Bandits

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1. Subject matter: Criminal perpetrators or social heroes?

In the legal sense, the transgression of banditry is rooted in the act of robbery, which involves the unlawful appropriation of property through the use or the threat of violence. The bandit's robbery can be portrayed as a challenge to the prevailing distribution of material goods and the socioeconomic concept of justice, especially when there is a perception of asymmetric power relations in society as a structural problem. While the state authorities in particular may attempt to label the bandits as criminals – or even terrorists – and thus deheroize them, the popular heroization of bandits is based on their struggle for the violent reversal of an unjust distribution of wealth that primarily benefits the authorities. Hence, in the heroization of banditry, a violent transgression of the normative order is contextually linked to a desired reversal of the socioeconomic order of justice, positioning bandits as ambiguous figures in the typological field of the heroic. By exploring the adoration of a bandit as a social hero or, conversely, the marking of the same actor as a criminal perpetrator, conclusions can be drawn about the competing social actors in the field of power.[1]

2. Delimitation: Modalities of criminality

The heroization of criminals and outlaws (as a super-category that includes bandits) requires a separate discussion. All heroic configurations of criminals and outlaws are based on a deviant or delinquent transgression that is viewed positively by the community. In this article, bandit heroes are defined and treated as a specific subcategory of these figures.

Due to the categorical difference between robbery and theft, the ideal type of the bandit hero must be differentiated from the gentleman thief, who refrains from using violence. That ideal type can be

recognised, for instance, in fictional figures such as Maurice Leblanc's (1864–1941) literary hero Arsène Lupin and Daniel Ocean from the *Ocean* film series (original: 1960; trilogy: 2001–2007). Similarily, the heroization of expert drug smugglers, like Howard Marks from *Mr Nice* (1996; film adaption: 2010), or confidence men, such as Frank Abagnale from *Catch Me If You Can* (1980; film adaptation: 2002), needs to be interpreted differently from the heroization of bandits. These figures are seldom associated with acts of violence and often socially rehabilitated, reminiscent of the [prefiguration](#) of the 'return of the prodigal son' in the gospel of Luke.

Additionally, the heroization of mafia and gangster figures has clearly become distinct from the heroization of bandits, at least in contemporary popular culture, e.g. in films such as *The Godfather* saga (1969; film adaptation as a trilogy: 1972–1990) and *Scarface* (1983), as well as in the case of gangster rappers. While mafia and gangster figures, analogously to bandit heroes, are idealised as representatives of a low or disadvantaged social class due to their social ascent, highly organised criminal cartels operating in familial networks in major cities, like the Italian mafia or the Japanese yakuza, generate different manifestations of the heroic than bandits, who commit robbery primarily in small bands of men. In contrast to bandits, contemporary organised crime is invariably involved in fraud and money laundering transactions to maintain the public pretence of a legally acquired fortune, significantly complicating any heroization. For brutal drug lords like Pablo Escobar (1949–1993) and brilliant drug cooks like the fictional character Walter White from the television series *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), even if they were involved in robberies, different heroization tropes apply because most of them are seen as anti-heroes who are idealised for their cunning superiority over normal people and common criminals, thus embodying different social features than bandit heroes.

Differentiating between pirates and bandits, on the other hand, is considerably more difficult because, as communities of violence, they function mostly very similarly. Nevertheless, the sea – and the oceans most of all – is an important spatial distinguishing feature in specific historical contexts. Due to the greater distance to the coastal populations, pirates are heroized in a different way than bandits, who are found mostly in spatially delimited, rural peripheries. As long as pirates operate on the high seas and in international waters, their aspirations for autonomy and territoriality create different conflicts with state powers than bandits, who are found mostly along frontiers within and between countries.[2] However, the differentiation is of a fluid nature, and the historical-sociological similarity between pirates and bandits in certain contexts is undeniable.[3]

3. State of research: Historicity and myth of the social bandit

On the theoretical level, bandit heroes can be compared with rebels and freedom fighters insofar as they are all heroized for challenging authorities and power structures through violence. Therefore, research into banditry can be situated at the intersection of social and cultural history and conflict studies and social movement theory.[4] The academic discussion of banditry has been significantly informed by the concept of "social banditry" developed by the sociologist and social historian Eric J. Hobsbawm.[5] Despite valid criticism, Hobsbawm's concept of the "social bandit" has proven to be highly productive for research done across disciplinary boundaries and cultural contexts.

Hobsbawm's ideal type of the social bandit is based on the archetype of the Robin Hood myth, in which the bandit is idealised as a hero and social actor who robs the ruling class of its wealth in order to share the captured spoils first among his community of bandits and then among the society's needy and oppressed. Studies that build on Hobsbawm's concept distinguish between social bandits and "criminal robbers": while social bandits fight for political participation in the name of an oppressed social class or stratum by resorting to robbery as a "pre-political" act of protest, "common" criminal robbers pursue supposedly reprehensible, egotistical and materialist aims.[6] This

distinction is not always reasonable, however, since it often projects normative and moral value judgments ahistorically onto the past and because complex bandit biographies cannot always be unequivocally categorised. Even the antithesis of an originally "asocial", but later heroized bandit can be found in many primary sources: while social histories, for instance, document the terrorisation of a rural population by bandits who were later promoted to representatives of social change in the interests of that demographic group, cultural histories suggest that it was more the power struggle between familial clans and notions of gender and honour that defined the actions of bandits than social and solidary ideals of an oppressed class.[7] The historical-sociological discussion of the phenomenon of banditry also reveals that, contrary to the assumption of a categorical dichotomy between state authority and non-state bandits according to Hobsbawm's ideal type, many notorious bandit heroes were recruited and coopted by states as militiamen and governors.[8]

The other distinction that remains unclear in Hobsbawm's writings and that drew additional criticism for his concept relates to the differentiation of the levels of analysis: Hobsbawm refers under the label of social banditry not only to real historical figures who were active as rebels in local and political resistance cultures, but also to mythological, folkloristic, literary and historiographical constructions of social banditry. Furthermore, he implies a causal relationship between the two levels, according to which certain persons have been idealised as social bandits by later generations in folklore and literature precisely because they were, in fact, social bandits.[9] It would be wrong, however, to consider the social reality and the social construct of the social bandit as two entirely separate phenomena, since heroization processes are indeed marked by a mixing of those levels. In his comparative research on heroized bandits, Graham Seals calls this the Robin Hood principle: "Wherever and whenever significant numbers of people believe they are the victims of inequity, injustice, and oppression, historical and/or fictional outlaw heroes will appear and continue to be celebrated after their deaths."[10]

The analysis of the heroization of bandits must therefore examine both the historical configuration as well as the mythical dimensions that reflect on the historical actors. In this sense, it is not Robin Hood who is the heroized social bandit, but the actor whose actions in a certain historical situation are placed in relation to the mythologised prefigurant of Robin Hood by contemporaries or a later-born audience.

4. Historical and literary manifestations: Rebels, cutthroats and adventurers

The heroization (as well as deheroization) of the figure of the bandit is not a uniquely modern phenomenon. Written sources attest an animated debate on the interpretation of bandits in as early as Roman antiquity – if not even earlier.[11] Because of the increasing entanglement of state sovereignty with local lifeworlds, however, the politicisation of the discourse on banditry has considerably intensified and proliferated since the advent of modernity.[12] On the one hand, modern states, in the sense of centralisation and expansion of sovereignty, have redefined banditry as a public problem and violently suppressed it.[13] On the other hand, political movements as well as their supporters have reinterpreted, glorified and popularised banditry as indigenous cultures of resistance since the 19th century.

Hobsbawm's reinterpretation of bandits as heroic "primitive rebels" and the criticism levelled against that reinterpretation that contends that most bandits were actually brutal cutthroats are therefore the core themes of global historical research on social bandits. It investigates the political legitimisation of banditry in different contexts, often decades or centuries after the events in question. Still, there is no doubt that famous bandit heroes appeared throughout world history, especially in times of rebellion and guerilla warfare, such as Bai Lang (1873–1914) following the 1911 Xinhai Revolution in China, Pancho Villa (1878–1923) during the Mexican Revolution from 1910 to

1920, Sándor Rózsa (1813–1878) in the 1848–1849 Hungarian Revolution, Stenka Razin (1630–1671) in his uprising against tsarist Russia and many more.

In the field of history, references to Hobsbawm's social bandit are interpreted differently in different regions of the world. The fact that bandit heroes were popularised in processes of nation-building, and sometimes beyond historical realities like in the case of the Lithuanian folk hero Tadas Blinda (1846–1877), is a significant subject of historical criticism.[14] For instance, the legends and songs about *haiduks* and *klephts* widespread in Southeast Europe – and cited by Hobsbawm multiple times – were widely interpreted in post-Ottoman historical narratives of the Balkan countries as nationalist (and partly socialist) accounts of freedom fighters who resisted the Ottomans. Such patriotic heroizations of bandit figures in the Balkan history-writing have been criticised and revised by historians.[15] In postcolonial contexts, such as in India and Africa, Hobsbawm's concept of the social bandit was received much more openly to assert the *thuggees* and *bushmen* as expressions of anticolonial and organised resistance against Eurocentric interpretations.[16]

In certain cultures, like in the historiography and folk culture of the Middle East and North Africa, bandit heroes garner only little attention since the bandits are commonly associated and encoded with other social categories, such as Sufi orders, urban guilds or tribal cultures.[17] The Anatolian legend of Köroğlu from the 16th century is one of the exceptions.[18] The resistance of the Caucasian bandit heroes, known as *abrek*, against the Russian occupation was treated in epic songs and narratives.[19] Other examples of pronounced bandit cultures that have received a lot of attention are found among stateless minorities in state peripheries, such as the Kurdish banditry in Turkey which achieved international exposure thanks to the success of the novel *Memed, My Hawk* (Turkish: *İnce Memed*, 1955) by Yaşar Kemal (1923–2013), but it is also attracting attention in scholarly research because of the political dimension of the Kurdish question.[20]

As *Memed, My Hawk* demonstrates, some bandits as well as other outlaw heroes continue to enjoy great popularity in popular culture today.[21] The archetype for the romanticisation of bandits remains the legendary figure of Robin Hood and his manifold literary manifestations, in which he has been reconfigured as either a peasant or a nobleman depending on the historical context of the cultural production.[22] In the literary genres focussing on bandits and robbers that emerged around 1800, including Friedrich Schiller's (1759–1805) *Die Räuber* (The Robbers, 1781), Johann Heinrich Zschokke's (1771–1848) *Abällino der große Bandit* (Abællino, The Great Bandit, 1794) and Christian August Vulpius' (1762–1827) *Rinaldo Rinaldini* (1799), changing cultural notions of honour were depicted through tragic bandit heroes.[23] Beyond tragedies, especially in popular literature, bandit heroes are portrayed according to the archetype of the adventurer and represent utopias, societal escapism and vigilantism.[24]

5. Dynamics of interpretation I: The social and the political of bandit heroes

Since robbery is, by definition, a violent act, bandits are also invariably perpetrators of violence, so that their heroization is not solely based on the redistribution of stolen property but also on the underlying act of violence. Therefore, in the heroization of individual bandits, reference is regularly made to their combative or martial capacity for violence. For instance, in the case of the literary figure of Robin Hood, there is a discourse on his outstanding abilities as an archer. A historical example is the famous bulletproof metal armour worn by Ned Kelly (1854–1880) during his robberies and firefights with the police. The individual capacity for violence often symbolises not only the bandit's perceived resilience in the face of the state or semi-state supremacy of professional violent actors but also refers to the aspect of masculinity often associated with banditry, which draws on ideals attributed to physicality.

On the other hand, individual bandits are usually part of a heroized collective, which as a community of violence challenges the state authority's monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force.[25] The heroization of bandit communities can focus either on the collective 'band' or on an individual leader. Bandit communities are shaped by communal cultures within their group and in social relation to their environment that contribute to their heroization in different ways. Firstly, the bandit community's internal culture is based on the collective experience of an outlawed and violent band. Secondly, hierarchical structures and solidary values are manifested in the distribution of loot, which can contribute to strengthening the communal culture. Thirdly, codes of behaviour and honour can shape the internal culture of the bandit community through rules and rituals, awards and violent sanctions. The revival of Ottoman-Albanian customary law *kanun* as an honour code as well as the traditional oath of honour *besa* as a secret oath in Albanian organised crime illustrates the necessity of a codified order and sanctioned regulations of honour in the formation of criminal communities.[26] The necessary secrecy about the criminal deeds contributes to the heroic myth-building at the intersections of internal and external communities.[27]

The legitimisation of acts of violence, adventurous law-breaking and communal autonomy are crucial elements of the self-heroization of bandits and also contribute to their external heroization. The charismatic role of the leader often plays an important part at the intersection of the internal and external heroization of bandit collectives. Charismatic leadership may also be linked to traditional claims to power, especially when the leader comes from a higher social class, as seen with robber knights, for example. Self-heroization includes the narrative transmission of the band's past achievements to newly recruited members, as well as rituals of self-celebration and commemorating the fallen.

Bandits represent a community that deliberately severs ties with society in order to achieve socioeconomic autonomy. However, the autonomy of the bandit community relies on the appropriation of the society's resources. The bandits' pursuit of autonomy challenges the dominant socioeconomic dependency relationships within the wider society. Rather than completely overturning societal dependency relationships, banditry aims – according to the basic premise of heroization discourses – to partially reshape them at the expense of those in authority and in favour of their own community. That partial and self-serving 'correction' of the social distribution of wealth distinguishes the ideal-typical bandit (i.e. the social bandit) from the unconditional and selfless ideal type of the political rebel.

The bandit community, however, relies on an external community of helpers, recipients of their protection or cheering spectators with whom a different collective culture must be nurtured. This external dimension of the heroization is important for maintaining the bandit community's autonomy as well as for the creation of their myths across time and space. Since a return to society or rehabilitation into normality is rarely possible without punitive consequences, there is a boundary between bandits and their external supporters. Legal and societal transgressions are essential for external heroization because not everyone can take that path. The bandit is both near and distant at the same time.

Internal and external expectations of heroization can also contradict one another, especially concerning the cultural significance and the social consequences of the acts of violence, such as the abduction of women and girls as spoils and the forced recruitment of boys and young men. While such abductions may distinguish the bandit leader as a masculine hero in his bandit community, the affected families are often plunged into societal dishonour, as the abduction is often interpreted as a sexual abuse of the abducted, leading to the humiliation of the entire family.[28] A notable example for such gender-specific aspects of abduction is the biography of Phoolan Devi (1963–2001), the so-called 'bandit queen' of India. She married a bandit leader after being abducted by a band of bandits.

Later, she herself became the leader of the bandits and sought revenge on her first husband in her native village, with whom she had been forcibly married as a child. The heroization of Phoolan Devi was also marked by a sacralisation since she was revered as an incarnation of an Indian goddess.[29]

The gradual criminalisation of a bandit, and thus also the attempt at public deheroization, from a mischievous criminal into a dangerous terrorist, is determined by how the authorities classify the threat to social order posed by banditry. For instance, a potential bandit hero can be merely denounced as a social parasite that occurs 'naturally' but must be controlled and eradicated like a pest even if it does not pose any serious political danger to the social order. In return, especially separatist acts of violence in peripheries can be depoliticised by states as nothing more than banditry and discursively rendered subordinate to the state's hegemony, such as in the Kurdish territories of Turkey for example until the escalation of intensive violence in the 1990s.[30] However, as soon as bandits are classified as a serious threat to the sociopolitical order, they can be tracked and hunted as 'predators' by using targeted violence. The militarisation of police measures against criminal groups in Latin America illustrates, on the one hand, the structural securitisation of state apparatuses in the last few decades and, on the other hand, the increased labelling of organised crime as a political threat in populist regimes.[31] Both the politicisation and the depoliticisation of bandits are also key discourses that can serve an intentional deheroization. In order to reinforce their claims to sovereignty, those in power can declare an apolitical bandit a terrorist or downgrade a revolutionary to a bandit. Yet, a discursive promotion on the part of state authorities, from ignoring a bandit to paying him particular attention, can serve his heroization by the opposition, as isolation from society and political agitation are seen as fundamental aspects of the bandit hero's fate. The simultaneity of heroization and criminal transgression must not be interpreted as a contradiction. The heroization of the bandit is always a political issue because the heroization is virtually based on the politicisation of the bandit.

For Hobsbawm, social bandits always stood at the threshold to political movements. However, the political aspect of banditry does not stem from its social dimension. It is the violent, transgressive capacity of bandits that makes them comparable with both rebels and violent state actors.[32] According to Charles Tilly's sociology of violence and states, the historical emergence of states is closely linked with banditry. Both the legitimisation and monopolisation of organised violence, as well as the imposition of taxes for "protection", generated the process of state formation.[33] Because of the similarity of the two phenomena, bandits may assert a local parastatehood that challenges a state's sovereignty.[34] Bandits, along with other forms of organised crime, continue the performance of statehood's monopoly on violence and protection through rackets and racketeering at the microsociological level. These parallel structures of order are culturally manifested through norms of hegemonic masculinity.[35] Banditry can even be seen as a bottom-up correction of a degenerating or failing state order.[36] Therefore, the heroization and deheroization of banditry are invariably in a dialectical relationship with the state's monopoly of the legitimate use of violence.

In that context, the fundamental condition for the heroization of bandits is the delegitimisation of the monopoly on violence of those in power and discrediting of the established concept of justice as being actually predatory and corrupt. Conversely, in terms of the rivalry relations in the imaginary field of the heroic, while bandits are deheroized, state actors' claims to legitimacy are valorised, and vice versa.

6. Dynamics of interpretation II: Spatiality and temporality of bandit heroes

Bandit heroes create both historical and imagined spatial and temporal orders. As a form of organised violence, banditry is characterised by a boundary experience beyond normality and legality. The bandit, as the saying goes, 'takes to the hills'. In its historical manifestations, banditry

has commonly been a 'frontier' phenomenon in the dual sense of the term. On the one hand, bandits have existed at the unilateral frontier of discovery and conquest, where state-building and civilising mission intersect. On the other hand, bandits have been and continue to be frequently found in bilateral borderlands and at war fronts.[37] These two spatial dimensions of the frontier, where bandits appear, are represented in the genre of the Western, for example, by the 'Indian territory' to the west and by the Mexican border to the south. However, the ideal-typical localisation of banditry in rural peripheries and borderlands is hardly tenable anymore, as urban communities of violence such as neighbourhood and street gangs bear great resemblance to the territorial claims of rural bandits of past centuries, inasmuch as those neighbourhoods can evade police control.

The local territorial claim – i.e. the control of violence and the taxation authority, such as the tribute to highwaymen known as the 'toll' – in a remote area detached from the control of the centralised authority (oftentimes poorly accessible mountains, forests or deserts) and the high mobility between the spaces of robbery and refuge (in some cases crossing state borders) generate diverse historical and mythical manifestations of the heroic, like that of Sherwood Forest in *Robin Hood and the Merry Men*.[38] The territoriality and the mobility of banditry contribute to the idealisation of the free and autonomous everyday lives of bandits. This constructs a historical or imagined topography of the lawlessness that is juxtaposed to the lawful space of the political centre.[39] Not just bandits are heroized and criminalised, but entire territories that are associated with banditry. The isolation of the territory can also be a downside to banditry. For communities that attach great importance to their autonomy, inaccessible mountains, forests or deserts provide them a protective space of refuge not just from state authorities but also from the plundering of enemy bandits.[40]

The rise of banditry also marks a temporal order and thus inspires periodisations. In terms of a "great age of social banditry" Hobsbawm defines a transitional phase between agrarian societies and capitalist state-building that took place in Europe between the 16th and 18th centuries while other parts of the world experienced this phase in the 19th and 20th centuries.[41] On the one hand, the romanticisation of adventure and autonomy in historical narratives contributes to the imagination of an 'age of bandit heroes'. On the other hand, from a state-centred and order-focused perspective, the lawlessness of a historical period can be condemned as a 'period of thugs'. The historical appearances of bandits in a certain period need not also be congruent with their mystification as 'the time of the bandits' because periodisations are always constructs and the myth surrounding bandit heroes can also do without actual historical bandits.

Whether actual social bandits still exist today was categorically rejected by Hobsbawm. However, it is certain that bandit heroes as myths are enjoying a boom in global pop culture in which inequality, injustice and oppression are seen as structural problems.

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36 Cf. Curott, Nicholas A. / Fink, Alexander: "Bandit Heroes. Social, Mythical, or Rational?" In: American Journal of Economics and Sociology 71.2 (2012), 470-497.

37 Cf. Yenen / Öztan: "Age of Rogues", 2021.

38 The extent to which Sherwood Forest can still serve as a model for the investigation of spaces of conflict is shown by Barak, Oren / Cohen, Chanan: "The 'Modern Sherwood Forest'. Theoretical and Practical Challenges". In: Miodownik, Dan / Barak, Oren (Eds.): Nonstate Actors in Intrastate Conflicts. Philadelphia 2013: University of Pennsylvania Press, 12-33. For a fundamental overview of the spatial dimension of bandit heroes see Haller: Mythische Räume der Gesetzlosigkeit, 2020.

39 Haller: Mythische Räume der Gesetzlosigkeit, 2020, 127.

40 Cf. Scott, James C.: The Art of Not Being Governed. An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia. New Haven 2009: Yale University Press, 177-179.

41 Hobsbawm: Bandits, 1981 [1969], 23.

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Category	Hero Types
Subject Headings (LOC)	Brigands and robbers, Government, Resistance to, Outlaws, Social justice, Heroes
Index	Authors: Alp Yenen Persons and Figures: Eric J. Hobsbawm, Friedrich Schiller, Maurice Leblanc, Arsène Lupin (figure), Daniel Ocean (figure), Howard Marks (figure), Frank Abagnale (figure), Pablo Escobar, Walter White (figure), Robin Hood (figure), Bai Lang, Pancho Villa, Sándor Rózsa, Stenka Razin, Tadas Blinda, Koroghlu / Köroğlu (figure), Yaşar Kemal, Johann Heinrich Zschokke, Rinaldo Rinaldini (figure), Christian August Vulpius, Abællino / Abaellino / Abällino (figure), Ned Kelly, Phoolan Devi Spaces and Locations: Russia, USA, Near East, Europe, China, Anatolia, Hungary, India, Africa, Turkey, Ottoman Empire, Albania, Balkans, Southeast Europe, Ocean, Mexico, Lithuania, Caucasus, Latin America, Sherwood Forest, American frontier Time and Events: Antiquity, 16th century, 17th century, 18th century, 19th century, 20th century, 21st century, Decolonisation, Xinhai Revolution / 1911 Revolution (1911/1912), Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), Hungarian Revolution (1848/1849), Razin uprising (1670)