

Leave Conscience's Rules Behind: Scandalous Societies Past and Present

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Anders Behring Breivik told the court that his attack was ‘part of a campaign by a secret society called the Knights Templar’. He claimed to be a founding member of the society, but had had a British mentor and had been to London to set it up. The society had a manifesto on the web entitled ‘A European Declaration of Independence’, which was headed by the Templar foliated cross. Breivik called himself ‘the justicair knight-commander’ and outlined a military hierarchy for the society (Pancevski 2012, 18). Of course, subsequent investigation showed this to be a scandalous society consisting of a solitary right-wing psychopath, with a manifesto copied from blogs or taken from Wikipedia, and the network of members never existed. There are, however, Masonic Templar lodges scattered across the world, whose members are law-abiding people with a propensity for dressing up in opulent medieval robes, and who have formal meetings and keep an account of their activities (Lord 2002, 216).

This article continues the theme of ‘scandalous societies’ as articulated by Sébastien Tutenges in his paper discussing the Danish club Gold n’ Metal, a club which exhibited all the traits of a society. But what constitutes a ‘scandalous society’ as opposed to a gang? The club Tutenges describes conformed to an ideal model of a scandalous society. It had a specific focus, beer and heavy metal music. It had rules, an initiation ritual, club meetings with official reports and a photographic record of these meetings. There were forfeits for any club member who did not keep to the club’s rules, and at meetings the members aimed to be as depraved as possible, and these activities were placed in the public domain on a web site.

This can be compared to the activities of a Glasgow gang observed by J. Patrick from October 1966 to January 1967 (Patrick 1973). The gang had no formal meetings and no written records (apart from those produced by the police and law courts). It had an oral culture with its own language and its own myths about the exploits of former members. It had a violent sociopath with a criminal record as its leader, a gang uniform, and issued challenges to other gangs by graffiti slogans. There was no initiation rite, members joined by just being around and then being accepted by other gang members, but there was a hierarchical structure based on the age of the members.

There were, however, unwritten rules which were understood by gang members. No 'grassing' (that is, handing evidence or betraying other members to the police), internal gang-fights to be settled without weapons, every member to indulge in violence, assault charges were deemed honourable, but to be charged merely with theft was a disgrace. Girls were not to be stabbed, and gang members were not to lie in wait to ambush boys in their own home close or street. The gang's values were to drink as much as possible, take drugs, wear the right clothes, have as much sex as possible, defend their own territory, and prove their manhood by their behaviour and attitudes (Patrick, 1973).

It is the gang's values that bring it closest to Gold n' Metal. But the difference is that the gang left no written account of its activities. We only know about its activities through the offices of an outsider. Was this difference class or educational based? The Glasgow gang boys were urban working-class, mostly un-employed and educational failures. The members of Gold n' Metal were literate, they appear to have lived in houses large enough to accommodate their meetings in private and without disturbing the rest of the household, and they had enough money to buy beer, sound systems and cameras. They displayed a carnivalesque inversion of normal behaviour, which marked the 'suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions' (Bakhtin 1984, 10), and included the physical excesses of Rabelais's world, offensive to the established order, and concerned with bodily pleasure, in opposition to morality, discipline and social control (Fiske 1989, 69; 81), while the Glasgow gang were a sad collection of youth with limited horizons who were acting out behaviour that is replicated down the ages in areas of deprivation and without any obvious future. A footnote to the article on Gold n' Metal says that they have ceased to exist. Does this mean that they have grown up, gone to university, or started paid employment?

Gold n' Metal can be more profitably compared to the Bullingdon Club, one of the select drinking clubs that can be found in Britain's older universities, but of especial interest in Britain today as both the present

prime minister and the chancellor of the exchequer were members of this club when they were at Oxford. This is evidence of its exclusivity as members are usually ex-public school boys, preferably from Eton and come from privileged backgrounds. The aim of the club is to drink as much as possible, and its uniform is white tie and tails, another badge of its exclusivity. Over the years the local press has reported incidents where club members have smashed up college rooms and restaurants and other excesses, which now have re-appeared in the national press to the titillation of the general public and joy of the opposition in Parliament.

The Bullingdon Club is one in a long line of similar clubs to be found in the older universities, for example the Phoenix Club at Brasenose College, Oxford founded in 1781. This was a genuine club with rules, officials and subscriptions, and like Gold n' Metal and the Bullingdon Club it was dedicated to hard drinking. The Phoenix Club had its own cellar, and each member was allowed to take 24 bottles of sherry or port from the cellar each week, and more was consumed at their meetings. Complaints about the noise and drunkenness from their meetings were made to the college authorities, and when a member drunk himself to death at one of their dinners in 1821 action had to be taken to close the club down (Jones 1942, 53; Midgeley 1996, 64-65).

What the Glasgow gang and Gold n' Metal had in common was that they were young males, whereas scandalous societies of the past were sometimes but not always young, more often they were middle-aged men with responsible positions in society; Members of Parliament, civil servants, wealthy merchants or members of the aristocracy. The scandalous societies they belonged to were a perversion of an 'assembly of good fellows' defined by Dr Samuel Johnson in his dictionary and which Francis de Rochefoucauld felt were 'one of the most sensible institutions, the best mark of confidence felt in society in general' and part of the growth of urban sociability in the eighteenth century. People joined these clubs and societies to enjoy male fellowship, often to escape uncongenial home lives, and to network. When Dr Samuel Johnson joined the Ivy Lane Club he wrote that he did so 'with a disposition to please and be pleased, would pass those hours in a free unrestrained interchange of sentiments, which otherwise would have been spent in painful reflection' (Clark 2000 10; 94; 158; 194). Scandalous societies were the antithesis of these polite clubs, preferring action to an interchange of sentiments, and bawdy debauchery and drunkenness to an assembly of good fellows who were a part of a sensible institution. The scandalous societies of the eighteenth century were often a reaction against polite society, and a growing trend towards the culture of the heart rather than the culture of the

body (Porter, 1991, 305). The Scottish club or scandalous society, the Beggar's Benison was definitely part of the culture of the body.

The Beggar's Benison records and artefacts were revealed to a shocked audience in the nineteenth century. Such was the nature of the records and the artefacts that some were immediately destroyed. The rest were rescued and are in the possession of the University of St Andrews in Scotland. The original Beggar's Benison was based in Anstruther a township in the far east of Fife in Scotland. The first meeting was held in 1732 and the name came from a tale about King James V of Scotland who disguised as a bagpiper was carried across the Dreel Burn in Anstruther by a buxom lass, who when he paid gave him the Beggar's Benison.

‘May your purse never be toom (empty)
And your horn (penis) aye in bloom’

This was abbreviated as the club's motto which appears on medals as ‘May your prick and your purse never fail you’. The society had a Code of Institution which set up a mock kingdom called ‘Merryland’. ‘Merryland’ was the title of an eighteenth century erotic novel which described the female anatomy in naval terminology, and set the tone for the club's future activities. Thirty-two members signed the code. They were respectable men, some were members of the government Customs and Excise service, landowners such as the Earl of Kellie, ship-owners like Andrew Johnston who owned ten ships trading between Scotland, Scandinavia and the Baltic, or merchants and businessmen (Beggar's Benison 1982, 2-5). However, at least 27 men of a similar background have been traced in the area, but they did not join the club (Lord 2008, 170). It is probable that they were deterred by the initiation ceremony, which required the initiate to masturbate onto a trial platter and produce a horn spoonful to gain entry to the society. If the initiate was successful his health was drunk and he was given a medal and a sash and required to read an erotic passage from the Song of Solomon from a Bible decorated with phallic symbols (Beggar's Benison 1984, 9-10). This was not the only time that masturbation took place. At the Lammas meeting (1st August) 18 1734 ‘18 assembled and fringed on the test platter’, and on St Andrew's Day (30th November) in an act of schoolboy-like bravado, the assembled company compared the lengths of their penises (Beggar's Benison 1984, 13-14).

Local girls were hired to strip and lie on a bed for members to look at, but not touch, and there were lectures on erotic subjects at the meetings, and readings from the growing number of erotic books published in the eighteenth century (Beggar's Benison 1984, 14). One of these was *Fanny*

Hill allegedly by John Cleland, and still famous as a prime example of erotica, once banned in Britain.

The Beggar's Benison spread, first to Edinburgh and Glasgow, and then it was taken by Scottish merchants to Poland and Russia, and clones appeared in the British Empire. But by the third decade of the nineteenth century attitudes were changing. A libertine life, even in secret, was no longer acceptable, and all branches of the Beggar's Benison were closed in 1836.

The Beggar's Benison was a scandalous society based on erotica, and it illustrates the binary structure of society, public and private lives which could be separated from each other. In private the members, respectable men some of whom were elders of the church, could be part of the erotic fantasy world of Merryland, where they could reject convention, and play out their fantasies under the pretext of scientific inquiry.

Merryland was a place of imagination, a world constructed in the mind away from reality. A false world where its inhabitants could break the laws of social homogeneity, and which can be seen in other scandalous societies of The Enlightenment. The Friars of Medmenham Abbey dressed as friars, and played out a charade of religious worship, and indulged their physical yearnings under the Rabalesian banner 'Do what you will'. the Dilettanti Society dressed as Romans for their meetings and had its own regalia and rules, and the Divan Club were arrayed in Oriental garb, and took Oriental names. Once a year in Ireland the Kingdom of Dalkey was set up on Dalkey Island with its own king and government who ruled for a day (Lord 2008, 97-129; 199). The members of these society were, in public, conventional men, in private convention was thrown to the wind. This has undertones of Bataille's definition of convention in *The Psychology of Fascism*, as being homogeneity, and that breaking convention leads to violence, excess, delirium and madness (Bettany & Wilson 1997, 127-130), excesses which can be seen in the accounts of the meetings of, for example, the Medmenham Friars.

The Beggar's Benison had a somewhat unusual method of initiation. V.W. Cocks suggests that masturbation was a part of the secrecy of scandalous societies, it symbolised the rejection of convention, and bound the members together, and in the case of the Beggar's Benison it was a rejection of the 1707 Act of Union with England (Cocks 2006, 1218-19), although whether this was in the minds of the participants at the time is not clear. Henk Driessen sees masturbation in the front of peers as being a rejection of outsiders, thus strengthening the society, and a comment on sexual vigour (Driessen 1993, 248). However, in the case of the Beggar's Benison masturbation went directly against one of their mottos which was 'Go forth and multiply', and the initiation rites and other activities might

have been done in the spirit of experimentation and the desire to quantify bodily excretions as an empirical scientific inquiry in the same way that Gold n' Metal was 'a sort of social laboratory where the members conducted experiments on morality' (Tutenges, 2012).

The members of the Beggar's Benison saw the product on masturbation as evidence of their virility. Georges Bataille defined virility as a moral, political and sexual virtue in matters public and private. Virility equalled power and the opposite was powerlessness and negativity (Suleiman 1998, 26-45). In 1937 Bataille founded his own scandalous and secret society *Acephale*. Its aims and rites are still secret, but some hints of these were disclosed by a member later in the twentieth century, and can be tentatively reconstructed from the articles in the journal *Acephale* and Bataille's other writings. Bataille's aim was to bind together a community and awaken it to the fatality of destruction and death, through a new religion based on that of the Aztecs 'fierce and malevolent' religion, promoting an intense spirituality throughout either blackest death or intense eroticism (Surya 2002, 245). The community was to be male, with one or two women, and at its inception had nine members. However, some members of Bataille's circle were notably absent, and like the Beggar's Benison pool of potential members they may well have been deterred by what might happen at the society's meetings, as in 1927 Bataille wrote a gruesome and anally fixated account of a sacrifice, and there was evidence that Bataille was looking for a willing human sacrifice, and a sacrificer (ibid., 249-250). Unsurprisingly, neither was forthcoming.

The society members were sworn to secrecy, and the details of what happened, and the society's rules only emerged much later. Members were forbidden to shake hands with anti-Semites, and had to attend a commemoration of the execution of Louis XVI in the Place de la Concorde, where Bataille was going to announce the death of God. There may be a deeper meaning to the choice of place, and it connects Bataille's community to another secretive society, the Freemasons, and back to Anders Behring Breveik. Some branches of the masons claim they descend directly from the Knights Templar. Eli Levi suggested that the Masons wanted revenge on the French monarchy for burning the Templar Grand Master at the stake, and were part of a silent conspiracy to destroy the social edifice which had destroyed the Templar order (Levi 1922, 265-266). When Louis was guillotined a mason dipped a handkerchief in his blood and proclaimed 'Thus is Jacques de Molay avenged' (Hayden 2004). Masons guard the secrecy of their members, so it is not known whether Bataille was aware of the Masonic significance of his choice of venue, or whether this was merely a coincidence.

Bataille's community had culinary rules; daily lunch was minced horse meat and water, and no wine was drunk during the day – something that sets it apart from most other scandalous societies, whose activities were dedicated and interspersed with the consumption of alcohol. The best known activity of Bataille's community involved each member travelling separately by train to a forest at St-Nom-la-Beteche, where they spent the night alone in meditation, and pouring rain. In the morning they met by a tree which had been struck by lightning and ignited sulphur or Greek fire. There is no evidence that any sacrifice or orgy took place, and one of the members was to tell Michel Surya that he did not understand the intentions of the occasion as most of it seemed to be in Bataille's head (Surya, 251-252). However, Bataille and his mistress Colette Peynot frequently visited the tree, and members visited brothels in the Rue Pigalle and in St Germain-en-Laye. Michel Leiris suggests that the rituals and the community's projects were part of a hoax, and Bataille was known as a prankster (*ibid.*, 535). This raises the question as to whether the accounts of the Beggar's Benison were also an elaborate hoax. Had only the records been found, that might have been the case, but the artefacts are elaborate and wide-spread with examples now in the British Museum, St Petersburg and in stately homes such as Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire.

The other question asked by Michel Surya was whether Bataille was deranged at this period? Some of his writing gives that impression, but *Acephale* was founded at a time when the Spanish Civil War was drawing to a bloody close – a conflict which Colette Peynot had seen at first hand. Fascism was rife, and Hitler and the Nazis were in power in Germany. Death appeared to be imminent everywhere, and unlike most other scandalous societies, *Acephale*'s members do not seem to have enjoyed their secret meetings. It was a scandalous society for its time, and had it continued after 1939 its members would have been in great danger, rather than open to ridicule as happened to the Medmenham Friars when their activities were exposed.

Risk assessment is an important element in society today. How far did, and do, members of scandalous societies assess the risk in joining these? The members of the Bullingdon Club, whose exploits are now recorded for posterity in black and white photographs in the tabloid press, might well have wished they had considered their positions more carefully when joining the club. Risks by some individuals can have a national impact, but in the past the impact was more likely to be local. The members of the Beggar's Benison were church elders and respectable men, and had knowledge of the club they belonged to and its activities become public in their life-times it could have had profound social and economic effects for them and the local community. Furthermore, eighteenth century

physiology taught that ‘the vital fluid which was the flame of life dwelt in the semen and masturbation was depletive, and associated with weakness, physical and moral’ (Porter 2003, 233-234). The risk to health and wellbeing was obviously worth taking, perhaps in the interest of experimentation, perhaps in the search of self-gratification.

Gold n’ Metal, Beggar’s Benison and other scandalous societies were part of a subculture, the underbelly of social life. Subculture takes role-play and reconstructs it in the dialectical relation between the structure and the actor, projecting an image and an identity, so that members have distinctive clothes, posture, gait, style and often a special vocabulary. Scandalous societies have, and had, a relationship to the overall dominant culture, but have reacted against it, and were and are a constant reminder of the fragility of society, and of how freedom can be expressed by disorderly behaviour.

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