

## **Introduction: The idea of a ‘Golden Age’ of Latin American banditry, 1850-1950**

This book examines the cultural history of banditry in Latin America from 1850 to 1950. It takes these dates because this is the period during which the so-called social bandit, a prototype first suggested by Eric Hobsbawm (1969), proliferated on the continent, certainly in myth if not in actual recorded history. This was an era of dramatic political and social change in Latin America, when nineteenth-century wars of independence severed these colonies from their Spanish and Portuguese rulers and when the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), at the start of the twentieth century, overturned the status quo once again. During this period bandits proved to be ideal cultural vehicles through which to channel nationalism and the desire for social justice, whilst, paradoxically they were also cast, according to the political currents of the time, by politicians, writers, artists and filmmakers as dangerous enemies of these fragile new nation states who struck at the fabric of society and threatened to plunge these new countries back to a pre-independence state of anarchy and barbarism. However, whether friend or foe to the nation, bandits and their accompanying folklore ensured that they were at the heart of popular culture in the period 1850-1950, making this very much a Golden Age of Latin American banditry.

Latin America here is understood not geographically but more broadly to refer to those areas where Iberian colonial cultures took root and where the contemporary postcolonial situation sees a majority of Spanish-speakers still living, that is the Hispanic USA.<sup>1</sup> The book focuses on a range of bandit life stories from the region, from a historical perspective, as well as a wide range of cultural representations of which the most significant are literary works in which the bandit plays a central role, with *Los de abajo*, *The Underdogs* (1915) the classic Mexican Revolution novel by Mariano Azuela forming the nucleus of the study. The book also focuses on folkloric depictions, transmitted through oral culture: the *literatura de cordel*,

poetry on a string, in Brazil's northeast; the *payada* or song of the Argentine *pampa*; and the *corrido* or ballad in the American southwest and Mexico, as these were an important means of mythologizing the bandit in popular discourse.

The central argument of the book departs from the still lingering stereotypical view of Mexico as bandit country and shows how this myth has been forged and then extended across Latin America such that outlaws of various types – revolutionaries, rebels and robbers – have come to represent the poor, the subaltern subject in the Americas not just in the countries considered but globally. The Latin Bandit has as much popular purchase as the Latin Lover. Using Hobsbawm's theoretical engagement with bandit histories as the main intellectual framework, the book focuses in particular on the idea of the noble bandit, the Robin Hood figure, because this model can be said to closely apply to the countries and regions in question, in particular to the case of revolutionary Mexico, which has been chosen as a literary case study. Mexico's bandit history and representation, peaking during the Revolution of 1910-20, foregrounds many of the hallmarks of bandit culture evident in the other Latin American nations featured. These recurring features, highlighted by the Mexican case, involve state repression leading to community identification with bandits, followed by revolutionary upheaval and a dissolving state wherein the very definition of the term 'bandit' is blurred to become interchangeable with that of rebel or revolutionary

Ranging across the Americas in a variety of approaches, including the detailed literary case study of *Los de abajo*, what emerges is the **dominant** idea of a Golden Age of Latin American Banditry in popular imagination as well as in popular and high cultural forms. However, what also emerges is substantial evidence which leads to the constant deconstruction of the noble bandit myth. For every noble bandit there is a nefarious other, an

outlaw of a different type altogether and this myth of Mexico as a bandit nation forms the basis for Chapters Two and Three. In identifying this other, this book substantially departs from Hobsbawm's theories. The book also goes beyond his theories in its focus on female bandits and in doing so it provides a corrective analysis of the often overlooked role of women during the Mexican Revolution. This is crystallised in the figure of the bandit la Pintada in *Los de abajo*, who, it is argued, is a far more influential character than critical opinion has previously allowed for.

<sup>1</sup> The concept of 'Latin America' is a problematic one which Walter Mignolo has discussed at length in *The Idea of Latin America* (2005). He finds the very concept of 'Latin America' to be historically loaded and judges it to be a European colonial construct or 'invention' (xiv: 2005). He writes of the way that Latin America was 'imagined as part of the West and yet peripheral to it. America, as a continent and people was considered inferior in European narratives from the sixteenth century until the idea was refashioned in the US after the Spanish-American War in 1898, when "Latin" America took on the inferior role [...] The concept of "Latinidad", an identity asserted by the French and adopted by Creole elites to define themselves, would ultimately function both to rank them below Anglo Americans and, yet, to erase and demote the identities of Indians and Afro-South Americans (xv).

## Chapter 1

### The figure of the bandit in history, culture and social theory

Eric Hobsbawm still dominates the literature on bandit theory. His theories are developed in the companion works *Primitive Rebels* (1959) and *Bandits* (1969). These texts categorize the different types and subtypes of banditry throughout the world. The core theory that the Marxist Hobsbawm outlines in *Primitive Rebels* is that banditry, far from being simply a criminal activity involving robbery, outlawry and terror, is in fact a form of ‘primitive social rebellion’ (Hobsbawm, 1959: v). He stresses ‘the peculiar symbiosis between social banditry and primitive revolutionary (millenarian) movements’ (1959: vii, Preface to the Third Edition). Banditry alone, however, is not capable of effecting social change and the ‘bandits tend to regard themselves as subordinate to the wider [revolutionary] movement or aspiration’ to which they are aligned (1959: vii).

As Juan Pablo Dabove says, Hobsbawm’s concentration is on ‘epidemic banditry’ rather than ‘endemic banditry’ (2007b: 14). By this he means banditry that occurs in rural societies during times of extreme ‘social transformation’ as opposed to banditry that exists as a permanent feature of those societies (14). Within this bracket of epidemic banditry, Hobsbawm’s main interest is in ‘social’ banditry, an odd, seemingly inappropriate description of such an apparently unsocial and marginal activity. Social banditry, based on his thesis, flourishes in ‘pre-political’ peasant societies. These societies are based on ‘kinship’ or blood ties and revolve around a traditional feudal structure. In such societies, banditry gains potency, Hobsbawm believes, under certain conditions, such as ‘in times of pauperization and economic crisis’ (1972: 22) and when society is threatened by ‘the impact of new economic, social and political forces’ (1959: x). In the context of this study, the bandits in question were operating in periods that were indeed characterised by social and political upheaval. Pancho

Villa and the fictional creation, Demetrio Macías, were active during the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20. So according to Hobsbawm, during periods of ‘basic social transformation, such as the transition to a capitalist economy’ (1959: ix-x), social banditry markedly increases as pre-political peasants react to ‘the operation of economic forces which they do not understand and over which they have no control’ (1959: 3).

The arguments of *Primitive Rebels* and *Bandits* inject new force into the term ‘social banditry’. The term is developed as ‘an endemic peasant protest against oppression or poverty: a cry for vengeance on the rich and the oppressors, a vague dream of some curb upon them, a righting of individual wrongs’ (1959: 5). Social bandits themselves are robbers who are ‘*not* regarded as simple criminals by public opinion’, even if they are by the state. These bandits are ‘peasant outlaws [...] who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case men to be admired, helped and supported’ (1969: 13). In *Bandits*, Hobsbawm expands upon his earlier definition of social banditry, claiming it to be a primarily rural phenomenon which exists whenever the peasantry is ‘oppressed and exploited by someone else – lords, towns, governments, lawyers or even banks’ (1972: 20).

But even Hobsbawm acknowledges the divergence between myth and fact inherent in the concept of social banditry, claiming that ‘in real life most Robin Hoods were far from noble’. However, such was and ‘is the need for heroes and champions, that if there are no real ones, unsuitable candidates are pressed into service’ (1972: 41). Hobsbawm here assumes that social bandits satisfied the peasant craving for representative heroes in harsh times, and, it will be argued in this study that they continue to sate the twenty-first century popular thirst for hero figures.

*Bandits* surmises that social banditry is a phenomenon that can be applied universally throughout history, up until the mid-twentieth century. In Hobsbawm's analysis, 'modern agrarian systems, both capitalist and post-capitalist, are no longer those of traditional peasant society and cease to produce social bandits' (1972: 19). The Argentine historian Hugo Chumbita, though otherwise supportive of Hobsbawm, disputes this point and its relevance to Latin America. He claims that 'La atracción del bandolerismo social no está agotada; en particular, si se trata de una sociedad que ha incorporado la tradición de los bandoleros a la cultura popular' (the attraction to social banditry [in Latin America] is far from exhausted, especially as we are talking about societies which have incorporated the tradition of noble bandits into popular cultura) (2000: 259).<sup>1</sup> In addition, Chumbita problematises the notion that the conversion to capitalism that Hobsbawm notes as being decisive in killing the social bandit phenomenon worldwide, has not actually occurred in the same way and to the same extent in Latin America as in Europe. He believes that 'Los principales logros de las naciones industriales no se han consolidado en los países latinoamericanos, y no es sorprendente que el bandolerismo social encontrara terreno propicio en los tiempos recientes de la Argentina' (the major achievements of the industrial world have not yet filtered down to Latin America and therefore it is not surprising that social banditry has had such an impact in Argentina in recent times) (2000: 259). However, Chumbita is in agreement with most of Hobsbawm's other points, including that regarding Hobsbawm's subcategorisation of the social bandit into three subtypes: 'the *noble robber* or Robin Hood, the primitive resistance fighter or *guerrilla* unit of what I shall call the *haiduks*, and possibly the terror-bringing *avenger*' (1972: 15).<sup>2</sup> It should be noted however, that Hobsbawm has somewhat updated this strand of his argument in later editions of *Bandits*. For example, in the revised 2000 edition he acknowledges that 'banditry can thrive in late capitalism, such as the contemporary banditry associated with the

demise of nation-states, Afghanistan, countries that comprised the former Yugoslavia, and Chechnya all being examples' (Hobsbawm, 2000 cited in Dabove 2007b: 16).

Finally, in *Bandits* Hobsbawm makes clear the distinction between social bandits and other categories of bandit, such as the 'bandit gentry', 'gangs drawn from the professional underworld', 'mere freebooters (common robbers)' or 'raiders' (1972: 17-18). Also part of the bandit bloc are the legitimised *bandidos*, tough men recruited into being 'state's bandits' and comprising 'retainers, policemen and mercenary soldiers', as well as 'landlords' bandits' acting as bodyguards or enforcers and 'protected by the local rural boss or *cacique*' (1959: 13). For Hobsbawm, the key difference between these other classes of bandit and the social bandit is their supposed lack of solidarity with the peasant class, who are as likely to be prey to these 'non-social' bandits as anyone else (1972: 17). The 'mob', comprised of the 'urban poor' is, according to Hobsbawm, 'the urban equivalent of social banditry' (1969 edition: 6-7).

However, as becomes apparent from research into Latin American banditry, Hobsbawm states that 'one sort of bandit can easily turn into another' (1959: 13). A supposedly social bandit, allied with and supported by the peasant class, can also at one time or another become a state's bandit, landlord's bandit, or a revolutionary or political insurgent. Demetrio Macías, in the novel *Los de abajo* (1915), is an example of the way a bandit can morph from one type into another. Macías begins the novel as a people's bandit or social bandit. He is an ordinary peasant who takes on the local landowner, Don Mónico. This makes him a hero to fellow peasants, who assist Macías during his *guerrilla* campaign against President Victoriano Huerta's forces during the Mexican Revolution. After Huerta is defeated and the constitutionalists for whom he is fighting take power, Demetrio then evolves into a soldier or state's bandit. Additionally, he is also a *caudillo's* (regional strongman's) bandit, as he is fighting under the overall leadership of General Pancho Villa. As Demetrio demonstrates, the social bandit's activities may exist concurrently with his other roles or be entirely

independent of them and his position as a social bandit may not necessarily be threatened by his other 'jobs'. However, though a bandit may maintain his status as a peasant hero, regardless of other activities, on his own territory, if he strays into 'foreign' territory he may well be regarded as a menace. In Hobsbawm's succinct terms, 'a man may be a social bandit in his native mountains, a mere robber on the plains' (1972: 18).

The bandit's mutability, enabling him (Hobsbawm's bandits are overwhelmingly male) to merge from one incarnation into another, or to combine more than one role, complicates his status as an outlaw and often confuses the hero/villain and myth/reality dichotomies that are applicable to banditry. This flexible though ill-defined role, on the margins of society, also makes the bandit a malleable figure for writers and artists to manipulate in print, on canvas and on celluloid, reflecting their own ideological predispositions. In Latin America, where independent nations were being established in the nineteenth century, the bandit, in his various incarnations, was often adopted by novelists and poets to represent either a heroic or villainous facet of nationhood. Nineteenth-century Argentine literature illustrates this point. The character of the *gaucho* turned bandit Martín Fierro, in the eponymous 1872 epic poem by José Hernández, is heroicised as a noble outlaw. Fierro is forced to become a fugitive by punitive laws and wars which threaten his very existence on the *pampa*, even though he is innocent of many of the crimes attributed to him. Don Segundo Sombra, the *gaucho* character in Ricardo Güiraldes' 1926 novel, is even further romanticised, as the last of a dying breed of noble horsemen uniquely attuned to the life of the *pampa*. Meanwhile, the *gaucho* Juan Moreira, in Eduardo Gutiérrez's *folletín* (first published in serial form from 1879 to 1880), is an example of a 'bad *gaucho*', or nationhood gone wrong. Moreira is more of a villain than the previous *gauchos*, but yet again his villainy is a consequence of the corrupt authorities under Juan Manuel de Rosas and subsequent presidents, which have deprived the *gaucho* of any avenue other than criminality. As a villain, Juan Moreira becomes ever more violent and dies a horrific death. Don Segundo Sombra and Martín Fierro in contrast survive, even though the age of the *gaucho* is drawing to a close. However, they remain very much manipulated by the narratorial perspective. In *Don Segundo Sombra* the narrator is Fabio, a



member of the upper middle-class landowning elite and, in part at least, a mouthpiece for the author, Güiraldes. Ricardo Güiraldes yearned to protect the landlord's status and traditional way of life, in what were changing times on the *pampa*, and therefore sentimentalised and muted the more malevolent aspects of *gauchesque* life. Martín Fierro meanwhile, in the poem's second part, becomes a mouthpiece for the revisionist views of the author, José Hernández. In line with this, Fierro repents of the excesses of his former existence and counsels his sons to obey the law.

The bandit figure has also functioned as a representative symbol in the 'civilisation versus barbarism' debate so prominent in Latin America in the post-independence era (Benítez Rojo, 1996: 473). The bandit could embody a patriot or an underdog outlaw fighting for the rights of the oppressed, thus offering an alternative vision for a society newly liberated from Spanish or Portuguese dominion. One such figure was Antônio Conselheiro. He led a millenarian religious movement that 'mobilised the poor' of the remote Brazilian northeastern *sertão* in the late nineteenth century (González Echevarría, 1990: 127).

Conselheiro and many of his followers were regarded as bandits by the authorities, who sent troops to suppress the supposedly renegade group at Canudos. However, they underestimated the resistance of the band and its loyalty to its leader and were routed, events that were memorably recorded in Euclides da Cunha's novel *Os Sertões* (1902) (*Rebellion in the Backlands*). The Peruvian novelist, Mario Vargas Llosa, reworked the story in a blend of fact and fiction in the novel *La guerra del fin del mundo* (1981) (*The War of the end of the World*). Here Vargas Llosa attempts to penetrate the consciousness of the messianic Conselheiro, and to recreate the otherworldly atmosphere of the Brazilian backlands (Higgins, 1987: 234).

As a threat to civilised society, the bandit unsettled notions of nationhood in nineteenth-century Latin America, where independence had only recently been won. Bandits could

therefore be represented as treacherous enemies of the state, or barbarian criminals motivated by greed and self-interest, to be suppressed or eliminated. An obvious example of this would be Facundo Quiroga, a bandit *gaucho* who rose to the level of ‘a provincial *caudillo*’ (González Echevarría, 1990: 97) and on whom Domingo Faustino Sarmiento based his work *Facundo. Civilización y barbarie en las pampas argentinas* (1845) (*Facundo, Civilisation and Barbarism on the Argentine Pampas*). This genre-defying text has been described as a ‘political pamphlet’ (González Echevarría, 1990: 97). It examines, among its themes, the negative impact of the *gaucho* on Argentine civilisation, with his propensity towards barbarism, banditry and support of dictatorial leaders, such as Juan Manuel de Rosas. It was Rosas who terrorised Argentina during his reign in power between 1835 and 1852.

Juan Pablo Dabove’s illuminating and original study of banditry, as represented in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Latin American literature, engages with this debate. In *Nightmares of the Lettered City* (2007), Dabove positions the bandit as the demon or ‘adversarial force’ haunting the educated Latin American elites (2007b: 3). The book looks at the intersection between the *letrado* or elite state and the bandit ‘other’ to explore how the outlaw consistently frustrates the *letrados*’ vision of nationhood. It concentrates on the ‘elite discourse’ of the Latin American novel and other ‘bandit narratives’ including ‘short stories, criminological treatises, essays, poems and film’ to analyse this phenomenon (2007b: 2 and 34). In this study, bandit narratives are divided into three sections. Part One covers those texts that present the bandit as the ‘demon of national modernising projects’ who has to be suppressed, and includes works such as *Facundo* (2007b: 39). Part Two looks at texts which mobilise the bandit to criticise state-sponsored national projects, and includes works such as *Juan Moreira* and *Martín Fierro*, as well as nineteenth-century Mexican novels, *Astucia* (1865) by Luis Inclán and *Los bandidos de Río Frío* (*The Cold River Bandits*) (1891) by

Manuel Payno. Part Three examines texts, such as *Os sertões* (1902), *Doña Bárbara* (1929), and *Los de abajo* (1915), the novel to be discussed in Chapter Four. These works, Dabove argues, take banditry to be ‘the suppressed origin of the national community’ (2007b: 40). The idea of the bandit as a link to originary barbarity is one which has also been developed by Roberto González Echeverría (1990), in relation to *Os Sertões* and *Facundo* and will also be analysed later in this study, in relation to *Los de abajo* and later novels of the land.

### **The pro-anti- Hobsbawm polemic**

To return to Hobsbawm, his provocative texts have inspired a whole body of critical literature both opposing and supporting his arguments. Anton Blok accuses Hobsbawm of generalisation by universally applying his ‘banditry as a form of social protest’ argument, without taking into consideration local and regional distinctions (Blok, 1972: 495). Blok’s other main point of contention is that Hobsbawm’s argument relies too heavily on class conflict, with the bandit as romantic peasant hero ranged against the official state apparatus and landlords. Hobsbawm’s argument, Blok believes, ‘obscures the links which the bandits maintain with established power-holders’ (1972: 502).

Richard W. Slatta, also seeking to revise Hobsbawm’s arguments, finds fault with his over-reliance on ‘popular and folk sources’ which ‘led him to conclusions different from those of other researchers working with documents from police and other judicial archives’ (1987: 3). Many of the authors in Slatta’s edited volume on Latin American banditry, while not directly referring to Hobsbawm, apply historical and anthropological analyses rather than Hobsbawm’s purportedly more folkloric and literary approach. They generally conclude that the varieties of Latin American banditry were economically and not socially motivated

criminal activities that have since been skewed by popular culture into manifestations of heroism and peasant rebellion.

Hobsbawm has his champions, however, including Hugo Chumbita in *Jinetes Rebeldes* (2000) (*Rebel Horsemen*), who finds that Hobsbawm's model of the romantic social bandit existed in myth and fact on the Argentine *pampa* in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Chumbita believes it imperative to recover the *gaucho* bandits from the annals of 'official' history, by looking at folkloric records and oral testimony. Otherwise he believes that bandit figures remain shrouded, 'relegadas a los comentarios marginales de la historiografía académica' (relegated to the margins of academic historiography) (2000:11). Contrastively, 'esas figuras relumbran en cambio en las proyecciones folklóricas' (these figures feature prominently in folkloric representations) (11).

Gilbert M. Joseph actually seeks to revise the Hobsbawm revisionists. He finds that "“official” police and judicial records are freighted with bias and present problems of their own' (1990: 15), namely that they solely represent the state and dominant classes of the era from which they derive. Peasant consciousness and attitudes are therefore not adequately represented by such sources. It was after all the state, Joseph contends, drawing on the research of Indian social historian Ranajit Guha, that defined what was and was not 'deviant' and what did and what did not constitute banditry or outlaw activity. Banditry as a term was therefore 'used by the state to “mark” certain types of violent or potentially violent behaviour.' And by Joseph's reckoning, the state 'consistently expanded or transformed the notion of banditry to meet specific political needs or challenges' (1990: 22). Joseph diverges from Hobsbawm however, by questioning the sole use of 'popular' and literary sources, such as ballads and novels. He believes that they have some value in examining banditry,

especially ‘the social, political and cultural contexts which shape such discourses of power’ (1990: 15), but that they are limited. His solution is to blend so called ‘official’ and ‘peasant’ sources and to engage in ‘substantial cross-checking to mitigate the limitations of both’ (1990: 15). Joseph concludes that there is a need to move beyond Hobsbawm’s thesis, ‘to expand existing analytical frameworks for studying Latin American bandit phenomena’, and to understand that ‘peasant resistance’ may assume many forms aside from banditry, from subtle defiance towards landowners and the elite to full-scale insurrection (1990: 33).

Joseph is just one of a group of Latin American historians who have chosen what Dabove describes as ‘a third position in the banditry debate’, somewhere between Hobsbawm and his revisionists (2007b: 20). They include: Daniel Nugent on Mexico; Florencia Mallon on Peru and Mexico; and Rosalie Schwartz on Cuba. These specialists tend to treat banditry not solely as ‘mere criminality or as a rudimentary form of peasant resistance, but as a form of peasant politics fully articulated into a peasant consciousness’ (Dabove, 2007b: 20-21). The theorist John Beverley (1999) has loosely grouped these critics under the umbrella of subalternists. Beverley is referring to those scholars who examine national narratives which bypass the creole elites, who have attempted to define notions of nationhood since the nineteenth century. This group, according to Beverley, are concerned with the ‘representation of subaltern subjects’ and of viewing the nation state from the perspective of those subaltern subjects. Bandits are one of the primary subaltern groups that he identifies (1999: 8). This perspective of Latin American history rejects Benedict Anderson’s theory in *Imagined Communities* (1983), of an elite-led nationalism. John Charles Chasteen and Sara Kastro-Klaren have also questioned Anderson’s stance in *Beyond Imagined Communities* (2003). Carlos Aguirre and Charles Walker, writing about variants of Peruvian banditry, support Gilbert Joseph’s argument for examining a plurality of historical sources on banditry, but

dispute his call for a distancing from Hobsbawm. On the contrary, they have noted that many critics, in a desire to refute Hobsbawm's arguments, actually refocus attention on his work and tacitly support his arguments on the periodisation of banditry. According to Aguirre and Walker therefore, such critics 'más bien fortalecen los argumentos de Hobsbawm, específicamente su insistencia en que se trata de un fenómeno pre-industrial' (strengthen Hobsbawm's arguments, especially his insistence on [social banditry] being a pre-industrial phenomenon) (1990: 17).

It is clear that, on banditry, Hobsbawm's texts remain central in generating the debate which has significantly expanded and diversified since their publication. This study will consider Hobsbawm's arguments where relevant, as well as introducing the work of numerous other critics who have engaged in the dissection of Latin American banditry. This broad theoretical base and detailed analysis of the bandits, as they are represented in fiction, enables this project to move beyond the confines of the pro-anti-Hobsbawm argument.

### **Approaches to the term bandit**

To begin any work on the topic of banditry it is necessary to consider possible approaches to the flexible term 'bandit' and how it will be employed in this research. While Hobsbawm refers to 'some kinds of robbers' (1972: 17), this work differentiates between a bandit and a robber. A bandit may practise robbery but equally may be involved in different types of outlawry including plunder, contraband, smuggling or kidnap. According to the legal and social codes of a particular locale, activities not normally associated with outlawry can be classified as bandit behaviour. For instance, in nineteenth-century Buenos Aires Province, Argentina, vagrancy, army desertion and a lack of adequate identification papers constituted criminality (Slatta, 1980: 452). The *gaucho* who failed to fulfil the strict criteria of legality

imposed by the ruling elites risked being branded a bandit. As Richard Slatta highlights, in this instance ‘poverty in effect became a crime’ (1980: 453).

There are also numerous examples in Latin American history where political subversives and insurgents have been branded as bandits by the authorities. The aforementioned case of the messianic religious leader in the nineteenth-century Brazilian northeast, Antônio Conselheiro, is one such example. Conselheiro and his followers refused to acknowledge the authority of the central Brazilian government and built a fortress at Canudos to defend their makeshift kingdom. For this they were uniformly denounced as ‘bandits’ by the government (Da Cunha, 1944: 135), no doubt in part to justify its attack on the community that it perceived as such a threat. The line between banditry and political rebelliousness is further blurred by the fact that many (but not all) of Conselheiro’s followers were indeed drawn from the bandit ranks, numbering ‘*cangaceiros* (northeastern backland bandits) fugitives and convicts’ in their midst (González Echevarría, 127: 1990). In fact, banditry often aligns itself with insurgency of various descriptions. Pancho Villa’s bandit status has become subsumed by his success as a political insurgent and revolutionary general, something that will be investigated in more detail in the sections on Mexico and *Los de abajo*.

The bandit/insurgent dyad has also arisen in the representation of the renowned nineteenth-century Cuban outlaw, Manuel García. His brigand activities have, for some critics, become fused with his reputation as a political insurgent and supposed ‘friend of the poor’ during Cuba’s struggle for independence from Spain in the 1880s and 90s (Paz Sánchez et al., 1993-4: 206). As often occurs in bandit culture, the folklore has overridden the admittedly shaky facts of this outlaw’s life. García simply cannot be considered as a venal bandit, robbing and harassing the poor as well as targeting Cuban society’s privileged classes. So, he has been

transformed into Hobsbawm's archetypal 'bandido insurrecto', or noble primitive rebel, in the public imaginary (Paz Sánchez et al, 1993-4: 26).

The Chambers English Dictionary (1999: 124) reveals that the word bandit originates from the Italian *bandito*, whose plural is *banditti*, to refer to a group of bandits. Research into bandits reveals that they often operate as a group, but not exclusively so. Gilbert M. Joseph explains that the word bandit stems from the Latin *bannire*, 'to banish', and denotes outlawry and prohibition. This language 'suggests a process of exclusion, in which a barrier was created between the bandit and society' (Joseph, 1990: 22). Dabove bolsters this view by adding that the state would issue 'a proclamation or bulletin (bando)', that ordered 'a criminal that has dropped out of sight to appear before the authorities' (Dabove, 2007b: 8). In *Don Quixote* (1605/1615) the notorious Catalan bandit of the seventeenth century, Roque Guinart, finds himself pursued by 'muchos bandos que el visorrey de Barcelona había echado sobre su vida' (all the edicts published by the Viceroy of Catalonia putting a price on his head) (Cervantes, 1979: 517, trans. Rutherford, 2000: 903). It follows then that banditry suggests more than an activity, it denotes a lifestyle and a marginal and subversive existence.

Another synonym for bandit is brigand, one of numerous words substituted for bandit, or types of criminal behaviour classified as banditry. Some texts in particular employ a profusion of words to describe different bandit types: 'forajido' – outlaw; 'facineroso' – criminal; 'malhechor' – malefactor; 'abigeo' – cattle rustler; 'cuatrero' – horse thief; 'salteador de camino' – highwayman; 'ladrón' – thief; and the catch-all 'bandido' and 'bandolero' are a selection of the terms used by Francisco López Leiva in his history of Cuban banditry (1930). However, Hugo Chumbita cautions against loose usage of certain terms which risk undermining their original definition. He traces the historical meanings of the terms *bandido*



and *bandolero*, which had quite distinct applications. A *bandido*, in Chumbita's appraisal, was 'un fugitivo de la justicia reclamado por *bando* en el sentido del pregón o edicto que los alguaciles difundían en forma verbal o impresa' (a fugitive from justice who was formally sought by the authorities either verbally or in writing) (2000: 26). *Bandoleros* however, 'eran los miembros del bando de cada señor feudal, o sea los vasallos que constituían cuerpos armados para las guerras y otros menesteres en custodia del orden' (members of a armed band belonging to a local landowner or strongman; they comprised the fighting forces for wars and other military engagements) (27). Applying this description, *bandoleros* were viewed as sanctioned landlord's or state's bandits, practising pillage and similar activities but with a certain justification and moral code. *Bandidos* were simple 'malhechores' or wrongdoers and remained unpalatable outlaws.

### ***Bandidas, soldaderas y sicarias: Writing women into Latin American banditry***

One prominent feature of banditry is the overwhelming maleness of its participants and key actors. Hobsbawm touches upon but never really engages with the possibility of female bandits in his Chapter entitled 'Who Becomes a Bandit?' (1969: 24-34). In a slightly later edition of *Bandits* (1972) and perhaps responding to this oversight, he includes an appendix entitled 'Women and Banditry'. However, he concludes that most women involved in banditry were companions and supporters of the male bandits, and rarely took any active part in bandit life themselves (1972: 135-136). Nonetheless, investigation into the histories of Latin American nations throws up occasional female bandits, often as legendary for their ferocity as their male counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Some of this select band, such as Martina Chapanay, who became an insurgent leader in the Argentine Wars of Independence, continue to inspire devotional myths and legends.

The fact that relatively few female bandits are mentioned in Latin American culture and history, certainly until the twentieth century, stands in marked contrast to the Spanish Golden

Age dramatic tradition, which bursts with *bandoleras* in both the comedies and the tragedies. In the work of Lope de Vega, Calderón de la Barca and other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century dramatists, bandits, and particularly female bandits, were prominent and formed a ‘standard and popular theme of the Spanish drama’ (Parker, 1973: 152). The rationale behind this inclusion of women in banditry reflects the Spanish society and culture of the era. The *bandoleras* of the Golden Age plays were invariably *serranas* or mountain women. However, in these plays, the traditional *serrana* model was adapted ‘to explore the theme of the aggrieved woman’ (McKendrick, 1973: 169), or those women ‘deceived, seduced and then abandoned’ by men (Parker, 1973: 152). Rejected by society and preferring not to accept their disgrace, these women avenged themselves on society at large by turning to banditry. Thus through this ‘anti-social, criminal activity’, the *bandolera* asserted ‘her own dignity as a woman’ (Parker, 1973: 152). Alexander Parker explains that these dramas had two distinct endings. In the first ending, often a comedic one, the *bandolera* is pardoned, marries her deceiver and is accepted back into the fabric of society. This is the case in Lope de Vega’s tale of bandit sisters, *Las dos bandoleras* (1597-1603), despite the fact that by this stage the girls have ‘murdered twenty-nine men’ to avenge their honour (McKendrick, 1973: 172). In the second, often tragic denouement, the *bandolera* repents of her immoral lifestyle and devotes herself to God, achieving sainthood, or else she must be seen to pay for her transgression through suffering and death (Parker, 1973: 153-4).

The bandit and saint juxtaposition is a feature of Spanish Golden Age drama which links to the worship of dead bandits converted to saints in parts of Latin America. Selected Latin American bandits, both male and female, such as nineteenth-century Argentine *montonero*/*guerrilla* fighters María Chapanay and Antonio ‘Gauchito’ Gil, have long inspired quasi-religious worship and Pancho Villa, too, has progressed from national icon to object of

popular religious devotion (Jónsdóttir, 2010: 101). Yet others, such as Lampião in northeast Brazil, professed a strong Catholic faith and allied themselves closely to religious leaders. In Lampião's case, this was to the *santos* of the *sertão*: 'rural messianic leaders' such as Father Cícero (Hobsbawm, 1972: 28). This peculiarly Hispanic apotheosis from bandit to saint is partially explained by Alexander Parker. He states that bravery overlaps both roles and so, 'because bandits are brave and fearless they can become saints' (1973: 155). Bandits possess 'strong passions' that have been diverted into criminality, but those passions can also prove their salvation when directed towards the ardent self-sacrifice required for sainthood (155). It is also clear that in the rigid moral framework of Golden-Age Spain, allowing a female bandit to convert to sainthood was preferable to maintaining her as an outlaw, with all the subversive implications that would have carried for the social status quo.<sup>4</sup>

Lope de Vega stands alone among the Golden Age dramatists reviewed, in that on occasion he was prepared to rupture the established social framework by allowing his bandit heroines to continue to be bandits. One example of this is Lope's comedy *El anzuelo de Fenisa* (1617), as Anita Stoll sets out in her article on the subject (1991: 245-258). Fenisa, the heroine, is described as a *pícaro* and a *mujer varonil*, and following the format previously described, the duped woman avenges herself against men by becoming a thief. Fenisa herself is eventually outmanoeuvred in this play, but despite this she defies social expectations by refusing to repent or turn to God. Instead in an 'early literary expression of feminism' she continues her career as an independent *bandolera* (McKendrick, 1973: 187). The trend of *serranas* becoming *bandidas* in Spanish culture reflected the historical reality. Eric Hobsbawm states that 'the phenomenon may [have] come from Andalusia', and continued well into the nineteenth century. He mentions two recorded nineteenth-century Andalusian

*bandidas*: ‘Torralba of Lucena [who wore male dress] and María Márquez Zafra [La Marimacho]’ (1972: 136).

Tellingly, Latin American bandit culture does not normally allow its *bandoleras* the same freedom to continue as outlaws. The future of the nation takes precedence over questions of female rebelliousness against social strictures. This is the case with the character Doña Bárbara in Rómulo Gallegos’s 1929 novel of the same name. Bárbara remains one of the most prominent Latin American fictional representations of the female outlaw. In common with Lope’s Fenisa, she has been set upon her unlawful course partly to avenge an injustice — in her case, the rape she suffered in girlhood at the hands of river pirates (Alonso, 1990:131). Though a landowner, Doña Bárbara engages in bandit-like activities, such as cattle rustling, and again, reflecting Lope’s Fenisa, she could be described as the Latin American equivalent of the *mujer varonil*, or masculine woman. She has usurped the land from its legitimate owner, Santos Luzardo, and has manoeuvred herself into the position of a *cacique*, or local boss, much like the *gaucho* bandit Facundo Quiroga in Sarmiento’s *Facundo* (1845). Like Facundo, Bárbara, whose name is a play on *barbarie*, is often viewed as a crude signifier of barbarism and backwardness, a path away from which Venezuela as much as Argentina needed to steer itself, according to Gallegos and Sarmiento (Alonso, 1990: 117). Bárbara, the wild woman is identified with the wild natural landscape she inhabits and both of them need to be tamed and civilised by the male character, Santos Luzardo. Narrative anxiety ensures therefore that unlike Fenisa, Bárbara is not allowed to continue her career of outlawry. She leaves the *llano*, her brand of barbarity having been put in its place, allowing the supposedly civilised qualities of Luzardo to take precedence. However, as contradictory as it sounds, a lingering sense of admiration for Bárbara perhaps remains. As with the character Don Segundo Sombra, she is a vestige of a lost past that has been necessarily suppressed but is still tacitly admired.

An exception to this trend in Latin American bandit literature is the character of la Pintada in Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo* (1915). Pintada is a forceful and often violent *bandida* who joins Macías's band when its activities have degenerated into banditry rather than fighting the enemy, be they federalist forces or rival constitutionalist factions. The predatory Pintada is presented with no redeeming features: she has no interest in fighting for any idealist cause, and is concerned only to further her own ends. Pintada aggressively claims her share of the loot obtained on raids and murders her rival, Camila, in a fit of pique. Demetrio Macías, the leader of the band, seems powerless to stop this monstrous *mujer varonil* and Azuela also chooses to let this *bandida* go unpunished. La Pintada eventually drifts away from the narrative and presumably towards further misdeeds. Here Azuela seems to be demonstrating the anarchic and hopeless state to which revolutionary Mexico has now plummeted. The role of la Pintada, female *guerrilla*/bandit, will be further explored in Chapter Three.

To some extent, the neglectful coverage of Latin American female bandits in recorded history and folklore has been replaced by a current cultural attraction to *bandidas*. This is exemplified by Jorge Franco's novel, *Rosario Tijeras* (1999), about a young, beautiful hitwoman or *sicaria* in 1980s Medellín, Colombia. Rosario is something of an avenging bandit. Having been raped as a teenager, she takes revenge on her assailant and daily avenges herself against the world, with the random slayings she is hired to commit for the cocaine barons (Aviv, 2009). Franco's novel and its charismatic bandit heroine have become something of a literary sensation since its publication, inspiring a 2005 film of the same name and a song, 'Rosario Tijeras', composed and sung by the Colombian pop star, Juanes (Southern, undated).

Another literary sensation on the theme of the female outlaw is *La Reina del Sur* (2002) (*The Queen of the South*) by the Spanish author Arturo Pérez Reverte, which has since (in 2011) been adapted by the U.S. network Telemundo into a popular *telenovela*, complete with

eponymous soundtrack. The *telenovela* was shot mainly in Spain following the furore over the film version of the novel which had to be abandoned in 2009 given the clout of the drug cartels in Sinaloa, Mexico where filming was due to take place. The cartels objected to the cinematic representation of their trade and security concerns halted the entire production (Adams, 2009, De la Fuentes, 2009). The novel looks at the contemporary drug wars through the eyes of the character Teresa Mendoza, a young Mexican thrust into the spotlight when her partner, a pilot for a Sinaloa cartel, is discovered to be double-dealing the organisation and is murdered. Teresa flees to southern Spain and determines to avenge the crime, as did Rosario Tijeras. But Teresa does not just become an assassin like Rosario; over time she rises to become the legendary head of a powerful cartel. Though a work of fiction, the novel is widely believed to be based on the life of ‘La Reina del Pacífico’, Sandra Ávila Beltrán, a powerful operator in the Sinaloa cartel (Martínez, 2011, BBC Mundo online, 2012) and niece of the once all-powerful *capo* and founder of the Guadalajara cartel Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo (Vros, 2011).<sup>5</sup>

Ávila Beltrán is by no means the only female cartel leader to emerge. As Paul Harris (2009) comments, ‘women have always played a key role’ in the drugs business in Mexico and beyond. An early recorded example, before the days of the cartels, is that of Lola la Chata, an influential Mexican heroin and marijuana trafficker in Mexico City from the 1930s through to the end of the 1950s, with ‘widely acknowledged ties to those in power’, including politicians, police and judges, who abetted and prolonged her highly successful trafficking career and ensured that, even during her prison terms, La Chata’s criminal empire continued to run smoothly (Carey, 2009: 68 and 8, Astorga, 1999). Concurrent with La Chata was the premier marijuana and sometimes heroin trafficker in Ciudad Juárez, La Nacha, who died in 1977. La Nacha was notable, for her ‘business, public relations and negotiating skills’ as well

as for her philanthropic tendencies in the region which included the ‘financing of an orphanage and a free breakfast programme’ (Campbell, 2008: 40). In this way she resembled a kind of Robin Hood figure and her ability to outlast political administrations, a hostile Juárez mayor and U.S. attempts to extradite her is attributed to her popularity in the community and her decision not to expand beyond Juárez into new drugs markets (Campbell, 2008: 51). This was not the case with the notorious Colombian ‘cocaine godmother’ Griselda Blanco. ‘*La madrina*’, who aggressively expanded her cocaine trafficking operation from Colombia into Florida in the 1970s and early 80s, has been held largely responsible for fostering a culture of brutality in Miami during those years, while her organisation, Los Pistoleros, are infamous for pioneering the *sicario*-style murder on a motorbike (Ovalle, 2012, Streatfield, 2005: 237). As Casey Frank, (2012) writing in the *Miami Herald* argues, ‘bad people sometimes make good stories’. This is undoubtedly true for Blanco, already the subject of two internationally-known documentaries, *Cocaine Cowboys* (2006) and *Cocaine Cowboys II: Hustlin’ with the Godmother* (2008). Furthermore, following her own *sicario*-style murder in September 2012, there has been renewed interest in the godmother, with Blanco the subject of at least two upcoming films, one of which is rumoured to star Hollywood actress Jennifer López (Robles and Bargent, 2012).

The *bandida* role has recently proved attractive to top-line *Latina*-film stars such as Penelope Cruz and Salma Hayek who starred in *Bandidas* (2006), a comedy Western set in nineteenth-century Durango, northern Mexico, *Bandidas* follows the fortunes of two fictional Latina lovelies, turned bank-robbing Robin Hoods. Unlike Doña Bárbara, Rosario Tijeras or Teresa Mendoza, these *bandidas* are not primarily motivated by personal revenge against an androcentric society. They wish to avenge a wider racial injustice that is being perpetuated by *gringo* bankers who are threatening their local Mexican farming community with eviction.

Yet despite its fashionable focus on female rebels, *Bandidas* did not achieve mainstream success. The film opened on limited release in the U.S. and to mixed reviews with critics bemoaning its racial stereotypes of evil *gringo* versus noble Mexican outlaw (Leydon, 2007). In contrast to the gritty portrayals of female outlaws such as Griselda Blanco and Teresa Mendoza, fighting to grasp power in the male-dominated world of narco-trafficking, the anodyne outlaws in *Bandidas* are unconvincing. Salma Hayek has recently taken on the role of ruthless bandit queen with gusto, however, as cartel leader Elena ‘La Reina’ in the Oliver Stone-directed *Savages* (2012). It would seem that in life, as well as in the movies, the face of narco-bossism is increasingly female.

### **The romance of Robin Hood in Latin America**

Latin American bandits, subaltern figures, have overwhelmingly been represented by others, becoming a popular subject of *letrado* artists and writers, but being equally popular subjects in the ballads, songs and stories of the oral cultures that are firmly established in the peasantry. And as Hobsbawm repeatedly highlights in Chapter Nine of *Bandits*, it was on this folklore, the original surviving material on many bandit figures, that many a writer relied on for inspiration when writing about banditry (1969: 109-115). This placed production and control of the bandit image back in the peasant orbit. This originary location in oral culture could be said to apply to the noble bandit prototype, Robin Hood of Sherwood himself, whose historical background remains shrouded in mystery. Most critics have concluded that Robin Hood is likely to have been a purely mythical and literary figure (Dobson and Taylor in Knight, 1999: 182-3, Gray in Knight, 1999: 32, Hilton in Knight, 1999:197), or at best a compound of a number of historical persons and a blend of ‘fact and fiction’ (Holt in Knight, 1999: 232). The Robin Hood myth first arose between the twelfth or thirteenth centuries with the growth of oral balladry that celebrated a putative Robin Hood. From its peasant origins



the myth was remoulded over the years to suit new generational tastes and fulfil the aspirations of every audience, be they peasants or nobility.<sup>6</sup> So, despite Hobsbawm's insistence on his peasant origins, the Robin Hood myth, it is clear, outstripped its humble origins and broadened its appeal.

But how did a Medieval Anglo-Saxon outlaw come to be adopted as the prototype for social bandits the world over and in Latin America particularly? The answer lies in the timeless power and appeal of the myth of the social bandit which Hobsbawm has argued can be found in most pre-industrial peasant societies (1969: 19), a description which applies to many of the regions of Latin America during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their Golden Age of banditry. It is an argument which contemporary folklore scholar, Graham Seal, reiterates when he outlines the 'Robin Hood Principle', stating that 'the need to generate and perpetuate the noble robber, good thief or the social bandit is found in cultures around the world [...] Despite many local adaptations and inflections, at the core of the facts and fictions surrounding outlaw heroes remains the belief that he, and very occasionally she, robs the rich to give to the poor' (2009: 69). In Latin America as elsewhere, then, the noble bandit and his oppressors 'appear to act out a cultural script with their roles predetermined by the tradition'. This almost invariably ends with the death and martyrdom of the outlaw who then develops an 'afterlife that feeds back into the tradition, both keeping the legend alive and providing the basis for the next individual to raise a sword, bow, or gun against an oppressive power' (69). It is this cycle of heroisation and the creation of bandit afterlives that we see repeated time and again in Latin America, regardless of whether the outlaws in question were true historical noble robbers. Even if most of the bandits in question had a sinister side that belied their 'social' credentials, this was invariably smudged out by their inevitable mythification. The Robin Hood bandit continues to have cultural purchase in many parts of the continent even

today with the continued celebration of so-called social bandit exemplars of the Golden Age, such as Pancho Villa in revolutionary Mexico and more contemporary icons believed to fit the prototype, such as Pablo Escobar in Colombia (Streatfeild, 2005: 262, Grillo, 2011: 300).

The approach taken to banditry in this book is thus informed by Hobsbawm's and Seal's identification of the powerful Robin Hood myth and bandit afterlives, but it is also concerned to unpick that myth where relevant, to uncover the nefarious other, the ignoble bandit often obscured by the myth. Clearly, there are limitations as to the number of sources that can be viewed over such a vast continent and during the hundred-year period in question, and so to avoid generalisation the book will focus on Mexico as its starting point and the centre of the social bandit phenomenon during the Golden Age, and focus most intensely on literary sources, supported by theoretical, historical and journalistic approaches where appropriate. Work focusing on elite discourses of banditry, such as the novel and other literature about bandits, has been undertaken very insightfully already in Dabove's *Nightmares of the Lettered City* (2007). The same is true of literary discourses on Pancho Villa, the subject of Max Parra's *Writing Pancho Villa's Revolution* (2005). While acknowledging the debt to these two major recent works in bandit studies, the emphasis here, where appropriate, is on popular as well as elite discourses of banditry, *corridos* as well as novels. Indeed, a figure such as Pancho Villa, who, as Dabove explains was excluded from Mexican elite discourse in the immediate post-revolutionary period, but flourished as a subject of discussion in popular discourse (2007: 39), highlights a need to combine discussion of popular and elite narratives, as analysis of competing discourses helps to illuminate most comprehensively this bandit's contradictory persona. Furthermore, whilst it is true that popular oral forms, such as *corridos*, were intended to be sung and listened to by an audience rather than to be read in isolation, much of their meaning can still be conveyed on the page. In addition, some literary works of

the Revolution, such as the novella, *Cartucho* (1931) (*Cartridge*) by Nellie Campobello, advertise their multi-disciplinarity by referring to and sometimes including fragments of *corridos*. Some narratives of the Mexican Revolution, it appears, incorporate a tissue of different discourses, both popular and elite, and so for this book it has proven instructive to cross-reference between the two.

<sup>1</sup> All translations, unless otherwise indicated in the text, are the author's own.

<sup>2</sup> *Haiduks* are, in Hobsbawm's analysis, rural Balkan bandits who were operative from the fifteenth-century onwards (1969: 61). As they opposed the influence of foreign rulers, *haiduks* could be equated with guerrillas or political insurgents.

<sup>3</sup> The scholarly project, 'Bold Caballeros and Noble Bandidas' contests this view, claiming that there were actually far more *bandidas* in Latin American history and culture than conventional historical research has allowed for. This, it is argued, has skewed our perceptions of banditry as being a male preserve, when women were always actively involved as outlaws, rebels and fighters (ASU, 2009). Research over the past twenty years, for instance, Elizabeth Salas's 1990 study, *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military*, and Elena Poniatowska's 1999 study, *Las soldaderas*, has been increasingly uncovering the significant role that women bandits, soldiers and rebels played in key historical events, such as the Mexican Revolution. However, despite this shift, there remains a distinct lack of information about specific *bandidas* in many major commentaries on Latin American banditry. This may be because information about *bandidas* has been suppressed by biased reporting (ASU, 2009). Alternatively, evidence of female bandits could simply have been missed, because such women felt it necessary to disguise themselves as men in order to be accepted in what was a male-dominated arena. One figure who adopted male dress was the nun, soldier and sometime bandit, Catalina Erauso. She was a seventeenth-century Basque noblewoman who escaped the confines of a Spanish monastery for the rough and tumble of soldiering, and sometimes banditry in Latin America. Her unconventional story was well documented at the time and made her a *cause célèbre* (Velasco, 2001: 2).

<sup>4</sup> Critics stress the rigidity of Spanish society at that time, and in particular the importance placed on honouring paternal authority (McKendrick, 1973: 185, Parker, 1973: 152-3, 156, Smith, 1991: 20-21). A woman who had been ‘dishonoured’ risked the ‘*desprecio*’ of her family and her community, leading her to banditry (McKendrick, 1973: 169). This choice was often represented by the dramatists as an acceptable response to the injury suffered. However, maintaining women as bandits outside of society was problematic, and most of the dramatists resolved the issue of the female rebel through a well-placed marriage or religious conversion.

<sup>5</sup> Ávila Beltrán has been in the headlines since 2007 when she was arrested in Mexico and imprisoned on money laundering charges. In August 2012 she was extradited to the U.S. to face charges related to drug trafficking (Harris, 2012)

<sup>6</sup> In the earliest surviving information, Robin Hood is invariably described as a ‘yeoman’ or freeborn peasant (Hill in Knight, 1999: 289).

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