

Social Bandits: Reply

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

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

would wish them—or someone—to be doing. My view is that the myth cannot be entirely divorced from the reality of banditry.

Here again, there is no disagreement about the facts. I do not claim that the bandit is necessarily or even typically a conscious social protester. On the contrary (Hobsbawm, 1969: 19) I state

As individuals they are not so much political or social rebels, let alone revolutionaries, as peasants who refuse to submit, and in doing so stand out from their fellows, or even more simply men who find themselves excluded from the usual career of their kind and therefore forced into outlawry and 'crime'. *En masse* they are little more than symptoms of crisis and tension in their society. . . . Banditry itself is therefore not a programme for peasant society, but a form of self-help to escape it in particular circumstances.

What turns them into expressions of peasant discontent is that they 'have no ideas other than those of the peasantry . . . of which they form a part'. What can turn them into champions of peasant discontent is the role which peasant society ascribes to them (and to which, for various reasons suggested, they may tend to conform), together with the arms and independence which enable them to play it. However, I insist—it is the key to Hobsbawm, 1969, chapter 6—that

the crucial fact about the bandit's social situation is its ambiguity. He is an outsider and rebel, a poor man who refuses to accept the normal rules of poverty. . . . This draws him close to the poor: he is one of them. It sets him in opposition to the hierarchy of power, wealth and influence: he is not one of them. . . . At the same time the bandit is, inevitably, drawn into the web of wealth and power, because, unlike other peasants, he acquires wealth and exerts power. He is 'one of us' who is constantly in the process of becoming associated with 'them' (p. 76).

This means that the 'pure' Robin Hood is inevitably rare (a) because to avoid or reject the temptations of power and wealth requires a degree of political consciousness which is rarely to be found among such men, and (b) because to do so implies the rejection of most of that support and protection from the local power-structure, which is so helpful to the bandit who wishes to pursue a successful career. Does he exist at all?

The strongest evidence for his existence lies in the sharp distinction which rural public opinion makes between bandits who do and those who do not play the role of Robin Hood, or between those who are believed to play it and those who do not. Such distinctions can be traced in conversation, in song and story, and probably in vocabulary (Hobsbawm, 1969: 41). There are 'good' bandits and 'bad' bandits, not to mention those about whom public opinion is indifferent. In the Argentine Chaco the late 'Maté Cosido' was a 'good' bandit. In the opinion of an informant (October 1968), a former policeman who had spent much of his career vainly pursuing him, he was moderate in the use of killing and violence, helped widows and never robbed good Argentines, not even Argentine banks, but only 'los cobradores de la Bunge y de la Clayton', i.e., the symbols of foreign business. The late Velasquez did not enjoy this reputation.

The value of such testimony is not fundamentally affected by the fact that in the mind of this informant a real bandit has plainly come to acquire the characteristics of the mythical stereotype as well; in this instance of one remarkably similar to Jesse James, a man who operated in a comparable socio-economic environment. The myth-making or otherwise distorting capacities of the human memory are well-known, and not confined to bandits. The significance of such information is, that it shows (a) the selectivity of the bandit myth (some bandits are 'good' whereas others are not), (b) the bandit myth (high moral status, 'good' actions) actually formulated by the policeman who fought the bandit, and therefore also (c) the myth of the 'good' bandit as compatible with a close and critical acquaintance with the actual behaviour of the 'hero'. It seems simplest to assume that that there is some relation between a bandit's real behaviour and his subsequent myth. There is, of course, also some evidence that certain bandits have genuinely attempted to play the Robin Hood role.*

However, one point in Mr. Blok's critique is well taken. My discussion fails to distinguish clearly between the versions of the 'myth' which are held about bandits who are personally known to those who hold it, and versions held by those at a more or less great distance in time and place from them; between what is said about the active bandit *now* and about the remembered bandit; about the local or remote bandit. These distinctions have not so far been adequately investigated to my knowledge. I see no reason to believe that such a study would eliminate all living examples of Robin Hoods.

The other major divergence is a matter of definition. My work has not been concerned with banditry as such, but 'only with some kinds of robbers, namely those who are *not* regarded as simple criminals by public opinion' (Hobsbawm, 1969: 13), or more exactly with that variant of robbery which represents an element of social protest. It is not open to the criticism of 'over-emphasizing' or under-emphasizing this element, since its object is not to quantify it in relation to other kinds of banditry, but to analyse the complex nature of this type of protest and the social role of the men cast to represent it.

Beyond this the differences between myself and Mr. Blok, in so far as they exist, appear to be matters of judgement about which argument is difficult. I am, however, grateful to him for drawing my attention to D'Alessandro, *Brigantaggio e mafia* (1959), which I did not know. It may be worth adding that various foreign editions of Hobsbawm (1959) and the forthcoming British reprint have noted, or will note, some literature on the relevant topics that has appeared since first publication.

* I cannot resist quoting the case of a somewhat more political peasant activist in Bihar (India), sentenced to jail for attacking landlords and joining the Communist Party (CPI) thereafter, who was the despair of his comrades in the late 1960s, since he insisted on distributing the money collected for the Party to the peasants, as he had been in the habit of doing in his pre-marxist days. (Personal information.)