

Eric J. Hobsbawm's Social Bandit: A Critique and Revision

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Banditry is taking property by force or the threat of force, often done by a group, usually of men. The act is as old as private property itself. The *Hebrew Bible* repeatedly commands “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15; Leviticus 19:11; Deuteronomy 5:19). Job 24:2 warns of rustlers: “The wicked remove landmarks; they steal away herds and pasture them.” Of necessity, bandits usually operate in the shadows, often on the fringes of society, in geographically isolated areas. Thus their lives and actions, like those of other frontier figures, remain shrouded in mystery and legend. Some have been lionized and romanticized in popular fiction. Banditry, however, often involves violent acts by common criminals, “ignoble robbers,” for whom theft is simply an expedient means to a profitable end.¹

In 1959 Eric J. Hobsbawm created one of the most famous and influential historical archetypes, the social bandit. Fleshed out a decade later in his book *Bandits*, the construct touched off research on crime and social deviance around the world.² Hobsbawm described “social bandits” who gained fame, Robin Hood reputations, and popular adulation.³ These men made themselves admired by flaunting authority and championing the interests of the folk masses against elite oppression. In exchange, peasants admired, protected and aided them. Other

¹ This opening background summary is condensed from Slatta, “Banditry,” in Peter N. Sterns, ed., *Encyclopedia of Social History* (New York: Garland, 1994), 76-78. For a more extended treatment see, Richard W. Slatta, ed., *Banditos: The Varieties of Latin American Banditry* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1987). I presented an earlier version of this essay at the Social Science History Association, Ft. Worth, Texas, November 1999.

² Hobsbawm's *Bandits* first appeared in 1969 from Liedenfeld and Nicholson in London. A revised edition appeared in 1981 from Pantheon in New York. Citations are to the 1981 edition. The social bandit concept goes back to *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959). Significantly for US publication, the title of this book changed to *Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960).

³ For a guide to the voluminous Robin Hood literature, see Robbins Library Bibliography, “General Sources for the Study of the Robin Hood Legend,” at <http://www.ub.rug.nl/camelot/rhbib.htm>.

writers have broadened and applied Hobsbawm's model, for example, creating similar pirate heroes out of Edward Teach ("Blackbeard") and other corsairs.⁴

Hobsbawm based his interpretation primarily on fictional literature (often elite lore) and printed sources inspired by folklore. Elite lore reflects mostly a writer's imagination and the reading public's taste for blood and gore. Much bandit mythology emanates from literate, urban, middle-class writers with no first-hand experience of bandit-folk ties, real or imagined. The power and allure of these images come in part from a seeming need for even highly urbanized societies to retreat to a "sometimes heroic past." Popular culture reveals little of the social reality of bandit behavior. Hobsbawm acknowledged the conceptual and methodological difficulties inherent in relying "on a rather tricky historical source, namely poems and ballads." Myths allow us to savor nostalgically the lost virtue, the "freedom, heroism, and the dream of justice" that the social bandit gallantly fought to reassert.⁵

Early critics of Hobsbawm's model, including Anton Blok, argued that the poems and ballads he used more often reflect ideals and aspirations than social reality. Giannes Koliopoulos concludes that in nineteenth-century Greece, bandit images in ballads "did not correspond to the actual outlaws."⁶ Paul Sant Cassia observed that Mediterranean "bandits are often romanticized afterward through nationalistic rhetoric and texts which circulate and have a life of their own, giving them a permanence and potency which transcends their localized domain and transitory

⁴ Lawrence Osborne, "How the Maritime Rogue Became a Multicultural Hero." *Lingua franca*, March 1998 at <http://www.sevenbridgespress.com/lf/9803/osborne.html>.

⁵ Hobsbawm, *Bandits* 10, 131-32. For additional references and discussion critical of folkloric sources, see Robert J. Antony, "Peasants, Heroes and Brigands: The Problems of Social Banditry in Early Nineteenth-Century South China," *Modern China*. 15: 2 (Apr. 1989): 123-48.

⁶ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 10; James A. Inciardi, Alan A. Block, and Lyle A. Hallowell, *Historical Approaches to Crime: Research Strategies and Issues* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977), 32-33, 54; Koliopoulos, *Brigands with a Cause* 279; Linda Lewin, "Oral Tradition and Elite Myth: The Legend of Antônio Silvino in Brazilian Popular Culture," *Journal of Latin American Lore*, 2 (Winter 1979): 157-204.

nature.”⁷ Indeed, in the revised edition of *Bandits* (1981), Hobsbawm recognized that “criticism of the ‘noble bandit’ and other such stereotypes is well taken. In no case can we infer the reality of any specific ‘social bandit’ merely from the ‘myth’ that has grown up around him. In all cases we need independent evidence of his actions.”⁸

By the late 1970s, scholars had examined official Latin American police, legislative, and judicial archives for clues to the behavior of the bandits so forcefully evoked by Hobsbawm. Based on archival evidence, researchers, including Peter Singelmann, Linda Lewin, Bill Chandler, Paul J. Vanderwood, Richard W. Slatta, and Rosalie Schwartz, revised, refuted, and emended the social bandit model.⁹ The flesh-and-blood bandits that they turned up in Latin America simply did not fit. As but one example, Chandler convincingly refutes Hobsbawm’s depiction of the Brazilian bandit *Lampiao*. As Chandler observes, “the major problem is that his definition of a social bandit is, it seems, inverted. It rests not so much on the actual deeds of the bandits as on what people thought them to be, or, more precariously, on how they were reported by balladeers and other popular storytellers even generations later.”¹⁰

Researchers working across the globe -- Corsica, China, Greece, Malaysia, Italy, and elsewhere--likewise found few historical figures to match Hobsbawm's model. Critics include

⁷ Paul Sant Cassia, “Banditry, Myth, and Terror in Cyprus and Other Mediterranean Societies,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 35: 4 (Oct. 1993): 774.

⁸ Hobsbawm, *Bandits* 142.

⁹ Peter Singelmann, “Political Structure and Social Banditry in Northeast Brazil,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 7, 1 (May 1975): 59-83; Billy J. Chandler, *The Bandit King: Lampiao of Brazil* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 1978); Linda Lewin, “The Oligarchical Limitations of Social Banditry in Brazil: The Case of the ‘Good’ Thief Antônio Silvino,” *Past and Present*, 82 (Feb. 1979): 116-46; Paul J. Vanderwood, ed., “Social Banditry and Spanish American Independence,” special issue of *Bibliotheca Americana*, 1, 2 (Nov. 1982); Lewis Taylor, *Bandits and Politics in Peru: Landlord and Peasant Violence in Hualgayoc, 1900-30* (Cambridge: Cambridge Latin American Miniatures, no date); Rosalie Schwartz, *Lawless Liberators: Political Banditry and Cuban Independence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989); Vanderwood, “Bandits, Real and Imagined: An Introduction to the Theme in Mexican History,” in Clive Emersley and Louis A. Knafla, eds., *Crime History and Histories and Crime: Studies in the Historiography of Crime and Criminal Justice in Modern History* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 229-51.

¹⁰ Chandler, *The Bandit King*, 241.

Anton Blok, Pat O'Malley, Richard White, Donald Crummey, Phil Billingsley, Stephen Wilson, and Boon Kheng Cheah.¹¹

Printed sources about bandits often project the urban bourgeois views of writers who romanticized peasant oral traditions for their own literary and political reasons. Furthermore, oral traditions themselves pose serious methodological problems, as Hobsbawm recognized: "Most oral history today is personal memory, which is a remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts. The point is that memory is not so much a recording as a selective mechanism, and the selection is, within limits, constantly changing."¹²

Researchers inclined to take folk tales at face value would do well to consider John Chasteen's conclusion about the creation of caudillo mythology on the Brazilian-Uruguayan border. "Borderlanders collected, refashioned, or even invented outright the memorable words of their political protagonists. . . . borderland Federalists constructed an image of the hero they wanted."¹³

Many scholars have found popular and literary sources, folklore, and first-hand reports by "just plain folks," to be fraught with difficulties. As Erick Langer notes for Bolivia, peasant

¹¹ Anton Blok, "The Peasant and the Brigand: Social Banditry Reconsidered," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 14, 4 (Sept. 1972): 494-503; Pat O'Malley, "Social Bandits, Modern Capitalism and the Traditional Peasantry: A Critique of Hobsbawm," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 6, 4 (July 1979): 489-499; Richard White, "Outlaw Gangs of the Middle Border: American Social Bandits," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 12, 4 (Oct. 1981): 387-408; and Hobsbawm's responses in "Social Banditry: Reply," *Comparatives Studies in Society and History*, 14, 4 (Sept. 1972): 503-5; and *Bandits* 11-15, 138-64; Ralph A. Austen, "Social Bandits and Other Heroic Criminals: History, Myth, and Early Modernization in Africa and the West," paper presented to the Symposium on Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa, Urbana, IL, Apr. 22-24, 1982; Billy J. Chandler, *King of the Mountain: The Life and Death of Giuliano the Bandit* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1988); Donald Crummey, ed., *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986); Phil Billingsley, *Bandits in Republican China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988); Stephen Wilson, *Feuding, Conflict, and Banditry in Nineteenth-Century Corsica* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Giannes Koliopoulos, *Brigands with a Cause: Brigandage and Irredentism in Modern Greece, 1821-1912* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); and Boon Kheng Cheah, *The Peasant Robbers of Kedah, 1900-1929: Historical and Folk Perceptions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹² Hobsbawm, *On History*, 206.

¹³ John Charles Chasteen, *Heroes on Horseback: A Life and Times of the Last Gauchos Caudillos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 118.

stories “exhibit a selective memory that emphasizes only certain traits among bandits. No tale deals with robbing other peasants.”¹⁴ These legends often overlook the brutality and indiscriminate terror and killing of flesh-and-blood bandits.

Folklorist Barre Toelken warns of the radical transformations that folk tales may undergo over time. For example, many pioneer families of the American West have a “grandma was almost sold to the Indians” story, even though we find virtually nothing in the historical record of such transactions. Likewise a memoir written in her old age by Harriet Sanders adds mythical Indian attacks on wagon trains not mentioned in her youthful diaries. Toelken points to the purposes of folk stories: entertainment, storymaking, dramatization, “expression not data” that limit the sources' usefulness to historians. However, even though fictive, folk tales can have dire consequences. The Almo Massacre (circa 1859-61) of some three hundred whites by Native Americans in southern Idaho probably never happened. Yet unsubstantiated rumors prompted white militia volunteers to retaliate by slaughtering 400 Shoshoni at Bear River in 1863.¹⁵

Analyzing folk ballads in particular, Toelken stresses the centrality of analyzing the human, social, cultural-psychological, physical, and time contexts of a song. Context is essential because “folklorists deal principally with materials that have lost their direct connection to their authors, materials, moreover, that reach expression primarily in live performance situations. . . . We know that some folksong texts are themselves very stable, while others tend toward wide variations.”¹⁶ “Narrational ballads perform a narrative function very much like that of legend. They purport to convey a believable event, a musical kind of folk history. Dramatic ballads, on

¹⁴ Langer, “Andean Banditry and Peasant Community Organization,” in Slatta, *Bandidos*, 124.

¹⁵ Barre Toelken, “Folklore and Traditional Cultures,” talk given at the Western History Association meeting, Portland, Oregon, 8 October 1999; *The Dynamics of Folklore* rev. and expanded ed. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996), 410. See the same text for helpful cautions in utilizing folklore, defined significantly by Congress in 1976 as “a wide range of creative symbolic forms” (9). On Harriet Sanders, see Clyde Milner II, “The Shared Memory of Montana's Pioneers,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* (Winter 1987): 3-13.

the other hand, are more like folktales or myths; their topics are universals like death, betrayal, sexuality, and assault.”¹⁷ Thus reading too much cultural specificity or data into any one rendering is dangerous historical practice.

The web of myth, fiction, and historical fragments surrounding “Billy the Kid” well illustrates the dangers of oral popular sources. As part of a Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s, interviewers questioned New Mexico residents who claimed to have known Billy the Kid. Some respondents avowed personal knowledge of episodes created by fiction writers. One person reported a conversation with Billy's mother during the spring of 1877. His mother died some three years earlier, on September 16, 1874. Faulty memory and vivid imagination shaped many recollections.¹⁸ As Stephen Tatum has noted, the Kid enjoyed a ground swell of rehabilitating myth-making during the 1930s and 1940s. “Although brief instances of the Kid's noble bandit characteristics cropped up in accounts before the 1930s, a veritable eruption of stories occurred in the next twenty years presenting the Kid's affinity with Robin Hood or Claude Duval.”¹⁹ These cautions take on added urgency in lieu of proliferating quests for subaltern voices.

If the literary and folkloric sources that Hobsbawm used are often flawed, what of documents found in official government archives? These, of course, cannot be taken at face value any more so than peasant tales. Government officials in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere have routinely labeled political rebels as bandits. Such labeling seeks to attach negative connotations to the rebels, strip them of political legitimacy, and reduce their popular support. Officials routinely labeled gauchos of the Río de la Plata as “vagrants and ne'er-do-

¹⁶ Barre Toelken, “Context and Meaning in the Anglo-American Ballad,” in *The Ballad and the Scholars: Approaches to Ballad Study* (Los Angeles: UCLA William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1986), 31, 35-36.

¹⁷ Barre Toelken, *Morning Dew and Roses: Nuance, Metaphor, and Meaning in Folksongs* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 15.

¹⁸ Robert F. Kadlec, ed., *They "Knew" Billy the Kid: Interviews with Old-Time New Mexicans* (Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, 1987); see especially the “Afterword” by Jeff Dykes 109-11; Stephen Tatum, *Inventing Billy the Kid: Visions of the Outlaw in America, 1881-1981* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 5-8, 168.

wells.” It is apparent that “shifting definitions of law and crime need more critical attention if the complex nature of banditry is to be understood fully.”²⁰

Nonetheless, government documents should not be dismissed out of hand as untrustworthy “hegemonic discourse.” Official reports, minutes, confidential correspondence, telegrams, court records, and contemporary press accounts can be used to good advantage. Robert J. Antony points out that Chinese court records transcribed confessions or provided summaries of confessions, thereby providing non-elite voices. The works of many researchers, including J. M. Beattie for England, George L. Simpson for East Africa, Nathan Brown for modern Egypt, and Greg Bankoff for the Philippines, show that official records provide penetrating, accurate insights into the behaviors and roles of real historical bandits.²¹

Another type of source that has drawn on post-colonialist criticism is the foreign observer. Anti-colonial fervor has led some to dismiss out-of-hand the observations of outsiders, especially foreigners. Banishing the writings of foreign visitors is throwing out the baby with the bath water. Obviously one looks for ethnocentric bias that mars many such accounts. However, by comparing travel books and memoirs with a variety of other sources, we can filter out the

¹⁹ Tatum, *Inventing Billy the Kid*, 98.

²⁰ See Slatta, “Banditry as Political Participation in Latin America,” *Criminal Justice History: An International Annual*, 11 (1990): 171-87; Slatta and Karla Robinson, “Continuities in Crime and Punishment: Buenos Aires, 1820-50,” in *The Problem of Order in Changing Societies: Essays on Crime and Policing in Argentina and Uruguay*, edited by Lyman Johnson, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), 24-25, 38, n. 10, p. 43; Slatta, *Gauchos and the Vanishing Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983, 1992), 106-08, 110, 114-15, 122-25; Slatta, *Bandidos*, 39, 45, 51-52, 63, quotation on 197.

²¹ Antony, “Peasants, Heroes and Brigands;” J. M. Beattie, *Crime and the Courts in England, 1660-1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Greg Bankoff, “Bandits, Banditry and Landscapes of Crime in the Nineteenth-Century Philippines,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 29: 2 (Sept. 1998): 319-39; George L. Simpson, “Frontier Banditry and the Colonial Decision-Making Process: The East Africa Protectorate's Northern Borderland Prior to the First World War,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 29: 2 (1996): 279-308; Nathan Brown, “Brigands and State Building: The Invention of Banditry in Modern Egypt,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32: 2 (Apr. 1990): 258-81.

untrustworthy. Many acute observers, including Charles Darwin, Alexander von Humboldt, and others, left important descriptions of Latin American social life.²²

Given the extensive research into other than literary sources, why have researchers turned up such meager archival evidence to support Hobsbawm's social bandit model? Owing to his reliance on folkloric and literary sources, he exaggerated the tie between peasant and bandit that "makes social banditry interesting and significant. It is this special relation between peasant and bandit which makes banditry 'social.'" Other bandit attributes may be disputed or open to various interpretations, but the existence of this relationship is essential to the model's credibility.²³

Researchers for Latin America and other regions of the world have found this "special relation" largely absent or mythical. Analyzing Jalisco, Mexico, William B. Taylor found "little evidence that common people in New Galicia before 1810 supported the highway robbers of their day."²⁴ In South China during the same period, Robert J. Antony found that "men were more likely to turn to banditry out of desperation and hard economic realities than for vague notions of righting wrongs or championing the poor."²⁵ On the contrary, peasants and townspeople actively assisted authorities in arresting bandits.

Did peasants use banditry, in James Scott's phrase, as one of the "weapons of the weak?" Seldom. Nathan Brown concluded that "recent attempts to cast Egyptian banditry as a weapon of the peasants add the final irony to this episode. Banditry did constitute a weapon—in the hands

²² For cautions on interpreting such documents, see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

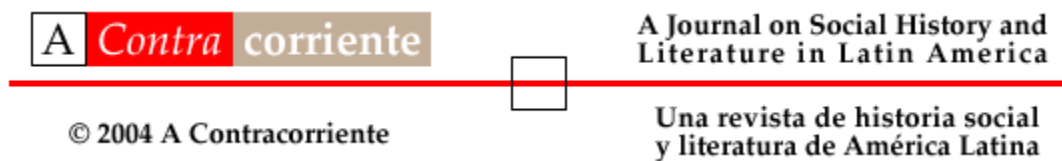
²³ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, rev. ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 17-18; Hobsbawm, "Social Banditry," in *Rural Protest: Peasant Movement and Social Change*, edited by Henry A. Landsberger (London: MacMillan, 1974), 143.

²⁴ Taylor, "Banditry and Insurrection: Rural Unrest in Central Jalisco, 1790-1816," in *Riot, Rebellion, and Revolution: Rural Social Conflict in Mexico*, edited by Friedrich Katz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 211.

²⁵ Antony, "Peasants, Heroes and Brigands," 138.

of the Egyptian elite, the British, and of, course, the brigands.” Many Latin American cases also point to banditry promoting elite interests at the expense of peasants.²⁶

Despite the shortcomings of the social bandit model, we owe Hobsbawm an enormous debt of gratitude for an inspired, original hypothesis. Thanks to his provocative model, subsequent scholars have dug deeply into the lives of bandits around the globe. We now know much more about these elusive figures and the social ties that they did and did not establish. I'm reminded of another model that inspired prodigious research that ultimately brought the model into question: Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis.²⁷ I conclude that all disciplines need “big thinkers” and conceptualizers, like Turner and Hobsbawm, to spur us into action. One would hope that innovative journals, like this one, will make space for such original thinking. Unlike the private sector, academe cannot merely produce a better mousetrap or another variety of soda. We need new ways to think about the relationship between mice and people. We need to question whether soda should even exist. Eric J. Hobsbawm provided the inspiration to ponder big issues; let's continue to embrace the challenge.



²⁶ Brown, “Brigands and State Building,” 279-80; Slatta, “Banditry as Political Participation,” 184; Slatta, *Bandits and Rural Society History: A Comment on Joseph*,” *Latin American Research Review*, 26: 1 (1991): 149-50.

²⁷ For guidance on the continuing utility of the frontier as an analytical concept, see Richard W. Slatta, *Comparing Cowboys and Frontiers: New Perspectives on History of the Americas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997, paperback 2001) and the online “Comparative Frontiers: A Working Bibliography,” at <http://legacy.ncsu.edu/classes/hi300001/comparebib.htm>.