



Vol. 5, No.1, Fall 2007, 201-207

www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Frazer, Chris. *Bandit Nation: A History of Outlaws and Cultural Struggle in Mexico, 1810-1920*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006.

A Discourse Analysis of Mexican Banditry and National Identity

Amy Robinson

Bowling Green State University

Chris Frazer investigates Mexican banditry predominantly through a discourse analysis of literary texts. This is a welcome departure from the methodological doubts about using literary sources that underlie the social bandit debate, whose basic arguments can be traced through Eric Hobsbawm's publications on banditry, the contributors to Richard Slatta's 1987 edited collection, and the spirited exchange between Gilbert Joseph and others in the *Latin American Research Review* in 1991. To be sure, one of Frazer's most significant and lasting contributions will be the numerous, fascinating literary critiques that he provides in this historical study. His book essentially reframes the question of whether literary sources can be

useful in a historical analysis, something that even Hobsbawm doubts (in the postscript to his revised 2000 edition of *Bandits* as a way of response to his critics), by postulating that both elite and popular literary texts reflect the subjectivity of their individual authors, if not the ideology of their respective social class. Indeed, he positions literary discourse as an integral part of the struggles between social classes that inform his definition of culture—"the constitutive process in social production and reproduction" (15-16). While this approach to literature and culture may resonate with other studies' premises that a collective national culture is communicated through the written word from the top down (Benedict Anderson, as one example), Frazer shows how different types of texts create a multi-directional construction of banditry's meaning. In this way he arrives to a more negotiated, historically dynamic and even internally contradictory understanding of national identity via discourse about banditry than previous theories would allow.

Frazer analyzes a wide range of texts to characterize and put into dialogue three perspectives, with a separate chapter dedicated to each one: elite Anglo-Saxon foreign writers, the Mexican elite, and the Mexican popular classes. While his overall discussion displays amazingly diverse ideological and thematic projects within bandit discourse over the long nineteenth century, he contends that this diversity was "patterned" and that "specific narrative forms (e.g., novels, corridos, or travel accounts) tended to arrive at a consensus, or a range of understandings, about the meaning of banditry" that corresponded to one's nationality and class-based subjectivity (8). In brief, the pattern he finds in travel accounts "expressed an attitude of Anglo-Saxon superiority" (13), the Mexican novel spread a "nationalizing discourse" aimed to promote "effective hegemony over the lower classes" (118), and corridos "embodied an alternative to the culture of the dominant elite" (138). To his credit, Frazer does not turn a blind eye to those texts that would disrupt the patterns that he delineates, and each chapter is thus spotted with exceptions and light contradictions to his overarching map. For instance, he generally concludes that the Mexico's elite literature, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, collectively promoted an anti-bandit perspective and endorsed a

strong central government capable of establishing order. Yet, he also discusses important exceptions, such as the novels by Manuel Payno that reveal empathy for the bandit through a critique of the society that would drive individuals into criminality. In terms of the lower classes, he generally concludes that corridos popularized bandits as part of a counter-hegemonic response to the inequalities underlying Porfirian order and progress. Yet, at the same time he shows that “[l]ower class Mexicans also reserved the right to condemn the behavior of brigands who violated popular norms of right behavior” (131), and there were even corridos that “appeared to reinforce elite domination” (133). Rather than retouching his general portrait to more explicitly illustrate that the three perspectives he delineates are not monolithic (ie; people from the same social class at certain points in history did not necessarily share and/or express the same subjectivity about issues of political rule and social justice), he instead tends to weave those exceptions into a more clear-cut explanation that bandit discourse reflects “a three-sided struggle over what it meant to be Mexican” (206).

The dialogue that he moderates between these three perspectives consistently revolves around the representation of Mexican identity in terms of the “organizing concepts” (8) of ethnicity, class and gender during distinct historical moments. By attending to these broad categories throughout his discourse analyses, he often provides original insights into texts about bandits, many of which have already been duly analyzed in the critical literature. He generally finds that all three groups promote an anti-indigenous and patriarchal foundation for Mexican identity. With respect to race, in the elite travel literature this materializes as Anglo-Saxon racial superiority, whereas Mexican elite and popular discourses depict a mestizo-centered nationalism that ignores, assimilates, marginalizes or condescends to the indigenous. With respect to gender, (with notable exceptions) all three cases tend to depict social and family structures that privilege upstanding masculine authority figures over non-existent or male-dependent females as well as over various forms of “degenerated masculinity” (62). The topic of class is more contested in that he generally argues that both elite literatures depict progress and modernity as

solutions to the backwardness of the popular classes but, by contrast, the lower classes express a resistance to modernization (23, 130, 186). The difference in perspective on this issue can be attributed to the elite view that a modernized society will be incompatible with forms of disorder and barbarity such as banditry, whereas the lower classes' experience of modernization is more likely to include increased impoverishment, dislocation and oppression rather than economic or technological progress.

A key component to Frazer's examination is the way that the discourse about banditry changed over time. In the context of the two elite literatures, he usually (but not always) uses 1867 as a dividing point to describe a decisive shift in authors' attitudes about order and disorder. In the case of the earlier nineteenth-century travel writings, Frazer demonstrates that representations of banditry typically revealed a somewhat abstract fear of Mexican barbarity and disorder to reaffirm a belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority. Frazer shows that this superiority complex is not strictly based on Mexico's banditry problem in that some authors (such as Charles Latrobe and Fanny Calderón de la Barca) also critiqued the corrupt officials that contributed to the country's backwardness. In this way, the foreigners' assessment of Mexico as a bandit-ridden country can be broadened to include those behaviors across the social and political hierarchy that were perceived as the "other" to civility and progress. To illustrate the constructed and imagined nature of these polarized Mexican and Anglo-Saxon identities, Frazer cleverly points out that the vast majority of foreign authors wrote terrifying tales of banditry without ever having been confronted by a bandit.

Frazer's analysis positions these foreign novels in an indirect dialogue with Mexican elite writers who had their own interpretation of banditry's relationship to national identity. In particular, early nineteenth-century Mexican writers (such as José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi and Manuel Payno) employ the figure of the redeemable or victimized bandit to generate a portrait of the country in need of overcoming its conflicted past, and especially the colonial legacy (106). Moreover, Frazer provides a compelling framework to account for the general changes in Mexican writers' relationship to national identity by asserting that early novelists

regard the failures of the young country as not inherently Mexican whereas late nineteenth-century novelists would depict the Mexican people as uniting to combat the internal threat of endemic banditry. The shift is mainly attributed to Porfirio Díaz's efforts to transform both Mexico's image and lived reality. Frazer finds that foreign writers channel their sense of Mexico's increasing order and progress into a more romanticized vision of Mexico's "charro bandido" (84) as well as of the rurales. By contrast, he argues that national authors of the Porfiriato (such as Ignacio Manuel Altamirano and Payno) opted to demonize bandits as shameful obstacles to national progress and thus "justify the authoritarian nature of an ostensibly liberal republic" (118).

The last perspective presented in this study's three-sided debate about Mexican identity is lower-class subjectivities as expressed through corridos about bandits. While this is undoubtedly a vital and rich object of study that Frazer capably examines, his focus on the corrido as the lower classes' principle vehicle for expression misses the opportunity to more thoroughly reflect on how the lower classes' access to other genres may have helped them to construct and communicate alternatives to dominant perspectives. For example, although Frazer briefly discusses a manifesto by Zapata (arguably in his capacity as a revolutionary rather than a bandit) (192), he only barely mentions the manifestos of Heraclio Bernal (159-160) and not at all those of Manuel Lozada. Restricting the expression of lower-class ideology to corridos may propagate a limited view of the origins and circulation of counter-hegemonic discourse prior to the revolution as well as obscuring the possibility of a more dialogic relationship between the lower and elite classes taking place beyond the boundaries of the oral tradition. In short, overlooking the manifestos by so-called bandits may underestimate the subaltern's ability to speak directly to an elite audience about the terms of hegemonic rule.

The final chapter explains how the last decade before the Mexican Revolution saw a "bifurcation...in middle-class and elite attitudes toward bandits, suggesting that some of the values inscribed in popular culture were making inroads into literary culture" (182). He thus builds a bridge between lower and upper class subjectivities through a discussion of the

upper classes' "more ambiguous" (184) representations of banditry. His examples of Ireneo Paz's 1904 rendition of Joaquín Murrieta and the anonymous novel (mistakenly characterized as a biography) published around 1900 about Chucho el Roto show that the upper classes were at least entertaining the idea of heroic bandits within their profile of Mexico's national identity. He also explains how this glorification of banditry "may have been linked to the expansion of the penny press and sensationalist newspaper reporting on crime around the turn of the century" (182). The revolution would only seem to cement this cross-class bond between bandit and nation, in that "the revolutionary elites draped themselves in the symbols and mythology of the revolution" as seen in the eventual "appropriation of Zapata to the official pantheon of revolutionary heroes" (202). The suggestion that there was an increasingly intertwined relationship between the perspectives of lower and upper classes in Mexico (which can especially be seen through the purely subjective line drawn between bandits and revolutionaries toward the end of the Porfiriato) certainly provides an interesting optic for pondering the origins of the Mexican Revolution (168). Yet, in a conceivable contrast to the idea of upper-class pro-bandit attitudes as precursors to revolution, it would have been interesting for Frazer to have addressed earlier upper-class ambiguities toward bandits such as those that circulated in newspapers during the 1880s about Chucho el Roto and Heraclio Bernal (as seen in research by Paul Vanderwood and others).

Taken as a whole, Frazer's study makes an important contribution to the areas of Mexican history, literature and cultural studies because it provides much needed clarity about the multiple perspectives that gave meaning to banditry during an extremely complex time period. His theoretical foundations, outstanding historical overviews and insightful literary analyses explain that banditry was understood as much more than a set of crimes, laws or individuals, in that it was negotiated by diverse participants on political and ideological grounds. He implicitly contributes to the social bandit debate by frequently collapsing the distinction between bandits and revolutionaries, by referring to the political impact of certain bandits (51, 148) if not the political nature of "all narratives about Mexican

banditry” (2), and by boldly suggesting that that discourse about bandits produced a latent “paradigm for rebellion” (168) in the years before the revolution. Finally, and most centrally to his overall argument about Mexican cultural history, his study sets an example for how a detailed examination of literary texts can render audible an often unharmonious chorus of voices negotiating the meaning and symbolism of national identity.