

# **THINE IS THE KINGDOM: RECONCEPTUALISING THE LATIN KINGS STREET GANG THROUGH THE PRISM OF REVOLUTIONARY VANGUARDISM**

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## **ABSTRACT**

With more than 25,000 members, the Latin Kings are considered one of the most formidable and dangerous street gangs in the United States of America. While the politicisation of criminal organisations is not entirely exceptional, the Latin Kings' development of a pseudo-religious belief system called 'Kingism' that encourages members to move beyond street crime and commit to socio-political revolution raises questions as to if they should be classified as a common street gang or, alternatively, a revolutionary force struggling with a pervasive criminal element. This analysis offers a critical reconceptualization of the Latin Kings as a political force whose criminal entrepreneurialism is just another method of destabilising the dominant capitalist system in its campaign for Marxist values, and presents an opportunity for law enforcement agencies to form strategies to combat their criminal operations by appealing to its members' own self-conception as a liberating force for oppressed Latin communities.

## **INTRODUCTION**

From the commencement of the era of political consciousness that was established in the aftermath of World War II, the vast majority of activism that has taken place in the United States of America has been strongly aligned with the principles of socialist philosophy. While much of the mainstream protest movement used non-violent tactics of mass mobilisation to convey their support of a left-wing socio-political agenda, a smaller and more militant cadre of activists formed in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century who sought to challenge the status quo through violent means designed to spark a revolution

amongst the country's most oppressed populations. Those who participated in militant forms of direct action largely perceived themselves as the vanguard of a Marxist revolution: a small, violent insurgency dedicated to triggering the downfall of the capitalist state (Debray 1967). For some, like left-wing domestic terror group the Weather Underground, the practice of vanguardism represented a purist form of political action. Bombings and other violent acts were specifically targeted at representations of the socio-political establishment, and were intended to avoid harm to innocent parties whilst inflicting maximum damage on the instruments of the state (Varon 2004). For other radical groups, the path to vanguardism was not as simple: requiring a level of financial capital to establish an underground insurgency, many on the far-left resorted to traditional criminal activity like bank robbery and illicit trafficking to effectively fund the revolution (Burrough 2015).

It is from this context of far-left political activism that the Latin Kings began its rise as one of the largest and most influential street gangs of the modern era. Several decades on, the Almighty Latin Kings y Queens Nations (ALKQN) stands as one of the most successful of the Marxist groups established amidst the socio-political upheaval of the post-war era to combat the negative impact of the capitalist state. More commonly referred to as the Latin Kings, the ALKQN has evolved from its 1940s origins as a social club for Puerto Rican immigrants in Chicago into one of the biggest criminal street gangs currently operating in the United States of America (Cabrane and Candelaria 1994). While the perception of the ALKQN as a criminal organisation is warranted, and its dangerous reputation warranted, labelling of the Latin Kings as simply another criminal gang is reductive, and belies its central purpose as a vanguard for the oppressed Latinx communities in which its members operate. It is the Latin Kings' origins as a socio-political force that essentially separates this gang from its non-political counterparts, and offers opportunities for law enforcement agencies to reshape their approach towards engaging with the ALKQN. Ordinarily, the Latin Kings' sets are grouped by police gang units in the same category as other criminal street gangs. In focusing on the driving motivations of the ALKQN, the opportunity exists to separate the Latin Kings from these analogous organisations and to deal with the gang on a variety of issues where police and gang members may find common ground, from community projects to limiting violence on the streets.

Criminal entrepreneurialism may be central to the day-to-day operations of Latin Kings' rank-and-file membership, yet it is the tenets of radical Marxism that are central to the pseudo-religion of Kingism that underpins the ideology that drives the ALKQN. It is this

underpinning ideology, focused on communal values more so than achieving capitalist advantage, that is a central factor in the practical reconceptualization of the Latin Kings. More so than power or reputation, Kingism dictates that socio-political enlightenment and commitment to the cause of vanguardism is the ultimate goal of a Latin King. A combination of traditional Catholic ritualism and radical Marxism, adherence to the concepts of Kingism sets the ALKQN apart from its street gang counterparts, with its fundamental values far more aligned with left-wing vanguardism than with conventional criminal capitalism (Brotherton 2008). It is the fundamental suggestion of this article that it is incumbent on law enforcement and the wider community to assist ALKQN members through the process of Kingism, which dictates that street crime is the purview of a Latin King only at the gang's most primitive levels; if it is possible for broader societal forces to encourage young Latinx members of the ALKQN to achieve the enlightened final stage of Kingism, to become a New King, it may also be possible to reduce violence and crime on the streets by refocusing young Latin Kings towards the overarching socio-political concerns that underpin the organisational mission statement of the ALKQN. In order to fully appreciate the motivations and operations of the Latin Kings, it is essential to reconceptualise the ALKQN through the prism of socio-political vanguardism rather than as a solely criminal enterprise. By doing so, it is possible to understand why the Latin Kings have been as successful as they have been in cultivating a strong membership, and identify potential opportunities to work with the ALKQN to achieve common goals in Latinx communities throughout the U.S.

## **EXISTING RESEARCH ON THE LATIN KINGS, AND KINGISM**

Although the Latin Kings has one of the healthiest memberships of any group in the American gang pantheon, relatively little scholarly literature exists that attempts to conduct a thorough analysis of its inner workings and guiding ideology. Nevertheless, there are several publications that have gone to great lengths to provide a comprehensive discussion of the Latin Kings and their evolution from cultural social group to notorious street gang. Foremost among the scholars focusing on the Latin Kings, Brotherton (2013) is one of the few scholars to profile the organisation in a way that recognises the importance of Kingism to the membership and their self-conception as Latin Kings. Whereas most literature referencing the ALKQN focuses solely on their actions as a criminal gang,

Brotherton consistently seeks to contextualise their behaviour under the pseudo-religious and ideological prism established in the Latin Kings' manifesto. Together with Barrios (2004), he recounts the circumstances which drove the adoption of the group's manifesto in 1972, and notes the considerable influence of revolutionary Marxism that is apparent in the Latin Kings' mission statement. Brotherton's framing of the ALKQN as an organisation motivated by a socio-political agenda is essential for the reconceptualization of the Latin Kings as a revolutionary vanguard, and has significant implications for developing further understanding of its operations as a criminal gang.

While Brotherton is one of the few scholarly authors to present a holistic and philosophical perspective on the Latin Kings, other researchers provide crucial insight into the functions of the ALKQN on a practical and, often, criminal level. Flood (2003) serves a strong primary resource when analysing the Latin Kings, using his firsthand experience as an embedded associate of the ALKQN to inform his discussion of the gang's historical connection to radical activism. Flood's analysis, while inherently biased towards the ALKQN, is mostly supported by other authors like Burrough (2015), who refer to the connection between the Latin Kings and overtly political groups like the Young Lords to a lesser extent; on some occasions, Flood's assertions must be weighed against those made by more independent researchers. Hagedorn (2015) disputes several of Flood's conclusions, some of which have serious implications in relation to the extent of the ALKQN's involvement with domestic terrorist groups like Fuerzas de Liberacion Nacional Puertorriquena (FALN). Whilst Flood's arguments cannot be solely dismissed on account of his personal connection to the subject matter, the existence of alternative sources allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the interplay between the Latin Kings and the Marxist concepts that their organisation purports to be founded on. Researchers such as Gonzalez (2015) and Ogbar (2006) are of use in contextualising the ALKQN within the spectrum of Latinx ethnic groups, and particularly those like the Young Lords who worked in conjunction with the Latin Kings on several occasions in pursuit of shared objectives. Whereas much of the literature specifically focused on the Latin Kings focuses solely on their criminal activity, scholarly material on groups like the Young Lords often takes a more socio-political angle that serves to present the ALKQN in a significantly different light to sources more concerned with their status as a notorious street gang.

## CONCEPTUALISING THE LATIN KINGS AS ACTIVISTS IN THE ERA OF REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS

In a set of circumstances similar to that observed in many ethnically-oriented criminal gangs, the ALKQN began its existence in the late 1940s as a group dedicated to providing support to Puerto Rican immigrants recently arrived in Chicago (Cabranes and Candelaria 1994). Flood describes this early incarnation of the ALKQN as ‘a sort of cultural shock absorber... the earliest members distributed communal property such as household items, clothing, and emergency funds’ (2003, p. 246). During this period of grassroots community activism which lasted well into the 1960s, the Latin Kings were primarily focused on providing support to immigrant communities: the provision of tangible aid to underprivileged Latinx migrants formed much of the basis of its initial support in the increasingly homogenous Latinx neighbourhoods in which it took root, like Chicago’s Humboldt Park (Ogbar 2006). While the ALKQN was not operating as a criminal organisation at this stage of its development, engagement in aid and outreach programs is a key element in the strategy of many street gangs when it comes to establishing a foothold in a community. In doing so, they are able to cultivate a sense of loyalty and gratitude within a population that does not feel as though they have been provided for by the state; thus, the tangible aid supplied by the gang cements its place in the informal systems operating in the community, and contributes to a situation in which non-members feel the benefits of the gang’s continued presence outweighs the risks they pose (Vargas 2014). While not actively operating as a criminal gang to begin with, the high-status position enjoyed by the ALKQN in Chicago’s Latinx community was primarily a result of its adoption of the same kind of grassroots socialist principles used by criminal operators to ingratiate their organisations in oppressed neighbourhoods to this day.

Whilst the ALKQN had begun to transform into its more recognisable incarnation as a criminal gang by the mid-1960s, Latin Kings’ members retained a clear observance of the Marxist principles on which the ALKQN had been established. Heavily impacted by aggressive police repression of immigrant communities and a rising rate of illicit drug use among the Latinx population, the ALKQN’s rank-and-file membership was generally considered to be a non-political force by the mid-1960s. An article in the *Chicago Tribune* on 17 June 1966 describes the Latin Kings as a gang ‘who’ve long been intimidating’ citizens in Latinx neighbourhoods, presenting one of the first examples of the characterisation of the ALKQN as a criminal operation in the mainstream media (*Chicago Tribune* 1966, p. 12).

Even so, the ALKQN's reputation for facilitating social welfare programs ensured that the group was still widely perceived as a grassroots community service organisation rather than having solely assumed the master status of a street gang.

Long-serving Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley allocated \$165 000 in city funds to the ALKQN for community projects as late as 1969, in spite of the fact that the city had adopted an aggressive anti-gang policy and the Latin Kings were locked in a deadly turf war with white gangs in Chicago's near northwest (Flood 2003). Indeed, at the same time Daley offered the ALKQN public money in 1969, the *Chicago Tribune* embarked on a renewed campaign to cast the Latin Kings as a criminal organisation. In that year the local newspaper of record published 16 articles linking the gang to a series of murders and rapes taking place in Latinx neighbourhoods. Even though the ALKQN had been undertaking community work like that which Daley sponsored from the late 1940s, the 16 articles published in 1969 represented the biggest period of publicity for the Latin Kings in its two-decade long history and undoubtedly coloured public perceptions of the group at a time when it was struggling to maintain legitimacy as a socio-cultural organisation. While Flood contends that Daley's grant to the ALKQN is indicative of the group's stature in the community, it is more likely given the mayor's adamant opposition to ethnic gangs that this funding was allocated with underpinning ulterior motives. Flood does go on to suggest that the grant could have been perceived as a tacit bribe to the ALKQN to cease its hostilities with its Anglo-American rivals; further, it could also be seen as a counterbalance to the federal funding of local black power groups intended to support similar community programs in their neighbourhoods (Cureton 2011).

In a reflection of the ALKQN's abiding commitment to supporting the Latinx community, Daley's grant was not used to fund criminal enterprises or further the gang's turf wars. Instead, it was used to fund the establishment of community centres and other services providing assistance in underprivileged immigrant-heavy neighbourhoods. Unlike the community programs that the Latin Kings' founders had established during the group's original incarnation, these ALKQN-sponsored initiatives were established at the exact same time that the organisation was cultivating its identity as a criminal street gang (Knox and McCurrie 1996). Essentially, it highlights the ALKQN's attempts to balance enlightened activism with criminality from the very beginning of its foray into criminal capitalism. Though external influences corrupted the purity of the group's socialist mission in the 1960s, it is clear that not only did the ALKQN continue to implement social welfare programs in Latinx neighbourhoods in Chicago, they were recognised by the city as an

effective avenue through which municipal money could be funnelled in order to ensure the delivery of quality services to the community.

Aside from its role in administering social programs targeted at Chicago's Latinx community, the ALKQN was also active in its support for the revolutionary anti-imperialist agenda that was prevalent in the late 1960s. From at least 1968, the ALKQN were a key participant in a loose coalition of Latinx groups who operated in conjunction with each other to combat the oppressive influence of the state on Chicago's oppressed populations (Rivera 2017). This informal alliance saw the ALKQN use its proficient street formations to support the goals of more overtly political organisations like the Young Lords Organisation (YLO) and the Puerto Rican separatist group FALN. Interestingly, the beginning of the ALKQN's collaboration with these left-wing political organisations coincided directly with a change in the way the organisation was covered in the Chicago media: before 1968 the Latin Kings received few references in the *Chicago Tribune*, however from 1968 to the end of 1970 there were 27 articles published on the gang — all of which portrayed the Latin Kings as a criminal organisation responsible for crimes ranging from murder to rape. Given the context, it is probable that the shift in coverage of the Latin Kings in the press was directly related to its increased involvement in the Latinx political movement, and the perceived threat that this movement posed to wider Chicago society.

While the ALKQN was significantly less political than either the YLO or FALN, it was nevertheless an essential contributor to radical Latinx politics in Chicago into the early 1970s. Often, the ALKQN's involvement in political violence was unrelated to either a defence of its members or the protection of its criminal enterprises. Gonzales (2015) notes that the Latin Kings joined with the YLO and a number of other Latinx church and social groups to form the United Puerto Rican Coalition (UPRC) in September 1969 in response to the shooting of a Puerto Rican high school student by Chicago police. The willingness of the ALKQN to support the Latinx community was reciprocated in the summer of 1970, when both the YLO and FALN were at the forefront of a direct confrontation with the Chicago Police Department and the National Guard over the public beating of a Latin Kings gang member by Chicago police. This incident escalated into one of the largest Latinx riots in Chicago history, and further example of the type of collaborative political action conducted by the ALKQN/YLO/FALN combine (Flood 2003).

A critical reading of the Latin Kings' manifesto and constitution highlights the ALKQN's self-conception as a hybrid group sitting somewhere between criminal gang and Marxist revolutionary vanguard. The concept of vanguardism originated in the



earliest stages of the Marxist movement, and was promoted by socialist pioneers like Lenin as the most effective way of forcing the paradigmatic socio-political shift needed in order to transition to a collectivist system. Lenin (1943) believed it was necessary for the most enlightened or politically-advanced members of a proletariat to pave the path to revolution, forming socio-political organisations dedicated to the promotion of Marxist values and acting as leaders in a violent revolt against the capitalist state. He declared it was the vanguard's role to 'raise the amateurs to the level of revolutionaries' and instil a sense of class consciousness in the proletariat (Lenin 1943, p. 119). Debray refined Lenin's concept of a vanguard in the late 1960s with the development of his *foco* theory of left-wing revolution. Debray promoted the belief that 'small, fast-moving paramilitary groups can provide a focus (in Spanish, *foco*) for popular discontent against a sitting regime, and thereby lead a general insurrection' (Hang 2013, p. 65). Debray's interpretation of vanguardism was very much in vogue during the period in which the ALKQN manifesto was developed, and is clearly reflected in the overarching mission statement of Kingism. Similar to the way in which the Latin Kings place an emphasis on mental and spiritual discipline, Dean notes that a revolutionary vanguard requires 'discipline and preparation' to be successful in affecting lasting socio-political change (2012, p 241). Vanguardism has served as a key element of revolutionary strategy since the very origins of Marxism, and the tactics it promotes to foster socialist liberation can clearly be observed in the ideals espoused by the ALKQN both in their canonical texts and through the group's guiding philosophy of Kingism.

The extent of official cooperation between the ALKQN and radical Latinx groups remains in question, yet is critical in understanding the influence of Marxist philosophy on the Latin Kings' development. Flood (2003), a self-described associate of and advisor to the ALKQN, claims that the group broke ranks with groups like the YLO and FALN sometime around 1971 as a result of the targeted operations conducted by the FBI under the banner of COINTELPRO. Though this may be the initial point at which the ALKQN began to distance themselves from radical politics and focus on criminal enterprises, alternative evidence suggests that Latin Kings were operating a FALN safe-house and bomb-making factory in Humboldt Park as late as 1979 (Hagedorn 2015, p. 47). If it is true that the ALKQN continued to provide resources to revolutionary vanguard units like FALN until 1979, this means that the Latin Kings were involved in radical Marxism for almost a decade longer than otherwise thought. It would also mean that the ALKQN remained committed to furthering the radical anti-imperialist agenda throughout the 1970s,



shaping its group identity during a period in which its fundamental ideology of Kingism was formed and it consolidated itself as a dominant criminal actor in the competitive gang landscape of Chicago.

## **KINGISM AS A PSEUDO-RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION OF RADICAL MARXISM**

A pseudo-religious philosophy that drives the ALKQN to this day, the concept of Kingism was developed at a time wherein the Latin Kings were experiencing a decline triggered by its transition from community activism to criminal capitalism. As noted, the Latin Kings' membership was strongly impacted by the rise of illicit drug use experienced by many minority communities in the late 1960s. Coupled with the ALKQN's decision to distance itself from political activism due to the threat of COINTELPRO, this led to a situation in which the focus on social justice that once drove the group was abandoned in favour of more profitable criminal enterprises like drug trafficking and robbery (Flood 2003). For the ALKQN, the loss of this inherently Marxist identity was a critical blow that delegitimised the organisation within the community and led to the loss of turf to other Latinx gangs. The perception that there was a correlation between the gang's declining fortunes and its deviation from its left-wing principles was not lost on the ALKQN stalwarts responsible for developing the Latin Kings' constitution and manifesto in Statesville prison in 1972 (Hagedorn 2015; Flood 2003). A comprehensive document that establishes firm rules and procedures that all ALKQN sets must abide by, the gang's constitution marked the commencement of a third age in the Latin Kings' operations which effectively blended the community-focused principles of the ALKQN's initial incarnation with the criminal capitalism that prevailed in the early 1970s (Brotherton and Barrios 2004). From a functional standpoint, the ALKQN constitution and manifesto serves as a foundation for the philosophy of Kingism, described by Harris as 'a mixture of ideals from twelve-step programs, ethnic empowerment texts, and a fusion of spiritual belief systems' (2009 p. 51). Central among the tenets outlined in these guiding documents was a renewed focus on the commitment of Latin Kings' members to supporting and acting as a defensive vanguard for oppressed communities. While borrowing from a divergent range of philosophical sources, the writers of the ALKQN constitution and manifesto placed such a premium on the Marxist worldview that it took a central role in the overarching values system espoused by the newly-reconceptualised Latin Kings.

As outlined in the 1972 ALKQN manifesto, instead of power or profit it is social awareness and personal commitment to Marxist vanguardism that is held in the highest regard by adherents of Kingism. Attempting to contextualise the appeal of the Latin Kings in contrast to other similar Latinx street gangs, Richardson claims that it is 'their mixture of intense discipline and revolutionary politics... adding idealism and a boot-camp rigour to the usual gang camaraderie' that sets the ALKQN apart and attracts a membership base that is equal parts ideological zealot and criminal operator (1997, p. 32). Under the tenets of the ALKQN manifesto, serving as a Latin Kings member involves a spiritual journey of enlightenment with 'the end product of complete awareness' (Brotherton and Barrios 2004). On the path to this 'complete awareness', members of the Latin Kings pass through three separate cycles of life that form the crux of Kingism. Firstly, a Latin Kings member must go through what is referred to as 'the primitive stage' wherein they engage in the traditional street crime associated with gang activity and live a life consisting of drug use and violence. Interestingly for a criminal gang, this is acknowledged as an immature stage of development that a Latin Kings member must move forward from in order to achieve higher status in the organisation (Brotherton 2013). At the second level of ALKQN membership - designated 'the conservative stage' - a Latin King usually becomes tired of 'the senseless routine of gang fighting' and effectively retires from active participation in the ALKQN's criminal activities (Brotherton and Barrios 2004, p. 72).

Whilst the decision to cease participation in criminal behaviour would ordinarily constitute the attainment of spiritual maturity, the influence of Marxist values on Kingism means that acceptance of existing rules and systems does not constitute true enlightenment. Instead, the ALKQN manifesto describes this period as one of a Latin King being 'mummified... accepting life as it has been taught to him by the existing system that exploits all people of colour - dehumanises them and maintains them under the economic and social yoke of slavery' (Brotherton 2013, pp. 238-239). There are a number of implications when this 'mummified' stage of Kingism is considered in the context of both street gangs and left-wing revolutionary activism. It is clear that, for the ALKQN leadership, the type of gang-related activity that has become synonymous with the Latin Kings is considered only a very superficial aspect of group membership. Rather than serving as an organisational focus, criminal 'gang-banging' provides an entry point into the ALKQN from which members are expected to grow spiritually and, perhaps more importantly, ideologically (Brotherton and Barrios 2004). It is even more noteworthy that the tenets of Kingism explicitly mention that cessation

of senseless gang activity was not in-and-of itself maturity. In a statement more typical of radical socio-political groups than criminal street gangs, it is made abundantly clear that achieving the highest level of Kingism can only be achieved by devoting oneself to anti-imperialism and acting as a vanguard for oppressed communities in a manner that is profoundly revolutionary.

Socio-political awareness and complete dedication to the cause of the ALKQN is at the heart of the highest stage a Latin King is able to achieve, that of the New King. In the Kingism manifesto, it is noted that relatively few Latin Kings members ever attain the status of a New King: this stage of enlightenment and awareness can only be achieved after passing through the mummified conservative stage where 'there are more Kings than at any other level' (Brotherton and Barrios 2004, p. 72). Being a New King is aspirational within the ALKQN, and calls on members who have moved beyond criminal gang-banging to submit completely to the 'will of the Nation' and, further, to recognise that 'the time for revolution is at hand... a revolution that will bring freedom to the enslaved, to all Third World people' (Brotherton and Barrios 2004, p. 72). For an organisation that is by-and-large considered a criminal street gang, the criteria established to qualify for New King status by the ALKQN manifesto includes no reference to criminality or an individual's behaviour during the 'gang-banging' primitive stage. Indeed, when the stages of Kingism are interpreted as a whole, it appears that the eventual rejection of a street gang mentality is a key aspect of progression within the ALKQN. Whereas in most criminal gangs, power and status is measured by tangible factors like profitability and violence, the New King is judged on a far more intangible set of standards: in an example of the way in which Kingism blends religious concepts with revolutionary philosophy, the ALKQN manifesto considers the process of becoming an enlightened New King to be a 'rising of the dead [which] means the spiritual awakening for those who have been sleeping in the graveyard of ignorance' (Brotherton and Barrios 2004, p. 265). To qualify as a New King it is essential that a Latin Kings member commit to participate in socio-political vanguardism, as directed by the ALKQN leadership. In doing so, an individual who joined the ALKQN as a member of a street gang experiences a metamorphosis in which they evolve into an ideological warrior who is able to serve the very same organisation in a manner that is completely divergent from their initial reasons for becoming a Latin King.

## **SUBVERSION OF THE CAPITALIST STATE THROUGH A STREET NATION OF CRIME**

Considering the ALKQN's origins in grassroots social activism and the prominent focus on revolutionary Marxism that forms the basis of its charter, it is somewhat challenging to account for the Latin Kings reputation as a criminal street gang. An estimated 20 000 to 35 000 Latin Kings members are believed to answer directly to the Chicago 'mother chapter' of the ALKQN, a significant figure which results in the organisation consistently being placed at the top of law enforcement issued lists of the most dangerous or prolific criminal gangs in North America (Kinnear 2009; National Gang Intelligence Center 2009). According to the National Gang Intelligence Center (2009), street-level drug dealing is the primary source of income for Latin Kings sets, with many other forms of criminal activity developing to support the drug trade including - but not limited to - money laundering, theft and homicide. As is the case for most street-level gangs in the United States of America, the vast majority of physical violence perpetrated by Latin Kings members occurs as a result of conflict over territory and the profits of illicit drug dealing (Papachristos, Hureau and Braga 2013). This type of violence is described by the ALKQN manifesto as 'gang-banging' and usually does not set out to harm to those that are not affiliated with a rival criminal enterprise. Continued trade in illicit drugs by Latin Kings members is in many ways at odds with the tenets of the ALKQN manifesto, which in large part was written in 1972 as a direct response to the perceived threat posed to the group by the rising rate of illegal drug use in its membership base (Flood 2003). ALKQN leaders attributed the organisation's decline in the early 1970s to a loss of ideological purpose spurred by illicit drug use, and specifically referred to drug use as an element of the primitive stage of Kingism that needed to be abandoned before a Latin King could progress in the organisation (Brotherton and Barrios 2004). In essence, a dissonance exists between the ALKQN's guiding principles and the reality of its members engaging in criminal capitalism in the drug trade.

While the practice is not held in high regard under the tenets of Kingism, by engaging in an illicit shadow economy like the drug trade the ALKQN could be perceived to be using criminal capitalism as a means of subverting the perceived oppression of the Latinx community in urban America. To a large extent, an illicit drug marketplace constitutes a closed economy system within a neighbourhood: while the drugs themselves are typically sourced from outside this closed system, both suppliers and users typically reside in the same neighbourhoods and as a result the capital raised from drug

dealing tends to stay within the community in some form (Duck 2015). Illicit drug sales are not taxed by the government, nor are they subject to price fixing or mandated consumer regulation. Operators in this system effectively exist outside the capitalist system, and are able to prevent the leakage of financial capital out of oppressed communities and into the hands of the white, upper-middle class elite who control the economic paradigm of contemporary America (Centeno and Portes 2006). Anderson asserts that the drug trade provides an attractive alternative for those who grow up in oppressed communities, as ‘street-smart young people who operate in this underground economy are apparently able to obtain big money more easily and glamorously than their elders ... [and] become role models for still younger people’ (1990, p. 77). It may be for this reason that drug dealing is accepted as accepted conduct under the tenets of Kingism: whilst it is labelled as an expression of the philosophy’s most primitive stage, it also serves as a subversion of the oppressive capitalist state. Primitive stage Latin Kings, while not overtly committed to revolutionary principles, are in their own way working to destabilise the state by preventing the money spent by oppressed populations from returning to the dominant capitalist state. Regardless of the ill-effects of drug use on the Latinx community, the retention of capital by illicit means strikes a clear blow to the economic paradigm and contributes to a weakening of the ‘economic and social yoke of slavery’ that the ALKQN manifesto warns against (Brotherton 2013, p. 239).

## **A TRADITION OF CRIMINAL CAPITALISM IN LEFT-WING MARXIST VANGUARDISM**

While the ALKQN provide the clearest examples of an organisation with inherently Marxist principles that is actively engaged in criminal capitalism on a regular basis, there is a strong tradition of revolutionary groups using criminal activity to fund vanguardism. For a number of left-wing underground organisations operating in the 1960s and 1970s, armed robberies were a typical means of obtaining the financial support required to live off the grid and wage an insurgent campaign against the state (Malkki 2010). Radical left-wing vanguards like the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) and Mutulu Shakur’s ‘Family’ offshoot of the Black Liberation Army (BLA) were notorious for conducting armed hold-ups both as a means of combatting the capitalist system and supporting their revolutionary aspirations (Burrough 2015). Despite being treated by leftist advocates as rational addendums to a revolutionary movement, there is little distinction between the crimes committed by the SLA or

The Family and those undertaken by the Latin Kings: although the financial capital obtained through these robberies was nominally intended to fund bombing campaigns or political assassination, in reality it was primarily used to finance the lifestyle of members of the vanguard that had made the decision to 'go underground' in order to avoid arrest (Burrough 2015). In this respect, the armed robberies perpetrated by the vanguards of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century were in some respects no different to the Latin Kings of the contemporary era, who also use the profits of the drug trade to fund their lifestyle and evade detection and arrest by law enforcement. The key distinguishing factor is the rhetoric employed by each group: while groups like the SLA and The Family were vocal about their commitment to vanguardism and Marxist ideals, the Latin Kings are traditionally portrayed as a non-political criminal enterprise.

When it comes to Latin Kings operating at the primitive stage of participation, the view that their illicit criminal activity is chiefly non-political should be considered a fair interpretation; that said, it also ignores the far more complex system of Kingism that calls for revolution and liberation of the oppressed as a fundamental goal of the ALKQN (Brotherton and Barrios 2004). If the entire system of Kingism is considered rather than simply the visible primitive stage, it becomes apparent that the criminal operations of the ALKQN bears few differences in practice from those of the vanguard groups that have obtained far more recognition for their political agenda. It is possible that this lack of recognition for the ALKQN's ideological position arises from the absence of an obvious vanguard engaged in conflict with the state. However, the ALKQN is locked in a constant struggle with a group that Lenin himself acknowledged as one of the most key instruments of state control: the police (Lenin and Chretien 2014). In attempting to shut down the drug trade that subverts the capitalist paradigm, the police engage in direct conflict with the Latin Kings. Under the ALKQN manifesto, this kind of conflict with the state reflects the revolutionary Marxist values of the enlightened New Kings, with members of the Latin Kings 'street gang' active participants in a struggle to undermine the forces of capitalism and imperialism that seek to maintain a status quo in which the oppressed communities of the U.S. are marginalised by the mechanisms of a socio-political structure purposefully designed to exclude them.

## **CONCLUSION**

Kingism's ultimate goal, as stated in its manifesto and constitution, is to combat the system of oppression that it perceives to



exist in the U.S. and to raise up those that have suffered as a result of a discriminatory and exclusive capitalist system. It is indisputable that a criminal street gang is substantive different from the kind of revolutionary vanguard promoted by Debray in his foco theory. For most criminal gangs, it is an organisational priority to operate within the system of criminal capitalism in pursuit of profits and power (Papachristos, Hureau and Braga 2013). While these criminal operators exist outside the formal structures of law-abiding society, it is clear that participation in individualistic capitalist enterprises is the primary motivation for gang membership. As one of the most prolific groups operating in the illicit shadow economy of modern America, the Latin Kings have regularly been affixed with the pejorative label of 'street gang' (National Gang Intelligence Center 2009). To some degree, this is a fair assertion: the Latin Kings are major players in the urban drug trade and routinely engage in associated criminal endeavours like robbery, identity theft and violent inter-gang conflict. Even so, to group the Latin Kings in the same broad category of other street gangs would be to misconstrue the purpose of the organisation and the philosophy under which it operates. Since its foundation in the 1940s and, more explicitly, the drafting of the ALKQN manifesto and constitution in 1972, the Latin Kings have conducted their criminal operations under a set of radical principles more reflective of a Marxist revolutionary vanguard than a typical criminal street gang.

Whereas the majority of criminal gangs are solely focused on conducting their illicit business and maximising profits, the ALKQN considers traditional street-level gang-banging to be the most primitive level of a member's life as a Latin King. Criminality is treated as a phase of immaturity under the tenets of Kingism, and one that a Latin King must move beyond if they are to move into the higher stages of enlightenment that would see them invested as a 'New King' (Brotherton and Barrios 2004). Developing an understanding the principles guiding the ALKQN's overarching philosophy allows for the reconceptualization of the Latin Kings as a revolutionary vanguard of sorts: motivated by the philosophical objective to empower oppressed communities, the ALKQN manifesto calls on its members to engage in revolutionary conflict with the express intent to undermine and destabilise the capitalist state (Brotherton 2013). Vanguardism and street crime are not mutually exclusive concepts, and have regularly been used in tandem by left-wing radical groups to support revolutionary causes. While the ALKQN itself acknowledges that gang-banging is a primitive stage of development for a Latin King, members participating in street gang activity in their own way contribute to the revolutionary cause.



By operating a shadow economy that keeps profits in their own oppressed neighbourhoods, the Latin Kings essentially subvert the capitalist system by preventing the money of the working classes from being recuperated by the white, upper-middle class establishment. In their role as a tool of state control, law enforcement label the ALKQN a criminal organisation and attempt to shut down this shadow economy. Conflict with the police is, as Lenin notes, tantamount to revolutionary combat with the imperialist state, particularly in circumstances wherein the police attempt to enforce a status quo that disenfranchises oppressed communities (Lenin and Chretien 2014). Under the philosophy of Kingism, the ALKQN affirm their commitment to Marxist values, and to the liberation of those that are disadvantaged to the 'economic and social yoke of slavery' (Brotherton 2013, p. 239). In its combat with the state, the Latin Kings serve as a revolutionary vanguard that supports these goals. Just as it did in the Latin Kings' original incarnation in the 1940s, Kingism provides a philosophical drive for members of oppressed Latinx communities to regain agency and fight back against the forces of capitalism that restrict their socio-political mobility. At its most basic level, street crime offers young Latinx people an opportunity to subvert traditional systems of capitalism in order to rise above their oppression. Kingism supports this perception of the value of street gangs, whilst at the same time recognising that criminal entrepreneurialism without an appreciation of Marxist philosophy is inherently primitive values system that requires development before true socio-political enlightenment can be achieved. Reconceptualisation of the ALKQN as a revolutionary organisation with socio-political goals rather than an exclusively criminal group allows for better understanding of what motivates the Latin Kings. By undertaking to do so, it is possible to address the group's illicit behaviours in a more effective manner, allowing for greater understanding of the systemic disadvantage that underpins the Latin King's driving philosophy and providing opportunities to work collaboratively with the ALKQN leadership to minimise criminality and improve standards for oppressed communities.

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