Gangs of New York Review

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INTRODUCTION

Martin Scorsese’s *Gangs of New York* is a 19th century depiction of America during the time of the Civil War in New York. During this time, gangs such as the Nativists and the Dead Rabbits ran the streets of Five Points where thievery and crime is abundant. Irish immigrants arrive in large numbers to an overpopulated town as a result of the great potato famine and in search of better opportunities for themselves and their family, a dream that is short lived once they arrive in Five Points. During their adventure, most Irish immigrants arrive poor and uneducated prompting a target of prejudice and discrimination by the locals. When the Civil War became tortuous and required a multitude of new soldiers, the military draft act was passed which resulted in rioting by the local populous and from the gangs. Those who were financially well off were able to buy their way out of the draft while the disadvantaged immigrants of Five Points were unable to do so. As a result, many Irish immigrants died fighting in the war.

Furthermore, poverty and discrimination are identified as a core component which prevents Irish immigration assimilation. As a result of this discrimination, another war took place—a war between the Five Points gangs and the Irish.

ASSIMILATION

The establishment of gangs is fundamental as a search for commonalities among people in order for assimilation to occur. In *Gangs of New York*, the Irish immigrants are looked down upon with racism and rejection which often sparked feuds between the Irish and American gangs of Five Points. As a result, this indicates the difficulties associated with diversity during this time especially during the abolitionist movement. This rejection from society therefore provides insight as to why crime exists as employment and social opportunities were insufficient during this time period. According to Abramitzky, Boustan, and Eriksson (2014), “contemporary
observers expressed concerns about the concentrated poverty in immigrant neighborhoods and
the low levels of education among immigrant children” (p. 470). As a result, laws such as child
labor and school requirements were created over time to assist immigrant assimilation into the
American culture. Furthermore, Abramitzky et al. (2014) also found that Irish immigrants
needed approximately 13 years to become equal socioeconomically to those born as Nativists (p.
471). This statement suggests that effective assimilation of immigrants does occur, although at a
reduced pace. The initial difficulty to establish assimilation can be reduced as prejudice and
discrimination viewpoints are overcame in addition to educational achievement and social status.
Therefore, Irish immigrants must make a conscious effort to learn the cultural values, language,
and political differences to effectively assimilate into a foreign land.

**RACE AND DISCRIMINATION**

*Gangs of New York* depicts many social issues to include poverty, homelessness, and
crime. Most notably, however, is the depiction of race and discrimination as wars are
consistently being fought between the multiple gangs in fight for control over Five Points.
According to Woodrow Eckard (2010), the Irish were viewed “as a separate race … [with] low
intelligence, unreliability, laziness, and a penchant for drunkenness and fighting” (p. 410). These
discriminatory characteristics categorize Irish immigrants as inferior. Different religion and
cultural norms did little to change the negative opinion from the Nativists, and the negative
qualities and racial discrimination associated with the Irish proved to be similar to that of African
Americans as well.

The influx of Irish immigrants continued to climb during this time and settlement within
the Five Points location provided incentive for other Irish immigrants to do the same. The
establishment of gang organizations further provided Nativists the opportunity to display superiority over the Irish whereas racial discrimination and segregation continued. According to Gitelman (1973), “Irish males were consigned to the most taxing, the dirtiest, and the lowest paying jobs” (p. 59). The resultant labor discrimination is identified in *Gangs of New York* in such that Irish women are paid low wages and often turn to prostitution to make a living. Furthermore, men often worked menial jobs to include working in slaughterhouses, and many immigrants roamed the streets in search of food.

**THEN AND NOW**

The racial discrimination and bias is not a new concept by any means, and society continues to deal with this very issue. Discrimination of different cultures, views, principles, religions, and ideas that are not our own will often be observed with prejudice and malaise. Diversity within the United States continues to introduce new customs and ways of thought, and as a result prejudice and discrimination may prove to ease with every passing generation.

Gang activity as shown in *Gangs of New York* share several similarities compared to the modern day gangs. During the Civil War, gang involvement included those of immigrant origins that experienced trouble assimilating while present day includes many of those that are natively born African American and Hispanic individuals prescribed to poverty and also often lack parental guidance. As a result, these individuals will assimilate into gang culture for protection and commonalities among individuals. Many members of gangs are criminally life-course persistent which is a similarity between modern gangs and the immigrant gangs shown in *Gangs of New York*. The gangs of Five Points persisted with criminal activity during the entirety of Amsterdam’s adolescence. According to DeLisi, Spruill, Peters, Caudill, and Trulson (2013), “[modern] gang activity is a robust predictor of noncompliance and continued antisocial
behavior” (p. 604). As a result, life-course persistent criminal activity can be linked to gangs and gang affiliations.

CONCLUSION

_Gangs of New York_ is provides a view into historic times of the Civil War and the gang activity in Five Points. Irish immigrants arrived to America in search of food, work, and a chance to live the American Dream. This dream, however, appears distant as poverty and discrimination were evident. The Irish were quickly localized into gangs as Nativists prevented any sort of assimilation and the Irish were seen as inferior just as African American slaves that share this same time period. _Gangs of New York_ makes it clear that diversity can be challenging, especially during a time of war in a foreign land. Thievery and the struggle to survive become commonplace to many of the immigrants, but the Nativists were not exempt. _Gangs of New York_ quickly summarizes the ideology that individuals as a whole most assuredly share common goals with each other regardless of race or nationality and that prejudice and discrimination does not equal progress towards a greater good.
REFERENCES


