

**Divide and Conquer:
Race, Gangs, Identity and Conflict
by Robert D. Weide (2022)
Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 284 pp.
Reviewed by Gary J. Kowaluk**

Robert D. Weide is an Associate Professor of Sociology at California State University in Los Angeles. In 2023, he was the recipient of the American Society of Criminology's Division on Critical Criminology and Social Justice's (DCCSJ) Jock Young Imagination Book Award for *Divide & Conquer: Race, Gangs, Identity, and Conflict*. In *Divide and Conquer*, Weide furthers Jock Young's theme that we have moved from an inclusionary society to one that socioeconomically excludes people with his theoretically informed ethnography of Los Angeles gangs. Synthesizing classical Marxist theory with anarchist criticisms of ethnonationalism, Weide uses interviews from 67 active L.A. gang members to support his argument that the root cause of interracial gang violence, both in and out of prison, is the capitalist labour management system's "divide and conquer" strategy that involves controlling gangs by coercing members to take on racialized identities.

Weide begins *Divide and Conquer* by discussing his own experience with interracial gang violence, relating a story to readers about how a high school friend of his was senselessly murdered by an African American man from the Black P Stones (Bloods) gang who had mistaken him for a member of a Chicano gang. Growing up on the Westside of Los Angeles, Weide is very familiar with gangs and gang violence. Relying on his own experience with gangs, Weide crosses racial boundaries to conduct what he calls an "insider participant observation" ethnography that involves interviews with active Sureno-affiliated, Blood and Crip gang members.

He begins Chapter One with the criticism that failing to consider the historical development of gangs too often results in villainizing gangs through the hegemonic lens of the existing capitalist economic, social and political order. Seeking a less biased view of gangs, Weide argues that the three pillars of modern civilization – capitalism, the race concept, and nationalism – provide the historical foundation from which contemporary gang identities emerge. For Weide, capitalism came before the race concept, which came before nationalism. To support his argument that capitalism preceded race, Weide briefly presents historical evidence showing that our current racial consciousness grew out of agrarian capitalism and 17th century

American planters need to maximize profits from farm labour through the enslavement of African Americans. Noting that bigotry had not existed before the mid-seventeenth century, Weide argues that capitalism was the only motive to enslave people of African origin.

He continues Chapter One by discussing how the capital labour management's "divide and conquer" strategy to control races first began in response to Bacon's Rebellion in 1676. Briefly, in what historians consider to be America's first rebellion, Nathaniel Bacon led a band of mostly Black and white former indentured servants against Virginia's Governor Berkeley for his refusal to drive Native Americans out of Virginia (American History Central, 2024). After looting Jamestown and driving Berkeley out of the city, Weide maintains that to prevent future rebellions, the Virginia elite invented the race concept and "divide and conquer" strategy to control labour by outlawing indentured servitude and passing slave codes that turned the white population against the Black population to create a racialized system of self-regulating labour management. For Weide, the race concept took on a life of its own after Bacon's Rebellion in the 18th and 19th centuries, to provide the foundation for our current labour management and social control system.

Weide closes Chapter One with a discussion of nationalism, which he identifies as the third pillar of modern civilization, showing how nationalist ideologies were invented in the 18th century by modern nation-states to further the capitalistic race concept developed in the previous century. Pointing out that modern nation states such as England, France, Spain, Italy and Germany formed after the breakup of large 16th century empires such as The Hapsburg and Holy Roman Empires, Weide discusses how the new nation states invented racialized national identities to give them a coherent identity. Criticizing that the newly created state identities were not factual, he depicts them as pseudo-histories proliferated by printed material to create coherent racialized national identities that included a shared national language, common names, symbols, and cultural inheritances. For Weide, the English, the French, Italian, and German, and as the new world was colonized, the American and the Mexican identities, are all grounded more in myth than fact. He closes Chapter One presenting evidence that that in the 20th century, stateless nationalism is also based in myth, emerging from the nationalistic identities to shape current white, African American and Chicano gang identities.

In Chapter Two Weide discusses the second theoretical perspective he employs to support his overall theory: anarchism. He begins by presenting early anarchist attempts in the 19th and 20th century to debunk and expose the newly formed nation-states' nationalist identities as more fiction than fact through their efforts to organize workers across racial lines in unions. He then moves the discussion to the 1960s and 1970s, presenting evidence on how the F.B.I. formed an alliance with Black nationalists to murder Black Panther Party leaders and foil their attempt to unify workers economically across races. Weide ends his discussion of the Black Panthers by arguing that our current system of identity politics and racialized polices emerged after their downfall. Overall, his presentation on the F.B.I.'s murders of the Black Panthers and their support for Black nationalist leaders is his strongest evidence in support of his overall argument that an intentional "divide and conquer" strategy exists in government to control the races.

In Chapters Three through Six, Weide presents his ethnography of African American and Chicano gangs, using evidence from 67 interviews of active gang members to support his argument that the Los Angeles gangs have taken on racialized identities as a result of hegemonic identity politics that pit the races against one another. In Chapter Three, Weide uses evidence from the interviews to show how both African American and Chicano gangs maintain and pressure other gang members to take on racialized identities through the clothes they wear, the hairstyles they adopt, the language and symbols they use to communicate with one another, the music they listen to, and the cars they drive. In Chapter Four, Weide demonstrates how the gang members police one another into adopting and maintaining their racial identities by holding biases among the African American and Chicano gang against interracial dating, against living in the same neighbourhoods and housing complexes, working with one another for the same companies, and racial differences in how they conduct themselves while hanging out. In Chapter Five, Weide uses evidence from the interviews to show how the racialized gang identities erupt into gang violence, providing the reader with a unique insight into how gang members perceive interracial gang violence, harassment, drive-by shootings, retaliation killings, and the killings of innocent bystanders. In Chapter Six, Weide closes his ethnography by discussing how some gang members manage to cross racial boundaries despite all the pressure not to. However, in doing so, Weide points out that gang members must still adopt the racialized identity of the gang they are crossing over to.

Weide closes *Divide and Conquer* with strategies for ending the capitalist labour management effort to control races. Asserting that minority community and gang members contribute to their own oppression by taking on the fictional ethnonationalist identities forced on them, inspired by the early Anarchists' attempts to challenge the capitalist systems, and skeptical that government agencies will institute change, he calls upon the gang member themselves to unite with one another across racial boundaries in economic solidarity to end the hostilities they maintain toward one another. To show the viability of his recommendation, he devotes much of Chapter Seven to discussing how, from 2011-2015, members of the four major prison gangs at the Pelican Bay State Prison – the Mexican Mafia, the Black Guerrilla Family, the Nuestra Familia, and the Aryan Brotherhood – took it upon themselves to form an alliance to end interracial prison violence and successfully change the Pelican Bay gang intervention strategy of keeping the gang members in indefinite solitary confinement.

Overall, Weide supports his argument that the government employs a racial “divide and conquer” strategy to control gangs well. However, his best evidence indicating that an intentional government policy is in place to control gangs by forcing them into racialized identities, occurred over fifty years ago when the Marxist Black Panther Party was dismantled by the F.B.I. to promote policies supporting Black nationalism. While current gang control strategies were first set in motion by the F.B.I.'s war against the Black Panthers, with no evidence of government support of nationalism since, they may be better described as policies in need of reform that are passed down through generations of police officials with no plan to change them, rather than as intentional policies aimed at controlling gangs by splitting and dividing them racially. While I do not share Weide's skepticism that the current government and business structure will work to end racialized gang control strategies policies in favour of economic solutions, I applaud him for his work in *Divide and Conquer*. Before change can occur, we need to know what to change, and *Divide and Conquer* clearly lets us know what is wrong with current gang control strategies.

REFERENCE

American History Central (2024) “Bacon's Rebellion 1676-1677” – July 17. Retrieved from <https://www.americanhistorycentral.com/entries/bacons-rebellion/>

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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