

On brigandage with special reference to peasant mobilization

by ANTON BLOK *

Dans un voyage de Minghetti à Camporeale en Sicile, à l'époque où il était ministre, le curé se présente à lui:

Curé: Je viens vous recommander un pauvre jeune homme, qui a besoin de votre protection.

Minghetti: Et pourquoi? Que veut-il?

Curé: Rien, seulement il lui est arrivé un malheur, il a tué un homme.**

I

About a decade ago, Hobsbawm presented an interesting argument on a markedly little known subject for which he coined the term 'social banditry' ¹. 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, champions, or avengers since they right wrongs when they defy the landlord 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 the established régime. 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 a recent book ², Hobsbawm elaborates some of the main themes he surveyed in *Primitive Rebels*. Like its predecessor, this study is an essay on the uniformities of social brigandage. The author maintains that these uniformities should be seen as reflections of similar situations within peasant societies:

* University of Amsterdam.

** Quoted in G. Alongi, *L'Abigeato in Sicilia*. Marsala, 1891, p. 50. Marco Minghetti was Prime Minister of Italy from 1873 through 1876.

¹ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive rebels. Studies in archaic forms of social movement in the 19th and 20th centuries*. Manchester, 1959, pp. 1-29. It is significant that this book has not received the attention it perhaps deserves from our discipline in the Netherlands. For an exception, see J. Goudsblom, 'Primitief protesteren', *Hollands Weekblad* (1959), no. 13, p. 14.

² E. J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*. London, 1969.

'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, p. 15).

Hobsbawm starts out from generalizations and then proceeds to provide evidence for them from various parts of the world. In this way he 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 between them, they have in common the fact that they voice popular discontent.

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, Hobsbawm 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 entertains the hope that the new data will not conflict with his original model as sketched out in his first book. And he adds: 'Still, the wider the generalization, the more likely it is that individual peculiarities are neglected' (1969, p. 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 express peasant 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 paper explores 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 distinction between direct and constructed reference groups may 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 an understanding of peasant mobilization. If we agree on political mobilization as the 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 the 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 the peasants. In this paper, therefore, I shall focus on the interdependencies and tensions between lords, peasants, and bandits. The vignettes are mainly based on Sicilian material since my fieldwork experience has been restricted to this area.

II

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, e.g. the Bedouin; *mafia*-like gangs; the landlord's bandits; and classic blood-vengeance bandits (1969, pp. 13-14). This narrows down the universe of social brigandage a considerable extent³. There are even further provisos, since not all categories necessarily exclude one another. Particular bandits may, either simultaneously or in the course of their career, express popular discontent as well as the power of the landlord or the State (1959, p. 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 19th century Indian *Thuggee* (Thugs), who specialized in ritually strangling and robbing travelers, 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 hundred miles from their homes⁴. Hobsbawm is aware of these varieties and complexities, but he does not attempt to account for them. His prime interest is social protest:

³ 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.

⁴ See Norman MacKenzie (Ed.), *Secret societies*. London, 1967, pp. 64-66. In this respect, Barrington Moore observes for 19th 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'. See his *Social origins of dictatorship and democracy*. Boston, 1968, p. 214. 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/Antwerpen, 1957. The play deals with a band operating in west Flanders at the end of the 18th century.

'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, p. 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, p. 76), we may question the heuristic value of the 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, p. 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, p. 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 cannot understand the behaviour of bandits without reference to other groups, classes, or networks with which bandits form specific configurations of interdependent individuals⁵. 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 larger society. Given the specific conditions of outlawry, bandits have to rely 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

⁵ For the concept of configuration, see Norbert Elias, *Was ist Soziologie?* München, 1970, pp. 139-45 and *passim*.

kinsmen and affiliated friends to powerful politicians: 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 peasants⁶. It may hence be argued that unless bandits find political protection, their reign will be short. This yields the following hypothesis, which can be tested against data bearing on all kinds of brigandage: *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 Sicily in the early 1870s, provide an example. Their mounted and well-armed bands synchronized their actions and fought regular battles with the police.⁷ Grisafi's domain was a mountainous corner in southwestern Sicily.

'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'.⁸

The more banditry is politically oriented and evolves into what Italian scholars have called *brigantaggio politico*, 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-peasant⁹. A surprisingly large number of the bandits mentioned by Hobsbawm were anti-peasant during most of their career, which they typically initiated by redressing personal wrongs. Sooner or later they were either killed or drawn into and constrained by the power domains of the established regional élites. 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

⁶ Cf. Eric R. Wolf, *Peasants*. Englewood Cliffs, 1966, pp. 1-11 and Henry A. Landsberger (Ed.), *Latin American peasant movements*. Ithaca, 1969, pp. 1-8.

⁷ Enzo D'Alessandro, *Brigantaggio e mafia in Sicilia*. Messina/Florence, 1959, p. 97.

⁸ Cesare Mori, *The last struggle with the mafia*. London, 1933, pp. 130-34.

⁹ During the 19th and 20th centuries, Sicilian brigandage provided alternately an *instrumentum regni* and a staff of the large landowners to suppress the peasants. See S. F. Romano, *Momenti del risorgimento in Sicilia*. Messina/Florence, 1952, pp. 80-81 and 279.

political protection' (1969, p. 46 n.). As the motto of this paper suggests, brigandage and its implications for peasant mobilization can be best understood when we focus on the specific relationships between local, regional, and national levels, and when we appreciate the fact that the State failed to monopolize the use of violence.

The case of Giuliano is much to the point here. Pantaleone, who refers to the incident, remarks:

'This was the most sensational of Giuliano's crimes, but not of course the only one. In the months between the Portella shooting (May 1st, 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'.¹⁰

The same orientation holds good for Giuliano's contemporary Liggio, still today one of the most violent outlaws in the Palermo hinterland. The zone of terror which he established in Sicily's interior during the aftermath of the second world war linked up with the dominant power structure and was primarily aimed at the demobilization of the peasants who had just begun to organize themselves in order to promote agrarian reform.¹¹

Marxists have consistently argued that peasants require outside leadership in order to change their conditions¹². Bandits are not instrumental in turning peasant anarchy and rebellion (e.g. *jacqueries*) into concerted action on a wider scale. This is not, as Hobsbawm maintains, because their ambitions are modest and because they lack organization and ideology, but rather because their first loyalty is *not* to the peasants (1959, pp. 5 and 26). When bandits assume retainership, which is a form of political mobilization in its own right, they serve to prevent and suppress peasant mobilization in at least 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, and partake in counter mobilization, there are none the less specific circumstances under which they may become effective in destroying an established régime. 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

¹⁰ Michele Pantaleone, *Mafia and politics*. London, 1966, p. 133.

¹¹ For the concepts of terror and zone of terror, see E. V. Walter, *Terror and resistance. A study of political violence*. New York, 1969, pp. 5-7 The atmosphere in which Luciano Liggio operated in the immediate postwar years is described in Daniello Dolci, *Waste. An eye-witness report on some aspects of waste in western Sicily*. London, 1963, pp. 25-50. See also Pantaleone (1966, pp. 113-22). Liggio is still active today. He is regarded as being involved in the kidnapping and killing of the Palermitan journalist de Mauro in September 1970.

¹² Cf. Barrington Moore (1968, p. 479) and Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant wars of the twentieth century*. New York, 1969, p. 294.

Garibaldi to unsettle Bourbon government in Sicily in 1860 are an example of the strategic role which bandits may fulfill 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 context¹³.

III

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 idealizes 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'¹⁴.

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*. 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 image¹⁵.

¹³ Cf. Denis Mack Smith, The Peasants' revolt in Sicily in 1860. In: *Studi in onore di Gino Luzzatto*. Milano, 1950, vol. III, pp. 201-40. See also the point made by W. G. Wolters in his discussion of the Cuban revolution.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Bott, *Family and social network*. London, 1964, pp. 167-168.

¹⁵ 'Since human beings have an infinite capacity for self-conceit, reality can only be

Actual bandit life is often unpleasant and grim. It involves prolonged residence in humid caves as much as brutal action against numerous victims. 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 band leaders, like di Miceli and Scordato in mid-19th century Palermo, were given special charge of public security.¹⁶ 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, Mexico, and the Philippines.¹⁷ Like the bandit's real life, these conversions in which bandits turn into retainers (either part time or full time) and help to reinforce suppression of the peasantry do not provide attractive ingredients for myths and ballads.

Actual brigandage expresses man's pursuit of honour and power¹⁸. This holds true for the bandit as much as his protector, who manipulates him in order to extend his power domains. The myth of the bandit (Hobsbawm's social bandit) represent 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

reached by exposing their illusions'. This is, according to Alexander Parker, how the early 17th century writer Francisco de Quevedo deals with the world of the delinquent in his novel *La vida del buscón*, the masterpiece of the picaresque genre. See Alexander A. Parker, *Literature and the delinquent. The picaresque novel in Spain and Europe 1599-1753*. Edinburgh, 1967, pp. 56-74.

¹⁶ Denis Mack Smith, *A history of Sicily*. London, 1968, vol. III, p. 419. In Spain, some bandits obtained pardon from the king and passed into royal service. See J. A. Pitt-Rivers, *The people of the Sierra*. Chicago, 1961, p. 180. Compare the position of Huks and Monkees in Central Luzon as discussed by Otto van den Muyzenberg in this issue. The alliances between delinquents and aristocrats throughout European history still await sociological treatment. Those who feel to embark upon such a study may consider if Barrington Moore's loose remark on the problem can provide a useful lead: 'Gangsterism is likely to crop up wherever the forces of law and order are weak. European feudalism was mainly gangsterism that had become society itself and acquired respectability through the notions of chivalry' (1968, p. 214).

¹⁷ For excellent data on Mexico, see Paul Friedrich, 'Assumptions underlying Tarascan political homicide', *Psychiatry* (1962), vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 315-27. The Philippine experience is described by van den Muyzenberg. The new development of brigandage throughout the whole of Sardinia in the 1960s is too easily dismissed by Hobsbawm (1969, p. 76). He fails to recognize the strategic role of outlaws in kidnapping and extortion. The bandits serve as tools in the faction fight between élites. In recent years, Sardinian banditry has assumed *mafia*-like features, which involve a rapid and violent ascent of both rural and urban bourgeois as well as covert protection from formal authorities. (Anna Eyken, personal communication.) The Sardinian case demonstrates that banditry, in spite of modern communications, is by no means as *passé* as Hobsbawm maintains.

¹⁸ See also Parker (1967, *passim*), who 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* is elaborated in my *The Mafia of a Sicilian village. A study of political middlemen*. (Forthcoming.)

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'¹⁹. As Eric Wolf has aptly said in this respect, before the deep sense of injustice which peasants often harbour can become active on the political scene, it must be given shape and expression in organization²⁰. Therefore, the conclusion of this discussion must be that both brigandage and bandit-myths, each in their own way, inhibit rather than promote the development of peasant mobilization²¹.

¹⁹ W. F. Wertheim, *Society as a composite of conflicting value systems*. In: W. F. Wertheim, *East-West parallels*. The Hague, 1964, p. 32.

²⁰ Wolf (1969, p. xiii).

²¹ Field work was carried out in western Sicily in the period April 1965 to June 1967 while I held a fellowship from the Netherlands Organization for the Advancement of Pure Research (Z.W.O.). I am much indebted to Rudo Niemeyer for criticism of an earlier draft of this paper.