

When Elites and Outlaws Do Philanthropy

On the Limits of Private Vices for Public Benefit

Abstract

Elitist philanthropy exploded in the last decade across the West and so did the philanthropy of outlaw motorcycle clubs and other criminal organizations. The question we must ask is: under what conditions becomes philanthropy an effective strategy of legitimization of one's power in society? In other words: why is philanthropy such an effective ideological phantasy precisely at this moment in history? It appears that neoliberalism did not only result in extreme inequality, weakening of the state, and emergence of increasingly disillusioned population, but also enabled under these conditions philanthropy to become an effective strategy of legitimization of the informal power of both billionaires and criminal organizations. Philanthropy in turn became instrumental to the insertion of these transnational non-state actors into governance, while also improving their image in face of crises of reputation, massive exploitation, human and environmental destruction. However, these destructive effects of neoliberalism did not only allow both groups to grow, but also to reproduce and accelerate the very conditions in which they thrive, thus weakening the state further and fuelling the rise of inequality. The argument counters popular narratives about how private vices and greed can serve public benefit.

Keywords: philanthropy, outlaw motorcycle clubs, neoliberalism, non-state governance, crime

‘When there is no longer any violence, there is no need for help,

Therefore you should not demand help, but abolish violence.

Help and violence form a whole,

And the whole has to be changed’

(Brecht 1967: 599)

Philanthropy: An Ideological Fantasy

‘Last Christmas [1973], more than 200 [Hells] Angels rode their motorcycles to City Hall to present a couple of truckloads of toys for underprivileged children to city officials.

“It’s hard to tell someone we’re not a bunch of murderers when you get a few of us in jail for murder,” says Phil Cross, former president of the San Jose chapter’ (Los Angeles

1974). An extreme example is always more revealing of the nature of our ordinary social practices. This news report strikes at the heart of philanthropic activity: philanthropy

often presents itself as the answer to the question of ‘how to convince someone that we are not just a bunch of heartless, ruthless and greedy criminals/capitalists/exploiters’?

And thus, how to legitimize our really existing power and acquire support despite our misconducts?

What is fascinating about philanthropy is how effective it is precisely against our better knowledge. Consider this for instance: police are always quick to denounce the charity of outlaw motorcycle clubs such as the notorious Hells Angels, simply because they regard them as cold-blooded transnational criminal organizations; they remind the good citizens time and again that they should not fall for the publicity stunts of these clubs. To them, such investments in charity only reveal the level of the maturity of these organization and their ambition to acquire popular support. Irrespective of the knowledge about crime and violence connected to these clubs, adults and children alike write thank you notes to the club members, admire them, turn them into their heroes, send messages reading 'respect', and proclaim their everlasting support. The situation is no different in the case of star philanthropists. Only here the police remain typically silent and more forgiving of white collar financial crime and extreme labour exploitation, or of what Michael Woodiwiss fittingly labelled 'gangster capitalism' (Woodiwiss 2005). Take for instance Bill Gates, the iconic and most celebrated philanthropic hero. It is worth reminding ourselves that he established the *Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation* as a direct response to a crisis of legitimacy. Throughout the 1990s, Microsoft was pursued by the Justice Department, which in 2000 accused Microsoft of unlawful monopolization and of crippling competitors, which led to fines from United States and European Union and damages to Bill Gates' public image. Microsoft has been, too, linked to exploitation of child labour

and workers around the globe. We even know that *Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation* has been giving financial gifts to other for-profit (!) corporations, such as Mastercard, in order to further its own agenda (McGoey 2015b), a practice that is in theory illegal. And yet, despite all of this, Gates and many others like him, who have faced similar scandals, were able to turn themselves into globally celebrated humanitarians, who claim to know best how turn the world into a better place (McGoey 2015a). The fascinating thing here is that philanthropy thrives against all the critique and all the suspicion it has faced throughout history. We could ask – is it so that philanthropy successfully diverts our attention from objectionable practices and simply creates an image of legitimacy, ready-made for consumption?

Ilan Kapoor has argued that such a ‘construction of celebrity corporate philanthropy helps repudiate corporate capitalism’s “dirty” underside, which is to say that celebrity charity helps stabilize and advance the global neoliberal capitalist order’ (Kapoor 2016: 113). While this may be the case, the interesting thing here is that this still works against our better knowledge. Only since 1973, when the first toy run was organized by the notorious Hells Angels, this outlaw motorcycle club (OMC) expanded into over fifty countries around the world with more than four hundred charters and even more support clubs. Along with other big and smaller OMCs (Outlaws MC, Bandidos MC, Mongols MC and so on) that follow its organizational and business model, it ended up on EUROPOL’s and

many national governments' priority lists of organized crime threats – notoriously connected to racketeering, smuggling of weapons and drugs, and occasional murder. Media have been increasingly reporting on the security threat these clubs pose, law enforcement agencies have been fuelling funds into combatting them. And yet, we should remind ourselves here that the ordinary actions of businessmen are often far more destructive than those of these intimidating groups (Woodiwiss 2005). In this sense, they can rather provide us with a microscopic extreme example of what is happening on the top, as an ordinary practice – and with it also reveal the shared logic of these processes on the top and the bottom. Not unlike the philanthropic billionaires, these so-called one-percenters have witnessed both a rocket expansion, and massive media controversies around their criminal engagements. This expansion combined with controversy and negative press has also led to their increased involvement in philanthropy and charity in an attempt to legitimize their increasing informal power. And in many places, they have been successful. They have become heroes for a certain segment of disillusioned population in the West, of people who know quite well that the bad boys are involved in crime, but who are still willing to see past that and instead celebrate them as their heroes – not unlike the star philanthropists.

It thus appears that philanthropy is particularly effective in creating an ideological fantasy, one, that is both general – in its structure, and particular – in its content. At a

general level, philanthropy creates a ‘but still’- structure in the minds of general public. Or better, a structure that can be summed up as ‘I know well, but all the same...’, a structure discovered by the psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni (Mannoni 2003) and further analysed by Robert Pfaller (Pfaller 2014). The problem is not the lack of knowledge. To the contrary, the knowledge sustains a cynical distance towards the disavowed illusion, which in turn enables the illusion to persist and take on real material effects. The structure of the disavowed illusion in regards to philanthropy can be summed up as: ‘I know quite well that Hells Angels are considered a criminal organization, and occasionally they shoot some people and deal in drugs or weapons and so on, but still, I can’t help myself thinking that in the end they have a good heart, they do so much for the community’. The success of philanthropy thus lies in its quality of being primarily an ideological fantasy, and as such practically impossible to unsettle by knowledge (Pfaller 2005). As Robert Pfaller aptly argued, ‘it is precisely our “subversive”, “cynical” distance towards a certain ideology which subjects us to this ideology and allows it to exert its social efficiency’ (Pfaller 2005: 115).

This being said, we must ask, would just about any ideological fantasy do and if not, what makes this one so efficient? While the aforementioned identifies what we are dealing with here, namely an ideological fantasy resistant to knowledge, it does not tell us anything about the reasons as to why precisely this ideological fantasy becomes so successful. An

ideological fantasy must be able to provide us with a certain cultural pleasure, or relief, in a given socio-cultural and economic context. Hence, we could ask, why is it so that philanthropy increasingly delivers such cultural pleasure and relief (as opposed to, for instance, the welfare state), and why is this fantasy increasingly embraced as a viable alternative, equally successful among the elites one hand and the economically and socially marginalized on the other? In order to suggest some tentative answers to these questions, I will broadly draw on my insights from ethnographic fieldworks among Indian business elites and philanthropists (2008-2014) and among outlaw motorcycle clubs in Europe (2015 – now), as well as the growing literature on elite philanthropy and media analysis.

The Emergence of a Power Vacuum

Since the 1970s, we are witnessing a rise of neoliberal economic policies, divisive neoliberal identity politics, and of austerity politics, accompanied by the retreat of the welfare state. This has led to the de-politicization of politics, deindustrialization, loss and outsourcing of manufacturing jobs, stagnation of wages, rise of extreme inequality, privatization of public property, deterioration and privatization of healthcare and education, and accumulation of capital in the hands of few individuals and multinationals (Winlow et al. 2017). ‘This new form of capitalism mocked the modernist state’s ponderous bureaucracies and restrictive legal frameworks. Instead, it presented its new

business activities as a battle fought on behalf of the creative individual against the stuffy old order' (Hall and Winlow 2013: 60). As a result of this broad restructuring and loosening of checks and balances on big business, today, according to a recent Oxfam report, eight individuals own the same amount of wealth as half of the world's population (Oxfam 2017), and even in developed countries such as Germany, one in five children grow up in poverty. This situation has created perfect criminogenic conditions (Hall 2012) as well as a sense of disillusionment, loss and rootlessness among increasing amounts of the population (Winlow et al. 2017). Hence it is no surprise that we are both witnessing a systematic gangsterization of the global economy and the rise of organized crime (Woodiwiss 2005; Hall et al. 2012). These processes have been accompanied by a transfer of responsibility for public goods from the state to individuals, by the emergence of new and more visible public-private partnerships, and outsourcing of security services to private agencies. Corporations have thus taken over a large number of functions previously considered the sole domain of the state, even if they were in practice never its exclusive domain (Lea and Stenson 2007).

In the process, the state has been increasingly cast as inefficient and weakening, an impression exaggerated in the view of a large proportion of the public by its perceived inability to effectively respond to terrorism and to protect its borders against the flow of illegal immigration. Considering the simultaneous very real material impoverishment of

many, these feelings have only been intensified by the ‘metropolitan middle class’s posturing hipster communism and shrill identity politics’ (Winlow et al. 2017: 40), which has driven many towards the right. Paradoxically, the state is becoming more authoritarian and interventionist in the process, criminalizing ever increasing spectrum of behaviours (Walters 2007). And yet, or rather precisely because of this, significant portion of the population in the West today perceive the state as delegitimized, unable to provide its key services, in particular protection (security) and welfare, instead focusing on controlling individual habits and pseudo-political issues, from smoking prohibitions to transgender toilets. At the same time, even mainstream media in countries such as Germany now openly talk about no-go areas in certain of its cities, most prominently Duisburg, where even police fear to enter. In the recent edition of the popular Sunday political talk show *Anne Will*, the proliferation of no-go areas in major cities, run by Lebanese family clans and other more or less organized crime groups, has been openly thematised and analysed in terms of the failure of the *Rechtsstaat* (‘legal state/state of law’ in German jurisprudence); recent polls presented in the show suggested that more than 50% of the population feels unsafe and does no longer believe in the power of the state (Das Erste, TV, 15.01.2017). Coupled with the emergence of a consumerist culture favouring competitive individualism, while feeding citizens the illusion of meritocracy, this has led to a widespread disillusionment, resentment of the establishment, and search for powerful, typically masculine, heroes and saviours, capable of shaking up the

deteriorating state of the affairs. The rise of figures such as Donald Trump, but also of iconic philanthropists, who all cast themselves as powerful saviours, can be understood precisely as a result of this disillusionment, fuelled by rising inequality, deteriorating quality of life, and divisive media. While some would argue that the state and its bureaucratic apparatuses have in fact never been more powerful than today, this has little to do with the actual perception of the state and one's security in it, as stories of police ineffectiveness and corruption proliferate, and as media systematically manufacture an atmosphere of constant threat moving from one 'moral panic' to another (Cohen 1972; Katz 2011).

Proliferation of Non-State Forms of Governance

The overall result of these processes that has led to the de-legitimization of the state has been an emergence of what can be legitimately labelled as a power vacuum in certain localities. We know that such situations are a breeding ground enabling different interest groups to insert themselves into governance. In particular, criminologists and political scientists have been making this point in relation to criminal organizations, militias, guerrilla groups, warlords, mafias and other non-state armed actors (Paoli 2008; Kupatadze 2012; Skaperdas 2001; Davies 2009). Similarly, those critical of multinational corporations have also pointed out their increasing insertion into governance (McGoey 2014; Hay and Muller 2014; Ostrower 1998; Ostrower 2003; Nickel and Eikenberry

2009; Nickel and Eikenberry 2010; Kapoor 2016; Odendahl 1990). However, rarely has the insertion into governance of these two types of organization been thought together.

Most prominently, corporations with their CSR programs and philanthropists proudly replace many of the previous functions of the state, casting themselves in the process as heroes and saviours. Charities become embraced as the solution, an appeasement displacing economic crisis. And yet, as Kuldova has argued, such charitable and benevolent action merely reproduces the status quo, impoverishment and inequality (Kuldova 2016c; Kuldova 2016a; Kuldova 2017). Others have pointed out that ‘charitable tax deductions can disproportionately benefit the well-to-do, thus widening the inequality gap’ (Hay and Muller 2014: 664) and that the state often subsidizes ‘charitable’ individuals and corporations rather than the other way round (Reich 2005). Some seem to believe that if charity did not exist and thus also appease, the masses would mobilize to protest, riot and rally together (Livingstone 2013); that upon removal of charity, a popular uprising would ensue. Even the multi-billionaire owner of Cartier, Johann Rupert, once said that what keeps him awake at night is the thought of the poor rising up and overthrowing the rich (Crone 2015), and yet rather predictably most of his philanthropy is channelled into environmental protection, fighting of wildlife crime, and elite cultural and research institutions. But if the celebrated philanthropic elites suddenly

magically disappeared from the stage, would the masses now appeased by their performances of generosity really revolt?

Precisely here we must not underestimate what we know from various cases from around the world, from Italy, via Mexico to Colombia, namely that a power vacuum is at the same time filled not only by ‘legitimate’ business elites, but also by organized crime groups and gangs, who offer protection services in areas where the state resigns upon its function (Skaperdas 2001; Davies 2009), something that we are also increasingly encountering in places like US or Germany. Mafia, capitalizing on the distrust of government and compensating for absent public justice (Gambetta 1988), has been a well-known example that remains instructive; for instance, the ‘Ndrangheta in Reggio is perceived as a sovereign political entity’ (Pipyrou 2014: 415). Parallel to the emergence of philanthropists, attempting to legitimize their informal power and distract from multiple forms of exploitation and breaches of corporate conduct, we will also see the emergence of criminal organizations operating, albeit some on a smaller scale, according to the same logic. There has been a long discussion about whether organized crime groups resemble most businesses, and should be analyzed as such or whether they should rather be considered as forms resembling the state, even if primitive or parasitic. Sudhir A. Venkatesh has for instance argued that gangs are organizations, whose business model ‘mirrors the structure of just about any other business in America’ (Venkatesh 2008: 35),

while Skaperdas has argued that because of their monopolization of protection (security) gangs and mafias are ‘less akin to firms and more similar to the traditional provider of protection, the state (...) organized crime groups are more similar in their structure and economic impact to pre-modern forms of predatory states’ (Skaperdas 2001: 174). Here, I believe, we can strike a middle ground; the most pertinent comparison in my view is with businesses actively inserting themselves into governance and seeking public legitimacy of doing so, for instance through philanthropy, thus seeking to gain popular support beyond provision of goods and services. In this sense, both philanthropists and organized crime groups can be increasingly perceived as representatives of ‘moral capitalism’, i.e. transnational businesses that take on state-like functions and insert themselves into local governance. This distinction is important as in practice only a minority of businesses act in such a way.

This emergence of different types of transnational non-state governance, from private security and welfare, large scale philanthropy, NGOs and international bodies, to parallel legal orders and criminal governance, that fills the vacuum created by the retreating states, has been nicely categorized by John Lea and Kevin Stenson. They argue that the recent neoliberal transformations lurk behind the proliferation of diverse forms of non-state governance and what they call governance ‘from below’ (Lea and Stenson 2007). They also show, much like Michael Woodiwiss in his work on ‘gangster capitalism’

(Woodiwiss 2005), that the top multinationals often cannot be thought of as separate from the networks of organized crime. It is well known, for instance, that ‘foreign multinationals concerned with oil, diamonds, timber make direct deals with various warlords who, for example, protect and secure exports in return for funding which enables them to sustain their regimes and “criminal” activities’ (Lea and Stenson 2007: 24). Within the neoliberal discourse itself, the growth of transnational non-state governance and the displacement of the state has been celebrated as liberating, unleashing the positive powers of the free market, while depoliticizing governance. However, rather than being liberating, it appears to stimulate the growth of diverse anti-democratic and authoritarian forms, from multinationals to criminal governance and the state itself.

Philanthrocapitalism and Legitimization of Power in Face of Scandals

The 1999 protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organizations, consequent revelations of corporate misconducts, exploitation of (slave) labour, environmental destruction as well as the recent financial crisis of 2008, led to a series of crises of legitimacy of big businesses, and the political establishment. Elitist philanthropy and CSR has become the most popular remedy and response to these crises, coming to rescue their reputations (Singla and Sagar 2004). Doing good and re-inserting morality back into what otherwise appeared as a cold market is also effective in diverting attention away from massive exploitation and environmental destruction. The same that was said about the

mafia, thus holds true even here: the mafia (or philanthropists or outlaw motorcycle clubs) are ‘creating risk with one hand and proffering protection with the other’ (Dickie 2012: Location no. 1271). While the philanthropic actions of the top 1% are being increasingly critically scrutinized, the parallel philanthropic activities of organized criminal groups have been surprisingly neglected, and reduced to brief mentions of the need of such groups to generate trust, reputation or alter their public image (von Lampe and Johansen 2004; Gambetta 2009). At most, the engagement in charity by criminal organizations is perceived as a sign of their maturity as an organization (Gottschalk 2010). But overall, this engagement is typically considered only as the usual shallow scam that criminals engage in. We should pay far more attention to both elitist and outlaw philanthropy and think them more often together. Not only is philanthropy crucial to legitimization of informal power in face of scandals, but it is also symbolically central. Stallybrass and White have in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Stallybrass and White 1986) rightly observed that that which is economically marginal becomes often symbolically central. Even though philanthropy rarely amounts to more than 0,5 – 2% of total income of both types of organizations, it often has tremendous symbolic power. However, again, we must emphasize that the ideological phantasy of philanthropy can be effective only under the aforementioned conditions, such as weakening of the state and emergence of a power vacuum. It is not a coincidence that for instance Hells Angels in Norway, according to their own account, rarely engage in charity, and if they do, they do not attempt to

publicize it, i.e. the opposite of their activities in places like Germany. They themselves say that such an engagement is generally perceived as negative and leads to negative press, facilitating distrust rather than increased trust and support. The reason for this is that the welfare state in Norway still remains strong in the imagination of the vast majority of the population, and people display a significant amount of trust in it. It is thus not the case that the outlaw motorcycle clubs in Norway would be somehow backward and less developed as opposed to their German counterparts. No, instead we must insist that this difference can be explained by external factors that either enable or disable certain actions. Is the state perceived as strong by general public, it becomes far more difficult for criminal organizations to legitimize their informal power through philanthropic engagement. Philanthropy as an effective legitimization strategy thus requires particular structural conditions in order to thrive, be it the one of the top 1% or of the outlaw 1%.

Engaging in ethical business has become in the last decade an effective strategy of market capture, one that thrives in a political environment saturated with moral judgements, and where the belief that individual consumer habits can transform the world into a better place is being promoted in order to displace responsibility onto individuals. ‘Moral entrepreneurs’ (Becker 1963) pop up at every corner of the social media, gentrified neighbourhoods and across the political and activist landscapes. Along with this moralization of the market, the idea of ‘philanthrocapitalism’ as a global, transnational,

business solution to problems largely created by capitalism has taken hold (Bishop and Green 2008). Suddenly, it was no longer the state, which was presented as inefficient, and no longer the NGOs, which were labelled as corrupt, that was supposed to deliver social services and protection. Instead, this task was taken on by the business elite, which has prided itself on its efficiency, lack of bureaucracy, fast action, and managerial skills as well as a special eye for the most pressing causes. This shift is most obvious in places like India, where I conducted long term research since 2008 onwards. Prior to and around 2008, the Indian press unanimously considered greed as bad and along with it also all Indian millionaires. Suddenly, in 2011, the Indian millionaires were represented in mainstream press as patriotic benevolent superheroes – only businessmen could save the world in face of global challenges and inefficient governments, or so the logic went. In response to the aforementioned crises of legitimacy, magazines like *Forbes India* began aggressively pushing the idea of the generous and caring Indian business elites, a ‘force of good’ and in 2009 established annual events such as *Philanthropy Awards*. Men like Ratan Tata have become the new heroes, the guarantors of a bright future of economic prosperity, international investments and of the caring hand of big business. The fact that Tata Foundation has given more to the Harvard Business School than to any educational institution in India or the scandalous land grabs in Singur have not threatened Tata’s iconic status as an entrepreneurial national hero. Irrespective of all these scandals, much like in the case of organized crime groups, the ideological phantasy of philanthropy is

efficient and thrives in a climate of political disillusionment with the state and even here we can observe the rise to power of muscular heroes, from Indian billionaires to the Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Kuldova 2014; Kuldova 2015).

Philanthrocapitalism has been programmatically promoted by books such as *Philanthrocapitalism: How the Rich Can Save the World and Why we Should Let Them* (Bishop and Green 2008) or Zoltan Acs' *Why Philanthropy Matters* (Acs 2014). Acs has openly argued that greed is good and that private vice can lead to the utmost positive public benefits, including equality and democracy, and we must embrace philanthropy in place of the state. According to Acs, capitalism and democracy will triumph globally when coupled with an unprecedented turn to philanthropy. And yet, we are witnessing precisely the opposite, the rise of diverse authoritarian forms of governance under which capitalism thrives far better than under democracy (Deppe 2013). Moreover, we know that philanthropic donations are not only unreliable, depending on the whims and tastes of the millionaires, but also mostly go to elitist educational and art institutions that reproduce the status quo, rather than unsettling it (Ostrower 1998; Ostrower 2003; Odendahl 1990; Reich 2005; Kapoor 2016). In his lecture at the Oxford Centre for the Study of Philanthropy, Zoltan Acs opened his talk, confident about his audience, by

saying that ‘we all hate Picketty’¹. It is no coincidence that philanthropy becomes most popular in times of extreme inequality, such as in the Victorian era, as those who exploit labour come to search for sources of moral capital and legitimacy (Little 2015).

Seeking to acquire moral capital and legitimacy of one’s social power and use of violence is as important for legal businesses as for criminal organizations. As Skaperdas argued, ‘whether out of genuine conviction, guilt, or narrow self-interest, many major organized crime figures are also involved in charity and public service. The leader of the Shanghai Green Gang, Du Yuesheng, became a major community leader and philanthropist. (...) Genuine propaganda or not, the outward projection of the provider-of-public-good image is often an important, if not necessary, component of organizations that have matured enough to compete with the state itself’ (Skaperdas 2001: 186). Similarly, once the *The Los Angeles Times* even labelled the iconic founding father of the Hells Angels (est. 1957), Sonny Barger (Barger 2001), as an entrepreneur and philanthropist. Not unlike elite neoliberal philanthropists, he too believes that the state is increasingly both weak and authoritarian at the same time and is quoted as saying that ‘the government is the bully’ (Sipchen 1994: E4).

¹ <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/what-philanthropy-and-why-does-it-matter-21st-century> (accessed 5 January 2017).

Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs and Charity

In the US, the involvement of the outlaw bikers and biker organizations in charitable giving has been longstanding, beginning with regular biker clubs. However, it was first in the mid 1970s that the outlaw motorcycle clubs began actively attempting to change their public image and claim that while they may look rough and tough, they have soft and generous hearts. The first toy runs coincided with the period of the mid-70s when the outlaw bikers began organizing themselves, together with regular bikers, in opposition to the notorious helmet law and thus also against the paternalistic state restricting their freedoms in the name of security, claiming to know better what is good for them than they themselves. In the same period, even outlaw motorcycle clubs began systematically using legal help to fight for their rights; also, for the first time, the Hells Angels MC registered their the notorious ‘death head’ as their trademark in 1978, followed later on by other big OMCs (Kuldova 2016b). Given this, some have even thought about outlaw motorcycle clubs alongside regular civil society organizations (Wijkström 1998). In 1990, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a headline ‘Hells Angels Make Good Neighbors in Ventura’ⁱ, making visible the concerns of the clubs in respect to gaining support in neighborhoods where they claim their territory. Endorsements from neighbors serve as a source of positive reputation, which can be transformed into moral capital, similarly to charitable involvements. Recently, media in Scandinavia widely reported that the residents of Nyborg in Denmark prefer the Hells Angels as their neighbors to refugees;

as a response the Hells Angels issued a press release and came to the defense of refugees, urging the population not to blame them, but instead direct their concerns at the politicians (Jakobsen 2016).

While the American outlaw motorcycle clubs engaged much earlier in charitable action and the notorious toy runs, with mixed success (Nichols 2012), across the ocean, outlaw motorcycle clubs in Europe in the 1990s were still living up the violent mythology; biker wars dominated the media, especially in Scandinavia. Outlaw motorcycle clubs in Europe began only fairly recently seriously engaging in charity and fundraising. This has been on one hand a result of an increased pressure on the clubs, their criminalization, their own criminal acts and controversy in the media, and on the other something enabled by the rise of social media, and thus easy and free online promotion of events as well as of alternative media outlets; these often endorse right leaning ‘anti-establishment’ narratives, in which the rebels and the outlaws represent the heroic and mythological characters fighting the unjust system – a Clint Eastwood-like utopia. But the engagement with charity is also coterminous with their transnational expansion; the rise of these clubs, in turn, should not only be credited to the effective marketing of the leading outlaw motorcycle clubs such as the Hells Angels MC, which are now an iconic American brand, but also to the economic and social crises resulting from neoliberal policies worldwide, along with what is often perceived by club members as the ideological and moral

confusions of post-modernism, rise of individualism and dissolution of traditional communities.

Since legitimacy is an unstable quality, which needs to be repetitively recreated, charitable events proliferate, taking place increasingly often. The strong muscular underdogs are seen as caring for the weakest in society, most often poor or ill children, orphans, single mothers, people with disabilities, homeless people, veterans, and drug addicts. If there is at first sight something that distinguishes elitists from outlaw philanthropy, it is the investment in very different causes. Where the elite tends to fund elitist institutions, the outlaws support those abandoned by everyone else, in the process insisting on proving the ineffectiveness of the state. Both forms of giving are, however, directed at the reproduction of the status quo, including one's own power within it, rather than its transformation – even if, in the process, certain people undoubtedly benefit from these actions. One's private vice can be turned into another's private good, but it cannot turn into a public good at large – on the structural level philanthropy reproduces and even accelerates the system that enabled it to emerge in the first place and that is not in public interest.

Outlaw motorcycle clubs offer a brotherhood, a warm community of 'mechanic solidarity' (Durkheim 1947), as opposed to what its members often perceive as a failing

‘organic solidarity’ of the society at large. The outlaw biker brotherhoods offer a ‘code of honor’, a way for men to be men ‘in a world gone soft’ (Nichols 2012), a set of clear guidelines for life, an alternative source of income, a community for life. Recruited typically from neighborhoods that feel left behind by the state, the clubs offer a communitarian alternative to atomized life and a way to acquire respect – along with consumer goods and a lifestyle which is otherwise close to impossible to achieve by legitimate means (Hall et al. 2012). The critique of society at large, of the state, of corrupt bankers and corporations, and a general anti-establishment resentment are also central forces that on one hand drive them into doing charity, and on the other help legitimize their violent and criminal acts. Coupled with the popular image of the outlaw motorcycle clubs, spread by popular movies such as the *Easy Rider* or TV shows like the *Sons of Anarchy* and pop culture at large, the clubs capitalize on the fuzzy mixture of fact and fiction. Even in reality, as in the club myths, the members and supporters understand themselves as a countercultural extension of the ‘American West’, indulging in the myths of the American frontier, of the Wild West. They consider themselves as outsiders, and as those who truly embrace western values, in their purity; they emphasize ‘true’ democratic organization (one man one vote), individuality, freedom and equality, and hyper-muscular expansionism. The resistance towards the weakening welfare state, especially within Europe, can in this case also be read as stemming from the American ideals of the West (Lehti 2009; Bonnett 2004; Lehti 2007) with which the clubs,

transnationally, identify themselves. The European West is from this position viewed as effeminate, undemocratic, paternalistic, interventionist, elitist and excessively politically correct. In particular, critique is levied against the oppressive ‘nanny’ state, a state that cuts individual freedoms through silly laws and regulations, such as smoking prohibitions, or prohibitions of club symbols – a symbolic pseudo-politics, but at the same time fails to control economy and multinational players as the condition of the working poor deteriorates. The outlaw motorcycle clubs thus often manage to strike a particular soft spot in today’s political and economic environment, promoting on one hand a right-leaning ideology seductive to many, and proposing a muscular alternative of self-rule, of non-state governance from below, with their own community, rules, laws, by-laws, a *Gemeinschaft* (community), to replace the in their eyes failing *Gesellschaft* (society) (Tönnies 2001), thus providing a neo-tribal alternative to the state (Maffesoli 1996), led by hyper-muscular social outcasts. This equips them also with a ‘charismatic authority’ (Weber 1985), that fuels their myth of righteous underdogs, violent but just, violent and criminal but attacking the unjust society.

During the electoral campaign in the US, outlaw bikers along with many ordinary biker clubs, whose members are often war veterans, ex-police officers, and the like, came massively in support of Donald Trump and organized the *Bikers for Trump* events, as well as the notorious run on Washington, offering protection to Trump supporters in case

of the anticipated left-wing violence; their tactics was to form a ‘wall of meat’ as they said (de Guzman 2017). Trump’s campaign shares a lot with the ideology and brand of populism, anti-intellectualism and ‘outlaw heroism’ as that of the bikers; there is no doubt that it systematically played with the Hollywood cinematic trope of heroic masculinity, of the man action hero, who goes against the establishment, not always using the most legal means, while at the same time being a successful millionaire, breadwinner and family man, thus combining the two hegemonic masculine ideals that appear to the supporters as under threat by liberal emasculating forces (Thompson and Holt 2004).

The charitable actions of the bikers aim to show that they ‘may be tough guys, violent, vulgar, but’ deep down they ‘have a heart and they care’; they ‘know right from wrong and they stand up for and help the weak’². From outlaws, living on the fringe of society, they have been trying to transform themselves into modern day Robin Hoods and present themselves as the grass-root, civil society voice that is tough enough to take things into its own hands and bring not only justice but also social services to the needy. Power and control over territories are inherent to this idea of ruling through benevolence, much like in its elitist expressions – the goal is to establish parallel mini-states with own rules, own sources of respect, own social welfare system, independent of what they perceive as the oppressive state and an economy run by ‘the 1% in suits’. Not only do these groups offer

² From an interview with a German member of an outlaw motorcycle club, June 2016.

protection, but also raise money for the treatment of sick children, support socially weak single-mothers and widows, gift toys to poor children or even mobilize help during natural catastrophes such as floods, when the state has too few men available. Even anti-drug publicity campaigns and rehabilitation of drug addicts are often on the plan – much like the elite philanthropists, these groups too often try to present themselves as a remedy to the problems they themselves create. Using their intimidation power and looks, without necessarily using actual violence, OMC members are also becoming part of local neighborhood militias, typically to ‘protect’ and deter by their presence immigrant men from sexually harassing local women, or just to present themselves as a visible alternative to the police. Children and women are often popular subjects patronized by the biker’s charities, something that the women often support and embrace. Charity events such as parties and runs, where money is collected for a good cause are increasing in numbers. Knowledge about these events is spread on the social media, where supporters are recruited, and where opposition to criminalization is voiced and perceived injustices by the state, police, corporate elites and white-collar criminals widely critiqued. Supporters and sympathizers are thus encouraged to turn away from the state and look elsewhere for the social, economic and emotional support.

Serving the community and doing good has not only become an effective way to transform or at least blur the clubs’ public image and acquire legitimacy, but also to

recruit new members and thus to expand; growth is a central goal of these organizations. In this sense, much like billionaire philanthrocapitalists, outlaw motorcycle clubs are increasingly directly competing with the state – offering social networks, community, protection, help in times of need and security, and ‘safe’ neighborhoods. And much like them, they seek to expand not only through their violent territorial grabs and exploitation, but also through doing good. And yet, charity among the outlaw biker clubs is not only and not always staged to manage the clubs’ public relations. The majority of charitable acts are often quiet and serve to lower club profile, mute neighbors’ objections to clubhouses, and build ties that might help thwart intelligence-gathering efforts by police and rivals.

Moral Capital Meets Charisma and Reproduces Inequality and Structural Violence

‘In the days following Petrosino’s murder, the Palermo newspaper *Il Giornale di Sicilia* denounced the escalation of the Mafia phenomenon on the two sides of the Atlantic, “the terrible and mysterious god that stays inside the state and is more than the state”—a god for which extortion and protection go hand in hand’

(Lupo 2015: 31)

Both elitist philanthropists and outlaws patronize people through benevolence to cover up their respective forms of violence and exploitation and to legitimize their informal

power and gain popular support. Both attempt to replace the state in one way or the other, monopolize their power and to expand. Both seek to place people in a position of debt and in a position of dependence, casting themselves as heroes and saviors in the process. Both seek to acquire moral capital and recognition, while also building each their own form of 'charismatic authority' (Weber 1985). There appears to be an undeniable charisma for many that comes with either millions in a bank or with criminal acts, and prison time. The fascination with murderabilia testifies to this (Denham 2016). Even the members of criminal organizations fall under this magic spell upon their initiation; once baptised, the mafioso 'thinks he's god, he feels like one. He is a god. His physique, his build, doesn't matter; once a man enters a criminal organization, even if he is a weakling, from that day on he feels like a god' (Nuzzi and Antonelli 2012: 30-31). Similar stories of transformation following initiation are common among the bikers as well. These stories are not unlike the rags-to-riches stories of transformation. There is no doubt that the amount of power and the amount of different forms of violence the millionaires perpetuate, provides the audiences with a certain perverse pleasure; they, too, would like to share into that power. In the same way that non-members and ordinary people are excited to go to a biker's party, to be close to the idealized hyper-muscular intimidating heroes, people like to partake in the power mystique of the billionaires, in hope that some of it will magically transpose onto them in the manner of sympathetic magic (Frazer 1894). Indeed, participating in charitable biker events, or purchasing commodities with

added ethical value, may not only serve our momentous feeling of moral redemption (Žižek 2009), but more importantly allow us to legitimately participate in the deep-down idealized and desired violent power and potential of the other.

In both cases, these organizations invest in charitable actions designed to reproduce the status quo, with all its inequalities, while in the process solidifying their group solidarity – be it by investments in elitist art or educational institutions or by investments in women and children in need in the clubs’ neighbourhoods. While indeed any help will generate thankful receivers and cannot be flatly denounced, for it does create a benefit to those on the receiving end, we must conclude here by returning to our initial point, namely that these forms of charitable giving thrive under specific social and economic conditions – from the weakening of the welfare state to the extreme economic inequality. As such, neither philanthropy from top or from the bottom can be said to facilitate truly *public* good, since it thrives precisely within the current system, which it not only reproduces but also intensifies for its own benefit. ‘The ultimate goal is for mafiosi to negate reciprocity and be elevated to a godly position’ (Pipyrou 2014: 413), or else, to give and waste without receiving (Mauss 1990). We should ask ourselves if we really need these gods that enslave us through their gifts, we did not even ask for in the first place.

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