

Honour and Violence

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On 25 July 2001 Phoolan Devi was shot dead outside her home. Best known in the west through Shekhar Kapur's 1994 film *Bandit Queen*, Phoolan Devi's life had been remarkable. Born of low-caste, at the age of 11 she had been exchanged in marriage for a cow. Following beatings by her much older husband, she made her way home, but was regarded as a disgrace by her family. An outcast she took up with a dacoit gang. Its leader, who became her lover, was killed and she was brutalised and raped by his killers. She established her own bandit gang and wrought havoc in the Chambal river valley of Uttar Pradesh, most notably with the massacre of 22 high-caste Thakur Hindus in the village of Behmai in February 1981 - she claimed to have seen the men who killed her lover and raped her among the victims. She surrendered to the police in 1983, spent 11 years in prison awaiting trial, and on her release - still without trial - she became a member of the Indian parliament where, a champion of the low-castes, she campaigned for women's rights and the abolition of child labour. In 1997 she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. This would have been an astonishing career for an illiterate, low-caste woman anywhere, let alone in India.

Karl Marx famously wrote that people make their own history, but not in the way that they intend. Phoolan Devi's fellow bandits and supporters claimed she was the reincarnation of a goddess, but events and outcomes can no longer be satisfactorily explained as the will of gods, and people in modern western society like to stress the independence and agency of the individual social actor. A succession of social scientists has sought to develop a theory of social action that might explain why significant social change does not come about as the intended result of the action of individuals. In his introduction the Dutch anthropologist Anton Blok describes the ambitious agenda that he has set himself in his research and which underpins this

collection of twelve essays, namely to demystify individual practice and strip it of its 'voluntaristic aura' (p. 3). Cultural settings and historical context, he emphasises, reduce the autonomy of actors. Similarly contingency, cultural forces, human interdependence together with a variety of other imponderables, coalesce to transform intentions. His subject matter for this challenging project is grouped loosely under the concepts of the title, 'honour' and 'violence'. The story of the Phoolan Devi constitutes the kind of starting point that Blok takes for his explorations.

The essays collected for this volume were written over roughly a thirty-year period. They range widely from banditry in the Low Countries and in Sicily, to a comparison between the death-hastening practices accepted within tribal and pre-industrial society and contemporary European concerns about euthanasia. Throughout Blok shows a determination to expose any woolly thinking by others and to squeeze his analyses till the last drop of explanation has been yielded. He has no truck with terms such as 'senseless violence'. This latter, he argues, merely reveals the reluctance in so much of Western contemporary thought to face up to the need for a serious exploration of violent behaviour. Violence, Blok emphasises, makes statements. If the Bokkeryders, who terrorised the Catholic churches and farms of the eastern Meuse valley during the eighteenth century, and the mafiosi were (and, in the case of the latter, still are) violent, then the important thing is to look for the meanings in that violence. While Phoolan Devi might, these individuals do not sit at all comfortably in Eric Hobsbawm's category of 'social bandits', and the first essay in the book is Blok's critique of Hobsbawm. The Bokkeryders were local to the district they pillaged, but agricultural workers were significantly under-represented among their members. The bands were linked by kinship and marriage, and contained disproportionate numbers of skimmers, marginalized men whose trade gave them familiarity with pain and death, not least since skimmers commonly served as executioners' assistants. Blood has symbolic meaning for groups like the Mafia: shedding the blood of an enemy can be seen as a way of replacing blood lost by a family or group; blood signifies the ties between family and friends. Moreover, in the absence of effective control by the state, bonds between friends and family can be all the more important. Violence, however, is not just the instrument of bandits. The state claims the right of legitimate violence, and Blok is also at pains to emphasise how the violence inflicted on the bodies and dwelling houses of those convicted of being Bokkeryders constituted equally important symbolism on the part of the relatively weak authorities in the troubled districts.

Blok notes how young mafiosi in the United States tend to talk in terms of the rights and duties of the 'individual', a concept unknown in Sicily where the concern always used to be for 'family' and/or 'blood'. Thus contemporary and identical behaviour can be explained and understood in different ways dependant on the context. But there also appear to be interesting variations in violence between countries that can contribute to the context. Since criminal justice statistics began to be collected, the homicide rate in England has always appeared well below that of Sicily and Southern Italy, yet, and there are always problems in comparing the judicial statistics of one country with those of another, it would appear that its instance of violent assault was higher. The monopolization of the means of violence within the hands of the state has been established for longer and with more permanence in England than in Sicily and the Mezzogiorno, and godfathers like those of the mafia are scarcely apparent. Yet young men have continued to strut in what they perceive as the height of fashion, sometimes in explicit fighting gangs, and sometimes carrying the designer weapon of the day - cut-throat razor, bicycle chain, knuckle duster, knife, even gun. Their sense of 'honour' was (is) rather more personal than familial, but essentially it remains a sense of honour. The homicide rate in the USA appears higher than that in England, but, as in Italy, the instances of assault are apparently lower. How might this be explained? It is unfair to criticise Blok for what he has not considered, and it is a measure of the stimulation provided by his writing that these questions do come to mind, but perhaps some tentative approaches to these issues could have rounded off the discussions rather more satisfactorily for this volume.

In an essay called 'the narcissism of minor differences' Blok stresses how ruthless struggles often originate in subtle distinctions rather than major differences between individuals and groups: Bosnian Croats, Moslems and Serbs are of the same ethnos; the differences between Hutu and Tutsi are, in many respects, far from extreme and in the fifteen years following 1945 in terms of property, wealth, as well as intellectually and as elites, they became more and more similar. It is, Blok insists, the loss of differences, and particularly cultural

differences, that can lead to explosive violence. Just as violence can be, and needs to be, unpicked for its meanings, so too can the cultural associations of honour. Blok explores the reasons why various trades and professions were perceived as 'infamous' across time - from ancient Rome to the early modern period - and across continents. Other essays discuss why chimney-sweeps, members of another dishonourable profession, were regarded as bringing good luck, and why rams and billy-goats had different totemic meanings in pre-industrial Mediterranean societies and almost certainly fed into the symbolic horns given to a cuckolded husband. Blok's range is formidable, and he takes no prisoners.

Mediterranean societies, and particularly Italy, have always figured large in Blok's work. He often ventures out of the area to make comparisons with the work of others, but in his essay on nicknames as symbolic inversions it is at least arguable that the generalizations made for such societies might need some rethinking from a different perspective. 'The evidence from Sicily and other parts of Italy', he concludes, 'confirms that while nicknames reflect dominant cultural codes and values, they also reflect on them' (p. 172). Quite probably, yet there are other nicknames that are as self-explanatory as *La Zoppa* (the limping woman) but which surely lack the profound *double entendres* that Blok finds in the way that this label was applied to an apparently adulterous woman with a limp - physical imbalance may possibly relate to moral imbalance, and the folklore of Sicily as well elsewhere, associates passion with limping women. In British society, however, nicknames appear to have been common well beyond the confines of village communities. British schools, regiments, ships, once abounded (and possibly still do) with 'Nobby' Clarks, 'Dusty' Rhodes or 'Dusty' Millers, 'Chalky' or 'Snowy' Whites and many more. Such nicknames relate specifically to the individual's name and say little or nothing about the individual. Similarly other nicknames within the military that refer to particular individuals, and that spread across units, do not necessarily pick up on dominant cultural codes. The rank and file of Wellington's army knew him as 'Old Nosey'. Nicknames in contemporary France do not appear to have developed in similar forms to Britain, yet Napoleon was *le petit caporal* to his men. Moreover, there is another form of nickname common to both Britain and France that merits some consideration, and not necessarily for the way in which it picks up on cultural values. The *menu peuple* of the French Revolution, were denigrated as *sans-culottes*, but rapidly took the title as one of pride. Similarly when, contemporaneously, Edmund Burke disparaged the unenfranchised in Britain, his slight was adopted as a badge of pride by radicals who referred to themselves as members of 'the swinish multitude' (as well as *sans-culottes*!) while the proto-socialist pamphleteer Tom Spence began publishing his magazine *Pig's Meat, or Food for the Swinish Multitude*. Perhaps this is expanding the notion of the 'nickname' too far, but perhaps too Blok's treatment of nicknames would benefit from moving out of the village and small town community context. Blok's essays are never dull, always provocative, rich, and stimulating, but the concepts of honour and violence do become rather attenuated as the book progresses. It is easy to recognise them among bandits. As Blok himself puts it in his critique of Hobsbawm: 'What animated banditry was the quest for honour and respect. What often motivated it was revenge.' (p. 22), and this can be seen as applicable to Phoolan Devi as the Robin Hood label. But it is less easy to find the centrality of the title's concepts when the subject matter becomes southern Italian agro-towns, female rulers and their consorts, or euthanasia. Norbert Elias may, as Blok points out (p. 308, n. 15), have noted that death is always an act of violence, but this seems to be pushing the meaning of violence to the very limit and not exactly encompassing the clarity that Blok insists upon elsewhere. Perhaps the variations in violence might have been compared a little more as suggested earlier. In one essay, first written in 1991, Blok criticises historians and anthropologists for their reluctance to make systematic analyses of violence (pp. 103-4). Yet it could be argued that, in more recent years, English cultural and social historians have begun to do just that, notably Joanna Bourke, Andy Davies, Shani D'Cruze, and Vic Gatrell; moreover the decision announced by the ESRC in 1997 to invest heavily in research into 'violence', and subsequent conferences and publications, suggests still further that his criticism is now dated. Nor does England/Britain appear alone in this; in the United States, for example, the National Consortium on Violence has now been active for several years.

The essays in *Honour and Violence* never cease to stimulate and provoke, but in the end the book suffers from the kind of problem that is common to other such collections of essays - some, more than others, have become dated. And some of the accusations that were justified five or ten years ago, are much less so today.

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