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## COMMENTARY AND DEBATE

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### BANDITS AND RURAL SOCIAL HISTORY: A Comment on Joseph

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I applaud much of what Gil Joseph has to say about the study of bandits and will first note our general areas of agreement. Then I will respond to questions raised about the methods, sources, and conclusions in the "revisionist" collection of essays, *Bandidos*.<sup>1</sup> Like Joseph, I recently suggested that banditry be analyzed within broader contexts, proposing comparisons of bandit activity in Latin America, China, Malaysia, Africa, and Corsica. I too endorse framing banditry within the context of agrarian protest and rural violence and share Joseph's concern about accepting official labels as accurate reflections of social reality. My conclusion to *Bandidos* supports his advice to study judicial systems: "Shifting definitions of law and crime need more critical attention if the complex nature of banditry is to be understood fully."<sup>2</sup>

1. See Gilbert M. Joseph, "On the Trail of Latin American Bandits: A Reexamination of Peasant Resistance," *LARR* 25, no. 3:7-53; and *Bandidos: The Varieties of Latin American Banditry*, edited by Richard W. Slatta (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1987).

2. See Slatta, "Banditry as Political Participation in Latin America," *Criminal Justice History: An International Annual* 11 (1990), an extended version of the paper that Joseph refers to in his note 87. See also Slatta and Karla Robinson, "Continuities in Crime and Punishment: Buenos Aires, 1820-1850," in *The Problem of Order in Changing Societies: Essays on Crime and Policing in Argentina and Uruguay*, edited by Lyman L. Johnson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), pp. 24-25, 38, n. 10, p. 43; Slatta, *Gauchos and the Vanishing Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 106-8, 110, 114-15, 122-25; and Slatta, *Bandidos*, 39, 45, 51-52, 63, quotation on 197.

Joseph anticipates some potential criticisms of his views, mostly in his endnotes. His note 146 cautions historians against overcompensating for skepticism of "official" sources by uncritically embracing "popular" sources. I would agree that popular sources, folklore, and first-hand reports by "just plain folks" are all fraught with difficulties. As Erick Langer has noted in his study of Bolivia, peasant stories "exhibit a selective memory that emphasizes only certain traits among bandits. No tale deals with robbing other peasants."<sup>3</sup>

The web of myth, fiction, and historical fragments surrounding "Billy the Kid" illustrates well the dangers inherent in "popular" sources. Members of a Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s interviewed New Mexico residents who claimed to have known Billy the Kid. Some respondents actually avowed personal knowledge of episodes that had been created by fiction writers. Faulty memory and vivid imagination thus shaped many recollections.<sup>4</sup>

Most recent advances in understanding the rural masses have come through the critical and creative reading of official sources. Based largely on such documentation, the boom in rural social history continues around the world. Scholars working in widely different cultures generally have criticized the social bandit model and offered alternative explanations. Many of these inquiries have reinforced the conclusions reached by the *Bandidos* essayists.<sup>5</sup>

The heart of the revisionist critique of Hobsbawm is threefold. First, bandit-elite ties are found much more often than bandit-peasant solidarity. Second, the figures cited by Hobsbawm as exemplary social bandits do not meet his own criteria. Finally, his linear depiction of banditry giving way to more organized political protest is flawed.

Despite qualifications, Hobsbawm remains unequivocal in his view that the peasant-bandit link "makes social banditry interesting and significant." He observes, "It is this special relation between peasant and

3. Erick Langer, "Andean Banditry and Peasant Community Organization," in Slatta, *Bandidos*, 124.

4. *They "Knew" Billy the Kid: Interviews with Old-Time New Mexicans*, edited by Robert F. Kadlec (Santa Fe, N.M.: Ancient City Press, 1987), 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; Robert Utley, *Billy the Kid, A Short and Violent Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

5. See Billy Jaynes Chandler, *King of the Mountain: The Life and Death of Giuliano the Bandit* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1988); *Banditry, Rebellion, and Social Protest in Africa*, edited by Donald Crummey (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1986); Phil Billingsley, *Bandits in Republican China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988); Stephen Wilson, *Feuding, Conflict, and Banditry in Nineteenth-Century Corsica* (Cambridge: 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).

bandit which makes banditry 'social.' Other attributes may be disputed or interpreted, but the existence of this relationship is essential to Hobsbawm's credibility.<sup>6</sup>

Joseph appears reluctant to accept the "revisionist" conclusion that bandits have shown little solidarity with peasants. For Latin America, this "special relation" is largely absent, exaggerated, or mythical. William Taylor has recently added supporting analysis for Jalisco, Mexico: "There is little evidence that common people in New Galicia before 1810 supported the highway robbers of their day." On the contrary, peasants and townspeople actively assisted the authorities in arresting bandits.<sup>7</sup>

Hobsbawm may recognize cross-class alliances, but he distorts the dynamics of relationships in rural society. Bandit-elite ties played the principal role. For example, Florencia Mallon discovered that in the 1880s in Cajamarca, Peru, "hacendados also hid bandits on their estates in exchange for personal loyalty." Lewis Taylor has examined the same province a few decades later. He finds that bandit-elite ties were far more important than bandit-peasant relationships. Some Marxists have searched zealously to uncover the interests of the working class in every situation, and perhaps Joseph and Hobsbawm may be straining too hard to inject peasant support where little existed. What united people behind outlaw gangs more often were kinship, friendship, and region—not class.<sup>8</sup>

Alan Knight commits a similar error in characterizing *serrano* bandits in Mexico as social. His evidence points to broad-based village or regional support that cut across class lines. Knight calls any outlaw who enjoys some popular support a "social bandit." This overgeneralization is akin to defining all transmittable illnesses as "social diseases" simply because they involve people. As will be discussed subsequently, the concept of "political banditry" is more accurate.<sup>9</sup>

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

7. William B. 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, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 211. Searches around the globe have turned up few flesh-and-blood bandits who have enjoyed the popular support found in legend and fiction. See Slatta, "Banditry as Political Participation," and the sources cited in note 5.

8. Florencia Mallon, "Nationalists and Antistate Coalitions in the War of the Pacific: Junín and Cajamarca, 1879–1902," in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Consciousness in the Andean Peasant World, 18th to 20th Centuries*, edited by Steve J. Stern (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 255; Lewis Taylor, *Bandits and Politics in Peru: Landlord and Peasant Violence in Hualgayoc, 1900–30* (Cambridge: Centre of Latin American Studies, Cambridge University, n.d.), 3, 113–14; and Slatta, review of Taylor, *Bandits and Politics*, in *Hispanic American Historical Review* 68, no. 1 (Feb. 1988): 172–74.

9. Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1:122–25, 352; 2:393–95.

Joseph wonders whether “revisionists are ‘splitting hairs’ in distinguishing ‘guerrilla-bandits’ from Hobsbawm’s ‘haiduk’ and political from social bandits.” I recognize considerable overlap between the former cases. I believe, however, that the term *guerrilla-bandit* is clearer than Hobsbawm’s rather murky depiction of the haiduk. Unless one’s native language is Turkish or Magyar, the term *haiduk* evokes little useful imagery. The term *guerrilla* locates such bandits in the irregular warfare of Spanish-American independence and civil wars. Ralph Austen pursues a similar strategy of rejecting Eurocentric, “Western models” in favor of behavioral categories more appropriate to the African context.<sup>10</sup>

Economic gain motivated both haiduks and guerrilla-bandits. But according to Hobsbawm, haiduk banditry was “a more serious, a more ambitious, permanent and institutionalized challenge to official authority than the scattering of Robin Hoods or other robber rebels.” Haiduks robbed seasonally when travelers and other quarry were on the move. Guerrilla-bandits were rural marginals drawn into war by coercion or promises of booty or both. They emerged sporadically during major political conflicts and exhibited little loyalty, switching sides according to their calculation of the best potential profit.<sup>11</sup>

Joseph misses a key conceptual distinction, however, in dismissing the category of political bandit as “hair-splitting.” Unlike social bandits, political bandits show clear partisan (rather than class) leanings. Unlike the prepolitical social bandit, political bandits are conscious of and loyal to a larger political movement. In Colombia, Mexico, and Cuba, political bandits did not switch sides for financial gain but worked toward a political, partisan, or regional agenda. Knight identifies such activity as serrano banditry, but he muddies the analysis by forcing it into social versus antisocial bandit models. Political banditry also is evident in studies of the Colombian *Violencia* by Gonzalo Sánchez and Donny Meertens and of early twentieth-century Cajamarca by Lewis Taylor. In Hobsbawm’s prologue to the Sánchez-Meertens book on the *Violencia*, he acknowledges that Colombian banditry “is in essence more political than social.”<sup>12</sup>

Rosalie Schwartz’s analysis of Cuban banditry also provides examples of political banditry. Louis Pérez cites land concentration as a cause of class conflict and social banditry in Cuba. According to Schwartz, how-

10. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 70–82; Ralph A. Austen, “Social Bandits and Other Heroic Criminals: Western Models of Resistance and Their Relevance for Africa,” in Crummey, *Banditry, Rebellion, and Social Protest in Africa*, 86–107.

11. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 72, 76–79.

12. Knight, *Mexican Revolution*, 2:393–95; Sánchez and Meertens, “Political Banditry,” in Slatta, *Bandidos*, 164–68; Hobsbawm, prologue to Sánchez and Meertens, *Bandoleros, gamonales y campesinos: el caso de la Violencia en Colombia* (Bogotá: Ancora, 1983), 10; and L. Taylor, *Bandits and Politics in Peru*, 113–14.

ever, many bandit gangs emerged before this process began. Peasant villages needed to support social bandits did not exist in the slave areas of western Cuba. Figures like Manuel García put banditry and extortion at the service of the independence movement. His letters and broadsides show a clear political agenda that is not typical of Hobsbawm's social bandit.<sup>13</sup>

In my view, the revisionist refinements provide conceptual advances in the accurate portrayal of bandit behavior in Latin America. But I agree with Joseph that taxonomic debates can be overdone. Hobsbawm's elusiveness also complicates the task. For example, he is ambivalent about whether the "avenger" is a subcategory of social bandit.<sup>14</sup>

Joseph seems to accept the revisionist challenge to Hobsbawm's evolutionary scheme in which "modern" forms of resistance supersede banditry. But he misreads my meaning when I pointed out that political activity can "degenerate" into banditry. This choice of words does not reflect any moral judgment. The word *degenerate* refers to relative levels of political organization and ideology. Joseph uses the word *regressed* to describe this process, a choice that implies acceptance of Hobsbawm's teleology. Political parties, groups petitioning through the courts, or mass insurrection are all more organized forms of political activity than banditry. The point is that social groups employed more organized and powerful strategies than banditry when they could.

Revisionists characterize banditry as "a weaker strategy." Joseph, however, misrepresents the point by appending his own phrase, "a tactic of last resort." The contributors to *Bandidos* did not label banditry as the "weakest" strategy and certainly not as the only one open to the rural poor. Groups resorted to banditry if they could not organize or protest through the judicial system. For instance, banditry thrived in regions where hacienda encroachment or other forces weakened the traditional village. Good examples of this distinction can be found in Langer's study of Bolivia and Knight's of Mexico.<sup>15</sup>

By using Donald Black's concept of "the quantity of law," we can see that elites possess a greater quantity of law than the poor. Elites successfully manipulate law and the political process to promote their class interests. The rural masses, who possess a lesser quantity of law, resort to other forms of resistance, including banditry. Revisionists recognize and accept James Scott's formulation of everyday forms of

13. Rosalie Schwartz, *Lawless Liberators: Political Banditry and Cuban Independence* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1989), 3, 9-11, 52, 64-65; Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 110; and Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Lords of the Mountain: Social Banditry and Peasant Protest in Cuba, 1878-1918* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 114.

14. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 58.

15. See Erick D. Langer, *Economic Change and Rural Resistance in Southern Bolivia, 1880-1930* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989); and Knight, *Mexican Revolution*.

resistance having lower levels of organization and mobilization than banditry.<sup>16</sup>

Joseph laments the slow infusion of other frameworks, including poststructuralism and the subaltern school, into Latin American studies. I do not share his alarm. Slow acceptance of new methods and theories can help keep regional scholars from getting sidetracked. In the 1970s, Robert Fogel's and Stanley Engerman's *Time on the Cross* heralded a brave new world of cliometrics. Fortunately, the inflated claims and methodological shortcomings of the project surfaced before Latin Americanists had traveled too far down that twisted road.<sup>17</sup>

I suggest similar caution in embracing Foucaultism or other strains of poststructuralism. Serious philosophical differences divide the practitioners. As Mark Poster has observed,

Baudrillard offers to decode the new age of "hyperreality" in which self-referential media languages constitute simulacra of communications. Derrida proposes an interminable reconstruction of the Western philosophical tradition, interminable because the internal structure of writing is trapped in an abyss of binary oppositions. Lyotard advocates a celebration of multiple, competing discourses, an acceptance of the justice of the *différend*, of the impossibility of consensus. Foucault proposes the self-constitution of the critical theorist through a practice of opposition to the dominant discourses of the present conjuncture.<sup>18</sup>

The cacophony of conflicting discourses and competing projects often is too abstract, rarefied, and sectarian to help working historians. The interpretation and translation of Foucault's concepts alone have become major philosophy growth industries. Philosophers are still working on what Foucault means by *dispositif* and other concepts. How, then, can practicing historians employ his ideas with any confidence?<sup>19</sup>

Despite my skepticism, I welcome any broadening in the discussion and definition of rural social history. I favor a more modest, incremental approach, however, one that builds on existing Latin American evidence. A rich "data set" has been supplied by two recent collections in addition to *Bandidos: Riot, Rebellion, and Revolution*, edited by Friedrich

16. Donald Black, *Sociological Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 8; Black, *The Behavior of Law* (New York: Academic Press, 1976), 3-4, 12; James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

17. Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974).

18. Mark Poster, *Critical Theory and Poststructuralism: In Search of a Context* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), 27.

19. For discussions of Foucault, see Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 120-25; Poster, *Critical Theory*; and Foucault: *A Critical Reader*, edited by David Couzens Hoy (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986). Similar problems face historians taking up Gramscian *hegemony*. The term suffers confusing "slippage" at the hands of the master and his disciples. See Hoy, *Foucault*, 159.

Katz, and *Resistance, Rebellion, and Consciousness in the Andean Peasant World*, edited by Steve Stern. Donald Crummey's collection, *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa*, adds an intriguing cross-cultural dimension. It might be argued that the approach I advocate amounts to building without a proper blueprint. I might respond that such is the nature of historical inquiry.<sup>20</sup>

20. Katz, ed., *Riot, Rebellion, and Revolution*; Stern, ed., *Resistance, Rebellion, and Consciousness in the Andean Peasant World*; and Crummey, ed., *Banditry, Rebellion, and Social Protest in Africa*.