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# Conflicting cultures – a street-ethnographic take on urban youth, unstructured socialization and territoriality

*David Thore Gravesen, Peter Frostholtm Olesen*

## **Abstract**

This article is about conflicting cultures among urban youth in a medium-sized Danish town called Lomby. At the central squares in Lomby different groups of children and young people gather around the newly established skater facility. Concentrating on a specific group of young boys, the pseudo-gang called the Thugz, the article illustrates how conflictual behaviour is a key component in the everyday lives of the various confronting groups present at the site. The analysis also depicts the Thugz' attitudes towards authorities like the SSP (a special Social Services, School and Police unit) and the police and in the summarizing part of the article, also the groups' reflections on school.

*Keywords:* conflict, urban youth, unstructured socialization, territoriality, ethnography

## **Zusammenfassung**

Der Beitrag beschreibt die konfligierenden Kulturen von Jugendlichen in einer mittelgroßen dänischen Stadt namens Lomby. Auf den zentralen Plätzen halten sich unterschiedliche Gruppen von Kindern und Jugendlichen rund um eine kürzlich errichtete Skateranlage auf. Am Beispiel einer bestimmten Gruppe männlicher Jugendlicher (der Pseudo-Gang ‚Thugz‘) wird aufgezeigt, wie Konfliktverhalten den Alltag dieser Gruppen durchdringt. Die Studie arbeitet zudem die Einstellungen der Jugendlichen gegenüber staatlichen Autoritäten wie der Polizei oder einer Sondereinheit von Schulsozialarbeit und Polizei heraus.

*Schlagworte:* Konflikt, urbane Jugend, unstrukturierte Sozialisation, Territorialität, Ethnographie

## **1 Introduction**

This article takes as its starting point an ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the late summer 2014 on the town square of Lomby – a medium-sized provincial town in Denmark.<sup>1</sup> In 2013, the municipality of Lomby bestowed the city's children and young people a skater/parkour/ball-cage facility right on the city's central squares. Lomby municipality has focused on creating opportunities for children and young people in the urban space, and many groups use the new facilities extensively. In this article, we are interested in how young people occupy, use and negotiate these facilities. What youth cultural dynam-

ics (Gravesen 2013; Hviid 2007; Rasmussen 2012) and interpretations (Corsaro 2002) come into play at – and around – the facility? The relational approach (Bourdieu/Chamboredon/Passeron 1991; Börjesson 2009; Prieur 2002) and the conflictual perspective (Bourdieu 1999; Crouch 1994; Tonboe 1994a, 1994b) is central in the analysis, as we strive to illustrate that social connections between the different groups that claim the space and try to define the place, are often fairly confrontational. In addition, we strive to analyse the social synergies and seemingly unstructured socialization processes that takes place around the facility. Unstructured because of the absence of parents, teachers or social workers defining and populating the place. Socialization in the sense that the children and young people register, mimic and challenge each other's behavioural dispositions.

Officially, the municipality donated the facility to give local children and young people an opportunity to use their bodies and participate in diverting and edifying cultural activities within the urban space. But not all children and young people subscribe to these municipal agendas, and thus conflicting relationships also occur between the municipality and (especially) some groups of young people, whose forms of capital (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1996), activities and cultural life is not consistent with the normative basis in the city's self-understanding. To meet these challenges the municipality supports a number of crime prevention- and social education agendas, carried out by the SSP (a special Social Services, School and Police unit), though such civilizing efforts (Elias 1994) officially is being toned down and thus seem more camouflaged.

## 2 The daily life at the facility

Every day many different groups that come for different reasons and with different cultural agendas use the facility. There are groups of young children who, accompanied by their parents, play and exercise on their skateboards. Other groups of young children play at the facility without their parents. They keep an observant eye on the different groups of older children and adolescents. There is a distinct group of boys who come here to skate. With skateboards, caps and expensive skater clothes, they occupy the facility and exercise while enjoying each other's company and recognition. There is a heterogeneous group of boys and girls, some members seemingly impoverished and vulnerable, others apparently wealthy and privileged, who enter the site to hang out – they are talking, laughing, joking, flirting and smoking cigarettes. And then there is a relatively firmly established group of boys with varied, primarily middle-eastern, ethnic backgrounds, none of them Danish. They have a group name, a hierarchical subordination, make petty crime and use the space around the facility with bodily energy and fighting. They inspire both fascination and fear. The main analytical focus of this article revolves around this latter grouping – the self-named pseudo-gang *Thugz* – with a take on the groups' codes of conduct and their general conflictual behaviour towards other of the above-mentioned groups, social services and the police. The analytical construction *pseudo-gang* stems from the fact that these young boys never once, during the time of the fieldwork, refer to their group as a *gang*. Their overall behaviour and language-use anyhow resembles gang-like behaviour (Bengtsson 2012; Jensen/Pedersen 2012; Rasmussen 2012). Their group name *Thugz* is a rather clear example of such behaviour, but also the hierarchy within the group recalls similar social structures of such sub-cultural and sometimes criminal groupings.

### 3 Empirical issues of conflict

Reflections upon how to interpret the obvious empirical *issue of conflict* analytically began after returning from the field site. In classic sociological conceptualizations, *conflict theory* concerns themes like conflicts between competing groups and conflictual human behaviour in various social contexts (Irving 2007). The concept of conflict theory originated with the thoughts of *Karl Marx* and his work dating back to the mid-1800s. Through a theoretical take on conflict between social classes in capitalist societies, *Marx* analysed human society in terms of those who owned the means of economic production and the workers who did not (ibid.). With a wider analytical range conflict theory can be – and has been – used to show a wide array of diverse human conflict-behaviour towards practices in education, criminal behaviour or cultural customs in general (ibid.). On an overall note, the conflict perspective in sociology regards a “*basic condition of social life as that of dissension and struggle which arise when individuals or groups compete for valuable resources of social life like power, prestige or property*” (Subberwal 2009). Some conflict theory also addresses the issue of territoriality, questioning the degree to which individuals or groups identify with specific locations, and their willingness to defend their right to occupy and enjoy the place and its privileges (Bourdieu 1999; Childress 2004; Crouch 1994; Pickering/Kintrea/Bannister 2012; Tonboe 1994a, 1994b). The British sociologist *David Lockwood* took on a different theoretical approach and differentiated between *systems conflict* and *social conflict*. Here systems conflict refers to conflict between social institutions, while social conflict alludes to interpersonal conflict (Subberwal 2009). With this differentiated theoretical approach in mind, the analysis in this article continues with the whole concept of *systems conflict* weeded out. Henceforth, the conflict-analysis in this article will revolve around the social and territorial conflicts of Thugz (for the most part) and a number of the other social groupings that claim the urban space around the Lomby centre squares. Sociologist *Erving Goffman* defined a *group territory* as several people claiming an area, and hereby the right to define, who belongs within its limits (Goffman 1961). The mid-town facility can be seen as such, in the sense that several different groupings try to control its boundaries, pursuing definitions of which cultural imperatives can be acted out at the site.

On a side note, it has to be cleared that none of the mentioned groups in this article are analytically constructed only. Some of the groups are more well defined than others.

### 4 The field researchers entering the site

In general, the ethnographic layout in the study gave the researchers an opportunity to spot children's and young people's own place- and time-priorities and the role of the urban environment (Fotel 2007) when the different youth alliances at the site create, cultivate and maintain their cultural everyday life (Ilan 2015; MacDonald/Shildrick 2007; Rasmussen 2004; Zahavi/Overgaard 2014) and their social relationships. Needing “a way in” at the very start of the field observations – an access point to the different social groupings and their stories, statements, interactions, linguistic and symbolic exchanges – the field researchers contacted the SSP-team, who willingly, and most kindly, introduced them to a handful of the youngsters present at the skater facilities one Monday afternoon. Negotiating

their entry and admission to the skater facility from a more formal position, supported by the SSP-team, was an intentional methodical choice that nevertheless caused quite a bit of frustration and confusion. The decision was essentially based on ethical and pragmatic considerations, regarding the field observers not wanting the young people to get the first impression of them as suspicious people hanging around the site with sinister intentions.

Occupied with the ulterior motive to become an accepted part of the social networks around the groupings at the urban site, this approaching strategy could have turned out clumsy and awkward, but luckily, the SSP-worker that aided the introductory encounters, fared with ease, as did the few youngsters, that were present at the site, this very first day. On the days to come, the fieldworkers, now on their own, operated towards an explorative approach to the field studies and the research in general. The majority of the children and young people that they came across, were not informed of their interests and agendas and the mere presence of the researchers thus resulted in quite a few comments and confrontations during the first introductory encounters; “*Can I ask you something? Why are you guys keeping an eye on us? Are you from the SSP? Are you from the police?*” were among the most commonly asked questions to greet the fieldworkers. *Hammersley* and *Atkinson* mark the following about informant’s scepticism towards newcomers to social groupings:

“Where the research is overt, as with gatekeepers and sponsors, people in the field will seek to place or locate the ethnographer within the social landscape defined by their experience... field researchers are frequently suspected, initially at least, of being spies... or of belonging to some other group that may be perceived as undesirable.” (*Hammersley/Atkinson* 2007, p. 63)

As noted in the quotation, the fieldworker might experience being taken as some sort of spy or at any rate, somebody *unwanted* – most commonly during the first confrontations with the field of research. This was very much the case in the Lomby observations. Despite the fieldworkers’ endeavour to explain their main research interests and themselves as somewhat different from the SSP and the police, they repeatedly experienced the informants questioning their presence around the facilities. In reflecting upon this slight confusion and the rather up-front scepticism that met them, the fieldworkers noticed that an ongoing negotiation of their presence on the site was needed throughout their time in the field. The key elements in that process turned out to be demystification along with an open-minded approach toward the informants. A lot of effort and time was put into coming off as something else than an SSP-street team worker or an undercover police agent. As days went by the field workers’ relations to a small number of key informants grew stronger. In getting to know some of the significant figures among the different social groupings and fractions of children and adolescents at the facility, through their own statements and interactions, the fieldworkers came to notice a rather pronounced resistance and an unmistakable distrust towards the more or less established authorities. On the first day in the field the self-proclaimed leader of *Thugz* – the 13-year old *Bezim* states:

“You know, SSP stands for “the social snitch police!” – The worst thing about them is that they talk to the police about us. They can actually be quite nice and all that, but if your dad beats you up, don’t tell them. They’ll tell the police.”

This apparent distrustful attitude toward the SSP seems to stem from *Bezim*’s own, in his view, *bad* experiences and confrontations with the SSP. As the fieldworkers spend time among the groupings on the site, utterings like the one above slowly, but steadily form a clear depiction of how the children and adolescents perceive and express themselves

about authorities like the SSP or the police. The fieldworkers also uncovered a pronounced conflictual behaviour *between* the more or less defined youth groupings on the site – often with *Thugz* being the most well defined social group with its complex set of membership criteria, as a main part of such conflicts. Bezim, the *Thugz*-frontman, and the non-member, but nevertheless *Thugz*-supporter, Roman, convey thorough social analysis on the topic during an interview. More on that later.

## 5 Thugz – codes and values

*Thugz* is an example of a group with distinctive boundaries, simple but somewhat strict codes of conduct and uniform values; as an example all the members has to put in *Thugz* as their last name on their Facebook-profiles. On a question on how to become a member, Bezim answers:

“You have to be gangster. A gangster is someone who’s not a faggot. A faggot is someone who doesn’t have the balls to beat somebody up. You’re also a faggot if you just want the help of the group, in order to beat somebody else up... You can also become a member if you’re willing to make money for us.”

The term *gangster* connotes an overall aggressive and confronting behavioural style, and may resonance in the minds of readers with a slight knowledge of ethnic sub-cultural and underground communities in the US. A similar point comes from *Kirsten Hviid’s* (2007) analysis of a marginalised ethnic minority group developing a so-called *black, expressive form of masculinity*, involving criminal actions, violence and acts of revenge in the hunt for respect and recognition. It seems natural for the young boys in *Thugz* to internalize similar cultural discourses and performativity and in that sense add ideas and phenomena from the afro-american youth culture to their own cultural identity and make them their own. For example, the group takes its name *Thugz* from the support group of a famous afro-american rap-artist. According to Bezim, they found inspiration in the rapper and therefore wanted the same name. In his discussion of the expressive masculine performance that young boys take on from their hip-hop icons, the Danish researcher in youth culture *Sune Qvortrup Jensen* (2007) argues that these forms of masculine performances function as extra-sub-cultural capital and even a more fundamental youth-cultural capital. These forms of capital allow the group members to obtain recognition within the group, but also attract attention from young people outside the group.

“Many young people, among them girls, will immediately recognize and decode the dangerousness, coolness and sexiness, that the young boys orchestrate” (*Jensen* 2007, p. 289 – our translation)

Playing out the roles of pronounced masculine behavior, the *Thugz*-members evidently attract attention from other groupings and young people more loosely affiliated around the skater facility. Among them young women from all over town, who seem drawn by the clear and uncompromising behavior and attitude of the young men. A distinct attitude toward sexualization of the young women is also present in the everyday verbal exchanges of the young men, seemingly acting as an underlying narrative imperative among them. Taking on conflicts in a way that connotes stereotypical constructions of gender roles, seems to be part of the underlying strategies when the *Thugz*-members act on and battle out their masculinity.

The group consists of roughly 20 members, all of them being of an ethnic minority heritage. According to Bezim, they are all “wogs”<sup>2</sup> [in Danish: “perkere”]. White people are not welcome in the group. Exceptions can be made though: “*We have a few white potatoes in the group – I call ‘em plastic wogs, because they want to be wogs, but actually they are just Danes*”. According to Bezim the so-called *plastic wogs* are: “*Danes who want to be wogs. You know... They say “Wallah!”*, but it just sounds wrong. With an “a” like in “apple”. That’s not right!”

When confronted with the question on what they *do* as a group the answer is: “*We smoke cigarettes, drink tea, smoke water pipe, and hang out.*” One of the more distinctive facts about the group is that it consists of children and youngsters from two distinct ghetto-like neighbourhoods in Lomby only. In that sense, the group shares characteristics with and can be understood in the vein of many research findings on conflictual behaviour among urban youth. Members identify with their own “hood”, and distance themselves from members of opposing communities and quarters (Bengtsson 2012; Harding 2010; Jensen/Pedersen 2012; Venkatesh 2008). Bezim reveals an important feature of the group’s code of conduct, activated when a member is in trouble. “*Just one call, and they’ll be there instantly!*”, he proudly explains, his facial expression clearly illustrating, that this is crucial to the group, and something all members benefit from.

## 6 Thugz vs. the western town kids – tough reality or mere narrative?

As both an analytical and empirical counter-equivalent to *Thugz*, there is a more informal and less-defined group of individuals present at the city’s public urban spaces. For the most part, this group consists of a fairly confused mass of impoverished and vulnerable boys and girls who all, with a few exceptions, originate from the western part of town. In the analysis, this less-defined group might come off more united and outlined than it actually is, meaning that the group might be more of an analytical construction than an empirical finding. With that being said, a slight notion of *conflict* between the two groupings could be hinted on an analytical note. The conflict is rooted in the fact that the different groups come from and used to hang out around different geographical areas around town. Now, encountering each other at the shared facilities in the inner city centre, tensions are lurking. One of the key aspects in defining the western-town kids as a certain group is the fact that they often meet at *SV* - an older and quite dilapidated skater-park in the western part of town. According to Adam, a 16-year old, *SV* is where the group regularly meet: “*On a typical night we’re around ten to twenty people here... It varies from day to day. It’s often set up in our Facebook-group: “Hi, are you at SV tonight...?”* Apart from this less-defined group, ranging from around 12-18 years of age, other groupings meet up around *SV*. Among these, a group of young men in their early twenties, with more shady agendas than just hanging out. According to the SSP, this group is generally engaged in criminal behaviour, selling drugs and the like. Also a smaller group of young adults arrive at *SV* in their older, but rather *pimped out* cars, blasting loud aggressive music, with some of them openly mixing tobacco and weed for joints in the backseat of their cars. These groups seem to co-exist at *SV* as long as they keep a distance to each other. As Martin, an informant, states: “*All that happens at SV is weed, weed, weed*”. In general, a conflict be-

tween *Thugz* and the western-town kids seems to exist more on a narrative note, than on an actual confrontational one. The fieldworkers experienced a lot of talk about a turf war – a seemingly quite constructed dispute between the groups belonging to different neighbourhoods. They never, however, experienced any actual confrontations between the groups. If they were ever rooted in reality, at least they seem to be something belonging to the past. Roman explains:

“When I was younger I thought: “The western part of town... They must die!... The ghettos [where Roman lives] are all right... And the area around the train station kind of belongs to the ghettos.”... It was like that. It was the ghettos against the western part of town... All the time!”

Apparently, the analytic key point of *conflict* between *Thugz* and the western town kids seems to revolve around a more mentally constructed form of *sought after* social segregations and mental divisions than actual, overt confrontations between the groupings. In uncovering such seemingly narrative constructions behind the empirical notions on conflict, the fieldworkers confront Bezim and Roman in an interview:

*Interviewer*: “You said you were to attend another school?”

*Bezim*: “Yeah... another school... I hope I’ll learn something there. I know some of the people there... People from the western part of town.”

*Interviewer*: “Actually some of your...”

*Bezim*: “No! They’re just acquaintances... It’s not people I hang out with or anything like that... But not everyone is an enemy either...”

*Roman*: “Sometimes vi hang out with some of the people from the western part of town. Actually, I don’t know if it’s much different, what’s going on at SV. Maybe it’s the same... But I don’t want to go there.”

*Bezim*: “Yeah, sometimes they come to us.”

*Roman*: “... and then we’re nice to them”

*Bezim*: “Yeah, you have to be!”

Following this empirical extract, the analytical concept of conflict takes on a rather ambiguous character. On which levels do the notions of conflict actually exist? Bezim and Roman make a rather serious effort in distancing themselves from other groupings, as we saw earlier. In addition, suddenly the western-town kids seem quite all right to them. “...*not everyone is an enemy either*”, Bezim states. Apparently, the figurative conflicts function as a social divider and as a way of creating the group’s and its member’s self-identity (Jenkins 1994, 1997, 2000) and sustaining the social division and cultural boundaries between the social groupings. Also the turf war and the territorialized narrative of belonging to different hoods seem to echo from the past, with a more mutual understanding and acceptance between the groupings these days.



## 7 Compromising the skaters' reputation

Another group at the inner city skating facility, indeed rather organized and homogeneous, is the skaters. In their expensive skater clothes equipped with cigarettes, skateboards and quite often alcoholic beverages, they enjoy each other's company while practicing and showing each other respect and recognition. They share different linguistic and behavioural codes than those of Thugz, using many words and phrases related to the skating milieu, that the researchers, and seemingly the other groups at the site as well, do not really comprehend. Except for a few informants, Roman being the most obvious example, members of the skater group and Thugz do not intertwine that much. The boundaries between the two groups are pretty stable, and except for ethnical heritage (the skaters primarily constituted by Danes, or "white-ish" coloured members), age constitutes a significant difference between the two groups. The skaters are older, some of them actually adults in their twenties. This age span seemingly matters in relation to the conflicting encounters between the two groups. The skaters find Thugz to be somehow immature and generally disruptive or destructive of the place. In general, the skaters, with just a few predictable objections, are quite satisfied with having received the facility and the provided opportunity to practice what they consider their sport in the urban environment, without having to fear the authorities and the police chasing them off the streets. However, Thugz complicate and threaten this joyous safe haven. According to the skaters, Thugz, with their aggressive body language, fighting and hunting down rivals at the skater facility and its adjacent sites, jeopardize the goodwill that the skaters and the site in general enjoy from ordinary citizens and the Municipality in Lomby.

These conflicts affect everyday life at the facility, with the skaters also complaining that Thugz are indifferent to the site and its qualities. Spitting, smashing bottles and throwing garbage are everyday examples of this disregard and neglect. Nevertheless, the conflicts also have a broader impact on the mindsets and concerns of the skaters. With the Thugz compromising the skaters' (and the facility's) reputation and recognition in the city, the skaters' worries about their future opportunities to practice their lifestyle on legitimate sites in the city seemingly gets extra nourishment.

All this aside, paradoxically, there is also a sense of mutual understanding. In informal talks during the field observations, the skaters unfold that earlier in their lives, they themselves were the ones committed, more or less, to the lifestyle of Thugz and other similar groups in the urban environment in Lomby. Past experiences of petty crime, turmoil in the streets and contact with guards and the police are common among quite a few of the skaters. Perhaps because of this joint basis of experience and familiarity, they do not just complain about their younger fellow citizens, but often provide comfort and assistance, when members of Thugz or others need a helping hand or a moral imperative:

*"Really, I would love to receive an educational addition on my salary account for all the times I've watched out and cared for some of Lomby's disadvantaged children!"* (Skater, 26 years)

Joking about the salary is witty and smart, but apparently, the joke expresses a deeper truth about the facility and many of its young users. They do live in separate groups and they do define antagonistic values and practice opposing codes of conduct. However, they also care for one another – the older often looking after the younger in this space cleansed of teachers, educators and parents. In that sense, unstructured socialization might not al-

ways be that unstructured. Patterns and structures of conflict and those of comfort and care intertwine and form the daily routines that shape the cultural life of these children and young people.

Another interesting thing about the age difference between the groups is the intertwining of some informants: When visiting the site the field researchers often encountered Roman hanging out with the skaters – practicing, smoking and having fun. But every now and then he would be back with Bezim and the Thugz, enjoying their company – often at a considerable distance to the skaters. In an interview, Roman explains that he used to be a member of Thugz – even being their leader and thus defining the rules and the members of the group. Now having surpassed the age of 15, which in Denmark is the age of criminal responsibility, he slowed down, passed on the baton and handed over leadership to Bezim. He claims to be still supportive of the group, but nowadays more in a mental manner. The point is that some of these children and adolescents (Roman and Bezim being obvious examples) are quite aware of the regulatory framework related to their situation as urban youth, practicing their unstructured social life without the continuous surveillance by adults. In Roman's case, this means spending more and more time with the skaters, using the site for its intended purposes and leading a generally more slowed down pace in life.

## 8 Confrontations with the police

Towards the established and official authorities, Thugz' conflictual behaviour takes on a much more direct and up-front form. The police do not seem to rank very high in the minds of the Thugz members. The fieldworkers noticed this early, when perceiving the informants' scepticism towards them and the overall distinct tension around their mere presence on the site. Among Thugz members who, due to their confrontational attitudes and incipient attempts to become juvenile delinquents, face legal issues from time to time, there seem to exist different tales, some seemingly a sort of urban legends of confrontations, with the long arm of the law:

*Interviewer:* "Please tell me, what you told me yesterday about the Police."

*Roman:* "Oh... Do you remember the guy who got beaten up by the Police?"

*Bezim:* "Yeah Ahmad... police violence!... I can show you the video, it's on Youtube."

*Roman:* "It's kinda like... When you're older police violence can be a part of it. And it's brutal... almost like being tortured by them."

*Interviewer:* "You told me something about the forest?"

*Roman:* "Yeah, they take people out to the woods and beat them up out there, if they get the chance... once I was pretty close ... But then I told them everything... But that's stuff I shouldn't be talking about."

*Bezim:* "If I had the chance... If the Police didn't frisk you, when they arrest you, I'd keep a knife on me... 'cause if they drag you to the woods, they'll leave you unconscious out there. Then you don't know what to do... It's like that with the Police... It's insane."

What becomes clear in these phrases is that the relatively brutal tales – mere fiction or bloody reality – function as clear dividers between Thugz and the law enforcers and the overall established order of society. The evident disgust towards what seems to be the young men's interpretation of the methods of the Police forms a general resistance in them. On a general note, the apparent confusion with and fear of the police, that Bezim and Roman expresses explicitly and implicitly throughout the interview, is apparently shared by many of the groupings on the urban sites, such as the skaters and the western town kids. A main component in youth cultural theory concerns how subcultural youth groupings present themselves through different styles in order to embody and express the group's self-consciousness (Scott Sørensen 2007). One of the key arguments is that the style in which the young choose to present themselves among other things refers to their often anti-authoritarian behaviour towards parents, teachers and the Police (ibid.). The constant, but sometimes underlying conflict between Thugz and the Police is, in this way part of the intragroup-self-consciousness, which over time becomes intra-group identity. A group member's overall approach to and general perception of the law and its enforcers determines his affiliation with the group. A disobedient attitude and illegitimate positioning is exchangeable for symbolic value, power and influence (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1996), and ensure the membership of the group. Within Thugz a certain strategic approach towards the Police is activated when needed. Knowing and acting loyal towards this distinctive code of ethics is in a number of ways crucial to the members of the group:

*Bezim:* "We always agree on the same story, when were in the interrogation room. As soon as the meeting is set up we know all about it... And it's not the Police who tell us. We learn it from someone who's heard something..."

*Roman:* "...Or if we're at the skating site and the Police shows up... We quickly agree on a story and make sure that everybody else is keeping tight... For example if we just pinched something from the mall..."

*Bezim:* "In Thugz everybody has the same story to tell!"

Mutual trust is part of the group's internal ethics and is crucial to the individual group members. A glaring example of this is when one of the boys is to be interrogated by the police. In such precarious and sensitive situations, the common group interests take precedence over individual intentions and problems. But what happens if this conjoint dependency is broken?

*Interviewer:* "But doesn't this loyalty get broken sometimes?"

*Roman:* "Yeah... it does... Sometimes if the whole group has fucked up, someone will initially say something... Then, you know... That person... He's done for good..."

*Bezim:* "Yeah he's done for good!... It's like that in Thugz. Hakim and Jameel are out! They both... like... stabbed us in the back!"

Breaking the symbolic code of ethics forced Bezim to exclude the two former Thugz-members Hakim and Jameel from the group. Their snitching showed Bezim that they could no longer be trusted. On another note Bezim and Roman talks about being *bros* or *brothers* – a rhetoric term most likely inspired by the black subcultural communities of North America. Being *bros* means that Bezim and Roman has formed a special bond and share a special creed, being loyal towards each other at any time as the main ethical prin-

ciple. Being *brothers* shares some of the same values as being a family (Connor 2007), with loyalty and mutual commitment being the crucial and important basis of the day-to-day relationships. Another example of breaking the bond of the *brothers* was when Casper, a white 16-year old Thugz supporter tried to catch a date with Bezim's ex-girlfriend:

*"The whole ghetto was here when we found out! He fled on his scooter, when he saw us! We were THIS close to kicking him off! Fucking faggot! I'll beat the shit out him. We never go after each other's ex-girlfriends! Never... You just don't..."*

This example underlines how much the complex and rather unspoken code of ethics and conduct mean to the members. Being *brothers* means that anytime and anywhere a group member is in need a flock of ghetto-boys show up to honour the code. This demonstrates how much belonging to the brotherhood of Thugz means for the mutual understanding of group identity.

## 9 Attitudes towards the SSP – the "Social Snitch Police"

As mentioned in the introductory passage of the article the municipality is concerned with issues of crime prevention and social education – and of course, the area around the skater park is in the spotlight. Struggling to combat juvenile delinquency and get young people to care for their schooling and internalize more civilized and morally acceptable norms of behaviour (Elias 1994), the social workers of the SSP observe, mingle and socialize at the facility. Discussions with the social workers during our observations clearly depict some of the somehow hidden agendas, related to their role at the urban site. Paul, a SSP-social worker, relatively new to the job, clarifies that his main motivation with the young people is to get them off the streets and have them enrol in educational leisure clubs instead. In that perspective, seemingly some groups of adolescents are more entitled to use the skater facility, whereas groups that confront, interpret (Corsaro 2000) and exploit the facility in other ways than the municipality intended, like Bezim and his comrades in Thugz, are taken as less authorized users.

Therefore, obviously, confrontations between the SSP and Thugz are common. The meaning of the boys using the nickname the Social Snitch Police is apparent and blatant, but the underlying rationale is seemingly equally as important; the Thugz do not trust the SSP – at least not all of their representatives, and they find their agendas, initiatives and imperatives laughable and unusable.

A good example of this originates from an afternoon at the facility, when Thugz and some other groups of adolescents talk about a forthcoming party, arranged by some social workers affiliated with the SSP. "The police will be there, checking your pockets and no drugs and alcoholic beverages are allowed – what a funny partyyyyy!" Roman cries out ridiculing the whole idea of the festivity, and the authorities (among them the SSP) involved. Don't go there! seems to sum up the groups attitude towards the arrangement quite well, and regardless of the fact, that some of them might actually attend, the situation illustrates some of the more obvious antagonisms between Thugz and the societal system.

With that said, it is also important to emphasize, that the Thugz' attitudes towards the SSP is in fact quite ambivalent. Not all their representatives are stigmatized as informers or futile party organizers. Laureen, now a social worker at the SSP, has been engaged in social work in Lomby in half a lifetime. Therefore she has known several of Thugz'

members since they were quite small and went to kindergarten. Laureens' social engagement in the city and many years of commitment and interest in the boys' lives lead to respect and a sense of trust that Bezim, Roman and many others benefit from in different contexts. Fragile as they also are, they appreciate Laureen's assistance if they have to visit a new school or need help to find a job.

## 10 Summing up and addressing one final question: what about school?

As illustrated in this article Thugz has a very confrontational behaviour towards the various groupings that claim the space around the skater facility in the city centre of Lomby. This applies to authorities like the SSP and the police, but also the other groups of children and young people that occupy and use the facility on a daily basis. Finally, we will shed light on a surprising side of Thugz' mental approach by looking at their attitude toward another authority, which affect their daily lives and future opportunities: the school. Although the school and its representatives are not present at the skater facility, educational issues appear present in Bezim and Romans reflections. And quite surprisingly, the confrontational attitude that we have seen them practice and activate throughout the articles' analysis, do not characterize their approach to school. They believe in the idea of education and basically find that in order to lead a decent life, you need to do your best and be successful in school. In that sense, Bezim and Roman embody a much more conventional and friendly understanding and acceptance of the school system, than we experienced from the lads in *Paul Willis'* classic work *Learning to labour* (1977). In this still inspiring book the rebellious working class boys personified a so-called counter-school culture, in opposition to the ear' oles' commitment to academic virtues and respectful attitude to teacher authority. Other scholars also demonstrate and accentuate that groupings of marginalized youth develop counterculture activity (*Gilliam 2007*) and often cherish opposing capitals, than those forms of cultural capital (*Bourdieu 2004; Bourdieu/Passeron 2006*), we usually associate with academic virtues and success in school. Be it through Hip Hop (*Hviid 2007; Jensen 2007; Sernhede 2007*), bodily and masculine capital (*Prieur 1999*), gang-like collectives and behaviour (*Bengtsson 2012; Jensen/Pedersen 2012; Rasmussen 2012*), street capital (*Sandberg/Pedersen 2006*), street habitus (*Fraser 2013*) or other forms of subcultural capital (*Jensen 2006*), they all express variations on a counterpart to school civility. Such opposition towards school is seemingly not a part of Bezims' and Romans' joint ethical dogmatics. On the contrary, Bezim and Roman explain that they have seen a lot of wogs facing social decline, and therefore they persistently insist that they've learned from former Thugz members' bitter experiences. In continuation of such insights Bezim states:

“You're much more of a gangster, if you cause trouble during leisure time and get your act together in school. At least, that's what I've learned!”

In that sense, Bezim and Roman come off fairly civilized (*Elias 1994; Gilliam/Gulløv 2012*) when reflecting on school, but whether these mental settings will have more than imaginary impact on their lives, this study really can't say anything about. Only future studies of the territorial epicenter in Lomby and perhaps years of observations of the prominent Thugz figures could reveal such interesting insights.

On an overall note, these concluding analysis on school attitude suggest, that the young boys are capable of navigating through a set of diverse cultural settings in their everyday lives, tweaking their identity, attitude and behaviour in a way that fits their given contexts. As illustrated above, several other studies on marginalized youth behaviour toward school have shown a far more distinct form of pronounced counterculture mentality. In that sense, our analysis of the young boys' attitude toward school brings something new to the table of youth culture studies. In future work and in forthcoming articles we wish to elaborate on this finding. Until then, let us summarize the Thuqz philosophy of life through Romans concluding phrasing:

*"Just enjoy your life! ...take it easy, go to school, smoke a cigarette and fuck your girlfriend!"*

## Notes

- 1 Of ethical consideration, the city name and all informants' names have been anonymized.
- 2 { /wäg/ (n.) offensive slang. 1925-30, from 'Golliwogg': a 19th century blackface doll; or alternately, an acronym of '(W)orthy (O)riental (G)entleman' }.  
British English: 1. \*racist\* a black African or dark-skinned South Asian (usually Indian or Pakistani) 2. \*Anglocentric\* a non-Briton or non-Englishman: "The wogs start at Calais" (across the English Channel in France) -- British proverb.  
Australian English: 1. a non-Anglo-Celtic European, esp. from Southern or Eastern Europe (e.g. Greek, Italian, Balkan, Slavic, etc.) 2. an Asian, esp. a West Asian (e.g. Lebanese, Turkish, Armenian, Iranian, etc.), but now also inclusive of South Asians and Pacific Islanders (<http://www.urbandictionary.com>).

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