

# Re-thinking Solidarity at the Fringes of Consumer Culture

## What do Outlaw Bikers Have that 'Brand Communities' Lack?

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### ABSTRACT:

The article asks a question that may, at first sight, appear rather simple. Namely, what is the nature of solidarity among outlaw motorcycle clubs and how does it differ from so-called 'brand communities', a concept popular in consumer culture studies and marketing, pointing to the ability of brands to serve as a new potent means of identification essential to the formation of communities. To answer this, we must ask: what are the limits of the brand community? This question is investigated here through a juxtaposition of the subculture of outlaw motorcycle clubs and possibly the most notorious brand community – Harley Owners Group (HOGs). Membership in the

former depends on a long period of trial, and is reserved only to those who are ritually initiated into the club following successful completion of their trial period – membership cannot be bought and the logo of the club, its brand, is both sacred to the members and inalienable; people are willing to die for it and to kill for it. On the other hand, membership in HOG's ultimately depends on a purchase, even if it cannot be reduced to it. It is argued that this has profound effects on the nature of solidarity and community that emerge: on one hand, a greedy institution which produces a sacred, on another, a weak brand community, a semblance of the Real.

### KEYWORDS:

brand community, outlaw motorcycle clubs, consumer culture, subculture, sacred, solidarity

*Unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno.*

(also, the motto of Switzerland)

*'Best we stay neutral.' – 'Come on, there ain't no Switzerland in the hood.'*

Sons of Anarchy

Lucky<sup>1</sup> a member of the Hells Angels MC – the transnational outlaw motorcycle club that law enforcement agencies worldwide label an organized crime group, with origins in the post-world war II United States, California (est. 1948), and today spanning 444 charters in 56 countries on 5 continents<sup>2</sup> – once told me a story that may help us start thinking through the nature of solidarity among the members of outlaw motorcycle clubs – and through the type of solidarity that people find increasingly lacking in their lives in an individualized society and that they search for in these groups (Kuldova 2019). Working for a museum, Lucky was sent to fetch an exhibition piece from abroad. During a club meeting, or *church*, he mentioned to his brothers that he must travel to Switzerland and won't be able to make it to the next meeting (one needs a good reason to skip one); a brother told him to contact a member in Switzerland, if he needs support. Feeling obliged, even though he did not require assistance and did not know the guy, Lucky phoned. The member on the line, assuming some illegal stuff was to be picked up, immediately asked how many men were needed and where to send them. Lucky re-assured him that this is unnecessary and that he calls only to let the local club know he is around. At an anniversary party three years later, Lucky finally personally meets the guy on

phone; only then the guy asks what he went to fetch in Switzerland: 'a celebrity wedding dress'.

Already this brief vignette can tell us something about the nature of solidarity among the outlaw motorcycle club (OMC)<sup>3</sup> members, the subject of our exploration. Solidarity here is not necessarily based on personal acquaintance, familiarity, or friendship, but rather on the *obligation* of the club members to support each other at all times, while not asking any silly questions. A code of secrecy and a code of trust, its flipside, as well as a penchant for rules can be also immediately discerned. These are an effect of belonging to the same outlaw motorcycle club, of sharing its 'totemic identification' (Malinowski 1948), the notorious (and trademarked) 'death head' (Kuldova 2016) and along with it its highly elaborated culture and organization. The concept of solidarity as obligation dates back to the Roman legal concept – *obligation in solidum*, a 'principle of mutual responsibility between an individual and a society, where each individual vouches for the community and the community vouches for each individual' (Bayertz 1999: 3). Or simply, *unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno* (one for all, all for one), also the motto appropriated widely by outlaw biker clubs. *Obligatio in solidum* establishes a rule of abstract law that regulates relations between both familiar and unfamiliar members of the community. Hells Angels MC<sup>4</sup> and other OMCs are governed by secret laws and by-laws that regulate internal club hierarchies, voting, meetings, rituals, membership, fee structures, sartorial and behavioural codes and more.

Solidarity also derives its meaning from *solidus* (firm, solid), pointing us to strong ties and social cohesion.

1 All characters are anonymized.

2 <https://hells-angels.com/> (accessed 10 June 2017).

3 I use the short cut OMC for the outlaw motorcycle clubs. Law enforcement and criminologists often prefer the label OMCs (outlaw motorcycle gangs), but I believe that the 'gang' label is inappropriate, as sociologically speaking gangs are a different kind of entity, even if they may share certain features.

4 Most outlaw motorcycle clubs have imitated the organizational structure of the Hells Angels MC, hence they can be understood as a certain ideal type of such a organization. Even street gangs and boxing clubs have appropriated this form of organization as it has proven effective in enforcing loyalty to the organization.

Solid relations and solidarity are often imagined to emerge on the basis of shared culture, interests, values or experiences – from family, ethnic to national solidarity – or one grounded in passion for the Harley Davidson lifestyle (Joans 2001). However, while shared features are important, and people can be temporarily mobilized in solidarity on their basis, they are not enough to produce a lasting form of *reciprocal* solidarity. The case of OMCs shows us that more is needed in order for a long term strong reciprocal solidarity to emerge. Here we must acknowledge the insight of the Roman legal notion of solidarity, namely that solidarity needs to be enforced; it requires an explicit commitment to shared moral/legal code that binds people into reciprocal relations of solidarity. As Barrington Moore noted in his insightful book *Injustice*, ‘ordinary soldiers in an army under fire require the social corset of military discipline even when they believe in their cause’ (Moore [1978] 2015: 321).

The difference between ordinary Harley Davidson riders, sometimes but not always organized in Harley Davidson Owners Group clubs (HOGs) and OMCs, can serve us as an example – and also an example of how solidarity manifests in the individualized bourgeois consumer culture as opposed to criminal culture, which cannot rely on the force of law, but depends on relations of trust. The latter has a far more rigid organization, moral codes, and a clear sense of ‘we’. Hence, OMCs also have clear enemies – (1) the police, an enemy shared by all OMCs, and (2) antagonistic OMCs and other competing similar groups within a certain territory. Their self-proclaimed outsider status also means that they are often either indifferent or hostile to the mainstream society – at least on the ideological level, and despite their attempts to commodify their own power mystique within the realm of popular culture. In practice, they often mobilize support from the general public and neighbours, but even then, they maintain a certain cynical distance towards the *citizens*. Unlike the hobby riders, who occasionally mobilize and display solidarity, be it during charity runs, biker events, or when helping each other in traffic accidents, the OMCs maintain clear social boundaries with territorial claims. Essential for the constitution of the ‘we’ among the OMCs is maintenance of the social boundary between the competing *clans* (Barth 1969).

Unlike the friendship-based HOGs, the ‘brand communities’ (Muniz & O’Quinn 2001) organized around *powerful but profane* brands, outlaw biker clubs are better understood as clans, *organized around the sacred* which is condensed, not unlike in the case of a brand, in the club logo (Kuldova 2019). All outlaw biker clubs share a common myth of origin, the heavily mythologized foundational event that has for the first time placed the outlaw bikers into opposition to the law-abiding hobby riders (Schubert 2012). As Malinowski argued, myth is not ‘an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force’ (Malinowski 1948: 79) that legitimizes a particular social organization, the rank of groups and individuals, while defining social boundaries, without which the ‘we’ would

be impossible. All OMCs irrespective of clan rivalries, trace their origin to the infamous Hollister riot of 1947 during a big motorcycle rally organized by the American Motorcycle Association. As the bikers got progressively drunk, some became wilder than others, threw bottles and damaged property. The LIFE magazine blew the event out of proportion (Schubert 2012); later, the story was turned into the cult movie *The Wild One* (1953) with Marlon Brando, turning the outlaw bikers into an icon of American popular culture (Austin et al. 2010). The alleged public statement of the American Motorcyclists Association (AMA) following these events, namely that the trouble was caused by the one per cent of the motorcyclists, who were deviant, whereas the ninety-nine per cent were law abiding citizens (Reynolds 2000), marked the origin of the 1-percenter designation of the outlaw bikers. AMA claims to never have issued such an official statement, labelling it ‘apocryphal’ (Dulaney 2005). Nonetheless, within the logic of myth, this does not matter. The 1% patch worn on the jackets of outlaw bikers is shared by all outlaw clubs, deriving from this external definition that excluded them from the good society. Subsequently, different outlaw biker clubs emerged, with similar myths of their animosities (such as the notorious conflict between the Bandidos MC and the Hells Angels MC) and their friendships. The sense of ‘we’ among the OMCs is even stronger as it already depends on exclusion as the precondition of its very existence. The name of the Scottish, now transnational outlaw motorcycle club Blue Angels MC, est. in 1963, where Blue stands for Bastards, Lunatics, Undesirables and Eccentrics, shows how this exclusion is turned into a positive identification, worn as a badge of honour.



Sonny Barger, the leading figure of the club and a worldwide celebrity, signing a photo book with historical images of the club created especially for the anniversary, Paris, May 2017. © Tereza Kuldova, 2017.

The boundaries that separate OMCs run (1) along the lines of general exclusion from the mainstream, (2) along the lines of belonging to the larger outlaw biker counterculture and (3) along the respective outlaw motorcycle club. While the first is the most porous, the third is the most solid. The insistence on these boundaries is often a source of recurrent social conflicts, be it between the outlaw bikers, larger society, law enforcement<sup>5</sup>, or competing clubs. However, these external oriented conflicts help to suppress internal conflicts typical for tight-knit communities, and increase

5 During the recent opposition of outlaw motorcycle clubs to the new revision of the German association law, which has since March 2017 flatly prohibited the symbols of the largest OMCs in Germany, Hells Angels MC, Bandidos MC and Gremium MC, these – under normal conditions mutually hostile – clubs came together to take collective legal action against the state, arguing that the legal reform is unconstitutional.

solidarity within – a function of social conflict well document by both Georg Simmel and later Lewis Coser in his book *The Functions of Social Conflict* (Simmel 1904, Coser 1964). Coser argued that social conflict with outgroups and reciprocal antagonism strengthen group consciousness and internal cohesion, while preserving social divisions and reproducing the established social order. As such, social conflicts can produce heat and solidarity on the inside and cold and indifference/hostility on the outside (Eriksen 2004). Turf wars over territory with competing clubs have also been shown to increase club solidarity (Hauck and Peterke 2010).

This reproduction of boundaries, one of the generative forces of solidarity, should not be imagined as driven solely by material interests. As Johan Huizinga in his analysis of the play-element in culture pointed out, ‘the real motives are to be found less in the “necessities” etc. of economic expansion, etc., than in pride and vainglory, the desire for prestige and all the pomps of superiority’ (Huizinga [1955] 1970: 90). But even in the work of boundary maintenance through social conflict, we find a significant play-element. A recent incident can illuminate this play-element in the outlaw biker counterculture. In 2015, at a biker event, a member of the Hells Angels showed me a video of a transsexual wearing the patch of the Hamburg president of Mongols MC<sup>6</sup>, a traditional enemy club (Queen 2011), while saying on the camera ‘I love dicks’<sup>7</sup>; some Hells Angels got hold of Erkan Uzun’s patch and paid a transsexual for the recording as a retaliation for members of Mongols MC roaming around in the traditional HAMC territory in Hamburg. The enemy was effectively humiliated – the very object that represents and embodies a biker’s identity was stolen and emasculated, something that provoked a violent reaction, and a video was uploaded threatening the Hells Angels MC<sup>8</sup>. Playful, but deadly serious, ridicule and humiliation of outsiders not only increases social conflict, but also produces group cohesion and suppresses internal conflicts (Klein 1975). Attacking the sacred patch is considered as the highest offence, even if everyone knows that it really is just a piece of cloth. And yet, such is precisely the sacred seriousness of play – men are even willing to fight, and murder for it, if humiliated – a woman was murdered in Arizona for making fun of the patches (Schubert 2012). If a member loses his patch, he can be thrown out of the club (Kuldova 2016).



Members of Hells Angels, riding during a public event, Austria, 2016. © Tereza Kuldova, 2016.

So far, we have gained two crucial insights pointing to (1) the crucial role of strict rules, or even a proto-legal framework of *obligation in solidum*, which imposes commitment to solidarity onto the members of the given outlaw motorcycle club and (2) the role of the boundary making and maintenance processes that produce the sense of ‘we’ and internal solidarity, bound together with powerful ‘sacred’ symbols that set members apart. While within the club we find the ‘one for all, all for one’ solidarity, it depends profoundly of the friend-enemy distinction (Schmitt 2007) – ‘brand communities’, even if superficially similar, typically lack precisely this distinction. In other words, members of outlaw motorcycle would, and some have, die for the club and for their patch. Few would fight with lovers of Royal Enfield, or die for Harley. This distinction is important to keep in mind when thinking about the nature of solidarity in a consumer society vis-à-vis the solidarities that emerge at its margins, and in direct opposition to it, and that appear increasingly seductive to a great number of individuals.

#### FROM NEOLIBERAL MELANCHOLIA TO GREEDY INSTITUTIONS

*‘Horried the melancholic sees the earth relapsed into a mere state of Nature. No shimmer of former history surrounds it. No aura’*

*Walter Benjamin (De Cauter 2016: 95)*

After Lucky told me the initial story, he went on praising the benefits of belonging to this transnational brotherhood: ‘Everywhere you travel, you get a decent meal, a place to stay, companionship of your brothers, you are never alone’. This sentiment is widely shared among the club members; everyone has a story of brotherhood solidarity to tell, be it one of crashing with a motorcycle in a foreign country, where local members, often personal strangers, immediately rushed to help or visited in the hospital, or just stories of visiting new club charters across the world for fun – a member told me of his visit to the new charter in Japan (est. 2014) and his fascination with the Japanese macaques enjoying the hot springs in the mountains. The paradox of the social ties that bind the brotherhood together is that they are often at once strong and weak, or rather that the strong ties associated with the belonging to a particular club charter are extended and projected onto the weak ties that bind one member to another one in a different continent – this is precisely the charm of the transnational brotherhood, it offers *both strong ties and ‘the strength of the weak ties’ at once* (Granovetter 1983).

This extended brotherhood solidarity, however, depends on the outside in a double sense. It does not only depend on the aforementioned exclusion of the outlaw bikers from the good society, but also on the bikers persistent and loud critique of contemporary mainstream society. Melancholia, depression, and feelings of loss and failure have driven many into the brotherhood in the first place. Disillusionment with contemporary individualized society, economic

6 Mongols MC is a transnational outlaw motorcycle club with a violent reputation, established in Montebello, California in 1969. The German Mongols MC were established first in Bremen in 2010 by a Lebanese immigrant crime syndicate. The Mongols MC in Germany are mostly only nominally an outlaw motorcycle club – unlike the Hells Angels MC they do not have motorcycles or even licenses. The charter in Hamburg has been dissolved in the meantime as several members are in prison.

7 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qVp7\\_njtVo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qVp7_njtVo) (accessed 10 June 2017).

8 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZD5A4cJEngY&t=139s> (accessed 10 June 2017).

inequality, job insecurity, unemployment, flexibilization, lack of vision, value disorientation and uncertainty, associated with the social and economic transformations of the last few decades, has led people to search for alternatives. The brotherhood provides a *relief* for these existential feelings and melancholia, but *not a cure*, as the reasons for this melancholia are bound with the structural effects of neoliberalization (Kuldova 2019).

In this sense, the OMC remain a counterculture – only while in the late 50s and 60s the outlaw bikers in the United States offended the middle class small town moralities with their sexual excesses, polyamorous relationships, senseless violence and general amorality, today they offend not only because of their crimes, spectacularized by the media (Katz 2011), but more because of their emphasis on values, meaning, purpose, order, justice, social relations, solidarity, strong social bonds, support networks and power in numbers, and the power in collective action that is increasingly becoming a mere utopian dream of the left. Today, outlaw motorcycle clubs offer their members precisely that which they see as disappearing from the atomized, commodified, egoistic, individualistic and hypercompetitive consumer culture where ‘all values have disappeared’, where ‘partners are exchanged like socks, and where social bonds, lasting relations mean nothing no more, everything can be sold’<sup>9</sup>. Against the popular perception still shaped largely by B-movies or men’s adventure magazines from the 50s and 60s, the brotherhoods have become rather conservative. This has also possibly been an effect of their growth, something that requires the opposite of wildness, freedom and spontaneity of the original clubs, namely, rules, order, obedience, submission and personal sacrifices on behalf of the club, which produces and requires members longing for traditional communal values of friendship, brotherhood, support, reliability, stability, respect, loyalty, love, and mutual trust.



Members of an official Support 81 outlaw motorcycle club, note the different patches. © Tereza Kuldova, 2017.

At this point it is important to clarify precisely what form of nostalgia in relation to the perceived disenchantment of the world and disintegration of human community we are dealing with here. Lieven De Caeter distinguished between three forms of nostalgia: (1) past oriented and reactionary *regressive nostalgia* (2) present oriented *critical nostalgia* that juxtaposes past with present as a way of exerting criticism, without

believing either in return to a certain ideal past moment or in a utopian future, (3) future oriented *utopian nostalgia* (De Caeter 2016). While many would imagine that the clubs are reactionary, they seem to rather engage in critical nostalgia. There is no idea of ‘return’ to golden ages located somewhere in the mythical past. Instead, their critical nostalgia reflects the melancholia of the now that has driven many into the clubs. There is no future either, a sense exaggerated by the often sudden and early motorcycle deaths of the men around. Even if these members live on in the memory of the club members, their dates of death along with club symbols often tattooed on the arms of their brothers, their images displayed in club houses and online, memorial runs being organized in their memory every year – there is no sense of future. The power in numbers is directed at survival in the here and now, not at the future. As a character in *Sons of Anarchy* remarks, ‘You got to realize, this isn’t 1967 anymore, sweetheart. This life, it ain’t romantic or free. There’s no path to anything that makes any sense. It’s just dirty and sad. And we both know it’s only gonna get worse’ (season 6, episode 11).

This critical discourse is not only effectively used to attract new supporters, friends and potential members, who search for communities that offer an alternative to the alienation, anxiety and inadequacy they feel in contemporary society, but it can also be seen as a direct continuation of some of the most influential and now topical discussions in social theory. Even the *New York Times* has recently run an article by Alex Williams, ‘Prozac Nation is Now the United States of Xanax’<sup>10</sup>, arguing that we have moved from a society of depression of the 1990s to a contemporary society of anxiety, pointing to the widespread nature of this form of critique of capitalist culture. But it is the old debates in social theory that we see resurrected here, in practice. The essence of Ferdinand Tönnies’ famous distinction between the ideal types of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* comes alive (Tönnies 2001). While the clubs effectively incorporate features of *Gesellschaft* in their organization, much like ‘the strength of weak ties’, it is clear that their own ideal is *Gemeinschaft*. Tönnies also emphasized that strong social bonds are dependent on people being bound to each other through moral obligations that have to be enforced – not unlike the aforementioned biker code of conduct and club laws. The Hobbesian idea of the ‘war of all against all’ also reappears. As Hobbes writes, ‘the dispositions of men are naturally such, that except they be restrained through fear of some coercive power, every man will dread and distrust each other’ (Hobbes 1972: 99). Tönnies also noted that modern, urbanized *Gesellschaft* covers up the underlying war of all against all, its excessively competitive nature and self-affirmation leading to individualized and generalized conflict. This sentiment directly echoes in the critical discourse of the OMCs.

Durkheim associates the notion of ‘mechanical solidarity’ (Durkheim 1947), an ideal that these groups to a large degree embody, with repressive laws designed to punish transgressors, i.e. those who either differ too

9 From an informal interview with a member of the Hells Angels MC, May 2017.

10 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/10/style/anxiety-is-the-new-depression-xanax.html> (accessed 10 June 2017).

much from the group that is built on similarity of its members, or those who ‘offend against the organ of common consciousness’ (Durkheim 2004: 28) – unlike the restitutive character of law under modern societies. While mechanical solidarity is clearly the self-proclaimed ideal of these groups, and the way they wish to be perceived, the reality is messy. In practice, we clearly discern elements of organic solidarity: the clubs act transnationally within advanced societies, depending on division of labour within and across the clubs. Nonetheless, ideologically, they enforce the ideal of mechanical solidarity – this is the type of solidarity that is enforced by the internal laws and expected from all members, at all times. Hence, the organic form of solidarity is never the subject of explicit discourse within the clubs, it exists, it can be observed in actual interactions, everyone knows it, but it is never part of their self-conception and self-understanding. It is a well-kept secret. Instead, the explicit discourse is dictated by the logic of brotherhood, of family solidarity. This discourse clearly demands much greater levels of commitment, mobilizing the individual affective capacities and subsuming the individual into the collective – unlike the logic of organic solidarity, where individuality is offered more space to flourish. At this point we must take a clue from Durkheim, where he says that mechanical solidarity

can be strong only to the extent that the ideas and inclinations common to all the members of the society are greater in number and intensity than those which belong personally to each of them; the greater the excess, the stronger the solidarity. (...) The solidarity that derives from similarities is at its maximum when the collective consciousness completely envelops our total consciousness and coincides with it at every point: but, at that moment, our individuality is nil. Our individuality can come into being only if the community takes up less place within us (...) at the very moment when this solidarity exercises its influence, our personality collapses, one might say, by definition; for we are no longer ourselves; we are a collective being (Durkheim 2004: 30).

Outlaw motorcycle clubs explicitly demand total submission, the club, as a collective body, always comes first. This suppression of individuality often becomes a source of conflict within the club (Grundvall 2018), hence the increased importance of the aforementioned group solidifying functions of social conflict with enemy groups. Organizations like the Hells Angels, not only demand sufficient loyalty but must also ensure its continual (re)production (Quinn and Koch 2003, Wolf 1999). Manufacturing total loyalty can be difficult in the social context of complex societies where the individual member is not only pushed by expectations from the side of the club, but also by expectation from the outside society in which he still often participates against his (self-)exclusion<sup>11</sup>. This means that the organization has to act particularly aggressively towards the individual if it wishes to capture the finite libidinal energies of

this individual for itself; others are competing for commitment as well – from family to work. Military is a similar organization that stands in front of the same predicament, being an equally demanding institution when it comes to loyalty, commitment and the demand on willingness to sacrifice oneself (Segal 1986). Lewis Coser labelled such institutions that make total claims on their members, *greedy institutions*. These are greedy

insofar as they seek exclusive and undivided loyalty and (...) attempt to reduce the claims of competing roles and status positions on those they wish to encompass within their boundaries. Their demands on the person are omnivorous (...) Greedy institutions are characterized by the fact that they exercise pressures on component individuals to weaken their ties, or not to form any ties, with other institutions or persons that might make claims that conflict with their own demands (Coser 1974: 6).

Under current neoliberal conditions and individualization, reciprocal solidarity, if it is to emerge and sustain itself over a prolonged period of time, depends precisely on such greedy institutions – if we like it or not. Greedy institutions do not respect any competing obligations or allegiances; they ignore the contemporary normative order that protects individual autonomy and private life. Vis-à-vis the general loss of trust, loyalty and long-term relationships, the greedy OMCs both demand and promise total trust and loyalty that is to last until one’s death – only under special circumstances can members be let off ‘in good standing’, or is kicked out of the club in ‘bad standing’. Greedy institutions have also a much harder time enforcing loyalty and solidarity than Goffman’s ‘total institutions’ (Goffman 1968), and they are not to be confused even if they share certain features. The crucial difference here is that greedy institutions depend on creation and maintenance of *symbolic* boundaries in order to manufacture undivided commitment, unlike total institutions that rely on *physical* separation – from prisons, monasteries, asylums to military bases. Greedy institutions are thus far more dependent on making their lifestyle appear as highly desirable; the entry is always voluntary. They need to offer something special to their members that is worth the massive sacrifice on their part, preferably something that they feel they can no longer find elsewhere.

11 The degree of participation of individual members in the economy outside of the club structures varies significantly, some have jobs that depend on the club structures, where the respective business is dependent on relations between individual members within the club, or is even a direct club business (e.g. selling of club merchandize, security/bouncer business), others have ordinary jobs in companies unrelated to the clubs.



Members of Hells Angels MC posing together with David Labrava, the actor in Sons of Anarchy and a member of HAMC in Oakland. © Tereza Kuldova, 2017.

OMCs and in particular the Hells Angels, that perceive themselves as the elite of the elite of such brotherhoods, offer not only a sense of being part of the chosen few, of the honourable and righteous bikers, but also a sense of order in a society marked by flux, flexibilization and atomization. Not unlike a religious sect, the outlaw biker brotherhoods offer an access to a certain form of truth: the aforementioned critical nostalgia that positions the club directly vis-à-vis the instability, inequality, uncertainty, disposability, transience, consumerism etc. of the outside. Instead, it offers rigidity, order, and 'character'. In *The Corrosion of Character*, Richard Sennett is on one hand disquieted by the dangerous pronoun 'we' and its rise in reaction to social transformations effected by neoliberalism, while in search for other, more progressive forms of solidarity, but on the other hand he acknowledges the sense of loss of character, of lasting values, pointing out that 'no long term', a principle on which contemporary society operates, effectively destroys trust, reciprocity, mutual commitment and loyalty (Sennett 1998). As he writes, 'character is expressed by loyalty and mutual commitment, or through the pursuit of long-term goals, or by the practice of delayed gratification for the sake of a future end' (Sennett 1998: 10). It is precisely this form of 'character' that becoming a member of a powerful transnational brotherhood restores in the individual. And here we return back to our starting point, to the critique of the consumer culture with its ethos of the survival of the fittest, of the winner-loser game, that has reversed the solidarity project and common sense of citizenship (Reiner 2007), thus not only creating criminogenic conditions (Hall et al. 2012) but also opening up a space of growth for alternative forms of organization that offer a sense of value, respect and honour. Or as Richard Sennett writes,

One of the unintended consequences of modern capitalism is that it has strengthened the value of place, aroused a longing for community. All the emotional conditions (...) in the workplace animate that desire: the uncertainties of flexibility; the absence of deeply rooted trust and commitment; the superficiality of teamwork; most of all, the specter of failing to make something of oneself in the world, to 'get a life' through one's work. All these conditions impel people to look for some other scene of attachment and depth... it is almost a universal law that 'we' can be used as a defense against confusion and dislocation (Sennett 1998: 111).

In the following, we shall look at the ways in which the OMCs establish 'character' and 'honour', and re-auratise the social, while enforcing a sense of order, coherence and control in a world of uncertainty.

#### FROM THERAPY CULTURE TO HONOUR CULTURE

*Solidarity is only gesturing when it involves no sacrifice.*

Mary Douglas (Douglas 1986: 4)

Mary Douglas opens her book *How Do Institutions Think*, in which she shows the extent to which our thinking depends upon institutions, with the following words,

writing about cooperation and solidarity means writing at the same time about rejection and mistrust. (...) Solidarity involves individuals being ready to suffer on behalf of the larger group and their expecting other individual members to do as much for them. It is difficult to talk about these questions coolly. They touch on intimate feelings of loyalty and sacredness. Anyone who has accepted trust and demanded sacrifice or willingly given either knows the power of the social bond. (Douglas 1986: 1).

The explicit willingness, at times bordering on a religious fervour, to sacrifice oneself on behalf of the club or for one's brother(s) is something that distinguishes these organizations from the mainstream western society. It is this readiness to sacrifice that is required from a person who wishes to join the club and permanently subject himself to its structures. In the following, I wish to sketch the process that leads up to the *initiation* of new members into the brotherhood, which is also at the same time a movement across cultures: *from a therapy culture to honour culture*; a movement that materializes the aforementioned critical nostalgia, a movement that is about rejection and mistrust of contemporary society. Before we proceed to this point, let me briefly sketch a distinction between three ideal types of culture that may be particularly helpful for our understanding of the ritual re-birth of the ordinary man as an outlaw biker. In an article, *Microaggressions and Moral Cultures*, Campbell and Manning distinguish between three ideal types of cultures – a *culture of honour*, a *culture of dignity* and a *culture of victimhood*, which correspond to different forms of social control (Campbell and Manning 2014).

Cultures of honour cultivate bravery, do not shy away from physical violence, and place high value on one's reputation. One's

honour depends on one's *reputation*. In order to protect it, one must respond even to the slightest provocations and offences with *direct* and aggressive *retaliation*, so as not to lose one's. 'The hallmark of honor is a heightened sensitivity to insult coupled with belligerence in responding to it' (Cooney 1998: 110).

Outlaw biker clubs embody this ethos of an honour culture; when it comes to retaliation against an enemy club, the question is *never if, but when*; or else, 'in honor cultures, people are shunned or criticized not for exacting vengeance but for failing to do so' (Cooney 1998: 110). Moreover, 'because of their belief in the value of personal bravery and capability, people socialized into a culture of honor will often shun reliance on law or any other authority even when it is available, refusing to lower their standing by depending on another to handle their affairs' (Campbell and Manning 2014: 713). Honour culture is a clan culture, where a disgrace of one member, is a disgrace of all – here too, our initial motto of 'one for all, all for one', applies. Furthermore, it tends to be a *belief culture*, marked by a certain distance towards its own beliefs and its magic, a source of cultural pleasure (Pfaller 2014, Pfaller 2011).

Cultures of dignity on the other hand, typical of western bourgeois modernity, tend to be more often than not *faith cultures*, whose highest value is *self-esteem* (Pfaller 2014). They believe in an inherent dignity of all individuals and direct their attention at self-control. Granted that everyone is imagined to possess this inherent dignity, struggles over reputation become less important, something that means that insults do not provoke as passionate emotions as they do in an honour culture; people have a tendency to shrug off insults. Police and justice apparatus are considered necessary only when a serious crime occurs. Minor differences are dealt without an interference of a third party; calling for police for every little thing is perceived as frivolous, while taking law into one's hands is widely condemned.

Cultures of victimhood or therapy culture, exemplified in the proliferation of complaints about microaggressions, are at odds with both honour and dignity cultures. While honour cultures are very sensitive to insults and provocations and would have a certain sympathy for microaggressions, they prefer direct retaliation without recourse to a third instance. Moreover, showing one's weakness or victimhood publicly would equal having zero honour. Dignity cultures on the other hand, would denounce appeals

to a third party based on such minor offences, preferring to ignore such provocations. Cultures of victimhood place emphasis on one's marginalization, weakness, and oppression, which is then turned into a form of status; only victims are considered as deserving of respect and help. Committees, boards and programs designed to help these victims proliferate indefinitely. Frank Furedi has captured this type of culture that celebrates the victim also in his concept of 'therapy culture'; he argued that the progressive institutionalization of therapy has led to a generalized cultivation of vulnerability, and a culture that treats people as unable to deal with their lives, permanently at risk, vulnerable and victimized, something that leads to people being unable to take control over their lives (Furedi 2004). This culture is also marked by an obsessive concern with individual identity, contemporary identity politics is a most vocal expression with its quest to deliver recognition to all (instead of free education, decent standard of living and jobs).

Individuals who find the outlaw biker brotherhoods particularly seductive are also those who resent the most the victimhood and therapy culture; they are either unable or unwilling to capitalize on it, self-respect often standing in the way – most often they are white working class men, or white business men, who lack cultural capital that would have been necessary for them to align themselves with the bourgeois culture of dignity. The proliferating therapy culture stands in the sharpest contrast to the culture of honour and its form of solidarity. The maxim of the therapy culture – what one feels and believes *internally* matters the most, one is entitled to behave in correspondence with these inner feelings ('I don't like you, why should I hide my feelings' – is the opposite of what facilitates solidarity. The honour culture can be equally intensely offended, but its reasons and solutions are profoundly social, pertaining to safeguarding the *clan's* honour and maintaining *appearances*. It is not important what an individual feels deep down at the bottom of his heart, after all, he personally may not want to take a revenge at all, but he is obliged to and hence he must.

Hells Angels and similar OMCs as greedy institutions institutionalize this form of honour culture where appearances matter more than internal belief; what matters is that individual members act in accordance with the brotherhood ideology, the moral code, and materially reproduce this ideology; whatever they internally believe, they should keep to themselves. And as we know, it is precisely in the material existence of ideas, in material acts, that ideology is reproduced and becomes most potently visible (Althusser 2008). Solidarity among outlaw motorcycle club members is something that has to be continually materially re-enacted: members hug each other excessively, cover their vests and motorcycles in the club symbols, patches and stickers that explicitly formulate the ideology of the brotherhood (such as ACAB, or else all cops are bastards, a reminder of the enemy, FTW, fuck the world, or Trust me I am Hells Angel, Protected by Extreme Violence), produce an impressive amount of material culture (gifts that represent mutual bonds, support merchandize for fans and so on), they engage in spectacular repetitive rituals (anniversaries, initiations, patch-over parties, charity runs, memorial runs, tattoo conventions and public parties they organize, funerals), and finally, they cover their bodies with tattoos symbolizing their alliance to the brotherhood. Unlike in a therapy culture, where what matters are internal feelings and where one demands to be recognized as one is, honour culture is dependent on its materialization, one has to constantly strive to be an honourable member, irrespective of one's interior feelings.



A supporter of the Hells Angels MC in Paris (note the 81 diamond patch); notice the patch with the wording: 'a friend will help you move, a brother will help you move a body', just another way to put the ideal of solidarity within the biker brotherhood. © Tereza Kuldova, 2017.

Material representations and materialized ideas can even act *interpassively* on behalf of the members (Pfaller 2017), delegating their (suspended) belief onto the material objects that then *believe on their behalf*; or else, objectively, materially speaking, solidarity is expressed and recreated at all times through ritual and material practices. This situation is parallel to Slavoj Žižek's example of the functioning of the Tibetan prayer wheel, where the 'wheel itself is praying for me, instead of me – or, more precisely, I myself am praying through the medium of the wheel. The beauty of it is that in my psychological interior I can think about whatever I want, I can yield to the most dirty and obscene fantasies, and it does not matter because – to use a good old Stalinist expression – whatever I am thinking, objectively I am praying' (Žižek 1989: 34). Rituals themselves, as Robert Pfaller vividly argued, are profoundly interpassive in their character: 'belief, too, can become subject to interpassive practice. We do not have to believe, then, ourselves (...) but some anonymous other merely has to be made to believe that we believed. Thanks to an anonymous illusion we are therefore able to derive a lot of satisfaction from not believing. The anonymous belief that allows us not to believe is established through performing the ritual (...) Through rituals, individuals delegate their religious beliefs to interpassive media' (Pfaller 2017: 60-1). While therapy culture is marked by a lack of distance towards one's own belief, an honour culture, indulging in excessive material demonstrations of its beliefs and in rituals, is able



A huge cake with an Eiffel tower and Golden Gate in red and white at a 60 years' anniversary party of the Oakland Hells Angels charter and Sonny Barger. © Tereza Kuldova, 2017.

to maintain a certain inner distance towards them. This distance becomes obvious if one engages in talks with the bikers; they often 'personally' think that for instance having a huge cake for a club anniversary party with the 'death head' logo on it is indeed rather silly, after all they are grown up men, but still when it comes to it, and the cake is lit up, split, shared and photographed along with collective selfies, they take great pleasure in the practice and objectively speaking, reproduce the brotherhood ideology that binds them in relations of solidarity. As Robert Pfaller notes, 'when objective belief is there (thanks to a ritual medium), the religious subject can go away. As a result of its interpassive dimension, the ritual frees the individual from subjectivisation' (Pfaller 2017: 62). This is also something that slightly complicates the traditional sociological concern in regard to the submission of the individual to the collective.

Becoming a member of the Hells Angels is a daunting and often very humiliating process. One could even say that no self-respecting human being would ever willingly let himself be treated like that, and yet, it is precisely respect and honour that one acquires at the end of this humiliating journey. The process of becoming a member involves a long period from months to a year of being first a *hang-around*, during which one becomes more familiar with the club culture, performs support tasks, is often humiliated and teased, internalizes the club codes, and if successful and liked, becomes an official *prospect* (wearing the bottom rocker of the patch), a period that lasts anywhere between six months and two years, during which one is tested. Then, if all members of the given charter unanimously vote the prospect in, he becomes a *full member* and receives a full patch with the club logo. Within the club itself, one can acquire additional positions over time – president, vice-president, sergeant at arms, road captain, treasurer or member of so-called horror crew and so on. Irrespective of seniority and position in the hierarchy, each member has one vote; the clubs pride themselves on their democratic organization and the fact that the president cannot pass any decision without majority support. Once a member told me, that they 'are the only real democracy left in this fucked up world', smoothly merging in the aforementioned critique with the value and righteousness of the club.

If I am to go by the statements of my informants, and one can never really be sure, as they have a penchant for fooling outsiders, the horror crew members are those within the club that are responsible for giving extra hard time to the prospects. One member for mentioned, commenting on the horror crew patch of another: 'he is a sick bastard, he did not sleep for three days, watching over the prospects who had to keep awake as long as he did, that's how he earned it, he represents terror for the prospects'<sup>12</sup>. This long process of 're-socialization' requires not only that the prospective member acquires and becomes skilled in the performance of the new culture, but also that he abandons the codes of the

dignity, victimhood and therapy cultures that dominate the majority society in which he is socialized. The transition that culminates in the ritual of initiation, is (speaking in ideal types) a transition from a therapy culture to a culture of honour. Humiliation is important in the process of distancing oneself from both the therapy and dignity cultures into which most pre-members are socialized and in developing a sensitivity for honour and for keeping their mouth shut; the code of secrecy in particular has to be learned (Grundvall 2018) as it becomes the core basis of mutual trust, as Georg Simmel noted in respect to secret societies (Simmel and Wolff 1964). Solidarity also means that you don't ask stupid questions and that you learn to talk without saying much'<sup>15</sup>. This process of humiliation also in an uncanny way mirrors the ways in which those who desire to belong to the brotherhood have been repeatedly humiliated, turned into losers, and failures by the mainstream society, only this time, they are afforded a chance to work not only through it, but also to work themselves upwards, to earn the very respect and status that the mainstream society denied them – a classic response to 'status frustration', where the club offers an alternative structure of achievement (Cohen 1955, Kuldova 2016).

Once, at 3 a.m. at a party, two members of the Hells Angels from different charters and countries, told me a story of how they were prospects at the same time, had to serve, clean, and take shit from members at some anniversary party in Sweden. They were in it together, treated like servants, having to stay sober all the time, and do anything the members asked. Remembering those moments of utter humiliation, tears appeared in their eyes. They became hugging each other, repeating that they love each other deeply, promising that they will always be there for one another. There is nothing like a shared humiliation to enforce solidarity. The final ritual of initiation, too, most often involves a form of humiliation. In the classic, *Hell's Angels*, Hunter S. Thompson described the scatological initiation rite as follows:

Every Angel recruit comes to his initiation wearing a new pair of Levis and a matching jacket with the sleeves cut off and a spotless emblem on the back. The ceremony varies from one chapter to another but the main feature is always the de ling of the initiate's new uniform. a bucket of dung and urine will be collected during the meeting, then poured on the newcomer's head in a solemn baptismal. Or he will take off his clothes and stand naked while the bucket of slop is poured over them and the others stomp it in (Thompson 2012: 26).

These stories of 'filthy rites' (Greenblatt 1982) are very popular; they involve all kinds of obscenities, gang-banging of prostitutes by all members and the like (Detroit 2013). However, one must say that the intensity of this humiliation and of the final initiation ritual differs widely across club charters. At one initiation, the prospect was forced to circle around the clubhouse

12 From a conversation with a member of Hells Angels, December 2015.

13 From an interview with a prospect of Red Dogs MC, a support club of the Hells Angels, May 2016.

several times on a pink children's roller – that much for humiliation; after that he received a patch and a party. The Hells Angels and other outlaw bikers are determined constructivists, they know well that culture has to be created, staged, performed and materialized through powerful symbols and rituals that arouse great passions among the members, even against their better knowledge. They know that only under such conditions can solidarity grow, enforced by moral codes and materialized.

**MAKING THE INALIENABLE AND THE SACRED SERIOUSNESS OF PLAY**

*The outlaw, the revolutionary, the cabbalist or member of a secret society, indeed heretics of all kinds are of a highly associative if not sociable disposition, and a certain element of play is prominent in all their doings. (Huizinga [1955] 1970: 12)*

Earlier, we have touched both upon the notion of the sacred seriousness of play, and the ability of play to arouse powerful passions, as well as on the notion of disavowed belief, or else, a suspended illusion (Pfaller 2014, Huizinga [1955] 1970). Combining these two notions, following the seminal work of Robert Pfaller, may help us understand not only how solidarity and order is forced into being among the outlaw bikers, but also how their culture becomes actively sacralised, while serving as a source of both collective and individual pleasure, thus giving an additional twist to the influential Durkheimian notion of 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim 1965).



Juliette De La Joie performing at the 60th Anniversary party of the Oakland Hells Angels, Paris, May 2017. © Tereza Kuldova, 2017.

As we have seen, there is a certain distance towards one's beliefs prevalent in this honour culture. Another example we could take are the members who feel personally a bit uneasy about humiliating the prospects and making them serve them, but they know that they must act like that nonetheless and eventually, they do derive a certain pleasure from this act. We should not assume that they are some barbarians that do not know that treating people like shit is not particularly nice, after all they are the first to value respect and good behaviour, but they also know that it is the cultural imperative to which they must submit, respect needs to be earned; they know that if they did not, the universe they have so painstakingly created would fall apart. As Huizinga put it, 'whether one is sorcerer or sorcerized one is always knower and dupe at once. But one chooses to be the dupe' (Huizinga [1955] 1970: 23). What is crucial in respect to the production of solidarity here is precisely that this counterculture is so

playful, full of rituals, meetings and material culture. The play element in this culture is particularly strong as compared to the mainstream, something that allows it to effectively *produce the sacred* through play and ritual. Here a final distinction important for us must be drawn, namely one that separates the outlaw motorcycle clubs from the Harley Davidson Owners Groups (HOGs). While they share the same passion for the Harley and while they both are organized in clubs, and the HOGs certainly mirror some elements of the outlaw biker culture, there is a fundamental difference. HOGs can be understood as very successful 'brand communities' (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Schouten and McAlexander 1995), where the Harley Davidson brand has effectively created something Maffesoli would call a consumer tribe, where the cherished commodity itself serves as the binding force (Maffesoli 1996). Unlike these groups that depend on the branded commodity, and are open to anyone with a Harley, the outlaw bikers depend on what Anette B. Weiner would call 'inalienable possessions' (Weiner 1992), possessions that have subjective value, that are transcendent treasures, placed above exchange value and that, in this case, are considered sacred and for which they are willing to even kill – the totemic symbol of the club, the 'death head' logo of the Hells Angels, is precisely such an inalienable possession. It cannot be commodified, or sold, it can only be earned.



Tattoo of the sacred and trademarked 'death head' on the hand of a member. © Tereza Kuldova, 2017.

While in order to grow, clubs like the Hells Angels have been effectively self-commodifying their own culture, selling derivative *Support 81* brand merchandize and the like, I have written more on this elsewhere (Kuldova 2016), all things with the club logo produced for the members (watches, t-shirts, trousers, belts, jackets, posters, rings, sunglasses and so on) can only be worn and used by the members. Not to mention the tattoos, which bear the symbols of the club, date of one's initiation, different world runs to which one have been, club anniversaries, tattoos commemorating dead members. All these things belong solely to the members. Moreover, all these things can only be acquired during different events in different localities to which members travel from near and where members from across the transnational brotherhood come to meet, celebrate, drink, and most importantly strengthen their bonds and exchange gifts. It can be anniversary parties, funerals, patch-overs, mutual visits, memorial runs, charity runs, toy runs, initiation parties and other occasions that bring the members together beyond their weekly local meetings and other interactions. Every such event also leaves material traces, stickers, posters, plaques, tattoos, t-shirts, patches, gifts – each ritual event is immediately turned into its own memory, even before it

happens, all these objects are carefully prepared in advance. The walls of club houses look like treasure troves, covered in gifts from friendly MCs, from support clubs, and from other charters, and covered in images of deceased members, and often even with little shrines that commemorate them. This omnipresence of the club's material culture is something that enhances the play-element in it, something that both reflects and stimulates its ritual character. Every event is carefully planned and staged, everyone behaves in accordance to his position, honourably. The events are also forms of ritual play, where the 'psychic intensity' produced during these events, 'is greater than the extent of affect that appears otherwise in life' (Pfaller 2014: 74), precisely due to their playful and ritual character. These events are effective in creating a sense of collective effervescence which binds the members together affectively, manifesting that there is something larger than themselves and reminding members of their submission to the club; the permanent tattoos, the clothes, the patch, they never let you forget that you are to sacrifice yourself for the club first. These events result in an alignment of the affective states that produce a sense of belonging in the participants, a social glue – a 'fusion of particular sentiments into one common sentiment' (Durkheim 1965: 262). The fact that we are dealing here with a form of play (but for that matter no less serious, to the contrary), is also widely acknowledged in personal conversations with the members: 'it's like playing cowboys and Indians, only the stakes are higher'<sup>14</sup> (on the relation to police and enemy clubs). The fact that pleasure is derived from this play is also widely acknowledged. As Robert Pfaller writes, 'play's culture-forming function seems to stem from (...) its ability to hold society together and its obvious trait of sparking off excessive happiness. This excessive happiness, which is the "sacred seriousness"

of play (...) is bound to the condition that the practicing persons are initiates who see through the illusion of the game' (Pfaller 2014: 90). The power of (ritual) play to create social bonds reflects our initial point pertaining to the importance of a strong moral code, of a set of *rules* by which the members are obliged to play. Collective emotions and affects that emerge from play, where a group is bound together by strong rules and obligations, are far more effective in enforcing solidarity than in groups where strong rules are missing and where play is minimized.

The inalienable also stands in the most direct contrast to the society they criticize – the throw-away consumer capitalism where nothing is sacred. It is no wonder that the statement of Marine Le Pen, which she uttered in the recent presidential race, resonated deeply with the sentiments of the bikers. She said to Macron: 'You are the candidate of the power to buy (...) everything is for sale, everything can be bought, men can be bought and sold (...) you only see human relations in terms of what it brings in, in terms of the dividends that can be derived from that. That is not my vision, I believe in giving'<sup>15</sup>. Instead of looking with much hope to political solutions, the members of OMCs create their own sacred in face of the generally felt loss of the inalienable in our culture. Solidarity among the outlaw motorcycle clubs is something that on one hand needs to be enforced through internal laws and moral codes, but on the other, something that presents itself as well as an existential need, one that appears to be left unsatisfied in contemporary neoliberal society, where only increasingly extreme forms of greedy organizations appear to be able to create a counterforce and manufacture the sacred of a belief culture, and thus also cultural pleasure. Something that also puts into question any hopes for more progressive utopian visions of solidarity.

14 From a conversation with a member of an official support club of Hells Angels, June 2016.

15 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dH9uXWh3n-Y&t=6518s> (accessed 5 May 2017, translation of the simultaneous translator).



Memory tattoo from a world run of the Hells Angels (members only) in Poland. © Tereza Kuldova, 2017.



Mad Pussy Gang performing during the aforementioned anniversary event; note the slideshow in the background that celebrates the memories of the club and reinforces the existing community. © Tereza Kuldova, 2017.

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