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## Banditry in Global Social History

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### Abstract

Eric Hobsbawm argued that banditry was an archaic and pre-political phenomenon that emerged simultaneously and with striking intensity in different regions around the world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While it has often been seen as marginal in global histories, banditry provides an essential gateway to the study of modern history from a global perspective. Drawing on different regional case studies, this article approaches the similarities and connections that ran through different instances of banditry in terms of their inclusion within the global dynamics of imperial expansion, capitalism, and the developing notions of territoriality and sovereignty. It argues that the ubiquitous presence of banditry in this period was propelled by the deep-running changes to local relations of class, economy, and power that resulted from these accelerating global dynamics. Bandits emerged as the expression of rural communities in all their complexity and were able to negotiate their place within the rapidly evolving societies of this period. Far from being victims, bandits were key agents who navigated change, adaptation, and resistance in the modern world. In this sense, banditry was a powerful expression of the different ways in which rural communities interacted, negotiated, and clashed with the global.

In 1893 Henry Mortimer Durand, foreign secretary of India, travelled to Kabul on a mission to negotiate Afghanistan's borders with the Afghan amir, Abdur Rahman Khan. In his correspondence with officials in India, he reported on the ruler's project of state-building in those areas that were newly coming under his jurisdiction as part of British-led boundary settlements and the internal conquest of formerly independent areas, a process that had started in the mid-1880s. In his account, Durand pointed out how the amir pursued 'refractory tribes' and 'highland free-booters'.<sup>1</sup> He recounted the destruction of a 'robber community' in an inaccessible mountain stronghold near Jalalabad. This community, 'numbering some thousands, [had] raided impartially in all

<sup>1</sup> Durand to Cuningham, Calcutta, 20 Dec. 1893, New Delhi, National Archives of India (NAI), Foreign Department, Secret F., nos. 193–217, fo. 194/14.

directions and gradually collected in their villages a very large store of arms, ammunition, and booty'. The amir's 'system' was to break up the settlement and 'distribute' the community 'in colonies over other parts of the country', 'groups of families being settled on land at a distance ... and many of the men being drafted into the army'.<sup>2</sup> Following the same strategy, in the wake of the Anglo-Russian demarcation of Afghanistan's north-western boundary, the amir proceeded to 'fringe the frontier with Afghan colonies' and forcibly displaced those tribes that had rebelled and 'committed robberies' following the replacement of their leadership with men appointed by the state.<sup>3</sup>

The convulsion undergone by Afghanistan's frontier areas was not exceptional in this period. The encounter with bandits – together with others who inhabited the polity's peripheries – became a common denominator of the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. In his studies *Primitive rebels* and *Bandits*, Eric Hobsbawm pointed out how phenomena of brigandage and outlawry emerged simultaneously in different places because 'the societies and situations in which social banditry arises are very similar'.<sup>4</sup> The continuities that characterized what he defined as the 'golden age' of banditry did not stem from cultural diffusion, but were 'the reflection of similar situations within peasant societies'.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, banditry did not emerge as a new phenomenon in the nineteenth century; reports of banditry and outlawry dated back to Roman, Chola, and European medieval societies.<sup>6</sup> However, the ubiquity and intensity of banditry in modern times, as well as the wealth of documentation, made this period stand out from previous periods. This article takes up Hobsbawm's call to consider banditry seriously, 'not simply as an unconnected series of individual curiosities, as footnotes in history, but as a phenomenon of general importance and considerable weight in modern history'.<sup>7</sup> It interrogates the role of bandits in the rapidly evolving societies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and draws a framework for understanding banditry within this global dimension.

Hobsbawm's work has led to the emergence of bandit studies in many different regions of the world, notably Latin America, the Mediterranean, China, the Ottoman Empire, Southeast Asia, Russia, and, to a lesser extent, the Middle East and North Africa, although banditry was a key element for many political dynamics in these regions. For a long time after Hobsbawm kickstarted the field, these studies dealt with the worldwide search for the social bandit, the Robin Hood-like outlaw who acts as an avenger of social injustice and

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 194/15.

<sup>3</sup> Ridgeway to Rosebery, Camp Karawal Khana, 1 Apr. 1886, NAI, Foreign Department, Secret F., nos. 849–81, fos. 864–5.

<sup>4</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive rebels: studies in archaic forms of social movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (London, 2017; orig. edn 1959), p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London, 2001; orig. edn 1969), p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy S. Jones, *Outlawry in medieval literature* (New York, NY, 2010); Brent D. Shaw, 'Bandits in the Roman empire', *Past and Present*, 105 (1984), pp. 3–52.

<sup>7</sup> Hobsbawm, *Primitive rebels*, p. 13.

the poor.<sup>8</sup> Testing this hypothesis against different national and regional contexts, these works focused on the social aspects of bandits' relations to peasant communities. However, social bandits, where they could be found at all, existed alongside other forms of banditry, both geographically and temporally. Bandits were not clear-cut figures, and often embodied different and fluid identities, goals, and motivations. They moved between lawlessness and service to the state, conducting complementary lives as soldiers, agriculturalists, and nomads.<sup>9</sup>

In an article published in 1972 and still widely cited, Anton Blok pointed out that banditry meant much more than to 'voice popular protest'.<sup>10</sup> Far from living in perpetual opposition to the upper classes of society, bandits entertained relations of interdependence to power, elites, and ultimately state structures. For him, the model of the 'social bandit' did not reflect all cases of banditry, and obscured those cases in which the bandit entertained outside relations that were to the severe disadvantage of the very peasant societies from which banditry originated.<sup>11</sup> Bandits were often themselves the oppressors of the communities they came from, terrorizing 'those from whose very ranks they managed to rise, and thus helped to suppress them'. Contrary to Hobsbawm's somewhat romanticized view of bandits as champions of social justice, Blok made the case for the need to study the 'ambiguous position of bandits' with reference to the different ties that linked peasants to larger society.<sup>12</sup> Subsequent research has tackled bandits' connections with state structures and power, highlighting that banditry was not always a pre-political form of rural rebellion but that bandits entertained much more complex relations to society. Historians have shown that discontent among rural communities was not the only motive behind the emergence of banditry but that bandits were motivated by many different goals: the search for personal gain, political aims, social mobility, and economic hardship. Banditry was not always used, as Richard Slatta has argued, as a 'weapon of the weak'.<sup>13</sup> This has become particularly evident in those studies exploring the role of bandits in independence, anti-colonial, and nationalist movements.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Graham Seal, 'The Robin Hood principle: folklore, history, and the social bandit', *Journal of Folklore Research*, 46 (2009), pp. 67–89; Nicholas A. Currott and Alexander Fink, 'Bandit heroes: social, mythical, or rational?', *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 71 (2012), pp. 470–97.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Fuliang Shan, 'Insecurity, outlawry and social order: banditry in China's Heilongjiang frontier region, 1900–1931', *Journal of Social History*, 40 (2006), pp. 25–54, at p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Anton Blok, 'The peasant and the brigand: social banditry reconsidered', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 14 (1972), pp. 494–503, at p. 496.

<sup>11</sup> Pat O'Malley, 'Social bandits, modern capitalism and the traditional peasantry: a critique of Hobsbawm', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 6 (1979), pp. 489–501; Richard White, 'Outlaw gangs of the middle border: American social bandits', *Western Historical Quarterly*, 12 (1981), pp. 387–408; Eric Hobsbawm, 'Social bandits: reply', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 14 (1972), pp. 503–5; Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, pp. 11–15, 138–64.

<sup>12</sup> Blok, 'The peasant and the brigand', p. 496.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Slatta, 'Eric J. Hobsbawm's social bandit: a critique and revision', *A Contracorriente: Una Revista de Estudios Latinoamericanos*, 1 (2004), pp. 22–30, at p. 29; James C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven, CT, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas C. J. Pappas, 'Brigands and brigadiers: the problem of banditry and the military in nineteenth-century Greece', *Athens Journal of History*, 4 (2018), pp. 175–96; Pierre B. Gravel, 'Of

In light of the unprecedented wealth of written material produced by the state about banditry from the nineteenth century onwards, historians have re-evaluated their approach to primary sources. In particular, they have questioned the validity and meanings of those materials produced by state institutions, in which ideas of banditry and criminality have converged in discourses about public security, the need for special legislation, and questions about the place of outlaws within the bounds of the nation. Bandit histories, in the form of folk tales, ballads, and mythologies produced by subalterns, have equally been the object of historical research. Works have highlighted the dichotomization of bandits as either criminals or avengers of the poor and oppressed.<sup>15</sup> They have analysed the meaning behind the mythologization of banditry and have looked into the relations between bandits and the nation, in particular the role that banditry had in forging narratives of national belonging.<sup>16</sup> They have also highlighted the fact that states used these tropes to propel their own state-building processes and extend their control over certain rural areas and communities. What state documents have termed ‘epidemics of banditry’, whether real or imagined, played important roles in forging and expanding the agency of modern states.

Despite the steady interest that historians have shown toward banditry over recent decades, studies continue to be anchored in national and area studies, and less in a comparative or transregional approach. By contrast, the study of piracy, or seaborne banditry, has seen a different development. While banditry assumed the contours of localized phenomena, piracy was a multi-ethnic, multi-national, and transregional enterprise. Because of its nature and the transoceanic lives of its actors, the study of early modern piracy has been intertwined with the broader themes of global trade, exploration and travel, imperial expansion, colonial violence, and global networks.<sup>17</sup>

Drawing on different regional studies, this article approaches the similarities and connections that run through the diverse instances of banditry in terms of their inclusion within dynamics of territorial conquest, colonial violence, the expansion and consolidation of state institutions, land reform and privatization, migration, the spread and requirements of capitalist economies,

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bandits and pirates: an essay on the vicarious insurgency of peasants’, *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, 13 (1985), pp. 209–17.

<sup>15</sup> Gilbert M. Joseph, ‘On the trail of Latin American bandits: a reexamination of peasant resistance’, *Latin American Research Review*, 25 (1990), pp. 7–53; Billy Jaynes Chandler, *The bandit king, Lampião of Brazil* (College Station, TX, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth J. Perry, ‘Social banditry revisited: the case of Bai Lang, a Chinese brigand’, *Modern China*, 9 (1983), pp. 355–82.

<sup>17</sup> Eliga H. Gould, ‘Lines of plunder or crucible of modernity? The legal geography of the English-speaking Atlantic, 1660–1825’, in Jerry H. Bentley, Renate Bridenthal, and Kären Wigen, eds., *Seascapes* (Honolulu, HI, 2007); Robert J. Antony and Sebastian R. Prange, ‘Piracy in Asian waters, part 1: the social and economic dynamics of piracy in early modern Asia – an introduction’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, 16 (2012), pp. 455–62; Sebastian R. Prange and Robert J. Antony, ‘Piracy in Asian waters, part 2: piracy, sovereignty, and the early modern Asian state – an introduction’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, 17 (2013), pp. 1–7; Sebastian R. Prange, ‘A trade of no dishonor: piracy, commerce, and community in the western Indian Ocean, twelfth to sixteenth century’, *American Historical Review*, 116 (2011), pp. 1269–93.

modern ideas of criminality and primitiveness, and the notions of territoriality and sovereignty that became the mainstream understanding underlying the working and requirements of both modern nation-states and empires. It argues that, over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, bandits emerged as a multifaceted group whose ubiquity resulted from the deep-running changes to local relations of class, economy, and power intertwined with these accelerating global dynamics. At the same time, it shows that bandits were at the forefront of these transformations and, indeed, played key roles in shaping them.

The article starts by outlining the multifarious forms that banditry took in pre-modern agrarian societies. It shows that, far from being a phenomenon connected only to exceptional moments of economic distress or unrest, banditry was deeply embedded in the functioning of these societies, in which it played recognizable and acceptable roles. The second section explores how, over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the advent of capitalism interacted with new ideas and practices of the modern state as they manifested in the extension and consolidation of territoriality, private property, and the criminalization of bandits. Together, they created the conditions for a global transformation of rural areas. The last section reconnects these dynamics to the simultaneous and virtually ubiquitous emergence of banditry at the global level. It shows that the interaction between modern states and rural communities both propelled these phenomena and was responsible for their ultimate demise. While banditry continued to manifest in its traditional forms, bandits' role and their opportunities to make use of this tool for social mobility and access to resources were profoundly undermined.

## I

In his studies, Eric Hobsbawm argued that banditry, together with millenarian peasant revolutionary movements, pre-industrial urban mobs and riots, and labour religious sects, should be regarded as a form of primitive social protest. In peasant societies, banditry is endemic in normal conditions but 'become[s] a major phenomenon when their traditional equilibrium is upset', which happens because of periods of pronounced hardship due to famine or war, or 'at the moment when the jaws of the dynamic modern world seize the static communities in order to destroy and transform them'.<sup>18</sup> In pre-modern societies, not only had banditry been the expression of unsettlement but, precisely because of its endemic nature, it had fulfilled important and accepted roles in the social and political functioning of those societies. It assumed different forms: rural dwellers became bandits to escape foreign invasion, military incursions, attempts by the state to levy taxes or impose conscription, or the consequences of natural disasters such as floods, droughts, and fire. But economic distress was far from their only motivating force. On the contrary, banditry was also propelled by considerations of personal gain, or the search for a better social position or political power. Often motivations of different

<sup>18</sup> Hobsbawm, *Primitive rebels*, p. 31.

nature were interchangeable and co-existed. Resistance to foreign occupation could, for instance, be conjoined with acts of simple robbery.

Pre-modern forms of banditry draw a picture that has little to do with ideas of peasants as helpless bystanders to changes they are unable to withstand. On the contrary, banditry was deeply enmeshed in rural ways of life, its existence rooted in a duality in which bandit life existed alongside other forms of rural occupation. In some cases, it could be an acceptable way of life that was an integral part of society itself. For instance, in the Middle East and North Africa, banditry was commonly part of peasants' and pastoralists' strategies of survival. For some peasant communities it was a temporary activity taken up in times of hardship and abandoned when need subsided, or a part-time or seasonal activity used to supplement an insufficient primary occupation. It did not always become a permanent departure from agricultural life.<sup>19</sup>

In the case of the Kallars of Tamil Nadu in south India, the duality of bandits' lives, between agriculture and outlawry, was even more strongly delineated. In pre-colonial times they fulfilled the role of both institutionalized bandits, whose caste defined their occupation as outlaws, and settled agriculturists.<sup>20</sup> The symbolism associated with the Kallars' way of life permeated into religious rituals and classical poetry, which portrayed them as being both robbers, whose lives were firmly rooted in the realm of wilderness, and heroes.<sup>21</sup> A crucial aspect was the fact that they were employed by local rulers as guardians to fight against the very acts of banditry of which they were the perpetrators. David Shulman has pointed out that, because of their liminal status and 'anti-social characteristics', they fulfilled a 'recognized role in society', which connected them to 'the central symbols of the social order': heroism and kingship.<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, in classical Tamil poetry bandits and deities could exchange roles. On the other, the Poligar kings of Tamil Nadu were 'rulers who periodically indulged in violence to maximize their revenue and extend their little kingdoms, especially when central authority was weak'.<sup>23</sup> The interplay of king and bandit was pivotal in the story of the Poligar Kattabomman, who 'questioned the authority of the colonial state' and 'championed the kingly virtues and legitimacy of the rebellious poligars'.<sup>24</sup> Tamil epic poetry documented the existence of kings and bandits as complementary and indispensable elements for the proper functioning of society. While in apparent opposition, the two could only ever exist together.

Banditry had also been a strategy for social mobility and a bargaining tool that was used *vis-à-vis* state structures by a variety of groups that operated within agrarian societies, from peasant leaders, soldiers, and slaves to

<sup>19</sup> Stephanie Cronin, 'Noble robbers, avengers and entrepreneurs: Eric Hobsbawm and banditry in Iran, the Middle East and North Africa', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 52 (2016), pp. 845–70, at p. 855.

<sup>20</sup> David Shulman, 'On south Indian bandits and kings', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 17 (1980), pp. 283–306, at p. 285.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 289.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>23</sup> Anand A. Yang, 'Bandits and kings: moral authority and resistance in early colonial India', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 66 (2007), pp. 881–96, at p. 882.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 895.

members of the nobility. The goal of these, often exceptional, figures was less the emancipation of the communities they came from than the increase of their own social ranking, prestige, and access to resources. Bandits could often somewhat easily make the journey from outlaws chased by the state to becoming an integral part of its hierarchies and structures. This had been the case in many parts of the Ottoman Empire up until the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> In the seventeenth century, the Porte approached the proliferation of banditry with strategies of bargaining and incorporation more often than by force.<sup>26</sup> Members of these bandit groups came from disbanded state regiments whose goal in the first place, countering Hobsbawm's social banditry thesis, was appointment to state positions.<sup>27</sup> In the case of Cilicia, a mountainous region in south-eastern Anatolia, local tribal rulers, the *derebeys*, were successful at defying the centralizing and reformist expansion of the Ottoman state until as late as 1865. Described in Ottoman documents as 'brigands' and 'outlaws', they were tribal leaders who led gangs of robbers drawn from the local population, engaged in robbing caravans on mountain passes and raiding villages on the plains.<sup>28</sup> Unable to either eliminate or subdue them, the Ottoman state resorted to offering the *derebeys* high positions and salaries in return for submission.<sup>29</sup>

While, in the early modern period, state institutions were dealing with banditry through negotiation, bargaining, and incorporation, both in Asia and across the Atlantic piracy started to be approached in a very different way. The so-called 'golden age of piracy', which preceded that of banditry by about a century, saw some of the same modern empires that would radically transform the approach to banditry in the nineteenth century – England, France, Spain, and the Netherlands – heighten their confrontation with pirates.<sup>30</sup> Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European states moved away from legitimizing and sponsoring 'privateers' through letters of marque and began cracking down on pirates – often castaways and runaways – who lived on the fringes of the Atlantic world.<sup>31</sup> Throughout Asian waters, on the other hand, piracy of breath-taking scale was taking place in the same period. Almost as a laboratory for the later criminalization of banditry as a phenomenon to be placed outside society, forms of piracy – or rather the less negatively connoted regional versions of it, which were equally seen as an integral part of society – started to be consistently voided of their agency,

<sup>25</sup> Cronin, 'Noble robbers', p. 851; David M. Hart, *Banditry in Islam: case studies from Morocco, Algeria, and the Pakistan north-west frontier* (Wisbech, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> Karen Barkey, *Bandits and bureaucrats: the Ottoman route to state centralization* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), pp. 195–202.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Andrew G. Gould, 'Lords or bandits? The derebeys of Cilicia', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 7 (1976), pp. 485–506.

<sup>29</sup> Nathan Brown, 'Brigands and state building: the invention of banditry in modern Egypt', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32 (1990), pp. 258–81, at p. 280.

<sup>30</sup> Marcus Rediker, *Villains of all nations: Atlantic pirates in the golden age* (London, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Shannon Lee Dawdy and Joe Bonni, 'Towards a general theory of piracy', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 85 (2012), pp. 673–99, at pp. 679–80.



the perpetrators now 'more likely to be portrayed as pests than as political actors'.<sup>32</sup> Piracy was a 'fluid and malleable concept with complex layers of meaning' enmeshed into local politics and rooted in local practices and norms.<sup>33</sup> Pirates, like bandits, equally operated in collusion and collaboration with state structures and it was this interaction that provided them with political legitimacy.<sup>34</sup>

The communities or individuals that were approached through strategies of incorporation were oftentimes located at the polities' geographical or social margins. Here, banditry was the expression of a struggle for power and regional influence between a central authority, often unable to enforce its rule in faraway and difficult regions, and local communities desirous to maintain their autonomy. At the same time, local chiefs, whose position, as we have seen, not uncommonly coincided with the role of bandit leader, were in need of recognition by the central government, whose legitimacy they formally acknowledged. Along Ottoman frontiers, but also Mughal ones (notably the wetlands of Bengal and the Hindu Kush mountains), this relationship led to processes of constant negotiation, failed attempts at military intervention, overtures, changes of loyalty, and political intrigues.<sup>35</sup> In some cases, these forms of interaction between bandits and weakened states continued well into the first decades of the twentieth century. In the Heilongjiang frontier region of north-east China, bandits took advantage of the ebbs and flows of Qing local state administration and its small and ill-trained army to expand their activities.<sup>36</sup>

In instances of severe political convulsion, central powers made use of the same bandit leaders they were otherwise trying to subdue in order to regulate conflict at the regional level and to pacify recalcitrant tribes that formed the bandit leaders' own base. Governments ultimately resorted to reinstating the same bandits they had been trying to fight to positions of state-sponsored local leadership, only to encounter them again during the next round of unrest. Bandit leaders, while agreeing to function as the central government's local allies and at times formally recognizing its authority, generally refused to submit to the more practical expression of governmental suzerainty, such as revenue payment and the instalment of government representatives in the form of tax collectors, judges, or police forces. In turn, their fate was inextricably linked to that of the tribal societies they originated from and often ruled over. Government attempts to hunt down these bandit leaders were a dangerous pursuit as they could trigger local insurrections. These networks of relations and interdependence created situations of shifting equilibria, in which the bandits of the Ottoman and Qing lands, like the Poligar kings of Tamil

<sup>32</sup> Prange, 'A trade of no dishonor', p. 1270.

<sup>33</sup> Antony and Prange, 'Piracy in Asian waters, part 1', p. 459.

<sup>34</sup> Prange, 'A trade of no dishonor', p. 1277; Michael Kempe, "'Even in the remotest corners of the world": globalized piracy and international law, 1500–1900', *Journal of Global History*, 5 (2010), pp. 353–72, at p. 361.

<sup>35</sup> Gould, 'Lords or bandits?', pp. 487–9; Jos Gommans, *Mughal warfare: Indian frontiers and high-roads to empire, 1500–1700* (London, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Shan, 'Insecurity, outlawry and social order', p. 27.



Nadu, could play different and often contradictory roles. The moving frontier between outlaw and legitimate chief inserted these figures as important actors into the state-building pursued by pre-modern polities, which were forced to respond to these periodic encounters by constantly redefining their strategies.

In other instances, banditry was used by figures who operated at the margins of society as an instrument to achieve a political position in the face of disruption and crumbling political order. In the early eighteenth-century Indian Deccan, the emergence of widespread banditry was propelled by political instability within the Mughal empire rather than economic hardship among peasants. In this case, the two most important and well-remembered bandit figures, Papadu, from a low-caste family of the upper peasantry, and Riza Khan, a Muslim Afghan *mansabdar*, turned to banditry for reasons of personal gain in the context of insecure and shifting political roles of the Mughal elites. Both engaged in highway robbery, plunder, and robbing of revenue destined for the Mughal state. Their armies – at its height, Riza Khan's amounted to 12,000 men – were recruited from among the disbanded soldiers of the Mughal regiments and from 'bands of impoverished men' such as peasants and artisans.<sup>37</sup> Both were able to gain considerable power and amass resources to the point that they turned into local powerholders whom Mughal and Hyderabad officials were forced to reckon with. Riza Khan was able to channel the stake he had gained through collaboration with Mughal authorities: he entertained close relations with imperial officials to the point that they employed his support and his troops in defeating his fellow bandit Papadu. Papadu, in contrast, remained outside Mughal circles and attempted, for some time with considerable success, to establish a kingdom of his own: he grew his personal army, seized forts, farmed the land, and established a market town.<sup>38</sup> Like the Porte, Mughal authorities, unable to stop these bandit-kings through force, resorted to different strategies of incorporation or co-existence. After a months-long siege to his fort, Papadu paid off the local Mughal governor, who had tried to offer employment to his troops in the hope they would desert him, and was left in peace.<sup>39</sup>

These cases show that the transition of bandits into state officials or local rulers in their own right was not uncommon. Governments and their armies were often too weak to consistently pursue outlawry and were unable to enforce the authority of the state over all the territory that it claimed. Stephanie Cronin has argued that 'the offer of elite incorporation in return for submission was a central strategy of states for dealing with all the troublesome or rebellious elements which were too powerful to suppress'.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the very survival of government centres often depended on 'an ability to manipulate and accommodate a variety of interests with only occasional

<sup>37</sup> John F. Richards and Velcheru N. Rao, 'Banditry in Mughal India: historical and folk perceptions', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 17 (1980), pp. 95–120, at p. 100.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105–6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103–4.

<sup>40</sup> Cronin, 'Noble robbers', p. 851.

application of exemplary force'.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, in agrarian societies, the boundary between outlawry and communal life was often blurred. Bandits entertained close relations with settled society, government officials, law enforcement, and city dwellers, and made use of ramified networks of trade with which they exchanged goods and service.<sup>42</sup> Banditry was part of society itself: made sense of through religious rituals, memorialized in vernacular literature, and seen as an acceptable, even desirable, way of life. In this sense, it was not just a form of primitive protest but a powerful political tool employed for purposes that went beyond overcoming economic and social distress.

## II

The moment of global change that occurred between the mid-nineteenth century and the early twentieth put new forms of economic pressure on many rural societies around the globe, and increased the presence of state structures in areas where they had scarcely been felt before. Mountain and hill areas, swamps, thickly forested areas, remote villages, and certain coastal tracts were at the forefront of shifting statehood, territorial expansion, the forging of national identities, and the development of capitalism. States and empires moved from being visitors, as had been the case for pre-modern polities, to becoming more permanent residents.

In many cases, patrimonial strategies for the incorporation of banditry gradually ceased to be possible as polities set out to enforce their sovereignty more pervasively. As Hobsbawm wrote, the societies in which banditry emerged around this time were part of a 'world which had long known the State (i.e. soldiers and policemen, prisons, tax-collectors, perhaps civil servants), class differentiation and exploitation by landlords, merchants and the like, and even cities'.<sup>43</sup> However, it was only in this period that polities started to systematically redirect their interest towards areas and populations that were located at their margins, figuratively as well as physically. Periodic and mostly short-lived attempts to impose the state's presence in areas that had often shown outright defiance and antagonism towards direct oversight were now replaced by strategies of co-optation, repression, and exclusion. While some local elites continued to profit from the language of patrimonialism well into the late nineteenth century, this became increasingly arduous as states and their representatives discontinued the forms of negotiation and incorporation that had characterized the earlier period. For the first time, in a world that was rapidly closing in on itself, modern polities acquired the power to incorporate non-state spaces and people, and were able to confront the rural areas where bandits operated. At the points of contact between states and rural societies, global changes were felt particularly acutely and propelled the emergence of widespread and deep-rooted forms of outlawry. As will be

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Louis A. Perez, 'The pursuit of pacification: banditry and the United States' occupation of Cuba, 1889-1902', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 18 (1986), pp. 313-32, at p. 325.

<sup>43</sup> Hobsbawm, *Primitive rebels*, p. 4.

outlined in the next section, in this context bandits came to fulfil new roles as actors of nationalist and anti-colonial movements or as collaborators of the same state institutions that were now working towards permanently dismantling their networks.

The newfound role and position of certain bandits went hand in hand with profound convulsions of landed relations and the uprooting of the ways of life of rural communities. These shifts did not, of course, happen everywhere at the same time. Their expansion followed that of modern empires and the consolidation of nation-states, but, during the decades under examination in this section, the degree and extent of state presence assumed a new and unprecedented magnitude. Boundary-making, new infrastructure, privatization of land, changes in land use, monopolies, enclosures, and the connection to market economies had the effect of integrating these far-flung areas more closely into state structures and the global economy, while putting unprecedented pressure on local communities. Simultaneously, the long-practised option of defying the state's presence, through temporary escape or migration, as well as forms of part-time banditry, became increasingly impracticable. The 'multi-layered processes of adaptation and erosion of an agrarian and rural way of life' that Eric Vanhaute and Claudia Bernardi argue for in this special issue were part of the same process of adaptation and erosion that banditry underwent. As the new norms of co-existence between states and rural societies started to be enforced more decisively, the forms of life of 'state-evading people', nomads and non-sedentary communities, who had long fled military incursions and avoided taxation, military conscription, and other state practices, started to become less tolerated. Ultimately, for them, there would be 'no unexploited, uninhabited forest left to migrate to'.<sup>44</sup>

The move by the state into these peripheral areas was underwritten by new ideas about the polities' territory and boundaries. Charles Maier has argued for a shift from territory as the site of a plurality of claims for supremacy, to one in which nation-states asserted claims for exclusive control. He identifies this moment of transition in the period between the 1850s and 1880s. To be sure, this late nineteenth-century shift had a long pre-history in the development of exclusive sovereignty and linear frontiers as the recognized form of delimitation between political units, which in Europe dated back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>45</sup> However, at this point, territoriality became the cornerstone element for how states understood their role and function. Even in cases where processes of state-formation had already been in the making for a long time, such as that between Spain and France in the Pyrenees mountains, it was only in the later nineteenth century that countries delimited 'the boundary by establishing an imaginary border of two national territories and

<sup>44</sup> David Prochaska, 'Fire on the mountain: resisting colonialism in Algeria', in Donald Crummey, ed., *Banditry, rebellion, and social protest in Africa* (London, 1986), p. 247.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Maier, 'Transformations of territoriality 1600–2000', in Gunilla-Friederike Budde, Sebastian Conrad, and Oliver Janz, eds., *Transnationale Geschichte. Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien* (Göttingen, 2006), pp. 38–40; Charles S. Maier, *Once within borders: territories of power, wealth, and belonging since 1500* (Cambridge, MA, 2016).

“demarcate[d]” the division by means of boundary stones’.<sup>46</sup> Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, this boundary had been ‘a complex interplay of two notions of boundary – zonal and linear – and two ideas of sovereignty – jurisdictional and territorial’.<sup>47</sup> The notion of territoriality presupposed the contestation of a finite global space, each power searching for ‘a zone of monopoly or exclusive control or sovereignty’. In this sense, territoriality was the ‘material condition’ for sovereignty.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, in the colonial world, according to Maier, Europeans were looking to transform their ‘overseas jurisdictions ... into cloned territories offshore that must themselves be clearly bounded’.<sup>49</sup> As Michaud and Turner have argued, in the mountains adjoining Southeast Asia, north-east India, and south-west China, colonial states now ‘found themselves able to achieve a project barely conceivable to their local predecessors: binding non-state spaces and acephalous, egalitarian people to the state’.<sup>50</sup> This understanding of polities, their boundaries, and the forms and extent of the state’s claims was crucial for and most visibly felt in the peripheral areas that were in this period becoming the object of territorial expansion, inter-imperial competition, the drawing of borders, and state consolidation.

Forms of imperfect and fragmented sovereignty, despite proclamations to the contrary, continued to be an integral part of the repertoire for territorial expansion and modern state-building. Their employment did not mean lack of state interference or presence. On the contrary, the exercise of territoriality in cases of imperfect sovereignty was most strongly concentrated at points of passage and transit, and could take various forms: survey parties, boundary commissions, government posts, military patrols, policing of people flows and marketplaces, transport and communication infrastructure, and military campaigns. Considerations around banditry bore a crucial role and helped shape frontier sovereignties. Eric Beverley has shown that the frontier zone between the south Indian princely state of Hyderabad and the Bombay presidency equally challenged the notion of a linear trajectory of sovereignty. British and Hyderabadi authorities held competing jurisdictional claims over *dacoity*, a British Indian term for banditry, which remained consistently undefined throughout the colonial period. This allowed this particular frontier to retain the character of a grey zone in which lawlessness could continue to exist despite British attempts to eradicate it, mainly thanks to Hyderabad’s conscious strategies of defying British claims.<sup>51</sup>

Often it was the very presence of bandits in border regions that forced state authorities not only to intervene but also to grapple with plural claims for

<sup>46</sup> Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: the making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, CA, 1991), p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Maier, ‘Transformations of territoriality’, pp. 34–5.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>50</sup> Jean Michaud and Sarah Turner, ‘Tonkin’s uplands at the turn of the 20th century: colonial military enclosure and local livelihood effects’, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 57 (2016), pp. 154–67, at p. 154.

<sup>51</sup> Eric Lewis Beverley, ‘Frontier as resource: law, crime, and sovereignty on the margins of empire’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 55 (2013), pp. 241–72, at pp. 248–50; Michaud and Turner, ‘Tonkin’s uplands’, p. 164.

sovereignty.<sup>52</sup> As would afterwards be the case for banditry, in the early modern period, piracy 'served as instrument as well as contender of nascent projects of empire-building and sovereignty – and as *raison d'être* as well as foil for their conceptualization'.<sup>53</sup> Competing empires employed pirates as 'methods of power building' in inter-state conflict and in the search for commercial hegemony.<sup>54</sup> In the case of nineteenth-century Hyderabad, colonial authorities used the pretence of banditry along their frontier to claim extra-territorial jurisdiction in the princely state and establish a parallel legal order to both British Indian and Hyderabadi law.<sup>55</sup> As will be seen in the last section, in most places bandits would inevitably succumb to the tide of state sovereignty. However, it was precisely where the idea of sovereignty did not follow a linear trajectory in its application that the heterogeneities and imperfections it harboured were experimented with and recalibrated.

The state's presence in these areas raised the question of how to incorporate populations that had historically been at the margins of early modern polities, had been outside direct government, and had started to be dealt with by states only from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries onwards, when the question of people at the margins was raised for tribal people, nomads, vagrants, and mad people.<sup>56</sup> Bandits, although usually seen as being marginal to the broader societies in which they operated, were taken very seriously when it came to considerations around disorder, crime, security, and national belonging. Faced with questions about the place of these people within national and colonial societies, states started to design strategies for their inclusion, as well as exclusion. In an effort to make the body politic of the nation coincide with the geographical body on which it was deployed, governments established regular censuses and control of migration. Internally, they defined citizenship and its duties.<sup>57</sup> C. A. Bayly has argued that 'All this was

<sup>52</sup> George L. Simpson, 'Frontier banditry and the colonial decision-making process: the East Africa Protectorate's northern borderland prior to the First World War', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 29 (1996), pp. 279–308; Mark Condos and Gavin Rand, 'Coercion and conciliation at the edge of empire: state-building and its limits in Waziristan, 1849–1914', *Historical Journal*, 61 (2018), pp. 695–718; Benjamin D. Hopkins, 'A history of the "Hindustani fanatics" on the frontier', in Benjamin D. Hopkins and Magnus Marsden, eds., *Beyond Swat: history, society and economy along the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier* (London, 2013); Lakshmi Subramanian, *The sovereign and the pirate: ordering maritime subjects in India's western littoral* (New Delhi, 2016).

<sup>53</sup> Prange and Antony, 'Piracy in Asian waters, part 2', p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> Janice E. Thomson, *Mercenaries, pirates, and sovereigns: state-building and extraterritorial violence in early modern Europe* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), p. 54; Dawdy and Bonni, 'Towards a general theory of piracy', p. 682; Anne Pérotin-Dumon, 'The pirate and the emperor: power and the law on the seas, 1450–1850', in C. R. Pennell, ed., *Bandits at sea: a pirates reader* (New York, NY, 2001), p. 26.

<sup>55</sup> Beverley, 'Frontier as resource', p. 248.

<sup>56</sup> Maier, 'Transformations of territoriality', p. 40; Seema Alavi, "'Fugitive mullahs and outlawed fanatics": Indian Muslims in nineteenth century trans-Asiatic imperial rivalries', *Modern Asian Studies*, 45 (2011), pp. 1337–82; Mark Brown, 'Ethnology and colonial administration in nineteenth-century British India: the question of native crime and criminality', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 36 (2003), pp. 201–19.

<sup>57</sup> Bernard Debarbieux and Gilles Rudaz, *The mountain: a political history from the Enlightenment to the present* (Chicago, IL, 2015), p. 71.

consciously or unconsciously directed to strengthening the sentiment of nationalism and making people on the margins choose one or another nation-state.<sup>58</sup> More importantly, it was the global scale in which this ideological shift emerged that provides insight into why mention of banditry in this period became ubiquitous in government reports, in police and military strategies, and in the legal frameworks engineered to circumscribe the phenomenon. Where special regimes, such as reserves, princely states, tribal zones, pseudo-colonies, and protectorates, were established to keep communities outside the standard legislation of the state and its institutions, this said more about the convergence of state practices and ideology than about a sudden change in these communities' traditional practices.<sup>59</sup>

The drawing of colonial frontiers also prompted native governments to reckon with the idea of sovereignty. This became most visible precisely in those polities that were at the crossroads of competing empires, such as Afghanistan, Egypt, or Ethiopia. On the one hand, they were expected to conform to the new forms of territoriality. On the other, they struggled to maintain their independence and internal stability in the face of imperial pressure. They walked a fine line that prompted them to strengthen their rule over their own peripheries, root out bandits, and settle agriculturalists as a way to pacify and stabilize their own frontiers. As the example opening this article illustrates, in late nineteenth-century Afghanistan, on the pretext of their engagement in acts of robbery and rebellion, the government forcibly displaced Tajik and Uzbek populations from the north-western region of Maimena and settled Pashtun agriculturalists in their place, with the goal of securing the newly demarcated frontier and pre-empting Russian claims on these lands.<sup>60</sup> Along similar lines, the pressure coming from expanding and aggressive powers such as Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy forced the Ottoman state 'to squeeze manpower resources it had hitherto not tapped', notably targeting 'nomadic populations, armed and already possessing the military skills required'.<sup>61</sup> In both cases, this meant the adoption of a mindset that led the native state to 'conceive of its periphery as a colonial setting' and start operating there 'in a much more immediate presence'.<sup>62</sup> Peripheral

<sup>58</sup> Christopher A. Bayly, *The birth of the modern world, 1780–1914* (Oxford, 2003), p. 203.

<sup>59</sup> Lauren A. Benton, *A search for sovereignty: law and geography in European empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 209; Radhika Singha, *A despotism of law: crime and justice in early colonial India* (New Delhi, 1998), pp. 168–228; Benjamin D. Hopkins, *Ruling the savage periphery: frontier governance and the making of the modern world* (Cambridge, MA, 2020); Elizabeth Kolsky, 'The colonial rule of law and the legal regime of exception: frontier "fanaticism" and state violence in British India', *American Historical Review*, 120 (2015), pp. 1218–46; Elisabeth Leake, *The defiant border: the Afghan–Pakistan borderlands in the era of decolonization, 1936–1965* (Cambridge, 2016); Elisabeth Leake in this special issue.

<sup>60</sup> Nancy Tapper, 'Abd Al-Rahman's north-west frontier: the Pashtun colonisation of Afghan Turkestan', in Richard Tapper, ed., *Tribe and state in Iran and Afghanistan* (London, 2011), pp. 233–61; Francesca Fuoli, 'Incorporating north-western Afghanistan into the British empire: experiments in indirect rule through the making of an imperial boundary, 1884–87', *Afghanistan*, 1 (2018), pp. 4–25.

<sup>61</sup> Selim Deringil, '"They live in a state of nomadism and savagery": the late Ottoman Empire and the post-colonial debate', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 45 (2003), pp. 311–42, at p. 311.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 311–12, 339.

communities, which had previously been loosely ruled from afar, were the subject of intensified state-building projects that had the goal of turning them into useful elements of society or placing them outside the bounds of the polity altogether.<sup>63</sup> The pressure exercised by European empires stimulated the translation of colonial strategies as part of processes of internal state-building, in which modern ideas of territoriality were often enmeshed with previous practices and long-established local ideas of statehood, and enacted through the work of native officials.<sup>64</sup>

Integral to this process of territorialization was the expansion and integration of the economic norms and networks of global capitalism. In virtually every part of the world touched by the introduction of a market economy, the commercialization of agriculture meant the transformation of rural communities' customary forms of land use, privatization, the disruption of subsistence farming, and increased taxation on land access.<sup>65</sup> This also presupposed a new definition of those lands that fell outside patterns of settled cultivation as waste, desolate, wild, and ugly land, just as nomadic herdsman were described as lazy, lawless, wild, and cowardly. Both were seen as standing outside the official ideology of improvement and generally lacking sovereignty.<sup>66</sup>

In pre-modern agrarian societies, while settled and nomadic groups had often lived in a state of conflict and mutual suspicion, the way of life of nomadic people was an integral part of society and ultimately was neither repressed nor censored. Nomadism, not unlike banditry, amounted to 'an act through which the norms of society are re-established'.<sup>67</sup> The introduction of principles of private property onto land that had been traditionally held in common, or where property rights had been established through usage by local communities, left rural dwellers displaced, landless, and unable to find their place in changing economic arrangements. In a similar vein, forests were enclosed and access to them restricted. Bans on customary bush fires, wood logging, or simple gathering activities were now inscribed into state legislations in Europe, Asia, and Africa.<sup>68</sup>

The changes in property rights brought about by colonial states or consolidating nation-states were enmeshed with changes and convulsion to local structures of power and authority. Neeladri Bhattacharya reminds us that this was 'not a simple shift from a regime of unrestricted grazing rights

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 318.

<sup>64</sup> James Caron, 'Social inequality and ideological circulation: speaking for and against the patriarchal state, 1930–1960', in S. Mahmoud Hanifi, ed., *Power hierarchies and hegemony in Afghanistan* (forthcoming).

<sup>65</sup> James C. Scott, *The art of not being governed: an anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT, 2010); Karl Polanyi, *The great transformation: the political and economic origins of our time* (Boston, MA, 2001); E. Vanhaute, *Peasants in world history* (New York, NY, 2021).

<sup>66</sup> Neeladri Bhattacharya, 'Pastoralists in a colonial world', in David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, eds., *Nature, culture, imperialism: essays on the environmental history of South Asia* (Delhi, 1995), pp. 70–3; Niall Whelehan, 'Revolting peasants: southern Italy, Ireland, and cartoons in comparative perspective, 1860–1882', *International Review of Social History*, 60 (2015), pp. 1–35, at p. 23.

<sup>67</sup> Bhattacharya, 'Pastoralists in a colonial world', p. 79; John F. Richards, ed., *Land, property, and the environment* (Oakland, CA, 2002).

<sup>68</sup> Marco Armiero, *A rugged nation: mountains and the making of modern Italy* (Cambridge, 2011); Marco Armiero and Marcus Hall, eds., *Nature and history in modern Italy* (Athens, OH, 2010).



to one in which such rights were denied'.<sup>69</sup> In cases such as the late nineteenth-century Philippines and Cuba the influx of capital from colonial metropolises turned land farmed by locals into cultivation destined for profitable export economies, such as sugar and tobacco, while the agricultural frontier moved fast into previously unfarmed tracts. This process went hand in hand with the concentration of land away from small proprietors and cultivators into the hands of landed estate holders, often foreign investors or national elites allied with colonial powers.<sup>70</sup> Pastoralists and nomadic people living off cattle farming, agriculture, and forest economies were similarly impacted by these changes. In South Asia, the nomadic Powindhas, Afghans who traded between India and Central Asia, were subjected to increased taxation and the concentration of property rights in the hands of a few tribal groups loyal to the colonial state.<sup>71</sup> While these measures had the effect of diminishing the availability of pastures and pushing pastoralists to the margins of agricultural life, they were also the outcome of profound changes in the understanding of what property rights meant, who embodied them, and how they could be transferred.

The expropriation of land from local communities, the concentration of cultivated land in the hands of a few landholders, and the threat to the rural dwellers' traditional life were propelling factors for widespread acts of lawlessness and, for some time during this period of transition to capitalist agriculture, of those forms of part-time banditry described in the first part of this article. Often this occurred in societies where banditry had been common before, but in which the outbreak of lawlessness was connected to periodic economic disruption and political unrest, rather than to a systematic dispossession and loss of livelihoods. The relationship between rural dwellers, the new regulations on forest access, and proprietary rights represented a significant part of the changes around which banditry started to revolve from the late nineteenth century onwards. In Algeria, French colonists in the 1830s, and British concessionaries later, established land rights in the Edough and Beni Salah mountains, where communities had sustained themselves by a combination of cattle raising and subsistence agriculture in communal land arrangements. Expropriated and stripped from their usage rights, Algerians responded with a mix of petitions to the French governor-general, attacks on European settlers, and arson of forests and farms. They were branded as 'insurgents', and setting fire to the contested forests was seen by the colonists

<sup>69</sup> Bhattacharya, 'Pastoralists in a colonial world', p. 54.

<sup>70</sup> Perez, 'The pursuit of pacification', pp. 316–17, 328–9; Michael Underdown, 'Banditry and revolutionary movements in late 19th and early 20th century Mongolia', *Mongolian Studies*, 6 (1980), pp. 109–16; Sven Beckert, Ulbe Bosma, Mindi Schneider, and Eric Vanhaute, 'Commodity frontiers and the transformation of the global countryside: a research agenda', *Journal of Global History*, 16 (2021), pp. 435–50.

<sup>71</sup> Bhattacharya, 'Pastoralists in a colonial world', p. 52; Malavika Kasturi, 'Rajput lineages, banditry and the colonial state in nineteenth-century "British" Bundelkhand', *Studies in History*, 15 (1999), pp. 75–108; Christopher Kenna, 'Resistance, banditry and rural crime: aspects of the feudal paradigm in north India under colonial rule, c. 1800–1840', *Sydney Studies in Society and Culture*, 2 (1985), pp. 214–46.

as ‘a particular form of native banditry’.<sup>72</sup> From the point of view of the mountain dwellers, however, these acts of resistance were part of Algerians’ wider opposition to French colonialism, which ranged from attacks on woodcutters and soldiers to outright armed rebellion.<sup>73</sup> David Prochaska has argued that mountain communities such as the Beni Salah had a long tradition of resisting overlord authority, from strenuous resistance to Turkish suzerainty to the outright rebellion against French hegemony. However, ‘What changed ... was less the Beni Salah tradition of resistance than the French ability to repress such resistance.’<sup>74</sup> Similarly, in the Heilongjian frontier region of north-western China, mentioned above, the push from the Qing and Republican states to settle pastoralists, hunters, and soldiers, combined with their Han immigration policy, led to prolonged banditry – described in contemporary official documents as ‘ethnic bandits’ – by the nomadic people ousted from their lands, who had now found refuge in the mountains.<sup>75</sup>

While many of the elements that underpinned global changes did not find expression only in these peripheral regions and communities, these examples show how these provided a fundamental ground for modern polities to redefine their limits and functions, and to shape the ideologies that sustained them. In this context, the evolution of banditry was embedded and tied into the evolution of forms of sovereignty. The shift in state practices over areas that had traditionally been loosely connected to a central authority and that were now bearing the brunt of a radically changed approach showed that episodes of modern banditry were far from unconnected. On the contrary, banditry closely followed and helped shape the process of transformation of rural communities and the consolidation of state institutions. Forms of negotiation and bargaining between the state and bandits, as well as the latter’s repression and marginalization, contributed towards embedding state officials, the army, the police, and the judicial apparatus into the local political and social fabric. With every step in this process, the formal suzerainty that had long existed as a ‘polite fiction’ to regulate the perpetual wrangle for power and authority was ultimately redefined.<sup>76</sup> What the history of modern banditry highlights is that this redefinition of sovereignty and the insistence on territoriality accounted for a paradigmatic shift in the very understanding of and relation between state power and people on the margins.

### III

By the second half of the nineteenth century, while banditry could still be seen as a response to moments of major disruption for rural communities, the role it was allowed to play dwindled inexorably. Most importantly, it changed fundamentally in the way it could be used in its traditional functions as a tool for

<sup>72</sup> Prochaska, ‘Fire on the mountain’, pp. 238–9.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 234–9.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>75</sup> Shan, ‘Insecurity, outlawry and social order’, p. 30.

<sup>76</sup> Deringil, “‘They live in a state of nomadism and savagery’”, p. 338.

social mobility or for personal gain, to overcome periods of hardship and convulsion, or as a part-time supplement to one's principal occupation. As the incorporation of bandit figures into the structures of the state became increasingly difficult and banditry could no longer be tolerated as it had been in pre-modern times, the role and place of bandits in society shifted. This change did not happen so much in the concrete forms that the phenomenon took – it still manifested in highway robbery, plunder, kidnapping, and theft of cattle – but in the ways in which banditry now interacted with and existed within modern societies. As the nineteenth century came to an end and the new institutions of the modern state closed in on the areas where bandits had been operating, their strategies became those of collaboration with the forces of change. Drawing on Hobsbawm's work, Anton Blok convincingly pointed out that banditry could often express popular discontent as well as 'the power of the landlord or the State'.<sup>77</sup> Many of the attitudes and behaviours emerging from the interaction of bandits and elites in this period were the continuation of pre-modern patterns, such as the practice of notables hiring brigands as guards to neutralize their threat to settled society. Despite these continuities, bandits turned into (often unwilling) actors of these political, economic, and social changes, in which they were not just passive bystanders of the worsening of their living conditions but agents in the forging of national identities, the building of state institutions, anti-colonial struggle, and nationalist movements.

Within the landscape of different forms of banditry, social banditry has received somewhat disproportionate attention.<sup>78</sup> While Blok's study has redirected the attention towards the elites, historians have also shown that social banditry was not only underpinned by reasons of personal gain, but that the appropriation of resources, intrinsic in bandits' day-to-day activities, intersected with consideration of social struggle. In the Philippines under Spanish occupation, bandits rejected the forms of settled life imposed by the colonial outsiders and, as the nineteenth century progressed, considerations around class differences seemed to play more important roles. The processes of sedentarization and the privatization and marketization of agricultural land outlined in the previous section, now firmly associated with the state and its authorities, led bandits to specifically target wealthy landowners and officials.<sup>79</sup> Court houses, police stations, and governors' residences became new favourite targets for plunder and ransacking, highlighting what historians have identified as forms of anti-establishment protest or 'of collective societal redress'.<sup>80</sup> In the case of the 1890s Philippines, bandits' antagonism towards established power merged with the struggle for independence through mutual exchanges, enlistments on both sides, and supplies of arms.<sup>81</sup> Even in places

<sup>77</sup> Blok, 'The peasant and the brigand', p. 497.

<sup>78</sup> Christopher Birkbeck, 'Latin American banditry as peasant resistance: a dead-end trail?', *Latin American Research Review*, 26 (1991), pp. 156–60.

<sup>79</sup> Greg Bankoff, 'Bandits, banditry and landscapes of crime in the nineteenth-century Philippines', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 29 (1998), pp. 319–39, at pp. 329–30.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330.

where capitalist relations were already in place, and quite contrary to Hobsbawm's argument that banditry died out with the advent of modernity, banditry continued to be seen as a tool to address growing social inequality. In cattle-farming Australia, land reform introduced between the 1860s and 1880s ignited a struggle between different groups. The clashes between the established class of 'bourgeois pastoralists', who were wealthy owners of large landed estates leased from the state, and a coalition of the 'rural proletariat' – shepherds, sheep-shearers and labourers, and 'small farmers', who owned small tracts of agricultural land – left the latter crushed by the concentration of freehold land in the hands of those who already owned estates.<sup>82</sup>

In other cases, co-opted by government authorities, bandits were used as quasi-paramilitary regiments in nationalist and anti-colonial movements. In the late nineteenth-century Balkans, nationalist elites made use of bandit regiments to fight against Ottoman rule.<sup>83</sup> In post-fascist southern Italy, the bandit Salvatore Giuliano became an agent of the Republican government in Sicily, for which he engaged in the violent suppression of peasants' political organization and mobilization, notably that affiliated to the Communist party. Upon orders of high-ranking local politicians, in 1947 he famously shot peaceful demonstrators who had gathered at Portella della Ginestra, a rural area in north-western Sicily, to demand the redistribution of agricultural land and celebrate International Workers' Day.<sup>84</sup>

As the first section of this article has shown, pre-modern states had often resorted to the services of bandit groups in the pacification of peripheral regions, driven by the inability both to stamp out bandits and to impose direct rule. However, now the precarious positions of bandits within changing societies brought them into a collision course with rural communities. Shail Mayaram has argued that it was the socio-economic differentiation of the second industrialization that created the conditions for peasants' opposition to banditry and the alienation of bandits from their communities.<sup>85</sup> On the part of the state, the extent and scope of the recruitment of outlaws, and the way in which they were perceived and treated by state institutions had undergone a significant shift. Bandits continued to interact with state power, negotiated their position, took advantage of these changes, fought when negotiation was not possible, and often succumbed to changes they had helped bring about. In this changing landscape, they took on new roles as instruments for state- and nation-building in the hands of elites who, in

<sup>82</sup> Pat O'Malley, 'Social bandits, modern capitalism and the traditional peasantry: a critique of Hobsbawm', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 6 (1979), pp. 489–501, at pp. 492–5; Pat O'Malley, 'Class conflict, land and social banditry: bushranging in nineteenth century Australia', *Social Problems*, 26 (1979), pp. 271–83.

<sup>83</sup> Pappas, 'Brigands and brigadiers', p. 176.

<sup>84</sup> Blok, 'The peasant and the brigand', p. 499; Jonathan Dunnage, 'Sicilian bandits and the Italian state: narratives about crime and (in)security in the post-war Italian press, 1948–1950', *Cultural and Social History*, 19 (2022), pp. 185–202.

<sup>85</sup> Shail Mayaram, 'Kings versus bandits: anti-colonialism in a bandit narrative', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 13 (2003), pp. 315–38, at p. 317.

turn, furthered discourses about the bandits' disorder, criminality, and otherness for their own political goals.<sup>86</sup>

Within processes of modern state-building, and often precisely because of their categorization as criminal, bandits were the object around which the introduction of new state institutions and legislation was justified and built. In British-occupied Egypt the struggling *khedive* government of the 1880s 'invented' a bandit emergency in the countryside and forged a discourse around public security to justify the extra-legal measures of its Banditry Commissions, in order to support its own legitimacy.<sup>87</sup> Nathan Brown has argued that the government used banditry to enhance its own sovereignty *vis-à-vis* the British occupants, increase control over peasants, and introduce an ambitious programme of state-building that involved the construction of a centralized police force, prisons, courts, and a national legal code. In turn, the British appropriated the weapon of the bandit emergency to make the case for the inability of the native government to guarantee peace and security and justify their increased encroachment. As Brown argues, 'The definition of banditry as a national problem was an integral part of state building in Egypt.'<sup>88</sup>

On the trail of pre-modern mythologies, bandits figured as central characters in histories of state- and nation-making, as told by both elites and subalterns. In some cases, these narratives were created *ad hoc* to support certain national narratives.<sup>89</sup> In the case of Lithuania, the horse thief *Blinda* – again a case far from Hobsbawm's social banditry – was made into a national hero who has been memorialized in popular ballads and oral histories since the mid-nineteenth century. His myth first became important in the Russian imperial period, when it was used to articulate the ethnic boundaries of those local elites not allowed to have a dominant role within the regime. During the Soviet period, the same figure was used by the government to transmit an ideological message based on the notion of class struggle, in which the horse thief was made into a social rebel fighting the rich and foreigners. Tomas Balkelis has argued that both nationalist and socialist elites saw the story of *Blinda* as powerful 'instruments of social and political mobilization on the threshold of the modern era'.<sup>90</sup> Bandit mythologies were used to mobilize nationalist struggle, often reproducing the fault lines that ran through society and contributing to consolidating them, while playing key parts in defining national identities.

These examples show that bandits continued to engage with elites and state institutions, and took part in nationalist, anti-colonial, or even separatist

<sup>86</sup> David Prochaska, *Making Algeria French: colonialism in Bône, 1870-1920* (Cambridge, 2002).

<sup>87</sup> Brown, 'Brigands and state building', pp. 268–71.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 259, 271–8.

<sup>89</sup> Richard W. Slatta, ed., *Bandidos: the varieties of Latin American banditry* (New York, NY, 1987); John C. Chasteen, *Heroes on horseback: a life and times of the last gaucho caudillos* (Albuquerque, NM, 1995).

<sup>90</sup> Tomas Balkelis, 'Social banditry and nation-making: the myth of a Lithuanian robber', *Past and Present*, 198 (2008), pp. 111–45, at p. 115; Chris Frazer, *Bandit nation: a history of outlaws and cultural struggle in Mexico, 1810-1920* (Lincoln, NE, 2008).

movements. The relation between state and bandits in this period uncovered a fundamental tension in the attribution of meaning that permeated contemporary understanding of the phenomenon and which has percolated into today's scholarship. On one side, banditry did become – or at least started to be recorded by document-producing states as – a national emergency the moment it became a problem for a state's expansion and consolidation. On the other side, the importance that more recent literature has attributed to state elites, while fundamental in redressing the inflated attention given to the 'social bandit', has framed the motivations and experiences of bandits themselves as mere exaggerations, consciously crafted by governments to justify their state-building agendas.<sup>91</sup>

Sometimes bandits succeeded in turning their relationship with modern polities to their own ends. More often, however, they found themselves caught in dynamics that went beyond their localized ambitions and needs. In the case of Salvatore Giuliano, mentioned above, national political interests intersected with the interests of local landlords, supported by Sicilian separatists, who wanted to prevent changes to the land settlement and to suppress peasants' claim for land. Where bandit groups participated in these processes of state-building, their newfound role was fraught with contradictions. In certain instances, they acted against the interests of the rural communities that represented their base, furthering personal goals of material gain and social status, only to find their support withdrawn when they were no longer needed. In other instances, they were eliminated by the very states that had first enlisted their services, often through military campaigns of impressive proportions. Ultimately, their own strategies proved increasingly ineffective as modern states moved towards outright repression of banditry and exclusion of criminals and 'savages' from society. Bandits were crucial forces in the establishment of the very institutions and ideologies that had been the causes of rural societies' resort to outlawry in the first place. In a world in which lawlessness, nomadism, and pre-capitalist agriculture no longer had a place, their participation in the dynamics of global modernity ultimately led to their demise. As Hobsbawm argued, when bandits realized that their tools of protest were too outdated to tackle the situations they were experiencing, it was already too late.<sup>92</sup>

#### IV

This article has developed a framework for understanding the widespread and exceptional presence of banditry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the ways in which this phenomenon was different from its predecessors, and how it shifted as part of global changes. It has shown that bandits were at the forefront of these transformations and played an important role in shaping modern polities. Together with the shift to a capitalist and industrial economy theorized by Hobsbawm, it was the changing role, function, and ideology of the

<sup>91</sup> Brown, 'Brigands and state building', pp. 260–7.

<sup>92</sup> Hobsbawm, *Primitive rebels*, pp. 54–9.

modern state and its institutions that propelled and reshaped banditry, and ultimately secured its permanent demise. The Robin Hoods of Hobsbawm's understanding, where they existed at all, were often only the tip of the iceberg of larger congeries of men and women, who were the expression of rural societies in all their complexity. They included not only peasants and landless labourers but also artisans, shepherds and other types of semi- and fully mobile people, disbanded soldiers and deserters, an aggregation of common criminals, and disgraced nobles and local chiefs. Banditry was not only a 'rather primitive form of organized social protest' but assumed different facets, negotiating its place within rapidly evolving societies.<sup>93</sup> In this sense, banditry was a powerful expression of the different ways in which rural communities interacted, negotiated, and clashed with the global. As this article has shown, far from being victims, they were agents who navigated change, adaptation, and resistance in the modern world; shifting balances between wilderness and settlement; and processes of othering and exclusion. Willingly or unwillingly, bandits played a crucial role in the redefinition of the modern state's ideology, function, and practices.

The study of banditry from a global perspective offers valuable insights for understanding the role of subalterns, marginal people, and their peripheries within processes of globalization, interconnection, and convergence, which add to the literature that has been articulating the need for bottom-up perspectives in global history. At the same time, they provide a privileged viewpoint through which contemporary dynamics can be investigated. Just as the global dynamics of the modern period propelled and then dismantled banditry, so today the resurgence of banditry in certain regions is driven by new disruptions. In rural areas such as northern Kenya or the border region between Nigeria and Niger, banditry has newly emerged as a response to a combination of weak state presence and scarcity of resources. Unlike the dynamics that characterized the phenomenon in the past, contemporary banditry appears as a complex interplay between its continued existence as a coping mechanism employed by agricultural communities to fight the economic and political distress caused by globalization, and its evolution into transregional and international networks of trade and organized crime that can flourish precisely because of their inclusion within the global capitalist economy and the weakness of state oversight. In its most recent reiteration, the relationship between global capitalism, state sovereignty, and banditry reverses their earlier collision and shows that banditry continues to offer an essential way in to the study of the multi-faceted scales of local, national, imperial, and global.

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.



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