



**Watchful Guardian or Dark Knight?
The Vigilante as a Social Actor**

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Abstract

Sociology and Criminology often reduce the vigilante to a deviant or criminal character without analyzing these people as social actors. This study will analyze newspaper reports on acts of vigilantism as well as academic discussions of the subject to discern several possible social constructions of the vigilante as a social actor.

Whenever one discusses inequality, the discussion must address forms and uses of power. This power is often legitimately granted to the dominant group and its members, either by cultural or political means. In other words, the specific use of power is often embedded in the social structure of that community. However, when members of a group feel that the social structure has failed to protect them or their rights, some protest this injustice. Protests are often discussed in sociology as social movements or social problems claimsmaking, but sometimes extreme measures are taken by one or many of the members. These people are called vigilantes and they are regarded by other members of the community in many ways. While certain forms of vigilantism are commonly discussed in sociology and criminology (e.g. lynching, terrorism, etc.), vigilantism as a social action itself is often not addressed.

The goal of this study is to define vigilantism in terms of social action using various academic and news sources. In doing so, I will examine how the definition of vigilantism is constructed by people protected by vigilantes, people victimized by vigilantes, and by vigilantes themselves. Evidence will be extracted from a small sample of top-circulated periodicals in the world and buttressed with academic discussions of vigilantism. The conclusion of this study will show that the concept of vigilantism has several major social constructions which can be elicited in the form of a typology.

What is a Vigilante?

The common image of the vigilante drawn from Western popular culture is a reflection of the dictionary definition: “a member of a volunteer committee organized to suppress and punish crime summarily (as when the processes of law are viewed as inadequate)” (www.merriam-webster.com). The word often summons images of a strong, large (white) male who carries a large firearm and hunts down criminals. He is cold, methodical, uses objectionable morals (if any), and usually has a back story that involves the untimely death of family or friends at the hands of criminals who were never brought to justice. This image is perpetuated by the entertainment industry in comic books, films, and television shows. Characters such as the Punisher, Batman, and Rambo permeate the popular trove of vigilante images. However, this contemporary image is not what was meant when the word was first brought into popular use in the English language. Derived from the Spanish word, *vigilante*, the original definition meant watchman, or guardian. The connotation of this definition is not as foreboding as the

contemporary definition and certainly does not conjure the same image to mind. The former is a darker, more dangerous character while the latter suggests a more heroic, selfless person.

In truth, neither definition is entirely accurate. The vigilante is discussed in many contexts, and how the vigilante is characterized depends on who is constructing the image. This construction depends on the nature of the person doing the constructing (i.e., opinions about justice, morality, ethics, politics, etc.), the actions of the vigilante in question, how the person doing the constructing relates to the actions of the vigilante, and the cultural norms and preferences regarding criminal justice of that place and time. The following discussion examines several constructions of vigilantism that have been analyzed by academics and found in news reports of vigilante acts.

Methodology

A sample of newspaper articles was collected from the research source Lexis Nexis (www.lexisnexis.com), which compiles back issues of many periodicals world-wide. This database was compared to the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers’ 2008 list of daily newspapers with the highest world-wide circulation (www.wan-ifra.org) to create a sample of ten periodicals which appeared in both lists. These ten periodicals were all from English-speaking countries, either the United States of America or Great Britain, which is a limitation due to the bias of periodicals represented in the Lexis Nexis database.¹ Each periodical was searched for reference to “vigilantism” and “vigilante” over a 10 year period spanning from January 1, 2002 to January 1, 2012. The final sample consists of the following periodicals:

Figure 1: List of newspaper sources listed by rank in world-wide circulation

Periodical Title	Country of Origin	Rank (by circulation)	Articles found (including references)
The Sun	Great Britain	10	33
The Daily Mail	Great Britain	12	32
USA Today	USA	14	11
Wall Street Journal	USA	20	2
Daily Mirror	Great Britain	28	50
New York Times	USA	47	57
Daily Telegraph	Great Britain	64	28
The Express	Great Britain	83	28
New York Daily News	USA	95	6
Washington Post	USA	99	37

To maintain the focus of this article as vigilantism as a social action, articles were removed if the reference terms were found to be used in a metaphorical nature (i.e., “vigilante lawyer tactics”, likening an act to vigilantism when it is not, etc.). Some articles were listed multiple times within

¹ 62 of the top 100 periodicals in world-wide circulation are from Asian countries. By leaving these out of the sample, the data represented in this study have a decidedly Western bias.

each periodical search. By eliminating these as well, the final sample consisted of 142 articles which cited the word “vigilantism” or “vigilante.”

Each article was analyzed by coding each use of one of these terms. Each appearance of these terms was coded based on the context of the use. Some uses had several simultaneous contexts and some articles were found to use the same term in contradictory contexts within the same discussion. This resulted in 186 individual appearances of either term or its plural form. A total of 11 codes were distilled from these articles: protecting democracy, threatening democracy, heroism, villainy, foolishness/misguided, protecting a cultural ideal (other than democracy), threatening a cultural ideal (other than democracy), historical/cultural justification, working in tandem with an institution, working against an institution, and riskiness. The results break down as follows:

Figure 2: List of types of vigilantism derived from coding and number of appearances

Type of vigilantism	# of uses in context
Protecting democracy	12
Threatening democracy	22
Heroism	14
Villainy	22
Foolishness/Misguided	16
Protecting a cultural ideal (other than democracy)	10
Threatening a cultural ideal (other than democracy)	12
Historical/cultural justification	20
Working in tandem with an institution	20
Working against an institution	28
Riskiness	10

Results and Discussion

The first question that one must ask when analyzing social action is who is committing these acts? In terms of vigilantism, we must ask what kinds of people become vigilantes. It is safe to assume that not everyone has the capacity or the desire to take the law into their own hands, so what kind of person would? Why would they do it? What are their motives? What is their social background/environment? What circumstances would push a person to commit acts of vigilantism?

May 15, 1856 marked the formation of America’s largest and most well-known vigilante movement, the “Committee of ’56.” This organization, led by William Tell Coleman, was called together as an act of “municipal purification” in San Francisco, California (Ethington 1987). The Committee formed in retaliation by nativists against a predominantly Irish Democratic party which had taken power in recent years. Following the example of the Committee of 1851, a vigilante group in the same city which formed to stop rampant crime, Coleman assembled over 6,000 men who either deported or executed Democrats, taking control of the local government in

a matter of days. They formed the “People’s party” in order to legitimately seize control of the government and enforce a strictly conservative fiscal system. When the national parties (Democrats and Republicans) took control again 14 years later, both parties attempted to run campaigns based on the successful financial platform run by the People’s party (Ethington 1987).

Another typifying example of vigilantism in America is the aforementioned citizens’ border patrols that exist at the present time along the US/Mexican border. These vigilante groups, often called Minutemen or Civil Homeland Defense, were formed by concerned citizens who were worried about illegal immigrants bringing crime and drugs into America (O’Meara 2003; Gaynor 2006; Oliviero 2011). The Civil Homeland Defense was founded by Chris Simcox, the owner of the *Tombstone Tumbleweed*, a local newspaper. Outraged by U.S. Border Patrol’s unwillingness² to stop the undocumented immigrants crossing into Tombstone from Mexico with guns and drugs, Simcox used his newspaper’s editorial section to declare a call to public arms (O’Meara 2003). Oliviero (2011) notes that the act of citizen border patrolling is one of “image management” (Andreas 2000; Oliviero 2011), maintaining the authority of the state over its boundaries. These vigilantes symbolically protect America’s reputation as an invulnerable country by guarding against possible terrorists and criminals (Oliviero 2011). They act as a call to action when the state is seen as inactive or unwilling to act (O’Meara 2003; Oliviero 2011).

Both examples, the Committee of 1856 and the Civil Homeland Defense, provide us with a basic starting point for understanding the type of person the vigilante life draws. Oliviero (2011) notes that these vigilantes are almost always white, heterosexual men. Their “tactical repertoire reminds us that logics of citizenship still depend on unmarked tropes of masculinity, whiteness, and heteronormativity, despite their gestures of multiculturalism” (2011, 702). This sentiment is echoed in many cases of vigilantism. Simcox, for example, has refuted claims that his methods are racist by stating that his ex-wife is black and that they have an inter-racial child together. On the other hand, Gaynor (2006) reports on the conviction of citizen patroller Roger Barnett who was found guilty in a civil suit of holding a Mexican-American family hostage at gunpoint because he believed them to have illegally crossed the border. Gaynor did not realize that the family he captured was of American citizens and the patriarch was a veteran of the U.S. Navy.

What is missing from this intersectional analysis, however, is any discussion of class. What no account of vigilantism directly notes is that these men require the time, money, and other available resources in order to perform vigilante acts. This hints at a possible middle class status for vigilantes. Also, a class analysis of victims of vigilante acts could elicit a type of person targeted by vigilantes.

Vigilantes and Institutional Social Structures

Vigilantes, by definition, operate outside of institutional structures. Every case of vigilantism analyzed in this article has one common factor: every vigilante or vigilante organization considered the current social structure to be ineffective in resolving a specific social problem. Furthermore, the vigilantes believed that there was a simple solution to the social problem. The failure of the system was not in a lack of recognition of the problem, but in a lack of action against it. Social scientists have addressed this commonality primarily in two ways: by

² O’Meara’s (2003) article was written from the perspectives of citizen border patrol leaders and therefore had an ingrained bias against institutional attempts at border control.

couching vigilantes in discussions of deviance or criminality (Evans 2003; McCall 2004; Jacobs, Carmichael, and Kent 2005), or by discussing vigilantism as a form of social control within small communities (Weisburd 1988; Martin 2010). Neither of these perspectives considers the possibility that vigilantes may be identifying cracks in the social structure that need to be fixed. In the case of vigilantism, the vigilante stands apart from other citizens by deciding to act on these flaws instead of asking the institution to amend itself.

The act of vigilantism requires the opportunity for non-institutional behaviors. This necessitates an exploration of the agency exercised by vigilantes. The discussion of agency and structure relies on much the same definition of agency as implied by Villalón (2010) in her discussion of how and why Latina immigrants might seek citizenship in the face of domestic abuse. Villalón defines agency as “in the middle,” recognizing that agency is tied to structure and the amount of agency one has is relative to the structural constraints faced by the actor in a given situation as well as influenced by the actions of others (2010, 121-2). She describes agency as “nuanced,” referring to resistance as much as it refers to compliance, strategy, and lack of intention (2010, 122-3). Her recognition of both formal, bureaucratic structural constraints as well as informal ones allows for a dynamic understanding of when, why, and how a person chooses to act.

For vigilantes, these barriers might include such things as legal definitions of how far popular sovereignty is allowed to go before an act of sovereignty is considered criminal. These would also include cultural understandings of when breaking the law is justified in the pursuit of popular sovereignty.³ Another possible structural constraint to (or opportunity for) agency would be whether or not the vigilantes are supported by local citizens or even members of the very institution they criticize with their actions.⁴ The very root of the agency of vigilantes may lay in their socially constructed identities. Being a white, middle-class man allows for easy identification with most of the most famous vigilantes in American history. Simcox’s story, for example, allows for easy comparison to the story of Wyatt Earp just by virtue of the fact that both stories take place in Tombstone, Arizona (O’Meara 2003). By playing up the connection between himself and the famed vigilante peacemaker, Simcox provides himself with the necessary cultural capital to legitimize his operation and endear himself to the locals via their shared history. While many vigilantes may not have the convenient structural allowances available to Simcox, they may have many avenues to be heard and to make people listen to their claims and ideologies.

Just because the vigilante’s actions are performed outside of institutional social structures does not mean they cannot be incorporated into the social structure or at least treated by the institution as acceptable. A recent worldwide trend is local communities, often within major cities, working in tandem with or literally hiring a person dressed as a comic book-style superhero. Blakely (2011) describes how a Seattle citizen named Benjamin Fodor began to dress up as a superhero, calling himself Phoenix Jones, and patrolling the streets to fight crime. The local police were glad of his assistance until he was video-taped pepper spraying several people excessively. This was deemed as unacceptable by the police and Fodor was arrested for assault. This case demonstrates how the line between working with or against the institutional social structure of a society is constantly negotiated by vigilantes and their communities.

³ The origin of the United States alone, with its Tea Parties and Continental Congresses, is usually enough justification for such acts of rebellion.

⁴ For example, Simcox claims the the local Border Patrol officers are grateful for the assistance (O’Meara 2003, 20).

Vigilantes and Historical/Cultural Ties

O'Meara (2003) notes that the actions of the border vigilantes are rooted in cultural mythologies of national heroes protecting their nation from the threat of invaders. She directly links the actions of the Civil Homeland Defense, and Simcox in particular, with the history of vigilantism that makes Tombstone, Arizona famous. The historical link between acts of vigilantism need not span centuries. The case of the Committee of 1856 shows how small acts of vigilantism can inspire newer and larger acts. The vigilantism that took place in 1856 was a direct result of the successful campaign by vigilantes to curb criminal activity only five years earlier. In both cases, we see a cultural and historical precedence for vigilantism. Fritz (1994) goes so far as to call vigilantism an American tradition.

Several articles in this study demonstrated a desire for vigilantes to identify with specific historical moments or cultural identities. A January 2009 article in the London Daily Mail noted that a group of men in Merstham, Surrey, England dressed in the imposing style of the North Ireland paramilitary when attempting to apprehend a suspected sex offender rumored to be in their town. A July 2011 article in The Express noted that the Islamic extremist group Islam4UK was posting signs denoting sharia-ruled territory when they felt their cultural rights were not being upheld by the British police (Clark 2011). In each case, vigilante groups were donning a specific cultural look in order to announce the seriousness of their intentions to other citizens, particularly those who would violate their local territory. This approach to vigilantism is also shared by so-called "superheroes" who use the cultural stereotypical spandex-clad, masked character to assert their dominance over criminals in a fashion similar to the comic book and movie characters they emulate.

Vigilantes and Idealism

Another concept about vigilantism that we can distinguish from these examples is that it attracts people who are dedicated to a specific ideology, a cause that they do not see being addressed through institutional channels. The social problem they identify can be indicative of a nationwide issue, such as crime and political corruption in the first example and immigration in the second. However, vigilantes address the social problem at a local level. Rather than attack the Democratic Party nationwide, the Committee of 1856 chose to attack only those Democrats in office in San Francisco. Likewise, the Civil Homeland Defense is based out of, and primarily operates in, Tombstone and its surrounding communities.

McClory (1996) notes in his report of the reform movement within the radical conservative group Catholics United for Faith that part of the group's reform tactics was to distance itself from vigilante groups operating under the flag of the CUF. The president of CUF claimed that "[the vigilante groups'] actions were based on 'local initiative,' not on orders from headquarters" (1996, 8). This quote further demonstrates the local restriction inherent in most acts of vigilantism. It also demonstrates the possibility that the vigilante group's ideals may not reflect those of the greater population. A 2011 New York Times editorial notes that several states and their legislators had spoken out against Arizona's penchant for stripping the legal rights of immigrants. The editorial team states that they find Arizona's legislation allowing the random checking of immigrant documentation to be a violation of civil rights and condemn the state for

allowing these measures to pass. This example also notes the prominence of democracy as the ideal cited in discussions of vigilantism.

Fritz (1994) suggests that the idea of vigilante justice in America is tied to the concept of popular sovereignty, an idea that is particular to democratic nations. Popular sovereignty is “based on the notion that ‘the people’ are the ultimate and only legitimate basis for government and that ‘the people’ possess the right to reform, alter, or abolish their government at any time” (Fritz 1994). In the case of vigilantism, the vigilante is attempting to fill a gap in the structure of the government in an effort to bring the inadequacy to the attention of government officials. Seen through this lens, the vigilante is a civic-minded citizen intent on creating a more perfect democratic system.

O’Meara (2003) presents us with an example of this construction in Chris Simcox, an Arizona resident who has taken it upon himself to protect the US/Mexican from drug runners. “It was after 9/11...[we] were being told by the president that we had to be vigilant...We are answering the president’s call to be vigilant. We are going to do the job that he refuses to do,” claims Simcox (O’Meara 2003). For Simcox, the efforts at diplomacy that the United States extends to Mexico regarding immigrants allow too many drug mules and criminals to cross the border in the USA. Simcox, as well as others who share his opinions, formed border patrols that use scare tactics to dissuade immigrants from crossing the border. For these men, who are branded vigilantes by government officials though they deny the title themselves, the act of protecting an area of their country that the government will not is an act of patriotism and a right that they possess and freely exercise. Simcox claims that his efforts are lauded by the U.S. Border Patrol officers and that they are establishing a model for other towns to act accordingly.

The vigilante constructed by Simcox in O’Meara’s article is not a vigilante per se, certainly not in his own mind. Rather, he defines himself as someone who upholds the values inherent in democracy, in contemporary America. He also described himself as someone who is offering themselves as a “model” for others to act upon. Simcox sees himself as a guardian, not a punisher of criminals, and in that sense he is a vigilante in the classical sense. Simcox’s description of his actions make evident the idea that the “perfect” democratic system would be left up to the ideals held by the vigilante himself, and not necessarily based on some grandiose ideal held by the majority of citizens. In other words, the justice meted out by the vigilante may not necessarily ensure justice for all.

The idea that vigilante justice may not be egalitarian suggests an entirely different character for the vigilante. Schwantes (1981) cites a unique case of vigilantism from 1918 which occurred in Walla Walla, Washington. In this case, a gathering of approximately 500 farmers from the surrounding regions meeting for their 30th annual convention were driven away by conservative townspeople with threats of violence and intimidation tactics. Critics of this assault, including President Woodrow Wilson and members of the Associated Press, commented on how these actions were a reflection of the “emotional insanity” that threatened American democracy under the strains of fighting World War I (Schwantes 1981). Here, the vigilante is someone who threatens to undermine the democratic principle of “justice for all” rather than protecting it.

The construction of the vigilante character as someone who threatens democracy seems obvious when the person commenting is a member of the government, like President Wilson, or a member of a national press, who often adhere to a generic sense of “law and order” (Girling, Loader, and Sparks 1998). The construction of the vigilante as a protector of democracy, a person exercising popular sovereignty, would most likely come from a different source, perhaps the vigilante himself. It is possible, however, for both judgments to be made by a neutral party.

Purves (2010) comments on the need for a balance between the passive-aggressive vigilante who “snitches” on his targets and the “swivel-eyed person with the baseball bat” (Purves 2010, 20). She lauds a local community for not allowing an over-reliance on police presence to keep them from defending themselves while also not becoming violent and aggressive by nature.

Vigilantes as Agents of Social Control

Sociologists rarely discuss the hero, mostly because it is difficult to discern a definition that encompasses all of the various characters that are often considered heroes (Best 2011). Klapp’s (1954) discussion of the hero as a social type is the most famous sociological work on the subject. Klapp defines the hero as someone constructed by normal citizens as the paradigm of all that is worth celebrating in a society. The hero is extraordinary, representing what average citizens care about, what they can achieve, or what they need to improve about themselves (Klapp 1954). Classically, heroes are people of action; they must perform some extreme feat in order to achieve a hero’s status (Raglan 1936; Carlyle 1840 [1993]). For example, Simcox and his friends on the citizens’ border patrol units see themselves as men of action who represent the virtue of popular sovereignty and guard democracy from those who would violate it.

Klapp points out that not everyone will agree on what constitutes a hero. What may seem heroic to one person may be mundane or foolish to another, and villainous to yet another. While heroism requires action on the part of the person, becoming a villain can be as simple as taking the opposite standpoint during a moral crisis (Klapp 1954, 61). In this sense, heroes, villains, and fools act as agents of social control, showing us the boundaries of decency and normality. Having heroes and villains demonstrates to members of a society which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. Klapp’s theory falls short, however, of realizing the extent to which social groups will segment from larger society. Each smaller social group may have its own ideals, its own understanding of acceptable behaviors. This allows for the possibility of one vigilante being socially constructed as many social control types. The key to this is to understand that the social control agent does not get to pick his own character. Rather, it must be ascribed to him by “normal” members of society (Klapp 1962). For example, a person may perform some vigilante action in order to protect what he believes to be a proper ideal. He would be a hero to those he protects. However, someone who does not feel protected by or ingrained in the morals of that vigilante may feel victimized by them or see them as victimizing someone else. In this case, the vigilante’s attempt at justice may be viewed as creating injustice. The vigilante would therefore be a villain.

This case is exemplified in arguments against “vigilante censorship” (Morgan 1990). When vigilantes act to remove a symbol, message, or image from the public eye because they find it offensive, those who put it there most likely will not share the vigilante’s point of view and will see the act as vandalism. Meister (1985) discusses how a feminist group that viewed a particular art exhibit as condoning violence against women stole the works of art and destroyed them. The vandals claimed to be acting in concert with the spirit of the first amendment, but in doing so, violated it. This sort of situation becomes a slippery slope legally speaking. In the case discussed by Meister, the vandals stole something that was property owned by a university. It was private property. Meister points out, however, that issues involving flag burning or effigy defamation are not so clear cut. In these cases, Meister suggests that the law is meant to protect the symbol from defamation, not the object itself (1985). In protecting symbols, though, courts must establish whether a reality was violated because it symbolized something or if a symbol

was violated in protest to a reality (1985). In either case, the vigilante would be a villain from the perspective of those who believe in the symbol.

A common example of this type of vigilantism is extremist pro-life protesters. These individuals believe so much in the pro-life cause that they will perform violent acts against abortion clinics and the staff who work in them. An editorial in a February 2010 issue of the *New York Times* notes that pro-life activist Scott Roeder was convicted of committing first-degree murder against an abortion doctor in less than 37 minutes. The defendant failed to plead the charge down to manslaughter based on the influence of his political convictions. This, the editorial staff points out, demonstrates that “political beliefs, no matter how sincerely held, do not lessen accountability for murder” (2010, 26). By taking his social group’s belief system into a place of unacceptable behavior, Roeder was violating the democratic morality of the greater society.

As the example of Scott Roeder suggests, the balance between social control at the meso-level (small social groups) and the macro-level (greater society) can often be at odds. Girling et al. (1998) point out how a localized act of vigilantism, initially viewed in a positive light (heroic or in defense of democracy) can be reframed in a negative light as the story is retold on a national level. When a young criminal in the English town of Macclesfield, well known to the local police but still free and committing acts of vandalism, was attacked and subdued by members of the community, the town considered the act one of vigilante justice. However, the national news reported the story as one of mob mentality and cruelty without due process. Subsequently, the town of Macclesfield reframed the situation as one in which the evils of the world had violated their small, protected town. Now the town’s name was synonymous with crime and lawlessness, a reputation the town eschewed (Girling et al 1998). What was at first a local story about a town protecting itself was now a story about a declining habitability of a small town in rural England (1998, 476). Depending on who was constructing this story, it could easily be one about heroic vigilantes defending democracy, villainous vigilantes violating democracy, or a fluid mix of all.

The construction of vigilante as someone who isn’t the hero could also put the vigilante in the category of fool, someone who attempts to be the hero but fails. Often, fools are seen as putting people at risk but often by accident. This is unlike vigilantes who put people at risk willfully in order to attain their goals (like collateral damage). Sir Ian Blair, Deputy Commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police, makes the point that criminals can be dangerous and vigilantism means putting oneself at risk (Steele 2004). While Sir Ian’s remarks point towards the rational choice of taking a risk in vigilantism, representatives of the online auction service eBay note that misguided attempts to stop corrupt sellers by “online vigilantes” can have unintentional consequences that make matters worse. “[Auction] interference’...can tip off lawbreakers, [the company] claims, without actually stopping them” (Dominus 2004). In this case, vigilante action is seen as foolish, preventing actual law enforcement officers from doing their jobs.

Conclusion

This study has been focused on the concept of vigilantism as a social action. The analysis of newspaper reports on vigilantism and the academic discussion of the topic have revealed several social constructions of this social character. Vigilantes are seen as heroes or villains or fools, defenders of idealism or enemies of it, exercising popular sovereignty or abusing it,

putting themselves or others at risk, or historically and culturally relevant. As discussed, it is possible for a vigilante to be constructed simultaneously as many of these characters without paradox. It always depends on who is doing the constructing, where they are doing it (i.e. in what time period, in what country), and what beliefs they and their culture hold that inform the construction.

The limitations of this study fall into those inherent in any content analysis. By observing only what was represented in the cultural object, the researcher is only able to analyze meanings frozen in that specific space and time. Any nuances that come with discussing an issue such as vigilantism are lost in the abrupt nature of condensing any subjective, socially constructed meaning into a single cultural object. More so, the researcher is only able to assume what is meant in each representation rather than be told what it really means to those presenting the representation. In other words, the researcher does not have any definite information about the cultural object besides what he or she can get from context clues. Future research on this topic should include direct responses (i.e. polls, short answer, or interview data) from people regarding how they construct vigilantism.

One direction that I believe would be important to study that was not explored in this paper is the understanding of how vigilantes create or restrict opportunities for others. Does vigilantism provide anyone with social justice? Do vigilantes provide others with cultural and political opportunities for flourishing lives and idealism or do they restrict them? These are questions best answered by studying the victims “saved” or “targeted” by vigilantes. Who are the victims that are saved by vigilantes? Are they the same (white, middle-class, heteronormative) as the vigilantes or does vigilante justice extend beyond social barriers? Who are the victims that are targeted by vigilantes? Several cases of vigilantism cited throughout this paper show a disturbing trend, that the targets of vigilantism are often members of marginalized groups (i.e. undocumented immigrants, criminals, members of minority races, etc.). I believe that an intersectional approach would be pertinent in this regard, attempting to determine the marginalized nature of victims of vigilante actions and how their marginalized status is reinforced by the institutional changes suggested by vigilantes. Are the efforts of vigilantes truly altering of social structure, or do they merely reinforce hegemonic social arrangements? Further research would be important in this matter.

Similarly, ethnographic data could be used to elaborate on the many possible constructions of vigilantism. It would be necessary to ask vigilantes how they construct their own social identity as vigilantes. It would also be necessary to interview those people who are victimized (viewed as the social problem) by vigilantes. Additionally, vigilantes are theoretically doing a job mandated to someone else by institutional powers. It would be useful to understand how those institutionally mandated workers (i.e. border patrol officers, police, etc.) view vigilantes. I suspect that categories found in the content analysis presented above would also be found in ethnographic data, though it would not be surprising to find more categories. The drawback of using ethnographic data drawn from interviews is that it often fails to capture the local history influencing the lives of respondents (i.e. local customs, laws, mores, etc.).

My content analysis did not uncover evidence of the vigilante as antihero, a common version of the vigilante found in popular culture. An anti-hero is someone who is considered neither hero nor villain, but rather is an every-man sort of character. Their motives are often suspect, but they still perform what can be considered good acts. They are often motivated by selfish means. Characters such as the Punisher, Batman, and Spider-Man are among the most commonly cited anti-heroes in contemporary culture. While many vigilantes look to images in

popular culture to influence their actions, this study has not noted any attempting to take on this role.

It should be noted that this study lacks any references to terrorism in the content analysis, though this is often a category equated with vigilantism. This is because terrorism is a loaded social construction. By labeling an act as terroristic, the act is being automatically judged as villainous, against democracy, and resisting institutional structures. This means that the terrorist may be one specific construction of the vigilante, but a proper discussion of vigilantism cannot be reduced to this one character.

In attempting to discern the kind of person who might turn to vigilantism as a legitimate attempt at serving justice, we have elicited several possible socially constructed traits that enable the vigilante. From specific positions in race, class, and gender, to historical context and ideological backgrounds, vigilantes seem to fall in a fairly specific segment of the American population. To test this, however, empirical data would need to be gathered about vigilantes themselves and compared to non-vigilantes of similar backgrounds to determine the differences (if any) that set vigilantes apart from average citizens. Conducting life history interviews with those vigilantes to whom access is available (i.e. Simcox and his fellow patrollers, incarcerated vigilantes, etc.) would be an invaluable method to discover what aspects of the social structure contributed to their choosing vigilantism over other methods of pursuing justice.

About the Author

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