

ESTABLISHING A TRAIL IN THE LABYRINTH

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The merits of Gilbert Joseph's pathbreaking article on Latin American bandits rests in its theoretical insights, its comparative perspective that transcends the understandings based merely on Latin American research, and its lucid critique and selective incorporation of the prevailing literature. Joseph has offered here a perspective that places our understanding of social banditry into broader settings of peasant societies and their responses to social disorder or transformation. In doing so, he has opened the door for more than new theoretical perspectives and a focus on the broader social context within which social banditry may emerge, become transformed, or dissolve. He has also stretched the boundary of what constitutes the realm of social banditry by incorporating the analysis of revolutionary movements, "mere criminals," and the various forms James Scott has identified as the "ordinary weapons" that peasants use in their routine resistance to domination.

The essay clearly attempts to offer a broader perspective in order to promote our understanding of banditry as a particular alternative of the rural lower classes, which is weighed against other options under given conditions. At the same time, the essay also invites its readers to explore further the underlying ideas to explain equivalent developments among other social groups in diverse social settings. While it may not have been the essay's purpose, the discussion goes beyond suggesting that social banditry can be understood in terms of its place within a labyrinth of overlapping historical, social, and theoretical parameters to offer ideas for a general conceptual framework that enables us to decode the raw data in different historical contexts and types of society as well as for specific groups within a given social context.

The broader nature of this perspective is reflected in the incorporation of ideas offered by Howard Becker, theorists of criminology, Michel Foucault, Barrington Moore, and the newer theories linking deviance to resistance and political rebellion in peasant societies. These perspectives represent propositions of the most general principles, which transcend peasant societies as well as historical contexts. This category includes the ideas concerning the switching of codes, routine resistance, threshold of

tolerance, labeling, and the concept of subaltern everyday forms of resistance. They can all be used to understand forms of resistance in “simple” peasant societies but also to comprehend many other situations: peasant communities fighting to persist in a more complex urban-industrial society; the previous accommodations to power and contemporary transformations in Eastern European societies; or the transformations of Pancho Villa in Mexico from a trader to a bandit, then a revolutionary hero, and finally a political troublemaker who was assassinated by the new *caudillos* of the Mexican Revolution.

The development of such general concepts and recognition of their salience for shedding light on specific historical cases are relatively less problematic than the causal explanations of these cases and the processes in which they emerged, changed, and reached their destination. Why particular groups of bandits or guerrilla movements emerged and became transformed or dissolved can be explained only by an intersection of theoretically connected, complex sets of variables and by historical research examining their particular combinations in given cases as well as the unique aspects of human action that can be “explained” at best through retrospective induction.

It is here that different types of theory are required to use the model proposed by Joseph, types implicit in his essay that are worth underlining.

First, in epistemological terms, middle-range theories are needed to guide the use of these general principles in explaining different subject matters and particular cases. The principles of the peasant economy proposed by James Scott, for example, entail the implication of broader premises about human society under the particular conditions of the peasant community. These principles explain the conduct of peasants under the ideal-typical conditions of an isolated rural community or in the economic pressures of an urbanizing and industrializing society. They may also apply in connection with new control variables in understanding the conduct of educated Frenchmen who had to adjust to German prison camps during World War II or to explain high rates of “accidents” in a modern factory. The point is to not close our eyes to seemingly incomparable processes in different historical and social contexts but to explore the intersection between these contexts and more general principles. Here lies the function of different middle-range theories as instruments for explicitly guiding our connection of historical cases with general principles.

Second, in substantive terms, the distinct contribution of Joseph’s article rests in his incorporating such middle-range theories as he adds new dimensions to the study of banditry with his broader discussion of various topics: their relations to “rural crime” and the processes in which rural criminals are labeled; Ranajit Guha’s theory of “subaltern” patterns

of deviance in their “common forms”; and Scott’s analysis of organized peasant rebellion as the exception that emerges only temporarily when “everyday forms” of resistance break down. By the same token, examining peasant resistance could also incorporate other theoretical perspectives that shed light on particular aspects of collective behavior, resource mobilization, social stratification, or social exchange. Scholars could also analyze the place of peasants in the links between a particular society and its place in the international politico-economic order. What I am suggesting here is not that Joseph’s proposal should be modified because it is incomplete but that his approach in principle provides a place for further openings according to the particular substantive interests that various investigators may have.

Third, by the same logic, different theoretical models within specific substantive areas can be used, according to the particular interests of the investigator, to shed light on the relevance of different dimensions affecting human conduct and social organization or disorientation. What Joseph proposes, as he links the models of Guha and Scott, reflects this type of theoretical linkage, which is less a plea for a new paradigm than an invitation to perceive the possibilities and the limits offered by each model in order to come closer to the complexity of real social worlds.

“On the Trail of Latin American Bandits” illustrates possibilities for dealing with these issues as it raises new questions about placing the analysis of banditry into a broader theoretical, methodological, and historical perspective. In this expanded approach, “social banditry” becomes even more situated in a highly abstract conceptual and theoretical framework. Those primarily interested in Cuban rural banditry around 1900 may not wish to expand their research into the area of, say, the Irish Republican Army, informal exchanges bypassing economic regulations also in advanced capitalist societies, international networks of illegal arms dealers and government officials, or the context in which Walter Raleigh was transformed from a pirate into a nobleman. Direct comparison of these phenomena would be farfetched indeed if it did not explicitly and systematically establish the indirect nature of their linkages by subsuming them under a more general theoretical framework. But those who have such interests can find some insights and directions in Joseph’s essay, which explores how far it is possible to push the analysis to the limits of what is still theoretically and substantively relevant for those concerned with banditry.

The task that remains is to relate given cases of banditry to such broader social contexts, a problem marked by the inherently problematic and transitory position of such groups constituted by socially losing outsiders in a dissolving or an emerging new social order. They can persist as bandits only as long as this order itself remains problematic. Their position as social bandits hinges on their links with different classes

before social transformations have reached some closure. But once a new social order is established, social bandits too are doomed unless they can find entry as revolutionary heroes, political leaders or followers, or (more commonly) by simply reentering their communities as ordinary members. What distinguishes social bandits from “citizens” is their position as “outsiders” in relation to the law, in terms of its formal stipulations and its always socially (that is, politically) determined enforcement. Here we find the broader parameters within which we can then focus on different types of banditry but also examine the other forms of deviance and rebellion just mentioned. Moreover, it may be along this line that the perspective proposed by Joseph can be fruitfully used to provide new insights into specific cases of social banditry, into the broader variations within this category reflected in the book edited by Slatta, and into the relationships between these phenomena and an even wider net of subject matters that cut across theoretical, disciplinary, and historical boundaries.