

Transnational Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs and the Ideas of the West

Tereza Kuldova

Researcher

Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History, University of Oslo

Visiting Senior Researcher

Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology, University of Vienna

tereza.kuldova@iakh.uio.no

The West: Concept, Narrative and Politics

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‘We are the ultimate American brand’¹. As we expand across the globe and conquer new territories, we are spreading a unique western culture and lifestyle. Freedom is our core value’². Those are the words of a member of the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club in California. The notorious American outlaws motorcycle clubs, the so called 1-percenters, labelled by law enforcement worldwide as transnational criminal organizations, have since the 1960s established themselves all across the world. New club chapters have been emerging at increasing speed during the last ten years, in particular across Europe. Small local clubs, which have been imitating the iconic American clubs such as the Hells Angels MC, immortalized and commodified³ in popular culture⁴, have been patched-over and included into the transnational brotherhoods, joining the ranks of what they believe to be the only true American subculture. This rapid territorial expansion in Europe and increasing popularity of the clubs among men coming from neighbourhoods hit hard by neoliberal reforms and subject to multiple forms of state interventions and policing, reveal a tension between two ideas of the West. On one hand, the ‘American West’ which indulges in myths of the American frontier⁵, of the Wild West, of which the outlaw clubs imagine to be a countercultural incarnation - men who are outsiders but yet at the core embracing western values, emphasizing ‘true’ democratic organization, individuality, freedom and equality, and hyper-muscular expansionism - versus, on the other

¹ For a discussion of branding of the Hells Angels MC see Tereza Kuldova, "Hells Angels Motorcycle Corporation in Fashion Business: On the Fetishism of the Trademark Law," *Journal of Design History* scheduled for Autumn 2016 (2016).

² Interview, September 2015, Berkeley, California.

³ On commodification of counterculture see J. Heath and A. Potter, *The Rebel Sell: How the Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (West Sussex: Capstone Publishing, 2005).

⁴ See in particular the iconic books by Hunter S. Thompson, *Hell's Angels* (London: Penguin Books, 2003). And Yves Lavigne, *Hell's Angels: Three Can Keep a Secret If Two Are Dead* (New York: Lyle Stuart Kensington Publishing Corp., 1987). Additionally, there are numerous movies (*Easy Rider*, *Wild One*), popular documentaries and shows inspired by the subculture, such as the *Sons of Anarchy* and even biker erotica.

⁵ For a discussion of the American frontier mythology in popular culture and its centrality to the idea of American West, see: Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992). Also see the iconic essay by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner who argued that democracy was the product of the American frontier Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Paper presented at the American Historical Association, Chicago, 12 July 1893 (1893).

hand, the idea of the European West, increasingly imagined by the same actors as effeminate, undemocratic and authoritarian, interventionist, elitist and excessively politically correct. By bracketing⁶ for a moment the emotive images of the criminal bikers served us by the media, and by bracketing the clubs actual criminal engagements, the talk will focus our gaze on the ways in which the outlaw bikers embody a particular right-leaning mythology of the West, increasingly seductive to many, while setting it in opposition to what they imagine and resent as the weak European West⁷. In this context, the bikers often construct themselves as the few of the remaining carriers of truly western values, embellished by honourable righteousness, 'in a world gone soft'⁸, in the process capitalizing on the American ideal of the outsider individualistic heroic masculinity⁹.

The talk is grounded in ethnographic work with outlaw motorcycle clubs in Germany and Austria, and outlines the ideology of these clubs in particular vis-à-vis the social and political environment of these European countries, pointing to the ways in which they embody the idea of the split West. The talk shows how the core values of the American West are ritually performed by the outlaw motorcycle clubs and how ideologically powerful myths come alive in the process: from the proud performance of democratic organization (one man one vote), equality, freedom,

⁶ Lea Tufford and Peter Newman, "Bracketing in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Social Work* 11, no. 1 (2010).

⁷ This split increasing split between the European and American West has been analysed by Marko Lehti, "American West Vs European West: A Struggle for Ownership and Legitimacy," in *The Struggle for the West: A Divided and Contested Legacy*, ed. Christopher Browning and Marko Lehti (London: Routledge, 2009); "The Wild West Vs. The Civilized West: Popular Cultural Readings of Transatlantic Relations," in *6th PanEuropean International Relations Conference* (2007). See also Andrew Gamble, "The Idea of the West: Changing Perspectives on Europe and America," *Institute of European Studies* (2006).

⁸ Dave Nichols, *The One Percenter Code: How to Be an Outlaw in a World Gone Soft* (Minneapolis: Motorbooks, 2012).

⁹ This ideal has been repetitively utilized politically, from R. Reagan to D. Trump, for a discussion of the ideal see Craig J. Thompson and Douglas B. Holt, "Man-of-Action Heroes: The Pursuit of Heroic Masculinity in Everyday Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research* 31 (2004).

expansionism, ruthless muscular neoliberal profit-driven efficiency¹⁰, self-reliance, basic rights and, in the US, the crucial right to carry. Following the identification of the tensions regarding the idea of the West embodied by these clubs, the talk will briefly deal with the internal and external struggles resulting from these tensions. The internal struggles often pertain to conflicts between the 'purists', members who insist on the American values and western heritage of the clubs, and members typically of immigrant backgrounds with at times conflicting value sets but with powerful entrepreneurial networks in both legal and illegal economies. The external struggles concern the legal and political battles for biker rights, framed within the rhetoric of individual civil and universal human rights, a mode of resistance against criminalization based on group membership. The ideas of the West are central to all these struggles and open up a new viewpoint at the ways in which these often stereotypical, ideological and mythologized notions of the West play out in the real life.

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¹⁰ On the utopia of neo-liberal democracy see chap. 6 in: Alastair Bonnett, *The Idea of the West: Culture, Politics and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).