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Source: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Sep., 1972), pp. 494-503

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/178039>

Accessed: 08/03/2010 09:59

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The Peasant and the Brigand: Social Banditry Reconsidered

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About a decade ago, Hobsbawm presented an interesting argument on a markedly little known subject for which he coined the term 'social banditry' (1959: 1–29). The author is a British social historian and an expert on social protest movements. He claims that social banditry is a universal and virtually unchanging phenomenon which embodies a rather primitive form of organized social protest of peasants against oppression. Social bandits are robbers of a special kind, for they are not considered as simple criminals by public opinion. They are persons whom the State regards as outlaws, but who remain within the bounds of the moral order of the peasant community. Peasants see them as heroes, as champions, and as avengers, since they right wrongs when they defy the landlords or the representatives of the State. Yet their programme, if indeed social bandits have any, does not go beyond the restoration of the traditional order which leaves exploitation of the poor and oppression of the weak within certain limits. Social bandits are thus reformers rather than revolutionaries, though they may prove a valuable asset for those who seek to overthrow an established regime. By themselves, social bandits lack organizational capacity, and modern forms of political mobilization tend to render them obsolete. The phenomenon belongs largely to the past, if only to the very recent past. The golden age of brigandage coincided with the advent of capitalism when the impact of the market dislocated large sectors of the peasantry.

In *Bandits** Hobsbawm elaborates some of the main themes he surveyed in *Primitive Rebels* (1959). Like its predecessor, this study is an essay on the uniformities of social brigandage. The author maintains that these uniformities should not be seen as a consequence of cultural diffusion, but as reflections of similar situations within peasant societies: 'Social banditry is universally found, wherever societies are based on agriculture (including pastoral economies), and consist largely of peasants and landless labourers ruled, oppressed and exploited by someone else—lords, towns, governments, lawyers, or even banks' (1969: 15). Hobsbawm starts out from

* E. J. Hobsbawm, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969, 128 pp.

generalizations and then proceeds to provide evidence for them from various parts of the world. For example, in discussing the recruitment of bandits, he states the categories that are likely to supply outlaws, indicates the causal nexus, and closes with examples. Writes Hobsbawm:

The characteristic bandit unit in a highland area is likely to consist of young herdsmen, landless labourers and ex-soldiers and unlikely to contain married men with children or artisans. Such formulae do not exhaust the question, but they do cover a surprisingly large part of the field. For instance, of the south Italian band leaders in the 1860s, those for whom we have occupational descriptions include twenty-eight 'shepherds', 'cow-herds', 'ex-servicemen', 'landless labourers', and 'field guards' (or combinations of these occupations) and only five others (*Bandits*, 1969: 28).

In this way the author deals with several aspects of social banditry and distinguishes three main types of bandits: the noble robber, the primitive resistance fighter, and the terror-bringing avenger. Whatever the differences among them, they have in common the fact that they voice popular discontent.

The approach leaves little room for a more comprehensive analysis over time of particular bandits or bands—accounts which are badly needed, as I hope to demonstrate presently. Where Hobsbawm embarks upon an extended case, the result cannot be else than sketchy (1969: 96–108). We should therefore read this study as the author asks us to in his Preface: as a postscript in essay form to *Primitive Rebels*. In this realm, *Bandits* seems an appreciable book, well written and elegantly edited, furnished with 62 illustrations most of which are quite fascinating.¹ The reader is offered a necessarily selective panorama on no less than 90 different bandits, who form the raw material to illustrate the author's ideas on brigandage at large.

Yet it is precisely because the interpretations do not extend very much beyond those already contained in *Primitive Rebels* that the reader who is somewhat familiar with the subject will be slightly disappointed. Anxious to find additional evidence for his hypotheses, the author avoids discussing the many cases contradicting them. If, as Popper said, theories are nets cast to catch what we call 'the world'—to rationalize, to explain, and to master it—Hobsbawm does not seem particularly concerned to make the mesh ever finer and finer. It could hardly be otherwise, for he tells us that he entertains the hope that the new data will not conflict with his original model as sketched out in *Primitive Rebels*. And he adds: 'Still, the wider the generalization, the more likely it is that individual peculiarities are

¹ Unfortunately, some illustrations bear subscripts which are not altogether comprehensible (e.g. p. 26), while several others fail to illustrate any part of the actual text. It can neither go unnoticed that it is out of key in a study on bandits to mis-spell repeatedly the Italian word *banditi*, especially in phrases like 'Italy, the classic country of the *banditti*' (p. 19), and 'Italy, whose *banditti* were long the most famous in literature and art, and which probably possesses more local monographs than any other country' (p. 121).

neglected' (1969: 11). One might wonder about the type of generalization that permits the neglect of particular cases, the more so since there were several questions in the first book which required thorough reconsideration.

It is my contention that there is much more to brigandage than just the fact that it may voice popular protest. Though Hobsbawm mentions several other aspects of banditry, his model fails to account for these complexities, and even obscures them, because he insists on the interpretation of new data in terms of his original model. This review attempts to explore the model of the social bandit as a special type of peasant protest and rebellion. I shall argue that the element of class conflict as embodied in certain forms of banditry has received undue emphasis. Rather than actual champions of the poor and the weak, bandits quite often terrorized those from whose very ranks they managed to rise, and thus helped to suppress them. The often ambiguous position of bandits may be understood when we appreciate the significance of the various links that tie the peasant community to the larger society. Likewise, the distinction between direct and constructed reference groups may help to explain why peasants and romanticists (including some of us) indulge in an idealized picture of the rural bandit as an avenger of social injustice, in spite of the obvious evidence to the contrary. The present discussion may contribute to a more adequate understanding of peasant mobilization and peasant movements. If we agree on political mobilization as a process through which people seek to acquire more control over the social conditions that shape their lives, it may be argued that bandits do not seem the appropriate agents to transform any organizational capacity among peasants into a politically effective force. Rather than promoting the articulation of peasant interests within a national context, bandits tend to obstruct or to deviate concerted peasant action. They may do so directly by means of physical violence and intimidation. In fact, we know that bandits have fulfilled pivotal roles in the demobilization of peasants. Indirectly, brigandage may impede large-scale peasant mobilization since it provides channels to move up in the social hierarchy, and thus tends to weaken class solidarity. In this paper, therefore, I shall focus on the interdependencies between lords, peasants, and bandits. The vignettes are mainly based on Sicilian material since my fieldwork experience has been restricted to this area.

To appreciate the importance and ubiquity of the social bandit, we should recognize which categories Hobsbawm excludes from this type. They involve all urban robbers, the urban equivalent of the peasant bandit as much as members of the so-called 'underworld'; rural desperadoes who are not peasants, e.g. the bandit gentry; raiders who form a community of their own, such as the Bedouin; *mafia*-like gangs; the landlord's bandits; and the classic blood-vengeance bandits (1969: 13–14). This narrows to a

considerable extent the universe of social brigandage.² There are even further provisos, since not all categories necessarily exclude one another. Particular bandits may, either simultaneously or in the course of their careers, express popular discontent as well as the power of the landlord or the State (1959: 13). Furthermore, we know of outlaws and bandits who were glorified or, at least accepted, in their native districts while feared as raiders far outside of these areas. For example, the nineteenth-century Indian *Thuggee* (Thugs), who specialized in ritually strangling and robbing travellers, lived as ordinary peasants in their native areas where they were protected by local rulers with whom they shared the booty, but operated well over a hundred miles from their homes (MacKenzie, 1967: 64–6). As Barrington Moore has aptly said with respect to nineteenth-century China: ‘It is necessary to be aware of romanticizing the robber as a friend of the poor, just as much as of accepting the official image. Characteristically the local inhabitants would bargain with the bandits in order to be left in peace. Quite often local gentry leaders were on cordial terms with bandits’ (1968: 214).³

Hobsbawm is aware of these varieties and complexities, but he does not attempt to account for them. His prime interest is social protest: ‘Though in practice social banditry cannot always be clearly separated from other kinds of banditry, this does not affect the fundamental analysis of the social bandit as a special type of peasant protest and rebellion’ (1969: 33). However, when it is recognized that ‘the crucial fact about the bandit’s position is its ambiguity . . . the more successful he is as a bandit, the more he is *both* a representative and champion of the poor *and* a part of the system of the rich’ (1969: 76), we may question the heuristic value of his model of the social bandit with respect to brigandage at large. As Hobsbawm admits elsewhere, few bandits lived up to the role of popular hero. Yet, ‘such is the need for heroes and champions, that if there are no real ones, unsuitable candidates are pressed into service. In real life most Robin Hoods were far from noble’ (1969: 34). For instance, Schinderhannes, a famous bandit chief who operated in Rhineland in the late 1790s, ‘was in no sense a social bandit but found it advantageous for his public relations to advertise that he robbed only Jews . . .’ (1959: 20).

The point I want to make is not that ‘social banditry’ cannot be a useful sociological concept. This it certainly is, though in a much different way than Hobsbawm suggests. In a sense, all bandits are ‘social’ in so far as they, like all human beings, are linked to other people by various ties. We

² We should remember that unsuccessful bandits are less likely to be recorded, for they do not live long enough to get widely known, let alone to reach the annals of history. Hobsbawm does not make clear whether or not this category belongs to his universe, since he does not mention it at all.

³ See also Eberhard (1965: 100–6). The same pattern has been described by the Flemish writer Hugo Claus in his play *Het Lied van de Moordenaar* (*The Ballad of the Murderer*). Amsterdam/Antwerp: Bezige Bij, 1957. The play deals with a band operating in west Flanders at the end of the eighteenth century.

cannot understand the behaviour of bandits without reference to other groups, classes, or networks with which bandits form specific configurations of interdependent individuals.⁴ What seems wrong with Hobsbawm's perception of brigandage is that it pays too much attention to the peasants and the bandits themselves. Before looking at them, it is necessary to look at the larger society in which peasant communities are contained. Without taking into account these higher levels, which include the landed gentry and the formal authorities, brigandage cannot be fully understood as indeed many particular characteristics of peasant communities are dependent upon or a reflex of the impact of the outside world. Given the specific conditions of outlawry, bandits have to rely very strongly on other people. It is important to appreciate that all outlaws and robbers require protection in order to operate as bandits and to survive at all. If they lack protection, they remain lonely wolves to be quickly dispatched, and those who hunt them down may be either the landlord's retainers, the police, or the peasants. Our task is therefore first to discover the people on whom the bandit relies.

Protection of bandits may range from a close though narrow circle of kinsmen and affiliated friends to powerful politicians, including those who hold formal office as well as grass-roots politicians. Protection thus involves the presence of a power domain. Of all categories, the peasants are weakest. In fact, this is the main reason why they are peasants (cf. Wolf, 1966: 1–11; Landsberger, 1969: 1–8). It may hence be argued that unless bandits find political protection, their reign will be short. This yields the following hypothesis, which may be tested against data bearing on all kinds of robbery: *The more successful a man is as a bandit, the more extensive the protection granted him.* The second variable may be difficult to quantify, though mere numbers and social positions of protectors may prove helpful beginnings. The first variable can be expressed in terms of the period of action: less than three years, like Schinderhannes in Rhineland and Corrientes in Andalusia, or more, like the Sicilians Grisafi (1904–17) and Giuliano (1943–50). Another measure of success involves the bandit's actions and the extent to which these operations are organized. Rinaldi, Rocco, and Capraro, who controlled large areas of western and central Sicily in the early 1870s, provide an example. Their mounted and well-armed bands synchronized their actions and fought regular battles with the police and the army.⁵ Grisafi's domain was a mountainous corner in southwestern Sicily

⁴ For the concept of configuration, see Elias (1970).

⁵ Cf. D'Alessandro (1959: 97). This important study is regretfully not utilized by Hobsbawm. It might have induced him to revise some of the ideas on *mafia* as expressed in *Primitive Rebels*, especially the notion that *mafiosi* can be understood in terms of social rebels. In the book here under review, Hobsbawm refers to the Sicilian *mafia* as those 'unofficial political systems and networks, which are still very poorly understood and known' (p. 33). The reader should know, however, that over the past ten years several studies on *mafia* have been published, some of which are quite instructive e.g., Pantaleone (1966) and Romano (1966).

over which he ruled absolutely, interfering in every kind of affair, even the most intimate, making his will felt in every field, including the electoral field, and levying tolls and taxes, blackmailing and committing crimes of bloodshed without stint. Some 30 murders were put down to him, besides an unending series of crimes. . . . Grisafi relied on a network of assistance that had grown wide, thick and strong in the course of time . . . [involving] 357 persons in all, of whom 90 were in his hometown alone (Mori, 1933: 130-4).

The more banditry is politically oriented and evolves into what Italian scholars have called *brigantaggio politico*,⁶ the more likely it is that it will assume 'anti-social' features when we take this term in the sense as understood by Hobsbawm, that is, anti-peasant. A surprisingly large number of the bandits mentioned by Hobsbawm were anti-peasant during most of their careers, which they typically initiated by righting personal wrongs. Sooner or later they were either killed or drawn into and constrained by the power domains of the established regional elites. Bandits thus represented the other side of a barely suppressed class war, especially those whose reign was long. Giuliano, who shot down peaceful Communist demonstrators upon orders of high-ranking politicians, is incidentally mentioned by Hobsbawm as an example of a bandit whose long career was due to 'a very great deal of political protection' (1969: 46 n.). Pantaleone, who is more explicit on this incident, observes:

This was the most sensational of Giuliano's crimes, but not of course the only one. In the months between the Portella shooting [May 1, 1947] and the April elections the following year, his gang concentrated its attacks on party members, trade unions and left-wing party headquarters, completely terrorizing the villagers in the provinces of Palermo and Trapani which were the usual setting for his activities (1966: 133).⁷

A similar orientation holds good for Giuliano's contemporary, Liggio, still today one of the most violent outlaws in western Sicily. The zone of terror which he established in the island region during the aftermath of the second world war was primarily aimed at the demobilization of the peasants who had just begun to organize themselves in order to attain agrarian reform.⁸

The Marxists have consistently argued that peasants require outside leadership in order to change their conditions.⁹ Bandits are not instrumental in turning peasant anarchy and rebellion (e.g. *jacqueries*) into sustained and concerted action on a wider scale. This is not, as Hobsbawm (1959: 5, 26) maintains, because their ambitions are modest and because they lack organization and ideology, but rather because their first loyalty is *not* to the peasants. When bandits assume retainership (either part time or full time) they serve to prevent and suppress peasant mobilization in at least

⁶ During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Sicilian brigandage provided alternately an *instrumentum regni* and a staff of the large landowners to suppress the peasants. See Romano (1952: 279-86).

⁷ For a case study on Giuliano's career, see Maxwell (1957).

⁸ The atmosphere in which Liggio operated is described in Dolci (1963: 25-50). See also Pantaleone (1966: 113-22). Liggio is still active today. He is regarded as being involved in the kidnapping and murder of the Palermitan journalist, de Mauro, in September 1970. For the concepts of terror and zone of terror, see Walter (1969: 5-7).

⁹ See the observations in Wolf (1966: 92; 1969: 294); Moore (1968: 479); and Landsberger (1969: 57).

two ways: first, by putting down collective peasant action through terror; second, by carving out avenues of upward mobility which, like many other vertical bonds in peasant societies, tend to weaken class tensions. Though bandits are thus essentially conservative, politically speaking, there are none the less specific circumstances under which they may become effective in destroying an established regime. This is most likely to happen when they can rely on a promising, rival power which questions the existing power structure. The armed bands who had helped Garibaldi to unsettle Bourbon government in Sicily in 1860 are an example of the strategic role which bandits may fulfil in major upheavals. Even then, however, bandits may provide embarrassments since they may simply dissolve, change their allegiance upon the occasion, or fail to understand the situation in a wider context.¹⁰

Though Hobsbawm describes the myths and legends about bandits, his two studies fail to penetrate them. Even when we admit that it is the urban middle class rather than the ordinary peasantry who idealize the bandit, we may well ask to whom or what the peasants refer when they glorify the bandit. Here we may follow Elizabeth Bott, who draws a distinction between direct and constructed reference groups. The former are groups in which the referent is an actual group: either membership or non-membership groups whose norms have been internalized by the individual. The latter concern groups in which the referent is a concept or social category rather than an actual group: 'The amount of construction and projection of norms into constructed reference groups is relatively high' (1964: 167–8).

The 'social bandit' as conceptualized and described by Hobsbawm is such a construct, stereotype, or figment of human imagination. Though such constructs may not correspond to actual conditions, they are psychologically real, since they represent fundamental aspirations of people, in this case of the peasants. Successful bandits stand out as men who evolved from poverty to relative wealth, and who acquired power. To use a standard Sicilian expression, they are men who *make themselves respected*. The notion of honour as expressed in a person's successful control over resources by means of physical force is characteristic of Medieval European and contemporary Mediterranean societies. This concern with honour and the specific meaning attached to it are related to the relatively low level of State formation in these societies. In the absence of stable central control over the means of violence, people could not rely for protection on State institutions. With respect to sheer physical survival, they were largely de-

¹⁰ See Mack Smith (1950) and Eberhard's discussion of the various stages of banditry in Medieval China (1965: 101–2). Similar complexities are described for early nineteenth-century Banten in north-western Java (Sartono, 1966: 109–27). The heterogeneity of the *déclassé* and floating population of which bandits make part raises specific organizational problems in revolutionary movements. The role of external power holders who challenge the power that constrains the peasants is discussed by Wolf (1969: 290–1).

pendent on their own, or on the protection of more powerful persons.¹¹ Successful bandits inspire fear and respect. Hence the fascination they radiate, especially among those who are in no sense respected—the peasants, from whose ranks they usually emerge.

The element of social protest is expressed in the myth, which thus builds up around the bandit. This process, or at least part of it, is pictured very skilfully and with great subtlety in Francesco Rosi's film *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962) in which we see surprisingly little of the bandit himself. Indeed the very physical absence of outlaws from the ordinary day-to-day life facilitates the formation of myths and legends in which the bandit appears as a man fighting the rich to succour the poor. We idealize all the more easily those things and people with whom we are least acquainted, or whom we rarely actually see, and we tend to ignore information that is detrimental to a beloved image.¹² Actual bandit life is often unpleasant and grim. It involves prolonged residence in humid caves and long toilsome marches as well as much and brutal action against numerous poor and helpless victims (e.g., Pereira de Queiroz, 1968: 112–22). Physical discomfort might be one reason why bandits seek to come to terms with their protectors in a more definite way, that is, when they assume the role of retainer. Many notorious delinquents and bandit leaders, like di Miceli and Scordato in mid-nineteenth-century Palermo, were given special charge of public security (Mack Smith, 1968: 419). In Sicily this and similar avenues to 'respectability' are institutionalized in the *mafia*, on which brigandage largely depends. We must expect to find similar mechanisms in Sardinia, Spain, Mexico and the Philippines.¹³ Like the bandit's real life, these conversions in which bandits turn into retainers and help to reinforce oppression of the peasantry do not provide attractive ingredients for myths and ballads.

Actual brigandage expresses man's pursuit of honour and power.¹⁴ This holds true for the bandit as much as his protector, who manipulates

¹¹ Cf. Bloch (1961: 145–62); Schneider (1971); and Elias (1971). Of particular interest is an article of the late Dutch historian Niermeyer (1959) dealing with the semantic shifts of the term '*honor*' in Medieval European societies.

¹² 'Since human beings have an infinite capacity for self-conceit, reality can only be reached by exposing their illusions'. This is, according to Alexander Parker, how the early seventeenth-century writer Francisco de Quevedo focuses on the problem of the delinquent in his novel *La vida del Buscón*, the masterpiece of the picaresque genre. See Parker (1967: 56–74).

¹³ In Bourbon Spain, bandits could obtain pardon from the king and pass into royal service (Pitt-Rivers 1961: 180). See also Brennan (1962:156). For data on Mexico, see Friedrich (1962, 1965). Van den Muyzenberg's article deals with the Huks in Central Luzon (1971). The new development of brigandage in Sardinia in the 1960s is too easily dismissed by Hobsbawm (1969: 76). He fails to recognize the part played by shepherds and outlaws in kidnapping and extortion and to note the rapid and violent ascent of both rural and urban bourgeois in recent years. (Anna H. Eyken, personal communication; cf. Brigaglia, 1971: 299–314.) The Sardinian case demonstrates that banditry, in spite of improved communications, is by no means as *passé* as Hobsbawm maintains.

¹⁴ Parker (1967: 135) points to the emphasis in the picaresque novel on self-assertion, the longing for 'respectability', and 'the will to power' as salient attributes of the delinquent. This orientation of bandits and *mafiosi* as well as the measure of political protection granted them is elaborated in a forthcoming publication (Blok, 1972).

him in order to extend his power domains. The myth of the bandit (Hobsbawm's social bandit) represents a craving for a different society, a more human world in which people are justly dealt with and in which there is no suffering. These myths require our attention. It has been argued that they are the institutionalized expression of a dormant protest element which, under certain conditions, may 'gather force and break through the culturally accepted patterns which kept it within its institutionalized bounds' (Wertheim, 1964: 32). Hobsbawm's comparative treatment of banditry over-emphasizes the element of social protest and obscures the significance of the links which bandits maintain with established power-holders. In future research on the subject, the relative importance of both dimensions of banditry must be accounted for.

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Social Bandits: Reply

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The concept of social banditry, which forms the basis of a chapter in my *Primitive Rebels* (1959) and of *Bandits* (1969), has been often referred to but has received comparatively little critical analysis from students familiar with the phenomena of banditry. Mr. Blok's critique of it is therefore most welcome. What seems to be at issue are not so much facts as interpretations. Most of the points made by Blok have also been made in the works criticized, notably in Hobsbawm (1969). Thus the difficulty of distinguishing between different types of bandits, the personal motivations of bandits, the problem of their protectors and supporters, the function of banditry as a channel of upward social mobility, and various other such matters are discussed by me. There is little substantial disagreement about the facts.

As to interpretation, the major difference seems to be that Mr. Blok denies that there is a type of banditry which can be regarded as a very elementary form of social protest. Consequently he believes that the 'myth' of the social bandit, which he appears to accept as having widespread existence, represents not what (some) bandits do, but merely what peasants