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European Ethnology and the Question of Social Banditry

The first issue of *Ethnologia Europaea* carried two highly significant articles whose authors suggested a policy for the future of European ethnology. Sigurd Erixon noticed the lack of „a uniform European folklife research in systematic form, taking Europe as a whole" (1967:5) and urged his colleagues to „build up a social study in the ethnological sense" by engaging in comparative research (1967:11). Similarly, Åke Hultkrantz insisted that,

> it must be considered one of the most urgent tasks at present that European ethnologists, conscious of their common goals and interests, create an array of terms and concepts which emerge from and fit their scientific endeavours. It is necessary for the self-esteem of these ethnologists, and necessary for the benefit of their science, that a new era of ethnological research, concentrating on definitions or working concepts and logical analysis of extant concepts, American or European, sets in (1967:40).

After enumerating a number of research tools already developed by European scholars, Hultkrantz concluded with carefully worded optimism,

> With this fruitful start, let us hope that an arsenal of useful concepts will appear to make regional European ethnology an authoritative theoretical science within the frame of world anthropology (1967:44).

Almost fifteen years later, one cannot deny the fact that Erixon's and Hultkrantz' goal of developing European ethnology into a theoretical discipline equipped with concepts powerful enough to account not only for regional, but also for crosscultural phenomena, has not been achieved.

Admittedly, some elements from the spheres of linguistics and material culture have been subjected to theoretical, crosscultural analysis, but social phenomena of a higher order have not received the same interest. Hence, according to Helge Gerndt,

> Der Vergleich noch umfassenderer Zusammenhänge (z.B. ganzer Subkulturen, „Volkskulturen", Kulturen) wird allerdings bisher unbefriedigend gehandhabt, weil noch eine hinreichende Strukturbeschreibung (Typisierung) als notwendige Voraussetzung meist fehlt (1977/78:19).

In this essay I would like to offer a contribution to the theory of European ethnology. The topic I have chosen for treatment, the phenomenon of social banditry, is eminently suited as an illustration for the rich grounds European societies offer to a theoretically minded ethnologist. By combining the comparative approach typical of North American cultural anthropology with the emphasis on historical analysis prevalent in European ethnology, I hope

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to help develop a typology of European folk or peasant societies, and show the importance of such a typology for our understanding of social phenomena such as social banditry.

Social Banditry — Myth or Reality?

In 1959, Eric Hobsbawm introduced the scientific concept of social banditry to the Anglophone world. In his book *Primitive Rebels,* the ideal type of a social bandit is described as a Robin Hood „who took from the rich to give to the poor and never killed but in self-defence or just revenge" (1963:13). Social bandits are said to be pre-political figures protesting against the oppression and poverty resulting from the transformation of a peasant society into a capitalist society (Hobsbawm 1972:12). A social bandit's protest is a pre-political action because no questioning of the inequality inherent in the exploitation of peasants is involved. According to Hobsbawm, a social bandit doesn't challenge the legitimacy of oppression, but protests against *unjust* oppression by local representatives of the state (1972:50). To use Weber's distinction, a social bandit questions the legality of laws rather than their legitimacy (Weber 1964:130). This pre-political nature of social banditry fits well with Hobsbawm's claim that a peasant becomes a bandit by necessity rather than by choice. After an *unconscious* violation of law, the peasant takes to the hills, because,

> how does he know what a system which does not know or understand peasants, and which peasants do not understand, will do to him? (Hobsbawm 1963:16, also 1972:50).

Hence the peasant becomes an outlaw, and his subsequent behavior can take two distinct courses. He will either rob and kill indiscriminately or even concentrate on terrorizing the powerless peasants of his own village, thus becoming on ordinary bandit, or he will indeed, take from the rich to give to the poor and qualify for the status of a social bandit. Here the controversy starts, for, whereas the existence of ordinary bandits has always been acknowledged, the validity of the concept of social banditry has become a debated issue.

The most explicit attack against Hobsbawm's concept of social banditry has come from Anton Blok. Basing his arguments on his research of Sicilian mafia, Blok claims that in order to survive, a bandit needs a powerful protector, somebody who will see some benefit in supporting an outlaw. According to this view, the bandit becomes a broker for a member of the local elite, maintaining contact with the peasants in a way beneficial to the landowner and detrimental to the peasants (Blok 1974:101). Therefore, in the sense of providing valuable service, Sicilian bandits ‚take from the poor to give to the rich'. Since banditry is held by Blok to be a purely individualistic quest for

honour and power, bandits actually prevent an escalation of class antagonism by carving out channels for social mobility (Blok 1974: 101). A similar view of banditry as an anti-social phenomenon is held by Jan Brögger and supported by his material from Calabria (Brögger 1971:137).

Blok's condemnation of the concept of social banditry as a myth (1972: 501) must be given serious consideration as long as it is applied to Sicilian conditions. Unfortunately, whereas in an early article Blok's arguments were used in that sense (1969:111), this precision is lost from his subsequent writings, and one is left with the impression that the author extrapolates from a particular place at a particular time to any place at any time (Blok 1972). But such a generalization is clearly premature, because it has been arrived at by a regional ethnologist who is not acquainted with other European societies from which cases of social banditry have been reported (Blok, personal communication). Equally, we cannot take Hobsbawm's opinion for granted, because his skill in comparative analysis is hampered by his self-admitted failure to make a clear distinction between myth and reality (Hobsbawm 1972:505). Also, his lack of precision with regard to his examination of the internal structures of peasant societies (Blok 1972:498) obstructs the acceptance of the concept of social banditry without further examination. In other words, we are confronted with the dilemma of contemporary anthropology: on the one hand, Blok represents the European regional ethnologist, admirably acquainted with a particular society, but unable to formulate cross-culturally valid theories. On the other hand, Hobsbawm continues Durkheim's and Radcliffe-Brown's tradition of comparative sociology, his analysis of banditry gaining in breadth but losing in depth.

In order to resolve this dilemma, we have to combine both approaches and attempt to treat the question of social banditry as a phenomenon which will be found in certain societies under specific conditions only. I have chosen one example for illustration. It represents some parts of eastern and south-eastern Europe. It is well known that this region's oral history is particularly rich in cases of social banditry, and I could have drawn from a large sample (Gašparíková 1964; Melicherčík 1952, 1956, 1959; Ochmański 1950; Stavrovský 1960). Quantity, however, is not a substitute for quality, and since I am concerned with social banditry as a truly historical phenomenon, I prefer to concentrate on a single case of a very recent and authentic social bandit.

The Case of Nikola Šuhaj

In 1933 the book *Nikola Šuhaj loupežník* was published by the Czech author and journalist Ivan Olbracht. In this and a subsequent collection of articles (*Hory a staletí*, 1935), all essential characteristics of social banditry

were described. Olbracht's work, translated into English and German (1952, 1954), was consulted by Eric Hobsbawm and praised as „the most moving and historically sound picture of social banditry" (1963:14). Indeed, it is hard if not impossiblě to detect any new insight in Hobsbawm's treatment of the topic which could be classified as belonging to the category of „rediscoveries of truths long known outside the autarky of the English-speaking world" (Shanin 1975:12).

The hero of Olbracht's book, Nikola Šuhaj, was a Ruthenian peasant turned social bandit, active in the vicinity of his native village Koločava during the years 1918-1921. Olbracht conducted field work in this village which started only a decade after Nikola's activities had ceased, and spanned a number of years. It involved interviews with the villagers and state officials, as well as a review of all available written records. This research was explicitly aimed at a successful separation of reality from the legend (Olbracht 1975: 198-209). According to this examination of facts, Nikola became a bandit in the classic way. He violated the law of the dominant society by deserting from the Austro-Hungarian army. He lived as an outlaw in the mountains surrounding his village, robbed local merchants and successfully avoided numerous attempts at capturing him. After the administration of Ruthenia had passed to Czechoslovakia, Nikola could have returned to his village, but instead, he continued his criminal activities, adding to his victims the new Czech officials. Thus we can see that contrary to Hobsbawm's opinion (1963: 16), a bandit can be highly conscious of his opposition to the state and *choose* individual freedom above oppression (Olbracht 1935:114-115).

Relying on the support from local peasants and rewarding them for it, Nikola had survived many chases organized by the authorities. Finally, he was murdered by his own friends who had grown tired of the constant supervision and frequent interrogations conducted by the Czech police. Nikola himself killed a number of policemen in self-defence, but he never killed anybody for gain — crimes he was accused of (Olbracht 1935:118-119).

While Olbracht rejected comparisons with socially motivated revolutionaries (1935:119), he agreed that Nikola Šuhaj did come very close to that archetypal image of social bandits as people who „took from the rich and gave to the poor and never killed but in self-defence or from just revenge" (Olbracht 1975:9). This element of a proto-class consciousness is clearly expressed in Olbracht's apt characterization of social bandits:

> They are the personification of the thirst of the weak to become strong — — be it for a while only and cost it their own lives. They are the personification of hatred and revenge (1935:90, my translation).

This ‚personification of the thirst of the weak to become strong‘ applied to east European social bandits is identical with Blok's view of anti-social banditry in Sicily as expressing „man's pursuit of honour and power" (Blok 1972:501). What has to be explained, therefore, is the question of why the Sicilian brigand seems to be plagued by false consciousness while his Ruthenian counterpart showed solidarity with his fellow peasants, thus deserving the designation social bandit.

Who are the Poor — — Who are the Rich?

The world view prevalent in most peasant societies is aptly summarized in Ignazio Silone's words:

> At the head of everything is God, Lod of Heaven. After him comes Prince Torlonia, lord of the earth. Then come Prince Torlonia's armed guards. Then come Prince Torlonia's armed guards' dogs. Then, nothing at all. Then, nothing at all. Then, nothing at all. Then come the peasants (in Appel 1977:76).

We know from legal anthropology that a society „does not possess a single consistent legal system, but as many such systems as there are functioning sub-groups" (Pospisil 1971:98). This is nowhere more visible than in states which contain peasant societies or which engage in other forms of colonialism. It can be argued that the frequency and severity of conflict between the legal system of the peasants and that of the dominant state society depends on the degree of affinity between the two societies. In other words, severe conflict (for example, banditry) is likely to occur in situations where the peasants view the representatives of the state (Prince Torlonia's armed guards) as strangers and/or enemies. Unfortunately, most social scientists (especially North American anthropologists) regard peasant societies to be segments of a wider society not just politically, but in a cultural sense as well. The long-standing tradition of Latin American research comes to the foreground in Robert Redfield's concept of the Little and Great Tradition (Redfield 1956: 70), and in Alfred Kroeber's ‚part-societies with part-cultures‘ (Kroeber 1948: 284). This model of an universal peasant society serves well in explaining syncretism (Steward 1955:61-62) and might be applicable to many Latin American societies, but when extended to any peasant society (Foster 1967: 2), the utility of this organistic model must be questioned. Unfortunately, it is this view of an universal peasant society which Hobsbawm adopts in his discussion of banditry:

> The traditional peasants are integrated into the prevailing political system by means of three major ideological devices: the ‚king‘, the ‚church‘ (or other religious structures) and . . . ‚proto nationalism‘ (1973:17).

I claim that this conceptualization of peasant societies as not only political but also cultural segments of a wider society prevents us from understanding the situation in much of Europe — particularly in those areas of eastern and south-eastern Europe where banditry was common. Unless we refine our view of peasant societies, we will not be able to explain why banditry can be social as well as anti-social. Let us therefore look at the structures by which the peasants in Ruthenia and Sicily were held within the dominant state society.

The similarities between the two settings are limited to the situation of ,internal colonialism', in which ,,the core is seen to dominate the periphery politically and to exploit it materially" (Hechter 1975:9). The peasants abide by the traditional ,folk' code of conduct, and are, in addition subjected to a formal legal system imposed by the state. The often contradictory character of these two legal levels (for example, in the sphere of dispute settlement shown by Brögger 1968 and Blok 1974) leads to a dichotomization between ,us' — peasants and ,them' — the state.

This perception of conflicting interests constitutes the precondition for the emergence of banditry. However, once we supplement this political analysis with a cultural one, we discover a set of important differences.

According to Otto Bauer, in 1900 over 93% of all Ruthenians were employed in rural subsistence economy (1924:238). The land and other resources were owned by Hungarian and Polish nobility, and the economic exchange between town and countryside rested in the hands of Jewish merchants who constituted the rural elite (Bauer 1924:369-371). Political power was monopolized by Hungarian, after 1918 Czech, officials (Olbracht 1935). Hence the Ruthenian peasants were controlled and exploited by classes whose members differed from them not only in terms of economic and political power, but also in language, religion, and most customs. In other words, the different social classes of Ruthenia belonged to different ethnic groups. With no representatives among the ruling elite, Ruthenia comes very close to the Marxist concept of a ,nation without history' (Herod 1976). Obviously, since none of the usual ties between peasants and their rulers — king, church, proto nationalism (Hobsbawm 1973:17) — were shared in Ruthenia, it would be highly misleading to try to fit the local peasantry into the model of a ,part-society with a part-culture'. Needless to say, this situation is in no way exceptional for many areas of eastern and south-eastern Europe prior to the end of the First World War.

This social structure had important implications for the existence of social banditry. The economic, social, and cultural gaps separating the peasants from their rulers precluded any form of identification with the elite, and

contributed to a feeling of shared interests among the peasants. Anything coming from ‚above‘ would be resented as alien, the laws foremost, and the daily contacts with the representatives of the elite would ensure a continuous perception of the differences and aggravate the situation. The physical presence of state officials and wealthy merchants in Ruthenian villages contributed to a dichotomization into ‚us‘ and ‚them‘ not in terms of anonymous categories (‚the state‘, ‚the officials‘, etc.), but along personal lines (the *Jewish* merchant, the *Czech* official) forged by daily encounters. Consequently, a peasant turned bandit had little choice in selecting his victims. His anger towards the local elite directed his actions against that segment of population which was directly responsible for his oppression and poverty. The bandit had to become a social bandit.

In Sicily, the implications of the existence of two legal systems, one traditional, the other one imposed by the state, were the same as in Ruthenia. Their often contradictory nature created the precondition for the emergence of banditry. However, it is known that Sicily has never become just another part of the Italian state. According to Blok, the attempted de-feudalization of Sicily during the 19th century had failed because of the resistance of the local elite composed mainly of latifundists (Blok 1974). These landowners belonged to the same ethnic group as the peasants; an important factor because within the division of Italy into ‚nordici‘ and ‚sudici‘, Sicilian peasants and landowners found themselves in the same political camp, sharing a strong resentment of the central government in Rome (Gramsci 1957: 41). The latifundists recognized the importance of this common interest and used it effectively to further their own cause:

> playing on local patriotism, xenophobia and the prevalent dislike of all laws and regulations, they tried to convince people that it was not they themselves but rather the hated Bourbons who prevented improvement and kept Sicily poor (Blok 1974:98).

Faced with this resistance, the central government failed to monopolize the use of physical force (Blok 1974:91), recognizing implicitly the local legal system as the mechanism by which the interaction between the peasants and their immediate rulers was to be regulated. Consequently, in much of southern Italy, the judicial function remained the responsibility of mafiosi, bandits, and members of different secret societies (Brögger 1968; Blok 1974), most of whom acted as the long arm of the latifundist (Hobsbawm 1963: 40; Blok 1974). These former peasants who maintained the daily contact between the elite and the peasants were perceived by the latter as belonging to ‚us’ and were admired for their active resistance against the Italian state. The fact that these bandits helped maintain the traditional status quo spoke in their favor, because the traditional exploiters were not seen as enemies but

as com-patriots (Blok 1974:98, 214) defending local autonomy. But for an outsider, the alliance between bandits and local rulers testifies to a situation distinct from what has been said about Ruthenia. Consequently, Sicilian banditry can be termed anti-social.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that social phenomena such as banditry have to be studied on a comparative basis. It has been shown that, depending on the social structure of a peasant society, banditry can exhibit social or anti-social characteristics. We have seen that in Sicily bandits can achieve their own liberation due to the institutionalization of banditry by the local elite. This I have called anti-social banditry because individual freedom is granted to a bandit in exchange for his help in continuing the oppression of the peasants. It has been claimed that this form of banditry is common in societies where peasants and their local rulers belong to the same ethnic group, whereas the state government is conceptualized as an alien and hostile body.

In regions of overlapping economic and ethnic differences, banditry acquires that particular suicidal form of social banditry. As has been shown for Ruthenia, a social bandit does not represent a vertical but rather a horizontal segment of the population — a social class — and in the absence of any kind of shared interests between the peasants and their immediate oppressors, local rather than remote rulers become the bandit's target.

By analyzing the structures of peasant societies cross-culturally, we can surely examine many more social phenomena shared by many European regions. We should complete and leave the stage of cataloguing data and move to the next step of analyzing and comparing ethnographic material which is in its quantity and historical depth unique in the entire world. Only then will European ethnology become a theoretical discipline in the way envisaged by the founders of this journal.

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Europäische Ethnologie und das Problem des Sozialbanditentums

Der Beitrag plädiert für die Entwicklung der europäischen Ethnologie zu einer komparativen Disziplin. Am Beispiel des Banditentums wird herausgestellt, daß dieses je nach den lokalen Gegebenheiten soziale oder antisoziale Züge annehmen kann. Nach der aufgestellten Hypothese herrscht „soziales" Banditentum in bäuerlichen Gesellschaften vor, die von einer ethnisch fremden Elite beherrscht werden, während „antisoziales" Banditentum in jenen Regionen auftritt, in denen ökonomische und ethnische Unterschiede sich nicht überschneiden. Diese Hypothese gestattet die Zusammenfügung der Theorien zum Banditentum von Eric Hobsbawm und Anton Blok. Sie wird abgestützt durch Material aus Osteuropa (Ruthenien) und Südeuropa (Sizilien). Weiterhin wird argumentiert, daß das Konzept einer einheitlichen „bäuerlichen" bzw. „folk" Gesellschaft, wie es von den Anthropologen in Nordamerika benutzt wird, beträchtlich verfeinert und differenziert werden muß, bevor es gewinnbringend auf europäische Gesellschaften angewandt werden kann.