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Robin Hood and the Cultural Importance of the Myth of Social Banditry

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Abstract

Throughout history, villains – whether real or imaginary – have served useful functions, especially those of “safety valves” for society. This is probably why many “villains” have been defined as “social bandits”, a term originally used by Eric Hobsbawm to refer to a type best exemplified in the Anglo tradition by Robin Hood. This true and widely admired social bandit who steals from the rich and gives to the poor operates outside the law but at the same time personifies both group resistance to oppression and a number of more personal virtues. As such, Robin Hood has transcended the Anglo tradition and has become a myth of universal appeal. He has formed part of the so-called universal culture since the Middle Ages, the Robin Hood stories being told, retold and adapted as a way of expressing people’s discontent with overbearing government authorities, dishonest church officials, prejudicial laws and other social injustices. In this paper, we shall analyse the way in which the English bandit has become a mythical rather than a legendary hero, and the manner in which other thieves of major consequence, from Jesse James to Clyde Barrow and Ned Kelly, have, in the wake of Robin Hood, been enhanced by legend-makers with the very same populist sympathies towards a bandit commonly revered for his fearlessness and generosity. Indeed, Robin Hood figures have transcended time, culture and even gender, and nearly every culture has the archetype of the benevolent outlaw, a folk hero born of the frustrations of an underclass that sees the law as the will and whim of the privileged classes above them.