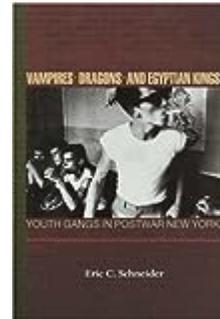


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Eric C. Schneider.** *Vampires, Dragons and Egyptian Kings: Youth Gangs in Postwar New York.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999. 318 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-00141-8.



**Reviewed by** Martin A. Jackson (Pratt Institute)

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In the Bronx of the 1950s, gangs loomed large in the public consciousness. Especially in the consciousness of teenagers who were alternately terrified and enthralled by the sight of leather jacketed cadres who hung out on certain corners and who committed acts mayhem on a nearly hourly basis...or so we fervently believed. Not a junior high school in New York was free of legend about the local hoods: the Red Wings in Italian Harlem, the Chaplains in Brooklyn, and in the Bronx, the truly ominous Fordham Baldies. The latter were famous for their haircuts, or more precisely, their lack of hair and hence their name. The Baldies ruled in the West Bronx and was the Baldies, of course, who feature colorfully in the Philip Kaufman's film *The Wanderers* (1979). In the East Bronx, the Baldies were matched in notoriety by the Golden Guineas, who prowled Morris Avenue and made Belmont safe for white (Italian) civilization. Scattered about, in occasional alliance but often in combat with the major gangs, were such loveable fraternities as the Pagans, the Imperial Lords, the Vampires, the Nordics, the Dragons, the Crowns, the Barons and the Boca Chicas, each with their own ethnic, racial, neighborhood and costuming requirements. Such was the mental landscape of Eisenhower-era New York City, and it is Eric Schneider's accomplishment that he has taken this compote of truth and legend, and turned a calm academic eye upon it. It turns out to be almost as scary as the legend.

Schneider is an historian and an assistant dean at the University of Pennsylvania and a former New York kid, upper east side variety. He was no gang member but he seems to know the terrain pretty well and has certainly devoted considerable energy to probing the motives and methods of the New York street gang. In brief, it is Schneider's thesis that the gangs of New York in the 50s and 60s were responses to a rapidly changing, and for many a declining, economic situation. The ethnic neighborhoods faced dramatic alterations with the collapse of the old New York economy of semi and unskilled labor: in short, the old garment, printing and light manufacturing economy that made New York hospitable to immigrants was evaporating in the 1950s. Combine that with the fervor for urban rebuilding, the suburbanization of white America and the steady influx of Black and Latino immigrants to New York City, and there is a fine recipe for urban disorder. In the post World War II America, the young were declared unnecessary, and most unnecessary were the poor, uneducated and working class young of all races. Says Schneider:

Adolescents in the postwar period were not even aware of the reordering of the urban system going on around them....they experienced the frustration of looking for work as low skilled jobs left the city; they saw the effect of migration as Euro Americans, African Amer-

icans and Puerto Ricans vied for resources; they witnessed the bulldozing of tenement districts; and they watched their more affluent neighbors fleeing to the suburbs. These experiences affected the daily lives of all New Yorkers, and they generated tremendous tension in the city, especially among the young. (28)

“Especially among the young” . . . to be sure. As populations shifted and neighborhoods changed, the young were caught in the tidal currents of social upheaval and they reacted in predictable ways. They banded together, found solace in each other or in romantic adventure, or they discovered the ultimate anodyne of heroin . . . the last being the solvent of New York gang culture in the long run. Blacks fought Whites, Italians fought Puerto Ricans, and everybody fought the cops, the landlords and the school system. With jackets and gang colors, gang girls and the occasional zip gun, the white ethnic and the new comer from Ponce or Mississippi could stand tall in the whirlwinds of change and make a little sense out of a world that seemed out of joint.

Nothing that Schneider says is revelatory, nor does he soften the edges of gang life with psychobabble. These were not nice guys, and they don’t deserve a romantic gloss no matter what *West Side Story* suggests. Schneider is clear-eyed and objective about the gangs and their impact; he’s been to the printed sources and talked to the survivors, and he is in control of his material. It is an instructive journey that Schneider takes us on, and for the now-middleaged survivor of the era, he puts the whole business into a useful framework of gender uncertainty and economic travail. It turns out that the guy in the leather jacket who whacked you around in the boys room wasn’t a monster, just a troubled white ethnic who sensed that the socioeconomic environment was turning against him and who needed the gang to assert his masculinity. OK, I feel better now.

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