



The Representation of Bandits in Turkish Cinema

Şan Ararat Halis

Anadolu University, Turkey

sanah@anadolu.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

The banditry cannot be considered independent from the state which is used as a power and an apparatus of coercion against oppressed class by the ruling class. In this respect, for the existence of banditry or the bandit, it needs to be a political and socio economic system to be against it. In different regions of the world historical process, the banditry has emerged and then tales and stories of bandits have been reflected as a subject into the art, cinema and literature. In the history of literature and art, the definition of bandit and how it is defined can vary. They can be presented as thugs, thieves or robbers by the ruling class and by the supporters of the founded system whereas they can also be seen as heroes or saviours by the oppressed class. The banditry is, in Turkey too, an issue has processed in the art and literature. The banditry themed movies in Turkey started in 1948 (with Şadan Kamil's *Efe Aşk*) and ended with Yavuz Turgul's *Eşkiya (TheBandit)* which was filmed in 1996. In this study, it is aimed to reveal how the bandits are represented in Turkish cinema through the concept of Eric Hobsbawm's term of *social bandit*.

INTRODUCTION

The etymological origin of the term *bandit* that spread to many languages starting from English dates back to *bandito* in Italian that means someone, one way or another, outside the realm of law (Hobsbawm, 2011: 15). As it is also implied in the etymology of the concept, the existence of bandits requires order and laws that are bound to regulate them. It is in that sense that Hobsbawm states that we can only talk about bandits within the context of a socio-economical and political order they are to oppose; the history of bandits is a part of the history of power; it is only possible to better grasp bandits with respect to those in power and their relations with societies under their rule (2011: 8, 14, 16). Hobsbawm also indicates that bandits dwell in places where power cannot assume dominance (2011: 21). Similarly, Ruff (2011: 258) argues that bandits gained power in places where the political authority collapsed due to ongoing wars. Historians state that bandit gangs, in early modern times, were mostly comprised of young people, while



today's criminologists believe that youth is a period prone to criminal behaviours (Ruff, 2011: 271). Supporting this argument, Hobsbawm also believes that bandits are mostly young males from adolescence to the age of marriage, as they have a certain freedom of manoeuvre not having yet undertaken the responsibility to raise a family (2011: 47). Lastly, Hobsbawm (2011: 36-37) adds that bandits came to end because capitalist economy removed both agricultural societies and peasantry; it has become history although we still witness the existence of bandits in some regions.

SOCIAL BANDITRY CONCEPT OF ERIC HOBBSAWM

Hobsbawm classifies social bandits under three groups: noble thieves, primitive resistant fighters he calls *outlaws* and reverger guerilla units. According to him, social bandits do not have an alternative intellectual structure than that of the peasant society they are a part of, that's why it would not be true to expect a new social or political alternative from them. Social bandits stand against inequity and do not let injustices, but they aspire the re-establishment of the traditional order by ignoring riches' exploitation of the poor. In this sense, social bandits are not revolutionaries but reformists. Their most noteworthy characteristic is that the sovereigns see them as criminals, while the oppressed peasants see them as saviors, heroes or defenders of justice. Social bandits do not unjustly kill people and they continue to live at peace in their respective villages again as respectful persons once they come to terms with the power (2011: 25-70).

Hobsbawm's arguments on banditry and social banditry have been criticized in many respects. One of the main critics is Blok. Blok (1972, 494-503) stated that Hobsbawm, ignoring social relations and structures, gave too much importance on banditry and peasantry; the myth of banditry and banditry itself prevented peasants to fight for themselves. Hobsbawm, in return, stated that the myth of banditry was based on the demand for justice and re-distribution of wealth at a social scale and accepted that this myth served as a means to console peasants or distort their zeal for change (2011: 228, 230). Carsten Kühler, criticizing Hobsbawm, stated that it was not true to classify banditry under different groups, as all types of crimes already imply social protest and rebel (Kühler in Hobsbawm 2011: 232-233). Hobsbawm, further worked on this idea and argued that petty criminals were considered to be more revolutionary than social bandits, as they had the courage to challenge authority and the very existence of state, while social bandits did not have a similar role, thusly differentiating social bandits from petty criminals (2011: 240).



BANDITRY IN ANATOLIA

In Anatolia, lack of order and peace, accordingly banditry has always been present during the time of Ottoman Empire. Although we have a lot of official documents regarding banditry cases in 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, we do not have many official documents regarding banditry in Anatolia in the 19th century, the period when banditry was considered to be the most prevalent (Yetkin, 1996: 49). Banditry and the myth of banditry have a significant place in different regions of Anatolia. There are variations of the same bandit histories in different regions. Köroğlu is the most common bandit myth. It is possible to come across with various stories on Köroğlu from the west to the east of Anatolia. Although it is not clear where and when he lived, documents from the prime ministry archive prove that a bandit called Rusen but known as Köroğlu actually lived in Bolu region in 1579-1582 (İnce, 2004: 11). According to the most common story, Köroğlu heads to mountains and becomes a bandit when his father's eyes were cauterised by the lord (bey) of the region. Since then, he fights against those oppressing people, starting from the lord himself. People see Köroğlu as a brave person and a rough gallant. He is ruthless to oppressors and protective and compassionate towards poor people. He likes good deeds and does not harm the weak. He fights against the feudal lords that oppress people (Öztelli, 1984: 18).

Bandits known as *zeybek* or *efe* in Aegean region also have an important place in the history of Anatolian banditry. Each member of the bandit gang is called *Zeybek*, while *efe* is the leader of them (Yetkin, 1996: 53). Çakırcalı Mehmet Efe is the bandit that is most widely known in Aegean region. Çakırcalı Mehmet Efe was born in 1872 and lost his life in 1911 out of a random bullet during a fight against the forces of the government. He was a bandit from 1899 to 1911 for 12 consecutive years; killed around thousand people and greatly troubled the Ottoman Empire (Dural, 2005: 56). Yetkin (1996: 83, 86). It is said that Çakırcalı became bandit to revenge his father and purge severe aspersions cast against his mother. The Europeans called him "Robin Hood of Turks" or "King of the Mountains," he was covered by the press of many countries like Italy, France, Britain and Switzerland and there were even discussions about him in British lower house. Çakırcalı distributed the money he robbed from wealthy people to poors; forced the wealthy to make charities and build fountains. People loved him due to his bravery and gallantry (Meydan Larousse, 1980: 123).

Atçalı Kel Mehmet Efe who lived before Çakırcalı is quietly different from the other bandits and Hobsbawm's concept of social bandits due to its actions. Atçalı Kel Mehmet, who started his banditry adventure as an ordinary "efe", becomes a leader of a major insurgent against the Ottoman State in the years of 1829-1830. Uluçay (1968: 6-9)



describes this insurgency as a people's revolution and he adds that Atçalı Kel Mehmet removes arbitrary taxes, especially war taxes, he becomes the governor by toppling the states' governor, and many provinces in the Aegean region are ruled under his authority. Also, he adds that the public adopts Atçalı's ideas and supports him. It is stated that a new view point in terms of a social and political manner is not expected by the social bandits as they defend continuity of the traditional order. Atçalı Kel Mehmet, on the other hand, tries to form a new system so it is separated from the social banditry.

BANDITS IN TURKISH CINEMA

Bandit films had a significant place in Turkish cinema especially in 1950s till the beginning of 1980s when there was a considerable migration from the rural parts of the country to cities. The first bandit film was *Efe Aşkı* (The Love of the Efe) that was shot in 1948. While *efes* were the heroes who populated Turkish cinema the most, Çakırcalı Mehmet Efe had a specific place among them. The life of Çakırcalı Mehmet Efe has been adopted to cinema for seven times. The most noteworthy of all Çakırcalı films is *Dokuz Dağın Efesi* (The Efe of Nine Mountains) directed by Metin Erksan in 1958. The film was criticized for its resemblance to *Viva Zapata* and the actors' attitude resembling Marlon Brando. Although all of the bandit films shot in 1958 to 1965 were about bandits rebelling against the Ottoman Empire, all were basically under the influence of western movies. Around 60 movies under banditry theme were screened from 1948 to 1977. The last bandit movie of Turkish cinema is *Eşkîya* (The Bandit) directed by Yavuz Turgul in 1996 (Özgüç, 2005: 163-169).

RESEARCH MODEL AND SAMPLING

The research aspires to find out how bandits have been represented in Turkish cinema based on the "social banditry" concept of Hobsbawm. The films thusly selected will be evaluated based on descriptive analysis method. Following three films have been chosen based on judgement sampling.

Name	The year when it was screened
Dokuz Dağın Efesi	1958
Atçalı Kel Mehmet	1964
Köroğlu	1968

To serve the purposes of the research, films about the lives of bandits that actually existed have been chosen. Among the movies dealing with lives of real bandits, we have chosen the ones that are about those bandits that have a prevailing existence in popular legends, stories and songs.



FINDINGS AND COMMENTS

When the films are analysed in accordance with the real stories of bandits, and Hobsbawm's concepts of bandits and social bandits, it is seen that three of the bandits in a younger age start to banditry, without getting married and so without taking family responsibility. In all films, the leading characters fall in love with a woman and got married after they started to banditry. In *Atçalı Kel Mehmet* and *Dokuz Dağın Efesi*, the spouses of the bandits always demand the leading characters to stop banditry. The most affected banditry character by the marriage is Çakırcalı Efe. In *Dokuz Dağın Efesi*, the wife of Çakırcalı accepts the marriage as long as he leaves the banditry.

In all films, the reason of starting to be a bandit is injustice and cruelty of the lords (bey) in the places where the leading characters live. In *Dokuz Dağın Efesi*, Çakırcalı become a bandit after his father is deceived and unfairly killed and her mother is insulted by a soldier.

When he clashes with military units that include a soldier who killed his father, Çakırcalı reveals that his intention does not to kill other soldiers and his aim is to take his personal revenge. His comments about leaving banditry after he killed the murderer of his father is also demonstrates this. However, other bandits persuade him and he continues to banditry. Later, he struggles to maintain justice for the peasants that suffer injustice. In the film of *Atçalı Kel Mehmet*, all the banditry is illustrated as if he made those to come together with the women that he falls in love. Also, in the film, Efe's being a governor is attached to this. When the women that he falls in love told him the impossibility of their marriage, he says that he can shift the impossible into possible and if it is necessary he could be a soldier or a governor to marry with her. In a conversation with a lord (bey) he says he makes the banditry to meet the women that he loves. In this sense, the movie distorts the reality about the social side of Atçalı Mehmet Efe and it makes unclear the social reality of the leading character. In *Köroğlu*, on the other hand, the leading character starts banditry after his father is tortured and made blind and then killed by the lord (bey). To take his revenge, Köroğlu joins the bandits in the mountains. Then, he takes the leadership by overwhelming the petty criminal leader. After that, he changes the system and he does not touch the goods of the poor caravan owners and he just robs the goods of rich caravans.

In three films, it is seen that the leading characters are not different from the peasants and they do not have an intention to form a new political or social order. As it is stated previously, although all the bandits have an intention to provide justice, they do not have any attempts to change the current class relations. In *Dokuz Dağın Efesi*, Çakırcalı, demands not to kill the soldiers and not to touch the government property from the



bandits that want to join his gang. Thus, this illustrates that he does not have any problems with the state or the current system. In *Köroğlu*, the father of the leading character says that the lord (bey) tyrannizes over the people and does not do the things that are prescribed by the sultan. In this sense, the father of Köroğlu implies that the problem is not stems from the state but is stems from the local lord. Also, he gives messages that the struggle will be continued against the local lord not against to the state.

In *Atçalı Kel Mehmet*, different from the other two films, the leading character announces his own governorship and he has an attitude against the state and thus, he become out of Hobsbawm's social bandit concept. However, according to the film, that anti-state attitude is unconscious and it is done to meet with a woman that he loves. Eventually, the bandits in films are not revolutionist but they are reformist.

By helping the poor people and struggling for the justice against the cruel lords, in *Dokuz Dağın Efesi*, *Çakırcalı*, in *Atçalı Kel Mehmet*, Mehmet Efe, and in *Köroğlu*, Köroğlu characters represent the social bandit. By making alliances with the lords, tyrannize over people and seizes the goods of them, in *Dokuz Dağın Efesi*, Kamalı Efe, in *Atçalı Kel Mehmet*, Uzun Efe and Kara Efe, and in *Köroğlu*, Cıdalı Kenan represent petty criminals. It is previously stated that Kührter says dividing bandits into different groups is false since all banditry actions include social protests and revolts. Hobsbawm's argument about the division of social bandit and petty criminals that is against Kührter's argument is obviously seen in all analysed films. When the petty criminals in the films commit a crime, they do not seek to realize social protests or riots as opposed to Kührter's argument. On the contrary, they conform Hobsbawm's petty criminal defining since they tyrannise over the people under the service of the cruel lords.

CONCLUSION

In the historical process, banditry has existed as a reality of the countries where the capitalist economy has not affected them yet. When the state does not provide the justice for the areas under its sovereignty and when it tyrannizes over its people, the banditry always exists as a social fact.

In the studied films, it is observed that the banditry is subjected to a clear division as a representation of social bandit and petty criminals. As a criticism of Hobsbawm's concept of social banditry, it is argued that since the petty criminals have an anti-state attitude, they are more revolutionist than the social bandits. In the studied films, petty criminals do not have an anti-state attitude; in fact, they make alliances with the state and the



lords in return of getting money. Among the three films, in *Dokuz Dağın Efesi*, social bandits' critical attitude against injustice and the mission of helping the poor people are relatively highlighted. However, in the *Köroğlu* and *Atçalı Kel Mehmet*, the mission of banditry is just a motif that nourishes the love story in the film. Especially, the movie of *Atçalı Kel Mehmet*, explicitly abstracts the real identity and social attitude of Atçalı Kel Mehmet Efe whose character has the most obvious social aspect annuls the states' laws and realizes people's revolution.

REFERENCES

- Blok, A. (1972). The Peasant and the Brigand: Social Banditry Reconsidered. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, (14), 494-503.
- Dural, H. (2005). *Bize Derler Çakırca*. İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (2011). *Eşküyalar*. İstanbul: Agora Kitaplığı.
- İnce, A. (2004). *Köroğlu*. İstanbul: Eflatun Yayıncılık.
- Meydan Larousse-Cilt 3 (1980). İstanbul: Meydan Yayınevi.
- Özgüç, A. (2005). *Türlerle Türk Sineması*. İstanbul: Dünya Kitapları.
- Öztelli, C. (1984). *Köroğlu Dadaloğlu Kuloğlu*. Ankara: Özgür Yayın Dağıtım.
- Ruff, J. R. (2011). *Erken Modern Avrupa'da Şiddet 1500-1800*. İstanbul: Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Yayınevi.
- Uluçay, Ç. (1968). *Atçalı Kel Mehmed*. İstanbul: AS Matbaası.
- Yetkin, S. (1996). *Ege'de Eşküyalar*. İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları.