BATHURST BIKE RACES: a Riotous Assembly

Phil Shannon

For a left analysis of crime, law and order, Chris Cunneen’s article on the biker/police confrontation at Bathurst (“A Riotous Assembly”, ALR 92, Winter 1985) is limited by his tendency to treat the conflict as a battle between Good and Evil. Understandably keen to oppose both capitalist media attacks on a proletarian outgroup and a strengthening of the police as a repressive agent of the state, Cunneen lapses into an idealisation of the bikers and a demonisation of the police. Unfortunately, Cunneen is not alone in resorting to the language of romanticised stereotypes in order to demonstrate the left’s proletarian credentials — Brave Bikers versus Callous Cops is a morality play on similar lines to the Pure Prisoners versus Wicked Warders of some left writing on prisons.

Certainly, the mass media making a “folk devil” of the violent bike serves the capitalist class in selling papers and upping the ratings, denigrating all working class dissent and legitimising an increase in politically repressive police goods and services. However, just because, for example, bikers and strikers get a bad capitalist image could be termed as an “outlaw” gang, must be a misrepresented and heroic group of oppressed. Their use of molotov cocktails and dynamite against the courts is uncritically accepted by Cunneen. While such methods do have their time and place (during the anti-Nazi resistance, for example), that time and place is not Australia in the ‘eighties.

To state that the police presence and harassment caused the “problem” is to oversimplify. Although police tactics certainly provoked the bikers on Mount Panorama, that does not justify the bikers’ violent reaction. It is not surprising that, as Cunneen tells us, for the bikers to “jeer and insult” the police in their “pig pen” and to throw rocks, bottles and molotov cocktails should invite a counter-response. Police are not simply academic abstractions of state power. They also have feelings which can get hurt, and bodies which can get injured.

Cunneen’s sensitivity to the boor-words used by the enemy (“bikie gangs” causing the “trouble”) does not always extend to his own “good words”. The biker subculture is sanitised. They have “fun” on Mount Panorama in a “fascinating” “carnival”. They are “buoyant and happy” when fighting police. But how innocent and pure is their culture? From Cunneen’s description it is also a macho scene, celebrating violence and the machine. And what are we to make of their “cock-fighting”? If it is the barbaric animal “sport” it should be no part of a socialist culture. If it refers to some sort of macho human contest it should be no part of a feminist culture.

Media bias and language confusion aside, Cunneen’s positive attitude to the bikers rests on his assertion that “bikers, like many other sections of the working class, do not like ‘coppers’”. Cunneen approves this dislike, but how widespread or justified is it? Which and how many sections of the working class dislike what police functions? It is at least equally possible to assert that more working class people (not just the property-owning middle class) are more concerned with the policing of crime which hits poor working class people hardest and most often than with the crime of policing (that so preoccupies the academic left). Cunneen’s celebration of bikers might be dampened somewhat if bikers were to frequent in large numbers the halls of academe and not just working class suburbs and towns. Few on the left would disagree that we must be interested in “the fate of marginalised groups” but some groups (Red Brigades, the National Front, Bikers) may deserve to be marginalised from other groups, the rest of the working class and socialists.

It is not to accept the language of the headlines to say that socialism riding in a biker pack will not look all that attractive to a working class with deep and legitimate concerns about crime, law and order.

Chris Cunneen

I would like to reply very briefly to some of Shannon’s criticisms of my article on the Bathurst Motorcycle Riots (ALR 92). I find it particularly alarming, given Shannon’s obvious ignorance of the crowd who visit Bathurst, that he should support the dominant capital/state interpretation of events. I say ignorance because, as I stated in the article, there have been no “gangs” at Bathurst at least for the last six years, that is, during the period when the largest “riots” have
occurring. After going through court records, talking to people and attending the Races, I can see no reason for regarding bikers as any different from other young working class men, except that they ride bikes and demonstrate some solidarity because of it. The vast majority of them are mechanics, welders, fitters and labourers; many are just finishing their apprenticeships, and a fair number are unemployed. Thousands of these people have now been criminalised because of police interference in their popular recreation. To say that they are "macho" as Shannon does, is in a sense to state the obvious. Of course they are sexist. How many working class males aren't? The particular style of masculinity displayed by working class men may be overt and crude but it is no more or less a display of the relations of patriarchy than the activities of bourgeois men. Is Shannon suggesting, instead, that we support yachting or the Chardonnay-sipping activities of the rich because they display better manners?

Shannon never escapes from the bourgeois representations of working class activity. He has no trouble in describing the "riot" as a "violent, anarchistic eruption". Unfortunately, he misses the whole point. Notions of "riot" and "public order" are highly problematic. The result of the application of the title to particular activities is far from academic. The most extreme forms of repression become legitimated. Where else are such para-military police profiles acceptable? To equate the bikers with the National Front and the Red Brigades would be laughable if the results weren't so devastating. It is exactly the tactics used by the state and the media to deny all opposition. No one is trying to endow the bikers with conscious organised political activity except possibly the police and the media (i.e. "These riots must be 'organised' by outsiders"). The same statements were made concerning the British "riots" in 1981 and 1983).

Shannon's statements on crime as it affects the working class deserves two comments. Firstly, the police have shown themselves incapable of dealing with the type of crime directly hitting the working class. For example, crime solution rates with motor vehicle theft and break, enter and steal are abysmally low. The policing methods that the TRG represent have made no dent in the solution frequency. However, the TRG has been effective in controlling various forms of working class activity. Secondly, given the connections between heroin addiction, property theft and the involvement of some police in the organisation and distribution of drug sales, it may be more accurate to see the police as part of the problem of crime rather than its solution.

Shannon's bottom line is that "the police have feelings", that they are "not academic abstractions". Perhaps he should talk to the friends of the 21-year-old youth who "accidentally" blew his brains out with a police revolver at Penrith Police Station recently. But, then again, he was only a junkie, hardly a cut above a bikie.

**Correction**

We apologise for errors in "Psychiatry: Making Criminals Mad" by Denise Russell ("ALR 92").

On p. 21, the omitted first line of paragraph 4 should be "In the DSM-II, there is a category entitled .... "

On p. 32, the paragraph beginning "Burning out parts .... " is misplaced and should be in the next column after the paragraph ending " .... irreversible brain damage".

**Apology**

Dear Comrades,

I refer to your treatment of my article in "ALR No. 92" — you called it "The Technology Test". My title as submitted was "Research and Policy Development".

I was distressed at the degree of success you had in destroying some aspects of the article and its overall appearance. My complaints are:

1. You gave the article a false title.
2. The text was transposed in such a manner as to destroy the flow and distort the argument.
3. You used sub-headings in a distorting way.
3.1 The first sub-heading, "Intelligent Computers", should have had a question mark after it.
3.2 The second sub-heading, "A Way to Go?" should not have had a question mark.

Note re 3: The sub-headings were yours and, with the above corrections and minus the transposing, would have been useful.

M. Bound.

We apologise for the errors made in the layout of Max Bound’s article in "ALR 92". The text was accidentally transposed in such a major extent that it is not possible to correct it without reprinting the entire article. We apologise to the author and to our readers.

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