

Book Review: Robert J. Duran, *The Gang Paradox: Inequalities and Miracles on the U.S.-Mexico Border*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. ISBN: 9780231181075 (Paperback). 299 Pages. \$30.00.

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Robert J. Duran opens his latest book *The Gang Paradox: Inequalities and Miracles on the U.S.-Mexico Border* with an account of his shock at hearing a faith-based Hispanic gang expert demonizing borderland Hispanic gangs and laying the blame for their existence on the shortcomings of gang members and their families. The remainder of the book is an effort to debunk this widely shared and alarmist approach to such gangs; explore the role of Hispanic law enforcement officers in the criminalization of Hispanic youth; document the resiliency of borderland Hispanics; offer solutions to the problems of Hispanic youth along the U.S.-Mexico border; and understand how a Hispanic man could partake in the public denigration of Hispanic gang members and their families. In attempting to attain these goals, Duran draws upon data collected over a 10 year period in Southern New Mexico and West Texas: data derived from personal observations, community focus groups and interviews, examination of government documents and newspaper archives, and the findings of undergraduate student research projects.

With regard to the alarmist approach to borderland Hispanic gangs, Duran begins with the observation that this approach is rooted in the derogation of people native to that region which began with their colonization and which has been exacerbated by both prohibition and the war on drugs with their attendant cross-border trafficking. He goes on to note that our perception of the prevalence and criminality of borderland

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Hispanic gangs is grossly distorted by the inherent difficulty of defining gangs (as opposed to both more and less problematic affiliations) coupled with our reliance on less than credible sources of information on the topic: most importantly law enforcement agencies with their lack of research training and their fiscal incentives to exaggerate the ubiquity and criminality of gangs. Based upon his more methodical and objective analysis of borderland Hispanic gang activity, Duran concludes that most of the groups that are considered to be criminal gangs are (and always have been) little more than identifiable collections of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who experience marginalization by an ethnocentric and increasingly draconian school system as well as criminalization by a discriminatory criminal justice process in which youth of Mexican descent are overrepresented at every punitive stage compared to white youth – collections that are best understood in terms of cultural resistance and ordinary youthful mischief. As such, he asserts, “gangs along the U.S.-Mexico border region of Southern New Mexico and West Texas do not exert a profound negative influence” (p. 242).

With regard to the role of Hispanic law enforcement officers in the criminalization of Hispanic youth, Duran begins by noting that such officers oftentimes constitute sizeable minorities, if not majorities, in the law enforcement agencies active in the region and yet racial and ethnic inequalities persist. Duran explores this apparent organizational paradox through extensive interviews with law enforcement officers of diverse identities and finds that not only do these officers categorically deny that race and ethnicity have anything to do with their treatment of youth, they frequently express great concern for Hispanic youth and the social conditions that lead to their high levels of surveillance, arrest, and incarceration. In fact, he found these officers to be both interested in addressing those conditions and profoundly frustrated with the lack of resources at their disposal for accomplishing this goal. And while many of their accounts of the problems of Hispanic youth are somewhat disparaging of such youth and their families, he refrains from accusing these officers of outright bigotry. Rather, he suggests that they are simply well-intended citizens trying to do their jobs in a system based upon what he later refers to as “racialized social control that serves to enhance inequality” (p. 222). In the end, Duran’s exploration of the role of law enforcement officers in general, and Hispanic law enforcement officers in particular, in the criminalization of Hispanic youth led him to the realization that “identifying a moral high ground in terms of which groups or individuals were bad and which ones were good was impossible in a world made up of shades of gray” (p. 156).

With regard to the resiliency of borderland Hispanics, Duran cites a number of what he calls “empirical miracles”. Among the miracles he identifies are their relatively low levels of criminal gang activity compared with other U.S. communities; their surprisingly high rates of educational and labor market success; their unwavering commitment to family, work, and religion; and their desire to assimilate despite their ongoing marginalization. These observations are fittingly supplemented by accounts of his conversations with two Latina women who have achieved success in the U.S. despite the many cultural and structural obstacles they encountered along the way.

With regard to viable solutions to the problems of Hispanic youth along the U.S.-Mexico border, Duran presents suggestions derived from his students, community practitioners, and his own experiences as a scholar and community member. His gleaning of student research projects generated a litany of potential solutions focused on increased access to employment for adults and increased recreational opportunities for youth, both in schools and in the larger community. His interviews with community practitioners generated similar suggestions along with calls for more inter-agency cooperation and the exploration of alternatives to criminalization, including diversionary drug programs and restorative justice forums. Duran endorses all of these suggestions and adds that instilling cultural consciousness is vital to ameliorating the legacy of colonization in the Southwest.

Finally, with regard to how a Hispanic man could partake in the public denigration of Hispanic gang members and their families, Duran draws upon his years of research on borderland Hispanic gangs and the context in which they emerge and concludes that the actions of this man are rooted in his acceptance of a colonialist ideology. Acceptance of this ideology is not peculiar to this individual in Duran’s opinion as he elsewhere notes its impact on many borderland Hispanics who, rather than challenge their marginalized status, instead “debated among themselves about how they needed to work harder and not blame society” (p. 189). This all too common (in his view) acceptance of colonialist ideology is the basis for Duran’s aforementioned insistence that instilling cultural consciousness is vital to ameliorating the problems of borderland Hispanics.

The Gang Paradox: Inequalities and Miracles on the U.S.-Mexico Border has been lauded for its contribution to changing the narrative on borderland Hispanic gangs, and rightfully so. It should also be lauded, in my opinion, for its generally balanced treatment of borderland denizens. Such treatment is especially evident in two instances.

First, the balanced treatment of borderland denizens is evident in Duran's portrayal of the communities in which Hispanic gangs emerge. Specifically, it is evident in his insistence that gangs and other social problems do not define Hispanic communities along the U.S.-Mexico border. I found Duran's account of the "empirical miracles" he observed during his research to be a welcome and much needed counterbalance to the accounts one frequently encounters not only in the media, but in scholarly works as well. In fact, I found it quite refreshing to come away from a scholarly work on a marginalized population without the impression that its communities have been reduced to little more than drug and violence infested wastelands. And while I understand the need for scholars to address the devastation wrought on marginalized communities by our social practices and the impulse to do so forcefully, I think it is important that we also reveal the humanity that survives such devastation; lest we inadvertently participate in the widespread maligning of those communities. It has been my experience that the overwhelming majority of people in even the most marginalized of populations live their lives with remarkable resolve, and I commend Robert J. Duran for making the resiliency of borderland Hispanics a central component of his narrative.

Second, the balanced treatment of borderland denizens is evident in Duran's portrayal of law enforcement officers and their role in the criminalization of Hispanic youth. That is, it is evident in his suggestion that the complicity of such officers (including Hispanics) in this process results from a combination of the limited opportunities available to borderland Hispanic youth and the context in which borderland law enforcement officers operate rather than from the moral shortcomings of those officers. I found it encouraging to read a scholarly work on the role of law enforcement in the perpetuation of racial and ethnic inequality that did not (however implicitly) portray law enforcement officers as either racists or sycophants. I found this encouraging not because I categorically support law enforcement agencies and their personnel (my political leanings being decidedly anarchist), but because I find the wholesale censure of any group to be at odds with both my personal experience and my sociological understanding of the world. I therefore commend Robert J. Duran for choosing morally engaged social science over reductionist moralizing.

Despite my recognition of the many merits of *The Gang Paradox: Inequalities and Miracles on the U.S.-Mexico Border*, I did find some aspects of this book mildly disconcerting. Not so disconcerting that they

detract from the overall value of this work, but disconcerting nonetheless. Those aspects are as follows.

First, I find Duran's conclusion that borderland Hispanic gangs do not exert a profound negative influence to be unwarranted. I find this conclusion unwarranted because even if Duran is correct in asserting that most of what are deemed borderland "gangs" are simply collections of disadvantaged youth rebelling against their marginalization and engaged in ordinary mischief at worst (and I am convinced that he is), the pages of this book are filled with references to gang-related killings nonetheless. So much so that among the notes provided at the end of this book is one commemorating specific murder victims and positing that "it would be empowering to have the names of everyone taken too soon by violence" (p. 260). This being the case, and while I appreciate Duran's attempt to change the narrative on borderland Hispanic gangs, I find his inclination to diminish the impact of all such gangs to be troublingly gratuitous.

Second, I find Duran's account of the criminalization of borderland Hispanic youth to be regrettably one-dimensional. I find this account to be regrettably one-dimensional in that while it is clear that such youth are criminalized at a higher rate than white youth and that this has something to do with race and ethnicity, it is also clear that this might have something to do with class as well. After all, we are talking about the criminalization rates of poor Hispanic youth compared to those of much more affluent white youth. The relative impoverishment of Hispanic youth in this context is important because there is simply too much evidence that class is an important determinate of experiences with the criminal justice system for it not to be a major consideration in any treatment of the criminalization process. Specifically, research suggests that members of the underclass, regardless of race or ethnicity, are more likely than members of the middle and upper-classes to be perceived as a threat (Petit & Western, 2004); to be scrutinized by the police (Mauer & Huling, 1995); and to be sent to prison (Western & Wildeman, 2009). Perhaps the most telling evidence of the importance of class in the criminalization process is the fact that when Western & Wildeman (2009) explored the impact of mass incarceration on different populations, they found that "in the period of the prison boom, class inequality in incarceration clearly increased, but racial inequality did not" (p. 231). None of this suggests that race and ethnicity are unimportant. It does, however, suggest that these categories might be especially important when they intersect with underclass status as has been noted by many of our most prominent contemporary commentators

on race and ethnicity (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Davis, 2007; hooks, 2000; Wilson, 1978). To be fair, Duran repeatedly acknowledges the underclass status of the Hispanic youth under consideration and its impact on their life chances. Nevertheless, I find myself lamenting the absence of explicit attention to intersectionality and its relevance for understanding the system of racialized social control he alluded to as the ultimate culprit in the criminalization of Hispanic youth.

Finally, I am not entirely comfortable with Duran's conclusion that the willingness of a Hispanic man to partake in the public denigration of Hispanic youth and their families is simply a result of his having accepted a colonialist ideology. This might well be the case. However, before I would accept this explanation of the origins of his worldview – and the worldviews of the other borderland Hispanics that Duran accords similar treatment – I would have to know why we should expect all such Hispanics to adhere to the same worldview in the first place. Are there not differences (class, status, religion, political ideology) among borderland Hispanics just as there are among other populations? Might not these differences contribute to the existence of multiple worldviews among this population, some of which tend toward the conservative and judgmental? Might not Linger (2002) be correct in asserting that rather than being surprised at the absence of intra-group empathy among people who share ethnicity “we should perhaps rather be surprised at our (anthropologists) continued tendency to group people under ethnic rubrics, to imagine that such conventional rubrics carry substantial weight, and be puzzled when they do not” (p. 500)? Might not Martes (2002) be justified in questioning the legitimacy of assuming “that it is the responsibility of so-called ethnic minorities to attach themselves to their cultural and national roots, while no such assumption is made in connection with the descendants of European immigrants” (p. 500)? I don't pretend to know the answers to these questions. I do, however, know that they warrant consideration. I also know that Duran's inattention to the implications of these questions for how we go about understanding the worldviews of borderland Hispanics left me with the uneasy feeling that he might have rushed to a less than generous judgment of this man and some of his brethren. Hence, my discomfort with this aspect of his narrative.

While my concerns about the preceding issues are real, they pale in comparison to my respect for Duran's contributions to contextualizing borderland Hispanic gangs and the hysteria surrounding them; nuancing our understanding of the role of law enforcement officers in general, and Hispanic law enforcement officers in particular, in the criminalization of

Hispanic youth; demonstrating the vibrancy of Hispanic communities along the U.S.-Mexico border; and generating community-based solutions to the problems of such communities. Therefore, I highly recommend *The Gang Paradox: Inequalities and Miracles on the U.S.-Mexico Border* as an essential resource not only for scholars interested in borderland Hispanic gangs, but for anyone interested in furthering their understanding of the challenges and triumphs of Hispanic communities along the U.S.-Mexico border.

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