Journal of American Studies of Turkey
7 (1998) : 13-21.

The Politics of the Personal: Constructions of Identity in Elmore Leonard's *Bandits*

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Introduction

Elmore Leonard's picaresque crime novel *Bandits* (1987) is a popular novel by an author who in his many novels relies on the narrative strategies of westerns and crime stories. In his fiction Leonard explores the underside of contemporary American society, the world of unsuccessful criminals, corrupt cops, and pimps. In its own way Leonard's writing gives voice to today's cunning little man hero, one who struggles hard but is not too successful. In the body of Leonard's work this novel marks a break from the past because of its description of a transition from the unashamed individualism evident in many of his crime stories to a more committed collectivism. In contrast to some of Leonard's unpoliticized writings, in this novel politics play an emphatic role. Published in 1987 amidst the Reaganite reinforcement of the traditional values of an imagined America, *Bandits* deliberately criticizes the practices of US imperialist politics and explores the nature of various power struggles. The novel describes how the ex-jewel thief Jack Delaney, who now works in his brother-in-law's funeral parlor, awakens politically when he meets Lucy Nicholls, an ex-nun, who has just escaped the violence of the US-sponsored Contras in Nicaragua. Together they plan a coup in which they attempt to steal funds from two Contra leaders who are on a money-raising trip. While Lucy intends to help the Nicaraguans, Jack's motives remain vaguer.

Since the novel is obviously another link in the chain of fictionalized popular narratives of American politics, its ideological elements deserve to be analyzed. Since my argument is that this novel reveals an ideological conflict in the American culture and society of the 1980s, a useful theoretical frame of reference is provided by Gramscian cultural theory and the analysis of hegemony. Indeed, the novel seems to invite a politicized reading of popular fiction, not only because of its political content and use of historical data, but also because of the way in which it treats its subject matter and locates its reader in relation to politics. As the novel reveals the horrors of the US involvement in Nicaragua, it seems to question the procedures of imperialist politics and to reveal the corruptness of the official government with its hegemonic model of identity. Thus, when the novel's characters attempt to re-define their relation with their nation(s) and to construct a new identity based on a politically critical stance, this re-construction should be seen in a larger cultural context in which it may be connected with the ideological

construction of the US national identity of the period. This, again, suggests a Gramscian interpretation of this popular novel as the meeting-place of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses, as an open rather than a closed work of popular art.

Yet the critique of politics in this novel is not primarily radical. Rather, it reproduces traditional views, as I demonstrate below by using Susan Rubin Suleiman's ideas of the didactic role of politically-located fictions. I would like to argue that this novel, despite its critique of the politics of the Reagan era, does not promote an alternative and radical variety of politics. The novel's criticism of the imperialist and secretive government of the period conceals a fascination with conventional American values based on the legacy of individualism. Though critical towards expansionist politics, the novel remains loyal to the traditional ideologies of nation, gender, and race, which are supported and exploited by the (neo)conservative government. Thus, the novel requires a more critical reading in which its view of politics is discussed in relation to history and identity. While the novel calls for political change, it remains, like so many other popular novels, loyal to the populist agenda.

Hegemony and Identity

Popular culture is not simply fun. According to Antonio Gramsci, popular culture is another of the fields where the battles for power are fought. Tony Bennett asserts that for Gramsci popular culture does not mean "people's cultural deformation nor ... their cultural self-affirmation" but rather "a force field of relations shaped, precisely, by these contradictory pressures and tendencies" (xiii). It is an area in which the subordinate and the dominant seek to define the terms of political power. The concept of hegemony is important here: in Bennett's view, it means "moral, cultural, intellectual and, thereby, political leadership over the whole of society" (xiv). In order to maintain its hegemonic position, a dominant group makes concessions to other groups, because these concessions are beneficial to the holder of the hegemonic position. A Gramscian approach to popular culture, defined as a field of power relations, makes it possible for us to understand and examine popular cultural products critically. There is no need to connect them with a certain class and its interests, as the Frankfurt school did in its analyses of popular culture. Rather, as Alan O'Shea affirms, in their contents the products of popular culture are "politically*indeterminate*" (245; italics original). These products, then, are not bound to reproduce a single, class-based message or world-view, but can convey complementary and contradictory ideologies since society is in a constant state of change and turmoil. Although popular culture tends to reflect dominant concerns, its location as the site of hegemonic struggles also enables it to convey messages which are critical of dominant ideologies.

My argument is that in its description of the government, its officials, its supporters and American businessmen, Leonard's *Bandits* projects a vision of hegemonic national identity in which the needs of the above-mentioned groups are privileged. Lawrence Grossberg, discussing the construction of a conservative hegemony in the US of the 1980s, notes that the popularity of conservatism and the Republican Party to some extent reflect a concern for the country's loss of power in international politics: the emphasis placed on a strong national identity is "a problem of national ego" (251). Following Grossberg, I would argue that the hegemonic national identity, constructed around the figure of Ronald Reagan both in the novel and its historical context, is problematic for some of the characters in Leonard's novel.

In *Bandits* this hegemonic identity has been defined by the power elite to serve its purposes as rulers. Through its inclusion of a letter written by the fictionalized Reagan the novel describes the values of the hegemonic identity directly. The importance of this inclusion cannot be underestimated since through this letter Leonard's novel constructs a textual representation of nationhood and its values. While Jack Delaney has been suspicious of Sister Lucy's initial narrative, which does not fit into the paradigm of Americanness conveyed to him through the media, the letter of introduction written by Reagan to the Contra leader Dagoberto Godoy forces him to understand the extent of US actions in Central America. Because of its mannered and recognizable rhetoric, the letter and Jack's reactions upon reading it are worth quoting at length:

It was a letter to the fundraiser from ... Jesus Christ, Ronald Reagan. It said:

Dear Colonel Godoy,

To assist you in delivering your message of freedom to all my good friends in Louisiana, I have written to each one personally to verify your credentials as a true representative of the Nicaraguan people, and to help affirm your determination to win a big one for democracy. Because I know you have the "stuff" heroes are made of, I have a hunch that modesty might not permit you to describe, personally, the extreme importance of your leadership role in this fight to the death of the Marxists who now have a stranglehold on your beloved country.

I have requested my friends in the Pelican State to give you a generous leg up, that you may ride to victory over communism. I have asked them to help you carry the fight through their support, and come to realize in their hearts, *no es pesado, es mí hermano*. (Note 1)

And there, under "Sincerely," was the president's signature. (169)

While the letter may be read as a form of humorous entertainment that functions as a parody of Reagan's rhetoric, it also explicitly combines national myth and patriotic-nationalist rhetoric with cold-war ideology. By juxtaposing the Marxists and communists strangling Nicaragua with the President's democratic friends, the letter contributes to a national identity based on a binary opposition between us and them, friends and enemies, *pesados* and *hermanos*. The stronghold of the hegemonic ideal can be seen in Jack's initial reluctance to accept any change in his image of national identity and the nation's role in international politics. The

ideology of the letter recasts the Contra leader Godoy as an American cowboy hero who rides to victory over the communist trash. By including this letter and attributing it to the national icon, the novel shows how the ruling elite has transformed the ideology of previous hegemonic groups and integrated their aims into its own politics. For example, when he applies the rhetoric of democracy and freedom articulated by the Founding Fathers, the American president legitimates the violent war of Godoy's Contras. In this representation of Reagan's rhetoric the traditional American values, based on democracy and freedom, are universalized and, through the internal logic of the novel, shown in a twisted form.

Whereas Jack changes his views as a result of his "education," as I discuss below, some of Leonard's characters base their identity on the hegemonic model of nationalism and patriotism. A case in point is Alvin Cromwell, an arms-dealer and Vietnam veteran, for whom the alleged enemy of the nation has been personalized. Cromwell, who fought for his country in Vietnam, has been unable to find enough excitement upon returning home to the routines of family life and work. Consequently, for him the nation and guarding it become a religion. This crusader finds peace and satisfaction in fighting. He boasts of having himself participated in fights in Nicaragua, and the hegemonic position of the US resting on the global juxtaposition created by the Cold War gives him a sense of self. Drawing from Cold War rhetoric and stressing the evil of communism, Cromwell compares his experiences in Nicaragua with those in Vietnam. From Nicaragua he comes "home feeling gooood. I know what's shaking and what it's gonna take for us to win down there. See, it's way different than over in Nam. It's the bad guys have the firepower and the fucking gunships" (250). For Cromwell, the pro-Contra operation is a way of reasserting both his own gendered identity and the image of a strong America controlling the world. While "those little suckers run us out" (250) of Vietnam, this will not happen in Central America if true men like Cromwell have their say.

By allowing a bloodthirsty patriot to reproduce the rhetoric of official foreign policy, the novel may seem to be ironic and to argue for a renegotiated hegemony. This is true to a certain extent and can be substantiated by reference to the novel. As Jack's story shows, Reagan's view (and that of the CIA) is not necessarily the whole truth about Nicaragua. In the change that Jack's identity undergoes, the novel opposes the hegemonic construction of identity. The catalyst in this process is Lucy Nicholls, an ex-nun and the daughter of a multimillionaire, who supports the official government and contributes to the Contra cause. Lucy, out of the robe and into Calvin Kleins, embodies the notion of a new identity that, for her, is both political and sensual.

Bandits reveals how Jack Delaney's sense of politics emerges from sheer ignorance: "He knew they were always having revolutions down there and did understand there was one going on right now" (39). Prompted by Lucy, Jack starts

to picture the complexity of official politics and moral actions. His initial ignorance is shown early in the novel when he reveals that he does not know anything about the foreign policy of his nation. Nor has he heard anything about the political murders in Latin America (42). This, indeed, gradually changes into a more critical awareness of the problem, as can be seen in his reaction to a TV interview of Richard Nixon. While Nixon argues for financial aid to the Contras in order to avoid a proper military intervention, Jack feels puzzled by the view of both Nixon and the TV journalist:

> Nixon says, no, it will prevent having to send our young men later. And Brokaw says, "Thank you, Mr. President." He doesn't say, "Are you out of your fucking mind? Why would we send *our young men*? You want to go, go ahead. And take all those asshole advisers in the White House with you." No, Brokaw says, "Thank you, Mr. President." (240-241; italics original)

A generic frame of reference that may be adapted to a reading of Leonard's novel has been suggested by Susan Rubin Suleiman in her study *Authoritarian Fictions*. On the basis of Suleiman's conceptualization, this novel may be classified as belonging to the genre of *roman à thèse*. This genre is, in her view, recognizable because it is at the same time ideological/doctrinal and fictional (2); it is a nearly realistic genre which has explicitly didactic aims (7). According to Suleiman's definition, the *roman à thèse* "*is a novel written in the realistic mode (that is, based on an aesthetics of verisimilitude and representation), which signals itself to the reader as primarily didactic in intent, seeking to demonstrate the validity of a political, philosophical, or religious doctrine*" (7; italics original). Leonard's Bandits complies with one of the particular type of *roman à thèse* identified in Suleiman's terms as a "positive apprenticeship novel" which, in the manner of a *Bildungsroman*, tells the story of the protagonist's progress from "not knowing the truth" to "knowing the truth," from ignorance to a "new life," and where passivity becomes action based on a certain doctrine (Suleiman 74, 77). Suleiman's model emphasizes the role of the reader, who is directed to identify with the protagonist and support him on his journey towards self-fulfilment through ideology. Understanding the meaning of the information that Lucy (a "donor" in Suleiman's terms) provides him with, Jack loses his belief in his democratically elected government and the way in which it propagates its views as a form of generalized or universalized truth. Instead of working for the benefit of its citizens, the American government appears to colonize Central America and support a war in which innocent women, children and the chronically ill are killed, all in the name of eradicating evil. While Jack loses his belief in his nation, Lucy loses her belief in her romanticized version of Catholicism and faces reality. For her, to become a nun has been a means of escaping the fate planned for her by

her parents. After eleven years in service at a Nicaraguan leper hospital, now bombed by the Contras, it is time for her to change again. Her experiences in Nicaragua have shaken her faith in the dominant social institutions, and she feels that she has been naive. Her need and willingness to construct a new identity are revealed in her discussion with Jack:

"That part's easy, you get it out of a magazine. But it's only a cover, Jack, while I change into something else."

"You don't mean clothes."

"No, it's more like changing your skin, your identity."

"Are we talking about another mystical experience?"

"I don't know."

"What do you think you're going to turn into?"

"I don't know that either."

She kept looking at him, looking at him in a strange way. Or else it was the mood, the quiet, the rain, faint daylight showing in the windows of the room. But he could feel something.

"You're different every time I see you."

She said, "So are you." (157)

Interpreted from a traditional Gramscian perspective, Leonard's novel reveals the pressures in popular culture, or put in another way, what Gramsci called "common sense." This pressure makes the identity formation of an individual more difficult, since the individual needs to negotiate a new hegemony, too. The dominant group, in this case the hegemony of the power elite (the military, the government and the CIA), is questioned because of its extensive imperialist political actions. To use Gramsci's terminology, in this novel this ideological conflict leads to situations in which some members of the marginal or subordinate groups become critical of the actions of the power elite. Through Lucy, Jack, an ex-convict, is shown to gain political consciousness and become active. By showing that it is possible for characters such as Jack to achieve a critical identity by presenting a reformist ideology, Leonard's novel promises a lot. While a liberal reader may find the novel supportive of his/her own liberal expectations, and critical of American military actions outside the US, a positive reading is also perhaps too idealistic, as the possibility of one individual influencing the course of politics in a post-individualistic society is rather limited. Thus, this interpretation should be taken further and the formation of identities explored within its cultural context.

History and Identity

It may be argued that in this novel the re-construction of identity is closely connected with history. Jack's and Lucy's choices are results of their dissatisfaction with their conditions. Indeed, their histories, and especially Lucy's history, in which the violence of Nicaragua is emphasized, differ from the official history sanctioned by Reagan and the media. Thus, their identities also exist in a critical relationship with the hegemonic identity based on the rhetoric of nation and the common enemy. The emergence of Lucy's counter-history produces a need to renegotiate hegemony as soon as an individual's world-view changes. This also suggests that historical narratives that contradict the hegemonic story and reveal its constructed nature may be threatening to the power elite and the maintenance of its dominance. This becomes evident in the novel when it voices the view of Colonel Godoy, who explicitly connects history and the media:

Dagoberto said, "Twenty first June, 1979, the ABC journalist was killed by a Guardsman in Managua and everyone in the entire fucking world saw it on film. That should never have happened, but it did and is the reason some people don't like us. (181)

In the contemporary world, history is available to us as it happens through the media. As Godoy hints, the media can (and in his view should) manipulate the nature of the historical narratives it conveys, as is the case in the novel. In Leonard's novel, the histories of all non-dominant groups are silenced and significant parts of their narratives forgotten, as can be seen in the novel's portrayal of the media. Since historical narratives are open to ideological interventions, their validity as narratives guiding individuals is also open to question. Thus, the notion of hegemonic national identity, constructed and reconstructed through the media and political rhetoric, is both an ideal and a sham. Though ideologically useful, it is a product of manipulation and alleged values. Its actual practices differ too much from the principles on which it has been constructed, which can be seen as a form of populist critical discourse.

What Leonard's novel shows is the tension between two different histories, one official and the other experiential. By incorporating historical figures such as President Reagan and legitimated narratives, the novel also enters history and attempts to rewrite it from a supposedly counter-hegemonic point-of-view. Since histories are dangerous, as may be seen in the fight between the representatives of different histories, s/he who can present the best history wields the most power. In this great game for the possession of history, the individual Nicaraguan becomes a mere object with a propaganda value. This is revealed in a (hi)story told by Franklin de Dios, a Miskito killer, whose anecdote deals with a "dinner for the freedom fighters" (290) in Miami. In addition to emphasizing the individual's role, diminished to embodied propaganda, the passage reveals an ideological use of national symbols to construct a patriotic sense of self:

First we have the dinner that cost five hundred dollars for each person. I think it was chicken. It was pretty good. Then we listen to speeches. One guy made a talk, he said my name to everybody that I was Miskito Indian fighting for the freedom of my people and everybody there clapped their hands. Then they presented statues of eagles to people who gave a lot of money. (291)

The interweaving of fact and fiction emphasizes the explicitly ideological aspect of the novel. By distorting history, *Bandits* constructs a historical narrative of its own in which the notions of irony are explicit. Through its ironic representation of historical figures and actions, the novel projects a populist vision of politicians, the reproducers of American nationalist ideology, as fools. President Reagan, whose writing resembles the rhetoric of his war-time films, is one of those fools. When history and historical forces are reduced to a comedy show, their importance diminishes, which is dangerous in many respects. In fact, when the story of American involvement in Central America becomes a story that can be forgotten or represented through nationalist rhetoric, the novel naturalizes a particular ideology, that of populism, and portrays it as a legitimate response to the actions of the power elite. The novel maintains that it is not possible to influence the deeds of the politicians, and that all one can do is to laugh at them. Thus, in this novel there is no role for critical and radical agency; only small groups or individuals are able to take action if they need to defend their own interests. This is the other side of this *roman à thèse*. Even though at one level the novel shows a changed consciousness, at another level it directs its reader to adopt the position of a passive bystander who can not really influence the course of history and/or participate in political action. Politics is a farce, and only direct action violating democratic and legal principles might be of any help. While history is shown to become available only through its fictionalized media representations, the novel's reader can only place trust in her/himself, which reproduces the explicit American ideology of individualism.

By rewriting contemporary history, *Bandits* also enters the terrain of power relations. Janet Woollacott argues that the appeal of popular genres is based on their ability to articulate "contemporary ideological tensions" (215). In the case of Leonard's novel, this means that by humanizing the criminal and dehumanizing the official, it criticizes the legitimation of imperialist politics and the role of the United States as a "vanguard" of democracy. In other words, on one level the novel appears to argue against a conservative hegemony. Thus Jack's dilemma and his need to reconstruct his identity show the confused way in which the histories of the Nicaraguan situation are met at the level of the individual (and Gramscian common sense). If we term these two narratives of Nicaraguan history the hegemonic (the CIA version) and the oppositional (Lucy's version), we can see that the process of

negotiation and the struggle for hegemony are illustrated in a popular novel in such a way that Jack Delaney's confusion becomes a metaphor of disorder in Gramscian common sense. This is revealed especially by the ending of the novel. Even though Jack's world-view has changed during the novel, the last words of *Bandits* show that he is not certain about his stance: "Jack didn't answer. He wasn't sure if he was [serious about selling a car and sending the money to Lucy's hospital] or not" (345). Jack is caught between Reagan's powerful national identity and Lucy's promise of a different world of love and equality.

While the novel criticizes the validity of political hegemony, it complies with certain other traditional ideologies and leaves their importance unquestioned. This is seen in the character of Franklin de Dios, who fights against the Sandinistas and for the Contras for his own reasons rather than those expressed by US politics. Towards the end of the novel Franklin becomes an increasingly sympathetic figure who takes over the role of the hero. He shoots the Contra leaders and agrees to share their money with Lucy. Whereas the national icon Ronald Reagan is criticized, the traditional American values of honesty and tough individualism are celebrated in Franklin, thus underlining the close affinities between the ideologies of the novel and those represented in populist-conservative discourse. Since he is a Miskito, he even speaks English as his first language. Franklin also embodies true and primitive masculinity, now almost disappeared in the US. With Franklin becoming a noble savage, heroic but capable of violent action when needed, the novel reveals its support of the neoconservative culture of the 1980s. Franklin's masculine power, like that of Rambo, helps *us* to fight *them*, the latter term meaning all those who dare to use or oppose us. Thus, like the hegemonic narrative, the narrative of nation projected as counter-hegemonic is specifically gendered. Reagan's masculine image—we may recall the famous quote "Make my day" that he borrowed from Clint Eastwood—is reproduced in a similar vision of a powerful male. Although Franklin learns about the behavior of the Contras against the Miskitos, his ideology does not differ remarkably from that of Reagan. Both emphasize masculine strength and power. For the narrator, Franklin is just "a pretty cool guy" (334), and, as such, is redeemed.

Whereas the novel criticizes the actions of the Americans in Nicaragua and questions the imperialist ideology of Ronald Reagan, the values offered for a new hegemony are only partially counter-hegemonic. In fact, Leonard's novel condemns not the legitimacy of American hegemony or power over Central America but its means; that is to say, the way in which the state is governed. At the same time, it questions the nation's right of representation. Since not all citizens agree with the way the politics are run, partly because they are given no information about the situation, the position of the critique can be labeled populist rather than radical. While the attempts to renegotiate hegemony in Leonard's novel are foregrounded, the struggle for hegemonic power is not between a conservative and a radical view, but, more precisely, between a conservative and a more liberal, but equally populist, view. Both views also stem from the binary opposition

between *us* and *them*. While some of them are accepted, they have to accept our views, to become our allies as far as that is possible. The novel contributes to a populist debate concerning the role of the nation in the legitimation of imperialist politics. The position of the hard-liners, represented in the novel by the arms-dealer and the President, is juxtaposed to the more liberal view propagated by the ex-nun, who exports religion instead of guns. Thus, the protagonist is not only located between an official and hegemonic position and a more critical view, but trapped also between two historical narratives which contradict each other.

This is the message of the novel. It points out that in contemporary America one no longer knows what is true and what is not. As President Reagan draws on his old films in his speeches, Jack Delaney reflects on his life through old films. While history is in danger of disappearing, the novel constructs its own popular history in which agency is returned to representatives of masculine power. In order to pursue her individualist-collective dream of rebuilding a leper hospital, Lucy shoots Roy Hicks who wants his share of the Contra money. The populist representatives of the little man are provided with power; the bureaucratic machinery is shown to be corrupt and inefficient. Although the novel is influenced by liberalist and oppositional ideologies, it does not support radical politics.

Conclusion

The novel's title, *Bandits*, becomes significant for its treatment of identities. We can raise the question of the identity of the real bandits: are they Jack and his friends, Colonel Godoy and his Contras, the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, or Boylan of the IRA? Does the title refer to the American government and the CIA? For Jack, this becomes a real problem: whose story or whose history can he believe in? It is a problem of who is right, or, as Jack's friend Roy puts it, "I want to know, for my information, which are the good guys and which are the bad guys" (207). When the distinction between the sides vanishes and the questions of choice, commitment and moral stand are emphasized, Jack locates himself among those with a conscience: "In fact I'm convinced we're on the side of the angels, at least the avenging ones" (309).

Jack's moral dilemma in the novel appears as a national dilemma: are the "we" of the novel, the Americans, good or bad guys? If the answer is that the nation's representatives are the bad guys, the novel might signify an end to the dichotomy generated by the Cold War, and in so doing call for self-reflection. However, the novel does not fully realize that similar threats can be located within the multicultural nation itself. Legitimated versions of the history of American imperialism are exposed critically but the histories of racism and sexism are not. Whereas Franklin de Dios, who speaks English and fights for his principles, is not one of *them* but one of *us*, that is, one of the good guys, the blacks who once shared the prison with Jack and Roy threaten the inviolability of the white masculine

subject. Thus, the constructed personal identity and the hegemonic political one are basically similar. Though different in degree, both forms of identity originate within the political hegemony of American neoconservatism and articulate a message of a strong nation based on cultural consensus and a shared fear of the Other. The important element in both is the emphasis on autonomous action and agency, which are destroyed by crooked politicians and an increasingly bureaucratic society.

Thus, while the novel loses its power as a radical novel, it remains a *roman à thèse*. The protagonist finds peace through commitment, even though this commitment is less connected with party politics than it is with populist ideologies. If Leonard's novel follows the positive apprenticeship model proposed by Suleiman and is about the adoption of the right values, the values are those of traditional individualism with its dream of unrestrained agency. By distorting history, the novel constructs a world in which it is possible to become active, but only within certain limits and ideological parameters. Leonard's narrative argues that one cannot change the world for others and everyone needs to make his or her own choices alone.

Notes

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"He ain't heavy, he's my brother." This is a well-known quotation from the 1938 Spencer Tracy film *Boys' Town* which took its title from a home for delinquent boys. Ed.

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