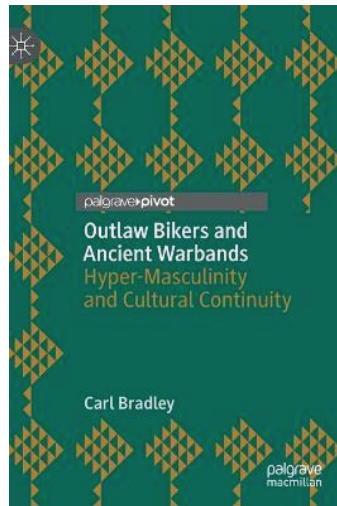


BOOK REVIEW:  
OUTLAW BIKERS AND ANCIENT WARBANDS:  
HYPER-MASCULINITY AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY

Carl Bradley, *Outlaw Bikers and Ancient Warbands: Hyper-Masculinity and Cultural Continuity* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2021), pp.134.



Carl Bradley's much anticipated first book is a timely and welcome contribution to our shared understanding of outlaw biker groups. By focusing on how these groups use violence to forge a strong sense of collective identity among their members while maintaining intragroup order and to pursue some of their more pernicious ends while engaging in intergroup rivalries, Bradley demonstrates why outlaw biker groups are an increasingly important phenomenon in the conduct of contemporary world affairs and, as such, worthy of sustained scholarly attention. Just as the number of these groups increases throughout Europe and North America, as well as in Australia and New Zea-

land, the membership of outlaw biker groups - including those who choose to associate with them - continue to grow. Bradley underscores the extent to which these groups are a force to be reckoned with at the local, national and global levels, illustrating how the reach of their power broadens and deepens through the many international connections fostered among these bikers. This sometimes results in the 'patching over' of a smaller group into a larger one and, at other times, increases the scale, or intensifies the frequency, of a group's transnational activities.

Bradley describes how these groups emerged and then spread during the second half of the twentieth century. He explains the gradual process by which biker groups link across disparate and distinct geographies:

Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia are important locations to highlight here as both countries, made up of previous British colonies, saw small groups of men form outlaw biker clubs, embracing the culture and setting the scene that would be repeated by the Hells Angels and Bandidos in Canada, Scandinavia, and other parts of Europe. For the Hells Angels, Auckland city in Aotearoa New Zealand was their first chapter outside California; for the Bandidos, Sydney Australia was their first outside of the United States. From these beginnings, there were moves into Europe and, now, the internationalization of the outlaw biker culture is spreading across parts of South East Asia and into South America" (p. 14).

He draws particular attention to those combat veterans who, returning home from conflict theatres and leaving military service, found outlaw biker groups offered them familiar opportunities to bond with other men, enact hyper-masculine ideas and actively contribute to the cohesion of small groups. Even though these bikers tend to be highly sociable, evidenced through their frequent use of club houses and bars, these groups are alienated from their wider societies. They are routinely involved in the so-called shadow economy, thereby marking themselves as separate from the rest of society. For Bradley, members of these groups are, therefore, best understood as liminal social figures. Estranged from the wider communities to which they belong, they make easy targets for those who need a scapegoat for certain behaviors privately indulged in, but also public censored by, mainstream society. Moreover, these groups become readily identifiable targets for law makers and security professionals.

Yet Bradley takes a broader, longer-term view, signaling the importance of the material conditions that give rise to this phenomenon by referring to neoliberalism, the inequalities that neoliberal policies and practices produce, and the recent impacts of COVID-19, which he treats as an intensifier of these inequalities. Bradley argues that "the effects of economic and class marginalisation under successive western democratic governments and policy decisions suggest that the shadow economy provides a means to earn money in a system dominated by capitalist ideas, albeit in the trade of illicit

goods” (p. 51). For those policymakers who see outlaw biker groups as a ‘problem’ to be solved through a tough stance on crime, these material conditions are a root cause that is seldom acknowledged, let alone addressed, even as the social cleavages driven by economic inequalities continue to deepen.

Bradley identifies the main characteristics of these outlaw biker groups as brotherhood, which “excludes women and other men who do not share the patch or the hyper-masculine markers” (p.19); demonstrable warrior prowess; being bound by oath and honour and observing codes of loyalty and bravery; and outwardly celebrating “the gory and bloody nature of warfare” (p.24). The concept of hyper-masculinity, and the associated practices of prioritising the needs and wants of a small group of men ahead of other men and all women, is the key that unlocks Bradley’s thinking on the rise and spread of these groups, as well as on their modes of conduct. It is a concept that underpins, sustains and justifies the use of violence, including highly gendered violence against women used to control them through fear, and justified by a toxic logic of patriarchy that views women as little more than the property of men and who need to be protected from themselves and others. It is Bradley’s thesis that outlaw biker groups draw on, sustain, and advance this set of cultural ideas, values and practices, the roots of which go right back to Antiquity and the first efforts to record human history.

In order to accurately describe the main characteristics of his subject matter and to more comprehensively understand the outlaw biker’s world, Bradley draws not only on the very latest international scholarship from criminology, but also on recent news reporting, ‘true crime’ journalism and the memoirs of ex-bikers. Notwithstanding the book’s insightful exposition of a violent group in contemporary world affairs, perhaps the book’s most enduring intellectual contribution lies in its innovative comparative approach. Bradley not only sees similarities between outlaw bikers and ancient warbands, but consults an array of ancient sources – including the writings of Julius Caesar and Tacitus as well as Aneurin’s Golodin and the Old English saga, *Beowulf*, which are in turn buttressed by the work of archaeologists specialising in Iron Age societies – to devise a bespoke analytic framework to make sense of outlaw biker groups as a contemporary phenomenon. This is salient when researching violent groups that tend to be highly suspicious of outsiders. There are few scholars who possess the intellectual acuity required to design such a framework, but Bradley’s doctoral research at the Classics Department within the University of Newcastle, Australia, equipped him well for this arduous task.

This surefooted and intellectually productive effort has yielded an approach for making better sense of outlaw biker groups that will also enable a greater comprehension of other kinds of violent groups that draw on, and sustain, cultures of hyper-masculinity. Bradley not only concludes that “outlaw bikers are just one group within modern society that prioritise hyper-masculinity in the formation, socialization and enforcement of

hegemonic masculinity” (p. 115), but he also points to specialist armed policing units and elite special forces in the military as constituting other violent groups in contemporary society, and suggests that some high-profile team sports engage in symbolic forms of combat, but without brandishing actual weapons of war. Yet Bradley’s framework will also serve as a robust basis from which to compare and contrast a range of other collectivities that use violence for nefarious ends from across multiple geographic locales, including some street gangs, organised criminal groups, belligerents in situations of armed conflict, private military companies, and terrorist groups.

In a deeply thoughtful chapter, Bradley takes aim at the reductive way in which security professionals respond to outlaw biker groups by using armed force. In one of the book’s most memorable phrases, Bradley uses the metaphor of a hammer and anvil used to crack a ball bearing in order to illustrate the problematic approach taken by law enforcement officers (p. 87). If hyper-masculinity lies at the heart of groups that cohere around the use of violence to achieve strategic ends, then outlaw biker groups and the security professionals who counter them are, in this sense, two violent sides of the same hyper-masculine coin. This problematical link is especially evident when combat veterans become outlaw bikers following their experiences in wars waged by governments and their militaries.

Bradley had previously published on the significance of two-horse chariots used by Iron Age Britons in response to Julius Caesar’s invasion of 55 BC (Bradley 2009) and, with Rhys Ball, on the significance of New Zealand’s military defeat at Gallipoli and the ensuing ANZAC tradition to the development of New Zealand’s national identity (Bradley and Ball 2017). Bradley also published his research into the use of violence by outlaw biker groups and patched street gangs to further their nefarious interests in the shadow economy (Bradley 2020a), the internationalisation of outlaw biker groups (Bradley 2020b), and the challenge these groups pose to national security (Bradley 2017). *Outlaw Bikers and Ancient Warbands: Hyper-Masculinity and Cultural Continuity* draws on, consolidates and advances that earlier work. It is an excellent first book. While it makes an important contribution to knowledge on outlaw bikers in its own right, the book does not pretend to offer the final word on its subject matter. Rather, like the very best scholarship, this book breaks new ground so that the work of other researchers may flourish. More specifically, *Outlaw Bikers and Ancient Warbands* invites other researchers in sociology and criminology, politics and international relations, history and security studies to gather further empirical evidence and assemble more case studies in order to compare and contrast the rise and spread of violent groups within contemporary society, better explaining their deeper causes and contexts, and better understanding their longer term and more profound consequences.

The book's enduring legacy will, undoubtedly, be the new research agenda that now lies in its wake. While Bradley casts light on the similarities between ancient warriors and contemporary outlaw bikers, work remains to demonstrate the cultural continuity of hyper-masculinity by carefully tracing the specific pathways by which this set of ideas, values and practices is transmitted from Antiquity, through the Middle Ages and Modernity, up until the present moment. Bradley's somewhat narrow concept of organised violence as a brutal, high intensity use of force to kill, maim, injure, intimidate or threaten as a means of controlling, subjugating and exploiting other individuals, groups or communities could be broadened to account for other forms of deliberate harm referred to as structural violence (Galtung 1969) or slow violence (Nixon 2011; see also Cusato 2021). Bradley's work begs new questions about cultural discontinuities of hyper-masculinity and the differing roles played by gendered violence in other politico-cultures shaped by contending sacral traditions, such as Islam, Buddhism or Daoism. While Bradley is entirely correct to focus on the significance of the last three or four decades of neoliberal policy preferences in creating and sustaining conditions for the emergence of outlaw biker groups, the deeper and more profound importance of the rise and spread of capitalism since the sixteenth century warrants investigation and elaboration, as does Modernity's reification of the individual as sovereign unto himself and the widespread and ongoing alienation this individualism engenders within modernist societies. Finally, Bradley's materialist account of why these groups personify hyper-masculinity deserves to be complemented by a focus on any conservative ideological commitments held in common by outlaw bikers and white supremacists as well as security professionals in military service, police forces and intelligence agencies.

Here, then, the intellectual challenge posed by this book, especially to those of us engaged in the independent production of knowledge on the collective use of organised violence, is an immense and formidable one. The tragedy is, of course, that Bradley's untimely death, at the age of 51, deprives us of a scholar who was uniquely well placed to progress this much-needed research. As anyone who was fortunate enough to be his colleague or student would testify, Bradley's passion for ideas and curiosity about the world knew no bounds; he relished informed, self-reflexive discussion and valued differing points of view, and was himself a generous, open-minded and open-hearted scholar. In this, his first and, sadly, only book, Bradley bequeaths a challenge to both security professionals and scholars of security studies alike to reconfigure the thorny relationship between objects and subjects of security practice. There is no doubt that Carl Bradley was so much more than a well-liked teacher and much-respected researcher, and so much more than a maturing scholar of criminology and security studies. Despite his endless fascination with Antiquity and his deep concern for the political exigencies of our contemporary moment, Carl was, in many ways, a Renaissance man in the sense that he "could appreciate the riches of classical culture and yet also feel himself breaking

beyond the ancient boundaries to reveal entirely new realms” (Tarnas, p. 224). To be sure, Carl Bradley was a rare and fine human being – at once a son, a brother, a partner, a father and a fine friend to many, not to mention an accomplished martial artist! Thank you, Carl, for your compassion, generosity and kindness. You are, and will forever be, sorely missed. And as you depart this life and make your way towards whatever lies ahead for us in The Beyond, I hope the thirst is upon you my friend – Sláinte!

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