crime

Moralists/conservatives win the debate in the 1920s – people must be held accountable, they have agency; modern society has led them wrong and they must reform.

Chapter 2 CRIMINAL BUSINESSMEN

Images of the invented gangster allow middle class audiences to adjust to complex business society and examine/evaluate the new urban businessman

“Incorporation” of crime mirrors incorporation of society

- Examination of the criminal businessman was an invitation to examine indirectly the business society of the 1920s
 - Americans did not adjust to their business society as easily as historians have assumed
 - Gangster businessmen indirectly subvert the worship of the mainstream businessman
- New Gangsters look and act like businessmen and identify themselves as such
 - Since gangsters and businessmen seem so similar, should businessmen be subject to closer scrutiny? How do their practices differ from those of gangsters?
- Gangsters have same motives as everyone else – make money; the important question is **how** did they make it
- Gangsters engage in business practices – growth, consolidation, and organization
 - Gangsters who find themselves alone – outside the corporate order – meet a quick demise
 - Gangsters portrayed as bootleggers and racketeers are “corporate” criminals – crimes are more systematic and criminals no longer rogue individuals
- People tolerate the gangsters’ racketeering because it doesn’t dramatically alter their lives (unlike a robbery)

Inventors of Gangsters celebrate productivity of corporate methods but also air concerns about the concentration of economic power

- New corporate methods make gangsters rich
 - “At every turn, the methods of the businessman seemed ominously well suited to the conduct of crime.”
- Gangs employ bureaucratic structure – CEO, middle management, worker
- If gangs and businessmen use the same models of production for making money, what are the social consequences?
- Do people recognize the disturbing similarities between the corporate salesman and the extortion artist?

- “The criminal salesman’s willingness to do almost anything to close a deal must have seemed disturbingly recognizable.” (52)
- Criminal enterprises also mirror the technique of corporate specialization
 - They have lawyers, much like “legitimate” businesses
- Gangs employ MODERN TECHNOLOGY for evil ends
 - Fast cars, explosives, “efficient” machine guns
- Business methods, widely praised, could function in the service of evil.
- Nostalgia for “old-fashioned” gangsters engaging in “old-fashioned” violence is suggestive of ambivalence about the new society – honor rather than money-making had been at stake; not so in the “corporate” crime of the modern city
 - Pre-capitalist vs corporate capitalist values
 - Violence is a “business tool” not to be abused or used impulsively; it is employed by contract killers to insure distance from the boss
 - Individuals no longer as important in corporate society – just as honor no longer matters in the criminal gang, it no longer matters on the battlefield

Public support of racketeering is to blame for crime wave → bootleggers provide a welcome service; racketeers help businessmen standardize and streamline their firms

- Paradox: gangster undermined the system but also brought “order” to it (mirrors complex meanings of organizational society)
- Gangster films’ critical assessments of modern business culture did NOT begin after the stock market crash – the continuities with media portrayals of gangsters earlier in the decade are more striking
- Gangsters – like legit businessmen – suffer “business” losses during hard times; they change their methods and become more desperate in the 1930s
 - “Economic necessity had driven the gangster to dangerous, provocative actions he had avoided in more flush days.” (i.e. kidnapping)

Chapter 3 DRESSED TO KILL

“As Americans developed a new kind of consumer society, many deployed the gangster in efforts to understand its promises and control its course.”

Gangsters’ consumerism preview paths to individual fulfillment but call into question how outward appearance affects old standards based on class and ethnicity

Broader development – personality replaces character as the standard of judgment. What does that mean for society?

Male “producers” and female “moral uplifters” become middle class consumers.

“As society became increasingly impersonal, goods were correspondingly personalized, celebrated as amulets that empowered the individual holding them.”

Message of the media created gangster: “Achievement could be measured by an inventory of goods.” → This blurs class and ethnic distinctions

- Gangsters are well dressed and surrounded by expensive goods – the media emphasize this. Does this make criminals worthy of respect?
- Gangsters participate in the commercial amusements of the new urban society alongside “respectable” people
- “The gangster was an oversized projection of the urban American seduced by the promises of consumption” (69)
 - Happiness and status comes through carefree spending
- Gangsters’ shabby origins concealed by lavish lifestyles
- High status people abandon the moral high ground for consumer pleasures
- Respectable and disreputable are linked as consumers of expensive pleasures
 - “Has the racketeer leveled himself up or has society leveled itself down?”
- Gangster is “de-ethnicized” as he comes to participate in the urban consumer culture
 - Not everyone accepts this trend as anti-immigrant sentiments remain even though portrayals of gangsters are less “ethnic”

Quest for pleasure had been a marker of immigrants and working class – now everyone takes part, causing some anxiety, particularly for middle class reformers

HOW TO RESPOND?

- Middle class reformers call attention to similarities between the consumption habits of the ultra-rich and the gangster → is the old hierarchical order threatened?
- Some claim that “over the top” styles of gangsters reveal their lack of “class” → this is reassuring to people that “old standards” still apply even in a time of social upheaval (p 74)

- Invention of “refined consumption” squares the circle. “Class” still matters – gangsters are “pretenders” to respectability and have no “style.”

Not only did the consumer society blur status/class lines, it blurred lines between good and evil – rots Americans’ moral fiber

- people would do anything for access to goods; when wages fall, they turn to crime
- blurred class lines will overturn social order and create chaos
- gangsters conceal bad character with a pleasing personality
 - artifice of personality enables one to advance in the urban consumer society
 - superficial behavior and possessions mask bad character – society values the wrong things

How to get back to “old” values?

- Depictions of stylish gangsters implicitly urged a return to the culture of character
 - Gangster’s “true” nature will always be revealed
 - women fall for deception of style because they are too accepting of consumer values
 - those who embraced consumer values made themselves “bait” for criminals
 - putting on “style” did not distinguish one from the “lower orders” – all new consumer extravagance undermined respectability
 - Style and duplicity are **linked** – an implicit critique of the consumer culture
 - Only those who reject or distance themselves from consumer culture can see through the “veil of stylishness”
 - Middle class (especially youth) – more so than working class – is at risk for “moral contamination” due to its love of consumerist pleasures
 - Moralists believe the pursuit of pleasure has precipitated moral breakdown at the top of society → socialites mingle with gangsters
- Fitzgerald, through Gatsby, joins the chorus of those condemning superficial, commercial society

Chapter 4 BAD MEN AND DANGEROUS WOMEN

“The gangster illuminated meanings of masculinity in a society that seemed to deny the virtues on which traditional conceptions of male honor had been based.”

Men and women of the underworld explored the prospects for new relationships between the sexes in the modern world.

Long simmering crisis of masculinity in which male roles change has multiple causes:

- Loss of economic autonomy undermines independence and self-determination
 - Taking orders from a boss in the new corporate economy clashes with traditional notions of masculine virtue
- Women’s political activism (suffrage) threatens man’s place in the public sphere
- Mass urban society turns local community leaders into “faces in a crowd”
- At home, male dominance of the family challenged by companionate marriage
- Family authority erodes as mass urban society’s experts and institutions gain more influence in daily life
- Concerns about “overcivilized” and feminized men being the products of modern society

Role of the gangster?

For some, the gangster personified all that is wrong with the modern, urban, industrial, corporate man

- Gangster is “effeminate” in his dependence on stimulants (drugs), in his infatuation with consumerism and style, and in his reliance on armored cars and shooting enemies in the back
 - Some gangsters portrayed as homosexuals and as cautionary tales to “respectable” men
- Unable to demonstrate virility in their daily lives, men turn to leisure activities, sports, and literary escapism

For others, the gangster is the antidote to lost virility: the tough guy who uses physical intimidation (despite his short stature) and violence to get what he wants or who remains cool under pressure

- James Cagney is the model of pugnacious, swaggering masculinity but is resolutely urban

Portrayals of virile gangsters remained irreconcilable with real men's daily lives

- Gangs are a sanctuary for male values but they do not exist in most men's real world experiences

Women's portrayals in the gangster genre reflect the changes in women's lives since the 1890s, but also offer new possibilities for modern women

Changing roles for women:

- 19th century ideals had emphasized hierarchical, gender-segregated obligations, innate female purity, and the home as redemptive sanctuary in a corrupt world.
- After the turn of the 20th century, courtship shifts from an emphasis on uplift to pleasure and gratification, from discipline to hedonistic consumerism

Changes in women's sexual behavior

- Not limited to home and marriage, sexuality emerges into the public sphere
 - Dance halls, movies, dress
 - More carefree attitude

Gangster films suggest control of women is the source of male power, but such control is also impossible (and undesirable) in modern society where openly expressive sexuality is ubiquitous

- Changes in gender behavior are irreversible
- Movie portrayals of the underworld help audiences understand the new meaning of "male" and "female"
 - Movies fashion a new set of values appropriate for the urban, modern society
 - Expressive sexuality is normal and essential in the modern world
 - Middle and upper class women are sexually expressive while (in a reverse of tradition) working class women are more sexually repressed
 - Gangsters see women as commodities, but women are drawn to gangsters because they provide them with luxury items → romance and consumption are inextricably linked
 - An ethos of indulgence and self-gratification as well as a desire for thrills and romance precipitate the new sexual conduct

- Modern life is too routine → for women, this creates a desire for intense experiences and the vitality absent from modern society

Some worry about how the ethos of pleasure has changed the relations between men and women

- From this perspective, portrayals of the underworld showed that indulgent men and women risked catastrophe
 - Modern sexually indulgent women's fates reinforce the distinctions between the sexes → Cagney abuses indulgent women in his films
 - Sexually indulgent men face the risk of homosexuality or, more broadly, going "soft" and putting themselves in jeopardy
 - Message to men: like stylish consumption, the new sexuality was potentially emasculating; men needed to resist the temptations of an overly indulgent society
- Films could have conflicting and contradictory messages
 - Women could be empowered by expressive sexuality → cunning and manipulative of men; sexuality could be their only route to power
 - Strong men would not be victimized by conniving women who end up being punished for their manipulations
- Media portrayals of independent women coming to no good are part of a larger effort to channel women away from challenging men's prerogative
 - Underworld portrayals legitimate and circumscribe the new expressive sexuality; women in particular should recognize limits and confine sexuality to marriage → the modern woman must be domesticated.

Chapter 5 THE INVENTION IN THE FLESH: AL CAPONE OF CHICAGO

- Capone was a "cultural invention" that he himself took part in creating
- Newsmen who invent Capone are doing so to explain the big city to the fascinated public that finds Capone simultaneously attractive and repulsive (just as they find the big city)
- Chicago is seen as center of "lawlessness" and "aggressive capitalism" and so becomes a metaphor for the linkage between the two
 - Do crime and industrial greatness spring from the same sources?

- Torrio's replacement of Colosimo as boss was a metaphor for the modern's replacement of the traditional
- Capone's replacement of Torrio was seen as the victory of aggressive masculinity fused with organizational acumen
 - "The Capone legend offered Americans a subversive set of metaphors for rethinking their business society."

Chronicles of Capone's exploits, particularly his violent conflicts with other gangs, become parables for how the new urban industrial society conducts business

- While Capone ran his gang by hiring mercenaries and organizing it according to a corporate structure, his rivals emphasized "friendship, loyalty, and affection."
 - Capone's "system" wins
 - Media accounts emphasize the "efficiency" and "artistry" of Capone's perfectly planned hits
 - Capone's audacity mixed with his efficiency cultivates public fascination with him as a celebrity and as an individual who transcends the "system" – "Living in an age of complexity and restraints, Americans were grateful to this exemplar of the individual triumphant."
 - Capone demonstrates individual achievement from within a complex modern system: the individual and the organization need not be at odds. This was a pleasing message to those who feared they were being swallowed into a system that stripped them of their individuality.
- Media presents Capone as a consummate consumer
 - Central message was that consumption could bring remarkable individual transformations → Capone goes from tasteless hoodlum to fashion template, so anyone can "remake" themselves in the modern commercial society
 - Extravagant consumption brings one attention, then status (provided one mastered the fine art of "personality")
- Conflicting message of the Capone story: Style masks one's true nature
- Press coverage of Capone's "moral" acts compresses the distance between him and "normal" people and suggests that all people have the capacity for good and evil
 - In modern society, people can live a multiplicity of lives, identity can fragment
 - Portrayals of gangsters illuminate human behavior in a new urban environment

EPILOGUE

- End of prohibition, Hollywood's imposition of the "code," and new social problems and cultural issues of the mid-1930s make the media created gangsters less of a relevant "cultural text"
- The public's hope that government can respond to the national emergency of the Great Depression and solve people's problems change the way both gangsters and "G-men" are portrayed in the mid-1930s.
- Gangsters less associated with the city and urban culture, lose their swagger and are often depicted as loners
 - "In the depths of the Depression Americans' social concerns no longer centered so exclusively on the city...[they] had turned their attention to a different set of social problems."