1
Vigilantes

Introduction

Vigilantes have arisen at many times in different regions of the world as defenders, often by force, of their view of the good life against those they see to be its enemies. Recent reports of their activities in Britain, Ireland, Italy, Mexico, South Africa and North America have appeared in the British and overseas press. Yet they have been relatively little studied outside the United States, where they hold a special, if at times romanticized, position in the nation's history. It may be that their common involvement in the defence of power, property and other 'bourgeois' interests has been less attractive to scholars than the more radical activities of bandits and revolutionaries. None the less, it is surprising that their often independent stance towards the state has not received more attention from both critical and friendly analysts of that institution.

Like many of my generation I first became aware of vigilantes as a young cinema-goer exposed to a large number of 'B Westerns', in my case on the silver screen of a small building in north Manchester known as 'the local' or 'the Mip' – an acronym for the undeservedly much grander title of Moston Imperial Palace. Vague memories of such films still occasionally surface when I read about Montana vigilantes of the 1860s and the wicked Sheriff Plummer, who immediately acquires the face of a minor 1940s Hollywood actor. So vigilantes were for me initially, and for some time to come, a phenomenon of the American Wild West, albeit dressed in powerful mythic imagery – as I

later learned – by immigrant Hollywood moguls. While trying to do their bit to unify America, these middle-Europeans also strangely captured the imaginations of innumerable youngsters all over the world, and I look back with some astonishment at my own English childhood days of playing cowboys and Indians, with their 'goodies and baddies', and an adolescence captivated by the songs of the old West which I still find touching today.

Of course, vigilantes were only a small part of the epic, whose other characters were the men and women settlers, the cowboys, the railwaymen and businessmen, and the Indians through whose lives and deaths the history of America's emergence as a nation was scripted. But they were an integral part all the same, as the American historian Richard Maxwell Brown makes very clear. For the history in question was plausibly portrayed as a history of 'the frontier' of the nation state, and vigilantes are essentially a frontier phenomenon.

My next conscious encounters with them were East African, first when as a fledgling anthropologist I noticed that night-watchmen in Kampala in the 1950s were for hire from a self-styled 'vigilante' company, and later through preliminary reports of Suzette Heald's research in eastern Uganda. Then in the 1980s, I encountered grassroots village vigilante groups among the Nyamwezi and Sukuma in west-central Tanzania. These groups, widely known in Tanzania as Sungusungu (the word 'vigilante' is itself not often heard there) had arisen to combat locally unacceptable crime levels. At much the same time, vigilantes began to hit the newspapers in Kenya and, especially, in South Africa – where use of the name was typically restricted to 'right-wing' protectors of the local status quo as opposed to the 'comrade' supporters of the African National Congress.

Meanwhile in Britain, popular anxiety about crime has also increased noticeably in the last few years. Partly following the lead of similar developments in North America, vigilantism along with more peaceful forms of neighbourhood watch, street patrol and other comparable activity has featured prominently from time to time both in the media and on the streets.[1] Summer 1993 was a high point for press coverage. In addition to its front-page report of the August Gallup poll which it commissioned, the *Daily Telegraph* published a detailed summary of the poll's findings and an editorial on the issue. The *Independent* also ran an editorial and several features on the poll next day. It commented that, while public concern was clearly rising to new heights, 'the answer to the problem certainly does not lie with vigilantes'.

I mention all this not just for the sake of reminiscence, but also to draw attention to some of the many different times and places in which vigilantism has appeared as an idea, a reality or a threat – and to those already mentioned one may add the modern Philippines, contemporary North and South America and different phases of the history of China.[2] Also, I hope that this brief 'gazetteer' will begin to evoke some sense of the fundamental ambiguities in relations between people and the state that vigilantism reveals.

My own reactions to it are ambivalent. For the Tanzanians whose communities I studied, vigilantism has clearly been part of their efforts to make sense of their lives and maintain some sort of order in their world in the face of the state's apparent inability to deal effectively with increased cattle theft and other crime. Like many anthropologists who have worked in comparable settings, I have felt considerable sympathy in this and other contexts for such 'ordinary' villagers who are commonly situated on the edge of the state and at the bottom of the political heap. This has been an important part of the humanist tradition in social anthropology which I personally do not regret. The interests of such villagers often receive scant attention from the powers that be, and their voices all too frequently remain unheard outside the pages of the ethnographic monograph. Their knowledge, their capacity for sensitive and fruitful co-operation, and their deep insights into the enigmas of being human well deserve the place accorded to them in such work.

Yet I am also well aware of the warts on the face of such communities, their literal or figurative witch-hunts, and the oppressive social control which membership of a 'caring' group may sometimes entail.[3] Similarly, I am conscious that although they are not highly stratified or deeply divided along class or ethnic lines – as are communities in many other places – they are not simply homogeneous either, and elements within them and outside them may try to exploit 'community' institutions for their own ends.

The power of vigilantism to generate ambivalence goes well beyond such personal research experience of village life. Its chief attraction probably lies in the notion of decent, independent, law-abiding citizens, anxious to live and work in peace, and ready to defend their right to do so if the state fails them. At the same time, many people fear vigilantism's disturbing implications for the authority of the police and courts and other formal instruments of state authority. This is nicely brought out by the criminologist Les Johnston's recent (1992) characterization of vigilantism under the heading 'autonomous' as contrasted to 'responsible' citizenship. Again, the term often smacks of violent 'mob rule' and the Captain Lynches of this world, in

contrast to 'the rule of law' and respect for due process. This point was strongly made by Caughey (1957) in his paper 'Their majesties the mob'.[4] He also reminds us sharply that vigilantism all too frequently carries 'the added onus of nativism, class prejudice, political motivation or personal ambition' – a point amply illustrated by the materials collected in his later book under the same title.[5]

Paradoxically, in contrast to repulsion by its threats to the established order, it is also likely to displease more radical critics of the state. For them, vigilantism can, by its nature, never go far enough. In spite of its potential for subversion, it commonly displays a non-revolutionary and even a reactionary character, and Maxwell Brown interestingly uses the term 'conservative mob' when discussing its practitioners. Rather than reject the state, vigilantism commonly thrives on the idea that the state's legitimacy at any point in time depends on its ability to provide citizens with the levels of law and order they demand. Its emergence is often a vote of no confidence in state efficiency rather than in the concept of the state itself. Moreover, vigilantism is not always what it claims to be. It may turn out on inspection to be an elitist weapon dressed in populist attire and more concerned with politics than law; and it is not unknown for its practitioners to be 'off-duty' members of the police or militia bypassing inconvenient formalities in their pursuit of political opponents and other 'undesirable' elements in their society.

What's in a name?

I use the terms 'vigilante' and 'vigilantism' partly because of, and partly in spite of, these mixed qualities. I have wanted neither to overemphasize nor to underplay their positive and negative connotations, since the phenomena they represent are multifaceted, emotionally highly charged and changeable.

Originally 'vigilante' was a Spanish word, from the same Latin roots as English 'vigil', 'vigilant' and 'vigilance'. In contemporary Spanish it is mainly used adjectivally to mean 'watchful' and as a noun simply to mean 'watchman' or 'guard'. It appears to have entered North American English from the south during the nineteenth century. The term 'Vigilance Committee', for a vigilante group, was also common in America at that time. Alternative cognate labels in America were 'Vigilant Societies' (a common term for associations formed to combat horse-thieves in New England), 'Vigilants' and

'Vigilanters'. Other early terms there for such groups included 'Regulators' and 'Moderators' and many other more specific titles, such as 'White Caps' and, of course, the Ku Klux Klan.

The emphasis on 'vigilance' in such contexts seems to have been predominantly American until relatively recently. The term 'Vigilance Committee' was also found in South African townships around the end of the nineteenth century, but its significance there was more akin to that of a 'board of guardians'. Apart from a brief 1839 reference to the encouragement of 'vigilance' in an official discussion of crime control in rural England, I have not consciously encountered this word and its cognates in such early British contexts. It has certainly not held the 'key word' status there which it acquired in America, and there has even been some recent effort on the part of British commentators to distinguish it, as a relatively unloaded term, from 'vigilantism'.

Another set of English words – 'wake', 'watch' and 'watchful(ness)' – covers much the same conceptual ground as 'vigil' and its cognates. These words are of Germanic origin, though they appear in fact to share ancient Indo-European roots with their Latin counterparts. However, the idea of 'neighbourhood watch', with its connotations of non-violence and collaboration with the police, is often contrasted with vigilantism in contemporary English usage.

The different shades of meaning of such terms reflect both the variety of forms of 'vigilance' in different times and places, and the wide range of attitudes they can elicit. The situation is, however, further complicated by the human capacity for deception, irony and metaphor. The term 'Regulators' appears to have been used in both England and America to denote both law enforcers and cynical lawbreakers intent on the 'regulation' of the wealth of others to their own advantage. Also, as if its diverse connotations when used literally were not enough, the term 'vigilante' has recently been used in a wide range of more figurative contexts. Almost any unofficial protesters, from animal rights supporters and hunt saboteurs to those opposed to the closure of a railway line, are likely to be described, at least by their opponents, as vigilantes. There are also 'cyber-vigilantes', including a self-styled 'vigilante moose', who monitor and in some cases delete material they do not like on the Internet. An article in *The Times* suggests that police action against members of ethnic minorities is likely to provoke accusations of racism from 'the vigilantes of the race relations lobby'. Another news item mentions 'the impatient monetary vigilantes' of the bond market, and yet another describes a well-known footballer, involved recently in a violent incident, as more like a thug than an avenging vigilante.

This last usage harks back to the many recent film portrayals of vengeance- and justice-seeking individuals, and the term is also often used in a comparable way to describe Batman and other popular film and comic book heroes. The name Vigilantes has been adopted by a number of American football teams and, apparently, one English Rugby team, and an American folk-rock and soul group call themselves 'Vigilantes of Love'.

Definition and comparison

As a concept for comparative study, vigilantism is not easy to define in rigorous authoritative terms even if one ignores more figurative uses of the term. There are several reasons for this, including some that derive from more general difficulties inherent in the process of sociocultural comparison itself. As students of other cultures and practitioners of a discipline that has sometimes been described as 'comparative sociology', social anthropologists have a long if not wholly successful history of trying to solve problems of this sort.

The labels that anthropologists attach to different features of society and culture fall into two broad groups. Some, like marriage, incest, politics, economics, religion and language, are generally treated as human universals to be found in all human societies. This creates particular constraints, since any definition must automatically be applicable to any society one happens to encounter. Others, such as unilineal descent groups, ceremonial exchange, age organization and ancestral cults, are more specific. Although there has been a great deal of argument about the nature and the incidence of such forms, it is not considered necessary to define them in such a way that every human group appears to have them. This provides some leeway to define them more pragmatically in a range of more or less inclusive terms, according to our perceptions of the relevance of a variety of similarities and differences between the patterns found in different places.

Vigilantism is a concept of this second kind. We may be interested in its distribution, but we do not expect to find it always and everywhere we look. We also have some choice about how narrowly or broadly we define it, and this will partly depend upon our research aims. This does not mean that we are free to act like some post-structuralist Humpty Dumpty, arbitrarily making words mean whatever we might happen to want. Rather it enables us to filter a variety of details in or out of our picture in our attempts to make what seems to

us the best sense of our own and others' observations. However, it is never simple to decide that the details found in one particular historical and sociocultural setting are as significantly similar as we might wish to those recorded elsewhere and/or at another time.

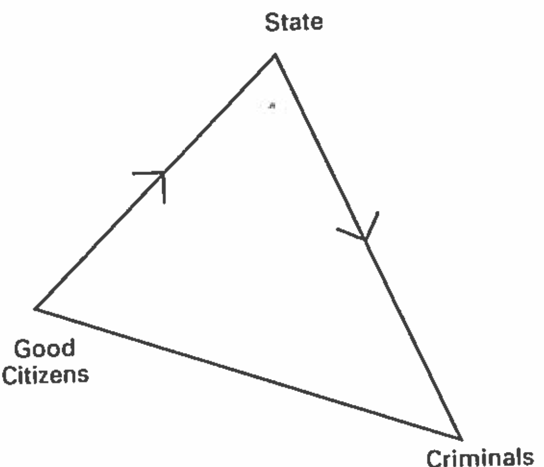
In addition to such general issues, it is arguable that certain more specific qualities of vigilantism also create problems for its definition. It is not so much a thing in itself as a fundamentally relational phenomenon, which does not make much sense except in connection with and often in contrast to others. Like 'civil society', it is part of a broad zone in the world of law and politics, encapsulated within the state and yet conceptually and at times politically opposed to official governmental institutions. It is also in some ways comparable to the 'informal sector' in economics. It occupies an awkward borderland between law and illegality, and between public and more sectional interests, in what I have elsewhere (1987) called 'the shadows rather than the bright lights of legitimacy and consensus'. Again, despite some vigilantes' attempts to formulate strict constitutions for themselves, the secret and highly personalized nature of much of their activity also helps to make it rather labile. Many of its manifestations are relatively short-lived, and it is always capable of slipping and sliding in one direction or another. Also, as I noted earlier, vigilantism – like other forms and levels of political activity – is not always what it seems or claims to be. It is typical of vigilantes that they attempt to take the moral high ground, but they may also entertain or covertly develop other agendas.

As all this implies, any delineation of their general characteristics *must* be treated as an 'ideal type' which the phenomena one investigates may interestingly approximate to, or as likely as not depart from, to varying degrees. This said, it is possible to delineate some of the main features of this 'ideal type'. Richard Maxwell Brown has usefully described vigilante groups as 'organised extra-legal movements the members of which take the law into their own hands' and also as 'associations in which citizens have joined together for self-protection under conditions of disorder'.

A recent article by Johnston (1996) also helpfully explores a number of main vigilante characteristics. He sums up with the statement that

> vigilantism is a social movement giving rise to premeditated acts of force – or threatened force – by autonomous citizens. It arises as a reaction to the transgression of institutionalized norms by individuals or groups – or to their potential or imputed transgression. Such acts are focussed upon crime control and/or social control and aim to offer

1. CITIZENS, CRIMINALS AND THE STATE: NORMAL MODE



2. CITIZENS, CRIMINALS AND THE STATE: VIGILANTE MODE

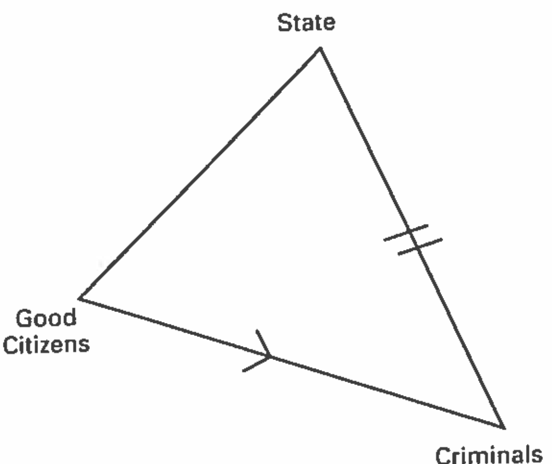


Figure 1 Structures of relations between 'good' citizens, criminals and the state

assurances (or 'guarantees') of security both to participants and to other members of a given established order.

This provides reasonably good coverage of the character of vigilantism, providing that one treats it as 'ideal' rather than 'substantive' and pays close attention to the implications of such phrases as 'potential or imputed' and 'crime . . . and/or social control'.

It may also be useful to state one or two points more explicitly at this juncture. Despite recent interest in lone armed figures like Bernard Goetz on the New York subway and in cinematic images of Charles Bronson or Clint Eastwood wreaking havoc in the city or on the High Plains, vigilantism is typically, as Johnston and Brown note, a group phenomenon both in America and elsewhere. Also, as Johnston's concept of 'autonomous citizens' implies, and as I have myself emphasized, vigilantism presumes the existence of the state, and of formal legal and other procedures involving the use of force over which the state normally claims a monopoly. Vigilantes typically lay claim, at least temporarily, to the state's own mantle of authority. If only for this reason, their relation to the state is bound to be awkward. Vigilantism typically emerges in 'frontier' zones where the state is viewed as ineffective or corrupt, and it often constitutes a criticism of the failure of state machinery to meet the felt needs of those who resort to it. It is a form of self-help, with varying degrees of violence, which is activated *instead* of such machinery, against criminals and others whom the actors perceive as undesirables, deviants and 'public enemies'.

At its most basic level, vigilantism thus appears, as in figure 1, as a particular form of a triangular structure of connections between 'good citizens, criminals and the state'. In what we might with caution label 'normal mode', this triangle involves good citizens successfully depending on the state to deal with criminals. In 'vigilante mode', the citizens are seen to bypass this procedure because, for one reason or another, the state does not deal to their satisfaction with their calls for help. They do not call upon the state, but simply try to deal directly with offenders. As I have already implied, however, it will become clear from the range of material dealt with in this book that reality may diverge from this basic ideal type in many different ways.

Vigilantism, at least as an ideal type, is thus conceptually very different from self-help of the simple oppositional kind – like feud, vendetta or simple revenge – between structurally equal individuals or groups, though it may sometimes tend in this direction. It also differs 'ideally' from local forms of dispute settlement and social control

that are fundamentally rebellious against the state, or which, on the other hand, participate in a clearly recognized division of jurisdiction between state institutions and themselves. However, in this as in other contexts, the real social world is once again less rigorously structured than our conceptual frameworks, and the boundaries between actual forms of judicial and retributional behaviour are commonly less clearly marked than we might wish.

It will by now be clear that difficulties of boundary demarcation are endemic to phenomena like vigilantism, where actors' aims and motives are often mixed, disguised and contested, and constraints against changes in the character of behaviour itself are commonly weak. Here perhaps more than anywhere, the warning of Lucretius that 'nature does not make leaps' applies. In these circumstances, I have felt it sensible to include in my discussion some material, such as that on the Ku Klux Klan, which displays some but by no means all of the qualities of classic vigilantism, while also lending itself to other kinds of categorization. Apart from its own intrinsic interest, such material will I hope serve as a useful reminder of the fundamental 'fuzziness' and complexity of the world of law and politics and its boundaries.

The spontaneous, the traditional and the global

Despite its wide distribution, and although its functions are relatively well understood, the emergence of vigilante action in particular places at specific times is not altogether easy to explain. Can such developments be treated as spontaneous local reactions of 'human nature' to certain types of social circumstance and problem, or does their explanation demand a historical and perhaps even a 'global' approach?

In the early history of social anthropology, when Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski led their functionalist crusades against the misguided worshippers of diffusion and historical conjecture, the issue seemed clear-cut. The functionalist message was that the origins of things mattered not a jot, or at most relatively little, compared to their place in a well-integrated and often small-scale social setting. Also, any local statements made about these origins were best understood as legitimating 'myths' and not as history.

Such functionalist fundamentalism could not hope to survive intact, even though paradoxically its allegations of the 'subjectivity' of history have flourished among some of its opponents and have even

been expanded to include all forms of 'objective' knowledge. For some critics, social anthropology was not to be confined to a non-literate world, but had to come to terms with complex social systems with a 'history', such as those of the Islamic world and southern Asia. For others like Southall (1956), it also became clear that the past of many 'simpler' societies was neither uninteresting nor irretrievably lost. Later, the emergence of new independent nations tempted him and others to explore the extent to which old tribal divisions were convenient if not sinister creations of their former colonial masters. To this were added Marxist-oriented 'world-system' theories, ideas about 'cultural imperialism' and more recently – in the wake of studies of literacy and increasing awareness of the contemporary 'information explosion' – 'globalization'.

The study of social and religious movements has been an important part of such developments, though for a long time they attracted relatively little academic notice. Chinnery and Haddon's (1917) account of early 'cargo' cults and Engels' interesting paper (1894) on the early history of Christianity as a cult of the colonially oppressed did not at first receive the attention they deserved from anthropologists. It was only after World War II that one saw a mainstream interest in such movements, on the part of writers such as Worsley, Burridge, Lawrence, Mair and Jarvie, which is only partly explicable in terms of the emergence of new instances to study at that time.

Giddens (1984: 204) follows Blumer in his description of social movements as 'collective enterprises to establish a new order of life', and he adds that movements do not characteristically operate with fixed locales and well-defined role systems. His emphasis is clearly laid on fluid social change, though as another commentator notes, movements may emerge to either 'promote or resist change in the society of which [they form] a part' (Masanja). Such a concept immediately directs our attention to areas of society and culture which one might describe as 'less set in their ways'. A focus upon actors and their problems and ambitions becomes necessary, while at the same time these need to be placed within a wider context of personal experience, social history, cultural repertoire and social structural constraints.

The above rider on resistance to change resonates well with the inherent conservatism of much vigilante activity. It is also true that not all eruptions of such activity display sufficient coherence and organization even to qualify for Giddens' definition of a movement, while other forms of the phenomenon go beyond this to achieve a degree of structural definition and stability more akin to that of

relatively established institutions. None the less, at one point or another in their history, most relatively persistent forms of vigilantism display some basic qualities and paradoxes of social movements generally.

An intriguing feature of such movements is that, despite their novelty and the possession of their own distinctive cultural and structural characteristics, they also exhibit recognizably similar features to developments occurring elsewhere and at other times. In fact, this mixed quality is largely shared by *all* social institutions, but it is particularly apparent in such 'new' developments.

There are three main potential sources of solution to the problem which such mixture poses. Firstly, there is the possibility of genuine spontaneity and independent invention. This in turn may be viewed more or less as pure chance or as resulting from a fairly predictable human response to a commonly recurring problem. In the case of vigilantism this problem could be defined as the failure of the state to provide the levels of order and social satisfaction that people would like to enjoy. The detailed differences between their responses can then be explained in terms of historical accident, individual quirks, cultural and social differences or a combination of some or all of these.

Secondly, the similarities may derive from experience or awareness of such action elsewhere and, thirdly, there is the possibility that they may represent the reuse of a pre-existing social and cultural template in the society itself.

My own strong inclination is not to see these different possibilities as mutually exclusive. Both freedom and constraint are of the essence of all human enterprise. Marx's well-known comment that men make their own history, but not just as they please and not in conditions of their own making, is as apt here as anywhere. The problem then becomes to understand the balance between the different factors in such situations. A long local tradition of particular patterns arising out of specific historical conditions may be crucial in some cases, while borrowing or spontaneous invention may loom larger in others. Yet all three seem likely to be found to some degree in every case, provided that sufficient data are available.

A brief discussion of the history of vigilantism in the United States may illustrate this point. Brown has attested to the presence there of a long-standing vigilante tradition, at least from the late eighteenth century to the present day, and he relates this to a number of key elements in American society and culture. These include the history and ideology of 'the frontier', the country's revolutionary origins, and the idea of 'popular sovereignty' that the state exists for and belongs to its members rather than vice versa. The asserted right of citizens to carry

arms and to defend themselves, which has figured so strongly in recent 'militia' propaganda, is a further important element in this value system, and Brown also notes the post-colonial influence of inherited British law, which appeared to many citizens to be far removed from the actual conditions in which the new nation was being forged.

Brown argues, plausibly enough, that vigilantism arose in such conditions as a typically American phenomenon. The implication is that it was predominantly spontaneously generated initially, and that later examples were to be understood as the application of what had become well-known ideas and practices to local situations as and when they might arise. The San Francisco vigilantes of the 1850s and those of Montana in the 1860s were especially widely reported and were very influential in the middle period of this process of diffusion in North America, where Brown has documented over 300 separate groups between 1767 and 1904.

Brown also comments in this regard that there was no comparable vigilante tradition in Britain, although violent rioting was common there and in fact appears to have served as a model for riots in colonial America. Yet, as Philips and others have argued, some material suggests that it might be mistaken to draw too sharp a contrast between the two countries and also to discount the significance of a two-way traffic of ideas and 'know-how' between them.

I shall discuss some of the evidence for such traffic in chapter 5, where I examine the British situation in some detail, and I restrict myself here to a few brief comments. Firstly, a number of suggestions have been made of a connection between various forms of American vigilantism and the puritan traditions of the founding fathers, and E.P. Thompson has also speculated, light-heartedly but interestingly none the less, on the possibility of connection between lynchings and *charivari* in the American South. Also, as Brown notes, the term 'regulators' was used, albeit ambiguously, for a group of London 'thief-takers' in the early eighteenth century. This was the most common name for American vigilantes in the late eighteenth century, when America was still a British colony, and during the early nineteenth century. Moreover, at this time in Britain, we find a variety of local self-help associations for the prosecution of felons and for the repression of horse theft, and during the same period, American anti-horsethief groups, with similar names in some cases to their British counterparts, also began to flourish in New England.[6] As Philips and others have commented, and as Brown has stressed, the main difference between such societies and full-scale American vigilantes was the much greater

use of and respect for the formal mechanisms of law and order in Britain and New England, and this in turn appears partly to connect to the readier availability of this machinery there.[7] The gap between the two forms of activity is not unbridgeable, however, either in imagination or in practice, though it may be viewed with strong emotion and is politically and legally of great significance. Indeed, one such old Horsethief Detection Society was resuscitated to provide support for Ku Klux Klan activities in 1920s Indiana (Wade 1987: 224–5). All this arguably suggests that American vigilantism was not so much a new invention as a step across a threshold of 'due process' within a framework common to both countries. There is good reason to assume that this threshold was clearly visible to actors on both sides of the Atlantic, and there is also evidence that it was occasionally crossed in Britain.

Support for southern lynchings and for vigilantes elswhere in America was also sometimes voiced by English commentators. A tantalizing point to which Philips draws attention in this context is the fact that Thomas Josiah Dimsdale, the author of a well-known positive account of Montana vigilantism in the mid-nineteenth century, was a young Englishman who had settled there and was a close confidant of the men whose activities he describes. While this is interesting in itself, there is the further intriguing fact that one of the key early nineteenth-century activists in the organization of British anti-felon associations, and a strong advocate of local policing under their auspices, was another Thomas Dimsdale of Barnet.

It has not proved possible to demonstrate any clear family link between these two men, though some such connection – if only a very distant one – does seem likely. In any case, the present argument does not critically depend upon its presence or its absence. The early settlers, and the later highly mobile population of miners and others who went to California in the 1850s and to Montana in the 1860s, were drawn from a wide variety of backgrounds. Many, of course, were from Britain, including Ireland, and many of the Californian 'forty-niners' were from Australia (and before that, in many cases, Britain) in addition to those who moved west from the southern and eastern States. All must have had a mass of knowledge and ideas about different forms of unofficial crime control. and, as I will discuss in chapter 5, the flow of information through books, newspapers and, one may safely assume, letters and word of mouth was considerable even in these relatively early days. In these conditions, it makes little sense to see American vigilantism as a purely 'home-grown' product, however well it flourished in that country.

Evidence for an element of diffusion into other places and in later times is partly linguistic, but it is suggestive. The use of the term 'vigilante' on a global scale, which I have already touched upon, clearly testifies to American influence, given the word's first widespread use there. Again, the cinema has clearly been an important medium for the spread of such ideas from the beginning of the twentieth century, while more restricted local usage, such as the name 'A-team' for a South African vigilante group in the 1980s, testifies to the influence of American television. At the same time, modern media coverage of various sorts has ensured more or less worldwide knowledge of the activities of Guardian Angels, 'urban avengers' and many other forms of vigilantism. More generally, contemporary growth in worldwide information networks suggests that it would be foolhardy utterly to discount an element of diffusion in almost any context anywhere.

At the same time, however, there is also evidence in some cases for more narrowly localized vigilante development. The Tanzanian case of Sungusungu, which I discuss in chapter 2, seems genuinely to be of this sort – though it has roots in earlier forms of neighbourhood collaboration in the area – and it has also been suggested that recent northern Peruvian vigilantism (also discussed in chapter 2) has similarly been a mainly spontaneous development. In such cases, the recurrence of a problem seems to have been largely if not wholly sufficient in itself to generate similar solutions in different areas.

There is ultimately no real conflict here. The range of conditions under which vigilantism emerges is relatively narrow, and the idea of self-help in the face of state ineffectiveness is commonsensical. At the same time, knowledge of one's own or others' previous experience of such situations is unlikely to be wholly absent, and it seems likely to be especially important at the level of practical organization and of maintaining adequate control over the actions of participants.

Vigilantism, anarchy and the state

In spite of its conservative complexion, the ambiguities of vigilantism are reminiscent of some features of the much more radical idea of anarchy. As Woodcock (1986) has shown, this is fundamentally a double concept. For some it is synonymous with chaos, and as such to be deplored. For others it encapsulates an idea of good order without government and the state.

Like anarchists, vigilantes often see themselves as substituting for

the state, if only for a time, in the pursuit of order. The state in turn commonly brands their activities as disorderly and illegitimate, and responds with firm assertions of its own monopoly in the use of force and the dispensation of justice.

From this perspective, anarchism and vigilantism each appear in contrast to and as a challenge to the state. Yet the fact that all three claim to provide order invites further thought concerning their comparability. It is already clear that anarchism is opposed to the principle of the state, while vigilantism tends mainly to bemoan its inefficiency. Yet it is also arguable that both anarchism and, at least, the modern state share certain concerns and dilemmas through their stress on values to which vigilantism often attaches relatively little weight.

One approach to this is through what some see as a fundamental flaw in anarchism. Every community, such critics argue, needs a series of conventions that individuals are not allowed to flout. Such a code of rules may claim to represent the will of the anarchist community as a self-conceived collection of free individuals, but it will in practice limit individual freedom and it is prone to reflect sectional interest.

At the same time, and from the opposite end of the political spectrum, modern western legal systems have, with variations, all incorporated and developed the liberal idea of individual freedom and rights, and these developments have also been quite influential outside Europe and America. In many areas of life, the range of these rights and the range of those deemed to possess them have expanded. Women's rights to their own property and the control of their own bodies, children's rights to care and even to 'divorce' from their parents, and legislation combating discrimination against individuals because of age, sex, colour or religion have been key areas of such expansion during the last century.

Most important in the present context are the rights of individuals suspected of or charged with criminal activity. Here too some recent expansion has been visible, as in the 1950s under Justice Warren's influence in the United States and in the constitutions of many newer nations, but the pattern tends to be less clear in this than in other areas. In Britain, many such rights have ancient roots, as in the well-known case of *habeas corpus*. Some enhancement of them has occurred, for example in the 1976 Bail Act, but their recent history mainly involves their clarification and delimitation rather then expansion.

The Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) of 1984 provides a good example of this process. Its aim appears to have been to strike a balance both between conflicting values and between the ideal and the

real. One aspect of the situation was anxiety about discrepancies between police practice and the rights of 'suspects'. In addition to its ethical desirability, the elimination of this problem also offered practical advantages. Police can arguably work more effectively if they are trusted by the public, and the collapse of prosecutions and the overturning of convictions because of police procedural irregularities are clearly best avoided. At the same time it was accepted that the police need substantial powers in the battle against crime. The Act set out to deal with these problems through the close specification of the rights and practices in question. The overall result appears to have been an increase in explicitly sanctioned police powers, tempered by the hope that their detailed definition in the Act will make it harder to exceed and abuse them.

A commonly heard argument is that the rights of suspects and their manipulation by skilled lawyers often make it difficult to convict the guilty, while those convicted are also often said to be given more help and comfort than a criminal deserves. A concerted government attack against this perceived trend began recently in Britain with considerable support from both police and public. This in turn heightened the anxiety of many legal and other professionals, whom Mr Howard, the former Home Secretary, has publicly dismissed as 'the woolly-headed brigade', that the state's commitment to the sanctity of individual rights within the judicial system is seriously under threat. At a more general level, the case for limitation of the rights of individuals in favour of those of 'the community' has been made by 'communitarian' writers like Etzioni.

It is clear that the debate about crime control, which vigilante activity both responds to and helps to generate, has to be seen not only as part of an argument about the functions of the state and its ability to fulfil them, but also in relation to the balance between state protection of the rights of individuals and the promotion of rights asserted to belong to the community or to society as a whole. Although vigilantism supports the rights of individuals to band together in the fight to maintain order, it very often involves repression of individual rights to due legal process as laid down by the state. In addition, it may also go beyond the boundaries of legally defined crime and demand adherence to some norms of good and bad behaviour about which the state prefers to leave individuals free to choose.

The search for order

Although contemplation and debate on social order are probably as old as humanity itself, the emergence of the state has posed special problems. Plato and a host of later writers have demonstrated that the balance between domination and the maintenance of order in the state is always likely to be questioned, and that it is also liable to be obscured by ambiguity and ideology.

Whatever one's political perspective, it is also clear that the development of the modern state – and with it capitalism, empire and bureaucracy – has generated much of the subject matter, stimulus and funding for the social sciences in general and the study of social order in particular. In the case of social anthropology, there is no need to cast it as the 'handmaid' of colonialism in order to acknowledge the connection between them. Empire made available for ethnographic study and comparison a treasure house of widely differing societies beyond the dreams of intellectual avarice. Contrasts and unanticipated similarities both between them and to 'home' were documented in profusion. Forms of order based on reciprocity and equilibrium were analysed in societies that seemed to manage reasonably well without the state, and a wide variety of forms of centralized control and legal institutions was explored.

Research in colonial and post-colonial Africa and elsewhere also presented anthropologists with a valuable opportunity to learn about the state itself. The relatively new national entities created out of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century international agreements, and inherited and modified by newly independent governments in the 1950s and 1960s, clearly displayed cracks which many older states had either filled or papered over. Cultural and linguistic diversity was commonplace, distances were great and communications relatively poor. Funds were scarce, and indigenous polities were subordinated to the overriding power of a state whose credentials were rarely well developed at the local level. All this drew attention to comparable problem areas of both historical and modern western European and other states whose frontier communities, ghettos and 'no-go' areas are the most obvious but not the only evidence that the power and authority of the state are not spread evenly throughout its territory.

Yet the problem of order remained – not simply for functionalist anthropologists and sociologists, but also for their various successors and not least for the communities they studied. Far more people than are dreamed of in more revolutionary philosophies place the quest for order and stability extremely high on their political agenda, and many in good Hobbesian fashion look to the state for help in this connection. Protestations that societies without the state are better thought of as 'societies against the state' are interesting but only partly true. People everywhere are thoughtful about their society and become aware, in personal experience, of its shortcomings. Problems of ineffective dispute settlement and crime control create anxiety and pain wherever they occur. As Elizabeth Colson (1975) notes, there is substantial evidence to show that many societies which lacked their own authoritative tribunals welcomed at least the courts of the colonial system if little else. Bohannan (1957) puts this strongly in the case of the Nigerian society he studied. Although he documents how the Tiv people had retained many of their traditional ideas about social order and still regularly made use of some of their own ways of resolving conflict, they were, he comments, 'for the most part, grateful for courts. Courts and administration have greatly increased the safety of the countryside'. Clearly, *Pax Britannica* was not always and everywhere an empty colonialist slogan, even though it could at times be tempered with Tacitus's comment – on a comparable Roman claim – that it 'created a wilderness and called it peace'.

In search of a comparative perspective

My main aim in this book is to provide a comparative and coherent picture of vigilantism that will bring out clearly both its general characteristics and the wide distribution and variety of its forms. Since vigilantes always operate on the edges of the power and authority of the state, and because fundamental questions of law and order lie at the heart of their activities, I hope that my discussion will also throw some useful light upon these broader issues.

This attempt to place my own research experience of vigilantism in a broader frame of reference has naturally led me to explore a wide variety of writings about other times and places. In choosing cases for discussion, I have tried to concentrate on those that seem to be both revealing and well documented. Others might well have chosen differently from the vast array of possibilities. The texts I have used will be acknowledged in the course of my discussion, but it is useful to outline their range and to note in advance the particular importance of some works. In the case of Sungusungu vigilantes in the Tanzanian countryside, I have made use of my own first-hand material and that

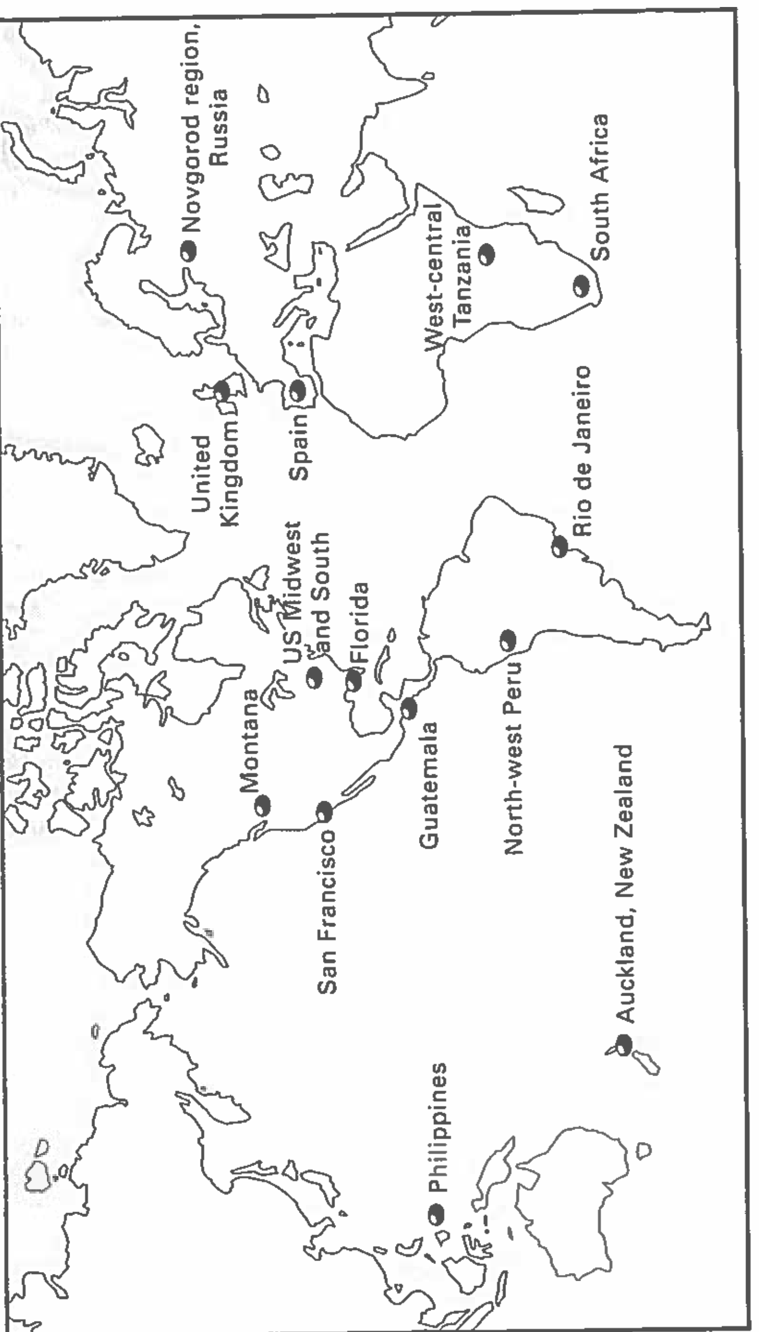


Figure 2 Locations of case materials discussed in the text

of my former student Sufian Bukurura, who conducted a full-scale study of the groups in the early 1990s. In other cases – mainly British and European, North and South American, Ugandan and South African, and Philippine material – I have naturally had to rely upon secondary sources. These include many books and articles, listed in the references, and a large number of newspaper reports, especially for Britain and eastern and southern Africa during the last decade. Where possible, I have consulted book reviews or other texts, and some specialists, to try to gain a picture of the status and reliability of such material. Even with such precautions, any comparative study that is not based simply on one's own research runs the risk of falling foul of local or historical specialists, who may well see as distortion what the author sees as distillation. This is ultimately an insoluble dilemma, and I can only plead that I have been quite painfully conscious of the difficulties of penetrating into the wide range of ethnographic settings that I attempt to deal with.

Two books have proved especially valuable for the study. The first is Richard Maxwell Brown's outstanding monograph *Strain of Violence* (1975), which examines the history of vigilantism in North America and places it squarely in the wider history of the United States.[8] Brown's delineation of the main features of the phenomenon and his analysis of the sometimes tenuous relation between crime control and due legal process is of classical status in this area. His argument, anticipated in his title, that a detailed understanding of American vigilantism demands recognition of particular attitudes to violence rooted in the history of the frontier and revolution also provokes thought about the possibilities and limits of comparison in this field.

The second text, to which Brown also contributes, is quite different. Rosenbaum and Sederberg's edited volume, *Vigilante Politics* (1976), covers a wide range of material from many different countries. The editors adopted a potentially risky policy of allowing their contributors a relatively free hand in the content of their papers, but the result has been an interesting collection that highlights the genuine difficulties of pinning down the subject within rigid definitional boundaries. This is in keeping with both the informality and instability of much vigilante organization and activity. The authors also make a useful contribution towards a typology of vigilante forms.

My references above to ambiguity, ambivalence and instability immediately suggest that this is not an easy task. In any sociological or historical investigation, one is likely to encounter uncertainties about who did what and why, and confident assertions about these may tell us less about 'the truth' than about the investigator's

prejudices or lack of energy to pursue matters further. A study of vigilantism poses these problems in an acute form. The polarized views that it tends to arouse in its supporters and opponents make it more difficult to portray in an objective way than less heatedly debated forms of social action. Its labile nature and the secrecy that commonly surrounds it make it hard to grasp and hard to document in detail. Its tendency to arise in real or alleged social and political crises provides it with special opportunities to conceal a variety of purposes behind assertions of public spirit, moral rectitude and the need for desperate measures in a desperate situation.

The book contains eight chapters. Chapter 2 explores the 'frontier' quality of vigilantism in more detail. I examine the relatively straightforward case of village vigilantism directed against cattle thieves and other 'public enemies' in Tanzania, and I also cast a side-glance at some interestingly comparable material from Uganda, Peru and rural Tsarist Russia. Chapter 3 extends the discussion of such attempts at crime and deviance control to the well-documented North American examples of San Francisco in 1851 and Montana in the 1860s.

Chapter 4 focuses more sharply on the significance for vigilantism of boundaries within communities themselves. These may mark divisions based on class, ethnicity, age and gender, and they may sometimes involve factions struggling for political hegemony. Who claims the right to define public enemies is an important question in this context, as both American and southern African material reveals. Chapter 5 examines a variety of forms of vigilante and related patterns of activity in Britain both historically and at the present day.

Chapter 6 returns to the question of relations between vigilantes and the state. Although reactions from the police, courts and politicians are often hostile, more complex relations between vigilante activity and the state and its officials also occur. Politically motivated state encouragement of vigilante 'counter-insurgency' groups has been recorded in the Philippines and elsewhere, while 'death squad' vigilantism in South America and elsewhere involves the covert participation of officers of the state in attacks on political opponents and other claimed 'public enemies', ranging from criminals to street children.

Chapter 7 explores some aspects of the fact that most vigilantism appears to be male activity directed against other males. At the same time it reviews the varying roles of women in different vigilante settings, and considers the possibility of the development of more active parts for them in such activity. To close the book, chapter 8 discusses some conceptual issues in the relation between vigilantism and the

law. The idea of law as a dual system of rules about behaviour and rules about the rules themselves is discussed, in the context of the state's claims to a monopoly of rights in legislation, jurisdiction and the definition of due process. This helps to clarify vigilantism's ambiguous position as a form of crime control which is itself criminal. I also pay attention here to the search for justice and security that underlies archetypal vigilante behaviour, and I examine some of the paradoxes crystallized in Brown's evocative characterization of vigilantes as 'conservative mob'. Lastly, I extend my discussion to consider similarities and contrasts between vigilantes and mafias, bandits, resistance movements and guerrilla groups. While all these are part of an 'informal political and legal sector', it is clear that distinctions between them are also important and enlightening.

Vigilantes operate in the shadows rather than the bright lights of mainstream political consensus. They have arisen at many times in different regions of the world as defenders, often by force, of their view of the good life against those they see to be its enemies. Recent reports of their activities in Britain, Ireland, mainland Europe, Africa and America have appeared in the press. Yet they have been relatively little studied outside the United States, where they hold a special if at times romanticized position in the nation's history. It may be that their common involvement in the defence of power, property and other 'bourgeois' interests has been less attractive to scholars than the more radical activities of bandits and revolutionaries. Nonetheless, it is surprising that their often independent stance towards the State has not received more attention from both critical and friendly analysts of that institution.

The book explores the 'frontier' conditions in which vigilantism emerges as a solution, full of ambiguities, to problems of perceived disorder which official instruments of law and order do not handle to the vigilante's satisfaction. Contemporary and historical case material from Africa, North and South America, the Philippines, Europe and Britain is examined within an analytic and comparative framework, as are the often fuzzy boundaries between vigilantism and other forms of 'informal sector' activity, such as state death squads, mafia and banditry.

This book will be of value to undergraduates and graduates in anthropology, political sociology, criminology and history. It will also provide stimulating reading for all who are interested in issues of law and order.

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