



Partecipazione e Conflitto
* *The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*
<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>
ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)
ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)
PACO, Issue 13(1) 2020: 930-942
DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v13i1p930

Published in March 15, 2020

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License

BOOK REVIEWS

Jeffrey Lane, *Digital Street*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2019, ISBN 9780199381265, pp. 256.

Niccolò Morelli
University of Bologna

In this book, Jeffrey Lane actualises the reflections on street life in troubled neighbourhoods made by Elijah Anderson in the '90s and published in the pathbreaking *The Code of the Street* (1999). Lane reflects on the new challenges in these neighbourhoods with the diffusion of Internet 2.0 technologies and with the spread of digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. These Information and Communications Technology (ICT) represent new challenges for the mechanisms of producing identity and reputation and belonging to the neighbourhood. Lane's work fully belongs to urban studies conducted with an ethnographic approach, well developed by Anderson, and with studies on neighbourhood effects, described by Sampson (2012, 2019). Lane Lane's work is inspired by Anderson's description of the rules, relationships and mechanisms that governed street life between Afro-American gangs twenty years ago, describing rules, relationships and mechanisms that governed street life between Afro-American gangs. Lane, however, is more interested on how neighbourhood relations change with new technologies, and how different actors, such as gangs, civil associations and the police, react towards these new challenges. Methodologically, Lane applies urban studies and ethnographies on both a digital and physical level. The author chose a specific neighbourhood of New York, Harlem, due to the massive presence of

youth gangs and for the attention given by institutions to this district that is currently under the important process of gentrification. The author is one of the gentrifiers.

Harlem

Harlem has experienced many changes in the last decades. In particular, the Federal State has financed the regeneration of the neighbourhood, which has led in recent years to the opening of the first shop run by white people (Zukin et al., 2009). Moreover, the spread of drug commerce that led Harlem as the capital of drug trafficking in the '80s and '90s has reduced considerably, owing to efficient and well organised police controls; however, these controls have led to discriminatory policies as the stop and frisk controls have been reported to be addressed mostly to Afro-American people. Nevertheless, consequences of that period of drug commerce are still visible through the uncontrolled spread of guns. War between gangs, which in the past happened to control the drug commerce, has been substituted with the fight for control of the territory, for social reputation and for the building of personal and gang identity, both in a digital and physical dimension. Moreover, opportunities are still far below the average of other neighbourhoods in New York and in the U.S. (Squires & Kubrin, 2005). The absence of opportunities has several implications on the formation of social ties, as powerful mechanisms of reproduction or emancipation from troubled situations and contexts.

Jeffrey Lane conducted ethnographic and netnographic research over five years, which involved spending time with and interviewing young people involved in gangs and volunteers who help people to flee from gangs. The book reflects on the implications that digital technologies have on gangs and on the emersion of female characters in the fight for power among gangs or in attempts to avoid conflicts. Female interactions to with males in a digital dimension are of particular interest and offer new opportunities for safe interactions, considering that in physical contexts there is a lot of violence between males and females involved in gangs. The book also analyses the legal implications of posting, sharing and spreading compromised photos, videos and messages through digital platforms, and discusses how young people create two different communicative codes in order to be respected by peers, older people and parents and to avoid raising suspicion with the police. Young people are not the only ones exploring new possibilities that digital platforms offer as the police officers and judges are also using them to their advantage. For this reason, it has been necessary for gang members to use different linguistic codes when using these new technologies.

Among the admirable qualities of Jeffrey Lane's work emerges the time he spent observing episodes of street life and reporting emotions, feelings and impressions in his notes in a non-rhetoric way giving the reader the full story about his experiences.

Moreover, because of the trusting relations that he created with some young people, the book contains an analysis of private digital interactions between these young people, which enables the reader to access to important moments of discussion, confrontation and sharing between peers about what happens in the street and their reflections on the events their personal identity and how it relates to the public sphere.

The book is structured as follows: Chapter One describes the roles of females and males in their street life and in relation with each other, and how the roles and relations change through the diffusion of new technologies. The second chapter focuses on processes of code switching that young people use on digital platforms in their public communication and examines what happens in private chats with peers or adults. In the third chapter, Jeffrey Lane presents a key actor, Pastor, involved in associations that help young people gain education and work, and examines how his role has changed due to the introduction of new technologies. The fourth chapter focuses on the strategies that police and law officers adopt to cope with gangs and their use of new technologies and discusses how the law interprets the publication of compromising videos, photos and posts on digital platforms. Finally, Lane portrays some lessons that he learnt during his research and provides some lines of interventions for ameliorating the lives of young people in problematic neighbourhoods. This review presents the most important evidence that this research obtained.

Young people towards digital platforms in Harlem

The first chapter of Lane's book outlines the changes that the spread of internet technologies brought to the interactions between males and females in their street life. First, digital communication, which enables people to connect with little economic expenditure other than phone calls, has created a safer space of interaction for females to deal with males on the street. One of the principal fears of girls dealing with boys is the exposure to frequent violence. Digital communication has thus enabled females to establish a new communication register, deciding what is acceptable and what it is not in a more protected and set way. For example, online interactions can develop in two forms: (1) a public interaction on a Facebook or other public social platform profile, where it is an observable style of communication and self-representation similar to that produced in the physical street, involving posts about belonging to a group or neighbourhood; and (2) private communications, such as a private chat, in which the discussion is more personal and open, thus allowing the possibility to deepen the knowledge about the person with whom you are chatting by discussing expectations,

values and suitable behaviours. This private dimension is more protected than previous private interactions between males and females on the street because it provides a physical barrier, a distance from street eyes that is far from the necessity to defend a reputation and public image in front of the group. Digital interactions have also permitted males to exhibit a different behaviour and to emancipate themselves from stereotypes. Moreover, social media permits many females to make connections and interactions with people from other neighbourhoods, giving them the opportunity to distance themselves from the logics of street life that they do not accept and to get to know different contexts. Private digital interactions also have important methodological consequences for researchers because it is now possible to access conversations directly that before were only possible through reports and interpretations of the people involved in the physical interactions (Markham, 2016). Private safe chat conversations also oblige males of the gangs to interact in a different way with females because they know that the females have more opportunity to find a better solution outside of the neighbourhood. However, it is more difficult for males involved in gangs to get to know females from other neighbourhoods because peers would judge negatively the choice to chat with someone from another neighbourhood. Through the relations he established with the young people being researched, Lane was able to access and analyse entire sets of private digital conversations between young people and to ask for interpretations and explications from the people directly involved. Because young people of Harlem want to communicate with people outside of their neighbourhoods, the number of friends they have established on Facebook is, on average, higher rather than in other U.S. contexts and the number of contacts they have never met before is significantly higher than in other contexts. Connections with people made through social media are growing because of Facebook's usage of geolocalisation systems which suggest people with whom users can make new friendships. Even if important steps towards establishing new contact outside a Harlem neighbourhood have been made by young people, especially females, gang members remain highly sceptical towards socialising with people from outside the neighbourhood, and this attitude could cause some tensions and violence.

Nonetheless, technology represents a new threat for young people due to the creation of fake profiles, denigration campaigns and incitation to violence (Davies et al., 2015), especially towards females who do not align with the expectations of males. Moreover, digital platforms act as resonance chambers for violent events and deviant behaviours, such as sharing brawl videos. However, this type of digital public communication usually draws the attention of associations involved with young people and

police officers that have access to more evidence or use the posts to find the perpetrators of these deviant behaviours.

Finally, females play an important role of connection or mediation between different gangs, associations and families, and they are fundamental in avoiding crimes and for helping boys to escape from dangerous situations, which they typically do through digital interactions. However, in this new digital scenario, new gangs are also emerging which are sometimes led by females (Brotherton, 2015). These gangs have own behaviour rules and codes that indicate an important change in the relationships between males and females different from Elijah Anderson's previous observations.

The second chapter of Lane's book is dedicated to the code switching that young people of Harlem apply in their digital and physical public communication, but also in the private sphere. Digital platforms offer young people a new dimension where it is possible to build their own identity (Darvin, 2016). This dimension offers young people a place to confirm their appearance on the street or to flee from the narratives and processes of identity building deployed on the street. Digital platforms are not easy for young people to use because the eyes that observe and control what happens in the digital space are far more numerous than on the street and digital communications leave traces that are accessible to everyone and are very difficult to erase. Moreover, these traces can reach people outside the inner group of friends, such as families or police officers, who can use this information against the young people. The author analyses how the young people of Harlem react to new challenges posed by new communication technologies in relation to identity building processes, reputation and the social desirability of what is appropriate to be communicated through social media. Lane outlines three strategies deployed through digital communication:

1. differentiation of identity between street and digital life,
2. affirmation of respectability both on the street and online and of the more private work of emancipation from gang life,
3. increased respectability in both digital and physical contexts.

Young people who work to build a different identity on social media from their street life tend to share their school and professional successes on digital platforms, and the positive feedback they receive from associations and family members on digital platforms encourages them to free themselves from violent environments. These people typically to avoid the public narration of street dynamics and they publish only the contents that are socially acceptable to older people, parents and associations. Another strategy of dealing with identity building on digital platforms involves posting photos and videos of violent episodes to maintain their respectability on the street while they study and work to escape from these violent environments. However, this

strategy is risky and complex because, over time, these young people discover how dangerous it is to publish such photos and videos because of trials that implied friends, and, even if they erase the posts, the contents could have been observed by employers or documented by police officers who could use this material in court years later, thus compromising the work they have put in to ensure their emancipation from their previous street life (Carbone, 2015). The third strategy involves publishing digital contents that would help to raise their reputation and respectability on the digital and physical street, using both dimensions to boost their communication and identification with their gang and their belonging. Balancing their street and digital reputation makes the identity construction process of young people involved in deviant environments particularly difficult, even if it enables them to show something different to diverse audiences should they want to emancipate. The digital dimension is a more complex reality from the one that was experienced by young people in the street before the spread of digital platforms, however it also gives new opportunities for young people that want to emancipate themselves from street life, if it is used wisely.

The role of associations through a key actor: Pastor

In the subsequent chapter, Jeffrey Lane portrays Pastor, a street pastor, who is an ordained minister active outside the church that is involved helping young people from the Harlem neighbourhood. Street pastors are peculiar to this context because they do not have a specific church or an institutional role; however, they are well recognised and respected in Afro-American communities and viewed as reference figures. Streets pastors are hybrid characters, which means that although they bring respect and trust to the people they stay with, they do not have any specific privileges or protection to offer. Nonetheless, Jeffrey Lane portrays Pastor as a fundamental character because he can offer concrete help and the right stimulus to young people that desire to quit criminal street life. Previous literature has outlined the importance of these characters (Marino, 2017), but with the spread of digital platforms, there are new challenges to reaching out and accessing the young people's world. Pastor understood quickly the importance of these technologies, and he thus uses digital platforms to ameliorate his point of view on street life, using private chats as a safe and constant channel of communication to keep in touch with young people whenever they need him or if they feel trapped. Pastor is involved in the difficult work of mediation between young people, institutions, police officers, parents – when parents are present – and other volunteers.

His capacity of understanding digital communication has enabled him to ameliorate his service for young people and to open a new channel of communication.

However, within associations, the understanding of the role of digital platforms is far from fully understood. Pastor is one of the few volunteers that has learnt about the new digital communicative dynamics among young people and he is fully committed to convincing other volunteers, who usually are not young and tend to be more hesitant, to use digital platforms. However, the risk is that these volunteers, who are sceptical about new technologies, will only interpret partially and without fully understanding what is happening on the street, and so volunteers result less present, less useful and far from young people, together with a more complicated affordability from young people to contact them, with the difficulty to find a safe, protected and always available ways of communication. In this chapter, I found the field notes of the author particularly interesting because the presence of Pastor enabled him to enter into direct contact with young people and see a close-up view of street life by helping Pastor with his job. In these notes, it is possible to appreciate the virtues and weaknesses of the commitment of the Pastor and enjoy the emotions that the inhabitants, especially the young people, and the volunteers feel about the street life. While these notes highlight the importance of the presence of church congregations because powerful services play a role in neighbourhood control (McRoberts, 2008), in New York, there is a huge presence of non-religious associations or services oriented towards helping troubled neighbourhoods (Marino, 2017). The presence of various types of associations in deprived neighbourhoods in the U.S. led also to an important reflection on street units in policies towards young people in Italy (Vitale, 2003).

What the author also highlights in this chapter, and it represents an important theoretical question with methodological implications, is that digital connections are important but not enough to create mutual trust. For this kind of connection, is necessary also a physical one (Baym, 2015). To create a trusted network with young people, Pastor invited them to his office, for dinner, to chat in a café, and he visited them in prison, representing sometimes the only person who cares about them. The digital connection represents a safe channel in an emergency and offers a way to maintain contact when a physical encounter is not possible. In some cases, it is also the first way for Pastor to connect with young people in danger. Moreover, the presence of Pastor on digital platforms permits him to know directly what is going on in multiple areas of the neighbourhood, to mediate when arguments are going on through digital platforms, to alert adults that something bad is going to happen in the neighbourhood and dissuade young people from becoming involved, and to inform the population of the neighbourhood about the events and initiatives that are taking place in the area. Pastor's com-

mitment has shown good results thanks to his high availability which enables young people to ask for help or a discussion or suggestion whenever needed. His work has changed the relationships not only with young people but also with volunteers by convincing them of the importance of digital communication and availability, but it has not been easy. Another delicate responsibility of Pastor's work is helping the families of young people who died as a result of street violence. Pastor helps them with spiritual and economic assistance and instils a message of peace instead of creating or provoking revenge and other violence. At the same time, he studies the dynamics of violence and attempts to stop it; for this reason, he spends time speaking with police officers.

Lane also describes the weaknesses of Pastor's work. First, he is unable to stop much of the violence, as the violent action is typically moved to another place, away from the eyes of Pastor. Second, the presence of Pastor is perceived as ambiguous because the young people are conscious that he maintains relationships with police officers and that his knowledge of the street dynamics could cause trouble for some of them.

Digital strategies to fight street gangs

In the fourth chapter, Jeffrey Lane explains how digital platforms marked a substantial change in investigations around street criminality. Police officers have adopted new tools, methods and approaches to find, monitor and prevent street criminality (Patton et al., 2017). Investigative forces have been extremely fast in activating a monitoring force that could deepen and open new methods of investigation through digital communication, including text, photo and video analysis but also private chats, to find more evidence that could be used in trials. These innovations have led police officers to new information that before were only accessible after long investigations and field observations. Today, this information is easy to access through desk analysis because of fake profiles opened by police officers, the tendency for young people to accept friend requests from unknown people and to have unprotected online profiles. This type of enquiry has important implications for young people and their criminal records: a photo that shows intimidatory attitudes or the presence of guns could be a proof for starting a trial. However, according to the author, young people could post these photos to show their strength and retain their street reputation and they do not necessarily mean that these people were involved in criminal acts. Many trials have included these kinds of materials even if the photos were unrelated to the crime object of attention in the trial. Moreover, lawyers usually ask for plea bargains when using this kind of proof because it is hard to argue against it. This method of investigating has sometimes

undermined the re-educational or job pathways of people that abandoned their previous criminal gangs, which represents a real threat for young people who are sometimes obliged to appear in photos with gang members to show their belonging to the group; in case of denial, such photos could signify violence against them because it seems a refusal of belonging to the gang. This is only one of several implications of the use of information obtained through the internet in trials and still have not a unambiguous interpretation. To understand the importance of this new method of investigation, Lane reports 198 cases that used materials from digital platforms; in 190 of those, the final decision led to a sentence for the person who was charged with an offense. However, as Lane does not tell us the rate of condemnation in trials without digital content, we cannot make a comparison. Nevertheless, Lane points out that the new digital strategy adopted by police officers has led to fewer criminal acts and suggests that although it may ruin the lives of people who have left criminal paths behind, given their effectiveness, the use of digital materials will continue. Their effectiveness could also be due to the speed in which police officers can conduct online investigations and have thus been able to identify and catch unprepared gangs. However, young people are quickly understanding the risks implied with the public posting of illegal behaviours, not only because their families could see them, but also because of the presence of police officers. This implies that in the future, it could be more difficult for police officers to find evidence on digital platforms, despite the inability to clear all traces from the web.

Lessons and possible interventions

In the last chapter, Jeffrey Lane sums up the salient points that emerged in the book about how social media has changed the way young people, associations and police officers experience the Harlem neighbourhood. The digital dimension represents a fundamental place for analysing urban processes and for developing a full understanding of the behaviours in the neighbourhood, not only for criminal phenomena but also for other events that today develop in the double dimension (digital and physical) and in the co-creation of the neighbourhood environment and a sense of belonging. Nowadays, our lives contain a digital extension in which we communicate, create and maintain relationships, and strategically interact that is no longer possible to ignore (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002). However, whereas the sense of belonging is still an urban practice (Blokland, 2017), the digital dimension fosters the loyalty and attachment to a physical place. However, physical connection is still necessary to build a

sense of belonging to a place. The digital dimension has numerous implications for researchers: while it is necessary to consider that everything that is published is worthy of attention, this does not mean that it will transform into a concrete action in the neighbourhood context. In face to face interactions, certain statements are made to uphold a reputation, but without the aim of deploying them. However, differently from physical communication, statements made on digital platforms remain public for a long time and could be used against them. This is particularly true in dangerous contexts such as that represented by street gangs. People that previously belonged to such gangs have difficulties erasing their past, even if they become fully committed to living honourable lives. This represents an important challenge for law and police officers that should use their discernment wisely to foster educative and professional pathways for young people who want to quit their gang life, trying not to focus solely on repressing menaces that are usually linked to the past.

Lane offers an important contribution to urban studies in the digital era and offer an interesting viewpoint regarding belonging to a digital dimension and neighbourhood. Throughout the book, Lane observes and analyses how digital platforms did not imply a weaker sense of belonging to the physical dimension of the neighbourhood, but rather strengthened the bonds through the possibility of remaining connected with friends and getting to know other people as acquaintances. At the same time, the digital dimension has offered young people suffering from the dynamics of the physical street life the opportunity to get to know people from other neighbourhoods, which before was impossible or risky. This innovation has represented a concrete possibility for escaping from the gangs, especially for girls.

Moreover, Lane contributes to urban policy literature some reflections on possible lines of interventions in troubled neighbourhoods, as in the case of Harlem. The first point that the author highlights is the necessity to invest more money into education for people that want to escape from street gangs, as education is still a privilege for too few young people. Girls have benefitted most from educational possibilities as being emancipatory from being subjected to gangs and from boys. The second line of intervention is the need for more effective strategies for boys and girls to escape from deviant paths and to make them important witnesses for peers. However, such strategies could also represent a danger for them as gang members would not appreciate that their peers are used as symbols against them. While much has been done on the criminal repression side, there is still much to do to emphasise the positive experiences of young people in the neighbourhood. It is fundamental to give positive feedback to young people engaging with educational and professional paths who in many cases remain alone, without friends, because they are judged as traitors of street life. More-

over, educational and professional successes should be used by law officers to overturn evidence of past exploits to show the changes the individual has made to their life and to valorise their efforts. Finally, according to the author, it is necessary to encourage the usage of social media to show stories and choices made by people that have successfully abandoned street life, as social media offers a platform through which to meet employers who can help them to join the job market and emancipate them from their street life.

Conclusions

I would like to point out some other considerations. I found the book especially useful for sociologists who want to deepen the relationship between people, spaces and digital connections. The book contains innovative reflections that deserve to be read not only by specialists but also by a vast public. The book shows how urban processes and dynamics have changed with the spread of digital platforms, leading to a new role of females in street dynamics (Ruble & Turner, 2000), mechanisms of code-switching in digital communication, and new policies adopted by associations and police officers to deal with new challenges brought by digital technologies. Moreover, the book shows with clarity how the spread of digital platforms does not mean a weaker identification and sense of belonging by young people to the neighbourhood (Matthews, 2015), but rather how these processes currently deploy on two different levels – digital and physical – that are in constant interaction. The author also defines crucial challenges and interventions necessary for associations, families, local institutions and police officers to deal with street gangs and to offer concrete possibilities for the emancipation of young people living in poor neighbourhoods. For sociologists, the author provides appendices at the end of the book to deepen the dimensions analysed in each chapter and presents useful tools enabling other researchers to repeat this type of research in other contexts. Doing so will allow the possibility of creating a dialogue between this research and others examine street life and the context of the neighbourhood in the digital era.

Last, I consider this book inspiring for European urban contexts, especially where the identity processes of young people are still embedded with the context of the street. Even if violence and gang affiliation in European contexts is lower than that in the U.S. (Klein et al., 2000), young people in many deprived neighbourhoods build their personalities and reputations at the street level; thus, an analysis of how these processes are now mediated through social media is warranted.

References

- Anderson E., (1999), *The Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, Norton & Company, New York, pp. 352.
- Baym, N. K. (2015), *Personal connections in the digital age*, New York, John Wiley & Sons.
- Blokland, T. (2017), *Community as Urban Practice*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Brotherton, D. C. (2015), *Youth street gangs: A critical appraisal*, London, Routledge.
- Carbone, C. E. (2015), "To be or not to be forgotten: Balancing the right to know with the right to privacy in the digital age", *Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law*, 22, 525.
- Darvin, R. (2016), "Language and identity in the digital age", in Siân Preece (eds.) *Routledge handbook of language and identity*, pp. 523-540.
- Davies, C., Coleman, J., & Livingstone, S. (Eds.), (2015), *Digital technologies in the lives of young people*, London, Routledge.
- Haythornthwaite, C., & Wellman, B. (2002), *The Internet in everyday life: An introduction. The Internet in everyday life*, pp. 3-41.
- Klein, M., Kerner, H. J., Maxson, C., & Weitekamp, E. (Eds.) (2000), *The Eurogang paradox: Street gangs and youth groups in the US and Europe*, Springer Science & Business Media.
- Markham, A. N. (2016), "Ethnography in the digital internet era", in Denzin N.K & Lincoln Y.S, *Sage handbook of qualitative research*, Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, pp. 650-668.
- Marino, M. P. (2017), "Harlem: New Perspectives on an Old Neighborhood", *Journal of Urban History*, 43(5), 846–851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144217725023>.
- Matthews, P. (2015), "Neighbourhood belonging, social class and social media—Providing ladders to the cloud", *Housing Studies*, 30(1), 22-39.
- McRoberts, O. M. (2008), "Beyond savior, victim, and sinner: Neighborhood civic life and "absent presence" in the religious district", in Lichterman P. & Potts C. B (eds.) *The civic life of American religion*, Redwood City, Stanford University Press, pp. 82-99.
- Patton, D. U., Brunton, D. W., Dixon, A., Miller, R. J., Leonard, P., & Hackman, R. (2017), "Stop and frisk online: theorizing everyday racism in digital policing in the use of social media for identification of criminal conduct and associations", *Social Media+ Society*, 3(3), 2056305117733344.

- Ruble, N. M., & Turner, W. L. (2000), "A systemic analysis of the dynamics and organization of urban street gangs", *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 28(2), 117-132.
- Sampson, R. J. (2019), "Neighbourhood effects and beyond: Explaining the paradoxes of inequality in the changing American metropolis", *Urban Studies*, 56(1), 3-32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098018795363>.
- Sampson, R.J. (2012), *Great American City*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Squires, G. D., & Kubrin, C. E. (2005), "Privileged places: Race, uneven development and the geography of opportunity in urban America", *Urban Studies*, 42(1), 47-68.
- Zukin, S., Trujillo, V., Frase, P., Jackson, D., Recuber, T., & Walker, A. (2009), "New retail capital and neighborhood change: Boutiques and gentrification in New York City", *City & Community*, 8(1), 47-64.
- Vitale, T. (2003), "Abbassare la soglia-confini ed apprendimento", in Bifulco L. (eds.), *I genius loci del welfare. Strutture e processi della qualità sociale*, Officina Edizioni, Roma, pp. 136-149.