

# **Born in the Streets: Violence, Gangsterism and Power in *Gangs of New York***

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## **Abstract**

When in 1928 Herbert Asbury published his acclaimed book *Gangs of New York*, he presented a panoramic and retrospective view of the most significant gangs that prowled the Five Point's area. His gangsters were villains of the past who had no influence in the present. However, in Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* gangsters such as Bill the Butcher seem to have certain continuity into the present. This paper explores the role violence and power play in the foundation of modern New York according to Scorsese and Asbury in their respective versions of *Gangs of New York*.

Nothing can prepare the viewer for the violent, disturbing and visually commanding first scenes of *Gangs of New York*, by Martin Scorsese. A sharp and repetitive flute tune keeps the pace of Priest Vallon and his Dead Rabbits –a gang that rallied the Irish immigrants of the neighbourhood in 1840s– while dressing for battle. Vallon cuts himself with a knife and tells his young son, Amsterdam, “that the blood always stays on the blade”. The child tries to clean the stain in the knife, but his need for purity, and later in the film justice, will have to wait for long. The Dead Rabbits are ready and eager to kill.

Then, the music stops and Scorsese's camera aims at the deserted, silent and snowy area of Paradise Square. For a minute, the white mantle disguises the misery of the dilapidated quarter. A crystal eye and a crisp footprint cover the whole of the camera's zoom. Danger looms large. Bill the Butcher is the sturdy leader of the Native Americans, a protestant and anti-immigration gang which claims privileges and authority over the Five Points area in New York. He

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speaks like a demon monster with a harsh voice, and in the first lines addressed to his Rabbit foes he invokes “the ancient laws of combat”.

The real fighting begins, and the viewer can even feel s/he is participating in the nearly fifteen minutes of utter carnage. The quick succession of camera shots catches the actual movements of killing when bricks fly and blades and axes dye the snow in blood. Though this is Lower Manhattan in 1846, *The New York Times* noted in a long review of the film that “it might as well be the Middle Ages or the time of Gilgamesh: these warlike rituals have an archaic, archetypal feeling”. (Scott, 2002).

Soon before the battle begins, both parties are aligned in front of each other, they are equipped with handmade weapons, they are dressed in leather, they fight hand-to-hand, and their leaders claim ancient laws of battle to regain their territory. The Medieval and ritualistic evocations are clear. Scorsese has long been interested in violence (*Goodfellas*, *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*), both in its diverse manifestations and its origins, and *Gangs of New York* presents to us a multiethnic carnival of social and political misrule as if Scorsese was, according to the *New York Times*, “a kind of romantic visual anthropologist, fascinated by tribal lore and language, by half-acknowledged codes of honour and retribution and by the boundaries between loyalty and vengeance, between courtesy and violence, that underlie a given social order” (Scott, 2002).

The epic and tragic dimensions of the film are evident. Some fifteen years after the priest dies, Amsterdam leaves the Kitchen’s Hell orphanage with the intention to kill his father’s butcher. He actually meets and puts himself under the umbrella of Bill, and becomes a privileged witness of the degradation and violence prevalent in Five Points. As Annalisa Panelli tells us in *Journal of Religion and Film*:

Amsterdam’s quest for justice kills his need for purity, which he exhibited as a child in his desire to cleanse the blood of the blade. Once set on revenge, the boy enters a world of rampant depravity. Nineteenth-century New York is indeed, in Scorsese’s able hands, a den of thieves and prostitutes that, Amsterdam tells us, may some day become a city. More aptly, the island resembles a

modern Sodom and Gomorra, where savagery rules.  
(Panelly, 2003)

But what is the origin of this violence, and what does it lead to? Hilary Neroni, in her article “Expressions of Masculinity”, challenges the idea that violence does necessarily erupt spontaneously or as an irrational response to a situation, and states that violence plays a very specific role in creating individual and social identities. We clearly see that in two climatic moments of the film: in the opening fight between two gangs, and in the final free-for-all against the backdrop of the Civil War Draft Riots of 1863.

In these two long scenes, the viewer gets the message that not only America was born in the streets, but that violence, both social and political, plays a significant role in the succession of historical events. The past of New York’s current prosperity lies in corruption and violence, as perhaps any other city’s past. Even more so when the democrat leaders of the Tammany Hall have direct dealings with Bill the Butcher, and, according to Herbert Asbury, with other prominent gangsters of that time. In those days the gangster flourished under the protection and manipulation of the crooked politician to whom he was an invaluable ally at election time, but his day has simply passed (Asbury, 1928: 19).

This sinister and corrupted relationship between formal political power and gangsterism is reflected in several scenes of Scorsese’s film, although it does not always play at Boss Tweed’s advantage. Bill the Butcher manipulates votes and extorts at Tammany’s command, but Bill brandishes real power because he resorts to violence. His violence allows him to trigger “fear” in others, as he himself reveals to Amsterdam, and in violence and fear he has found actual power and, therefore, success.

At the same time, violence in Scorsese’s film and in Asbury’s book is almost exclusively related with men and masculinity. Hilary Neroni tells us that in order to understand the way random acts turn into conscious violent actions we must consider the individual, as well as the individual acts of violence, but also the larger social totality that might provoke, demand, or provide an environment for such violence.

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Serving as a fundamental signifier of masculinity, we not only consider violence more the province of men than women, but it is also an activity that inevitably enhances a man's masculinity as much as it would conversely detract from a woman's femininity. (Neroni, 2005: 42)

Neroni adds that the multiple ways American film has narrativized and depicted masculinity illustrate that ideals of masculinity often change with each historical period. And one way to generalize about masculinity in films is to consider how an individual's masculinity is often defined by his link to a larger group or institution. In *Gangs of New York*, masculinity is clearly linked to violence and the sense of belonging to a group, in this case Amsterdam belonging to the Native Americans gang. To be the most violent individual means to attain the group's highest symbolic status, a status that connotes ultra-masculinity.

Of course, violence is just one signifier among many that point to maleness. Violence itself doesn't entirely make up masculinity, but it is also not possible to entirely erase violence from masculinity. One cannot separate ideas of masculinity from violence in our society—which is why, for example, a woman committing violence is inevitably at some point referred to as masculine. (Neroni, 2005: 45)

However, this strong and historical identification of maleness with violence does not explain, in itself, the different sadistic expressions of violence we find in *Gangs of New York* as a way to exert power and influence.

According to Nancy Chodorov in *The Enemy Outside*, identity seems to be, at a cultural level, one of the concepts that consolidates and justifies genocide, ethnic cleansing, and similar horrific practices. The willingness to wipe out certain groups of gangsters on the part of Bill the Butcher and his Natives seems to have, on the one hand, a strong masculine-testosterone component which triggers intense violence, and on the other, an identification with a group and a cause which understands aggression as the only way to put forward its

agenda. At the same time, extreme poverty and misery pave the way to violence. But Tweed and other politicians in the Tammany are not poor and nevertheless resort to corruption and aggression to foster their political aims, so the question remains: Are violence and aggression valid means to reach social or political stability? According to Scott, and perhaps Scorsese, violence seems to be at the core of human nature:

The rioters are seen as exploited, oppressed and destined to be cannon fodder in a war they barely understand, but they are far from heroic, and the violence of the riots makes the film's opening gangs battle seem quaint and decorous. What we are witnessing is the eclipse of warlordism and the catastrophic birth of a modern society. Like the old order, the new one is driven by class resentment, racism and political hypocrisy, attributes that change their form at every stage of history but that seem to be as embedded in human nature as the capacity for decency, solidarity and courage. (Scott, 2002)

Gangs and politicians seem to resort to violence for unjustifiable reasons. They are led by selfishness, interest, false idealism and sadistic impulses, but nevertheless their aggressive actions change history forever in the city, and we could argue they do not change it for the worst of it. Violence becomes an instrument of survival and also gives some meaning to life. *Gangs of New York* is not about the classical clash between good and evil. Goodness is a sign of weakness and evilness and aggression are treated as commonplace values to survive both in the Five Points quarter and in politics. Scorsese's subtext seems to be, in his somewhat free version of Asbury's book, that for twenty-first-century viewers is very easy to condemn violence, but it is far more difficult to understand its causes and to acknowledge that violence has forged our recent and remote historical past. In an interview for the BBC in London, Scorsese revealed:

I hope people will begin to see that this is how America started, the amount of racism and the amount of hatred that existed. They threw everybody

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in from the boats, living together, expecting them all to get along regardless of religion or race. Naturally there's going to be friction and there's going to be an explosion. It was really the first test of immigration and democracy, a struggle that still hasn't ended. (Cawthorne, 2003)

The final scenes of the Draft Riots in *Gangs of New York*, with all its chaos and massacres, attest to the fact that generalized violence is, maybe, inevitable at the turning point of a great social and political change. Its randomness or intentionality is a subject of diverse discussion in academic circles but the fact of its cathartic influence in social and political spheres is undeniable. For Nancy Chodorow,

The enemies are constructed as part objects without subjectivity; at the same time, destroying their subjectivity helps provide the sadistic pleasure of violence. When social wholes fracture, and identity, via conscious and unconscious concepts of peoplehood, nation, or ethnos, is threatened, for men, especially, gender identity seems to fracture along similar lines. (2002: 255)

When Bill the Butcher dies in the hands of Amsterdam and the city falls in an orgy of killing and blood, the pervasiveness of its violence makes the viewer realize how much New York City has changed over the last 150 years. But its sense of aggressiveness and profanity makes you wonder whether it has barely changed at all.

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