SOCIOLOGY Vol. 32 No. 2 May 1998
379–396

FIGHTING THE LEGACY: BRITISH BIKERS IN THE 1990s

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Abstract This working paper focuses on police actions involving meetings of motorcyclists at a public house in Warwickshire, where police mobilisation resulted in a national outcry among motorcyclists against what was perceived as unnecessary police harassment. Through the detailing of the confrontation it shall be shown how the reactions by motorcyclists were centred not only around actual events but also around perceptions of negative myths about 'bikers' prevalent in society. In order to examine the basis of riders' claims, an exploration will be made of the available socio-economic statistics for the industry to highlight the disjuncture between popular images of 'bikers' and the actuality of the motorcycling profile. It is argued that the complex social identities portrayed by the motorcyclists are based on a social composition at odds with popular perception. Further, it is indicated how events may function on both political and cultural levels, carrying implications for future sociological analyses of social movement.

Key words: Bikers, collective action, identity, myth, postmodernism, new social movements.

The subjects of this paper are British motorcyclists, an unusual if not totally novel topic for sociological investigation, whilst the theoretical concerns are more traditional; namely, the relationships between the cultural and the political and between actuality and perception. Central to this is an investigation into the reactions of riders to a police action mounted against biker gatherings at a rural Warwickshire public house in August 1995. The events are 'real' historical occurrences: the riders a 'really-existing' social group. Yet 'biker' is also a socially-constructed identity. A biker exists not only as a person on a motorcycle, but carries in his panniers (for, as we shall see, he *is* still male), a vast weight of symbolic goods. Like the more famous scapegoats and minorities throughout history, motorcyclists have accrued a set of socially disapproved characteristics based on a perceived resistance to authority and the right-ordering of social life (Cohn 1975; Richards 1990).

Yet these perceptions are essentially contested by motorcyclists. Viewing the police activities not only as an attack on their social persons, but on their identities and lifestyles, the riders' reactions were crucially centred on a rejection of the 'biker myth'. An empirical examination to establish whether they were merely being disingenuous in their disavowals in order to attract public sympathy reveals a more complex profile which counters stereotypes of motorcyclists. Relatedly, the ways in which objective and subjective, political

and cultural are melded within their understandings carry important ramifications for ongoing discussions into postmodernism and New Social Movement (NSM) theorisations.

'Watermangate'

'The Waterman' public house in Hatton, a few miles outside Warwick, has, for some five years, been the site of 'bike nights' on a Wednesday evening. Whilst these gatherings are small in the winter, in summer numbers swell as motorcyclists seize on hot weather to go for a ride and the opportunity to socialise with like-minded individuals. However, with the hot 'biking' weather in the summer of 1995, there was a vast increase in the numbers gathering weekly as news of a convivial evening spread throughout the motorcycling community. By August, as riders came from as far afield as Liverpool, the situation was escalating beyond the abilities of 'The Waterman' to cater for such large numbers, which ranged from police estimates of some 2–3,000 motorcycles to the more modest 1,000 estimated by the landlord (Radio WM 17 August 1995).

Events reached a climax during August, when the police intervened. For two successive weeks, road blocks were placed on the roads leading to the pub to prevent the motorcyclists from congregating, there was a police presence at other local public houses in addition to 'The Waterman', roving police motorcyclists and a police helicopter. At a minimum, forty police officers, twenty police vehicles and two video cameras were involved in the action (Radio WM 17 August 1995).

The motorcyclists were clearly perplexed by the police action and, given the absence of concrete information, rumour ran riot. Three sets of concrete circumstances were held to underlie the police action. Firstly, that the large number of vehicles attending the event (including many cars whose owners came to look at the motorcycles), meant that cars had parked along the highway. Additionally, people were lining the roads to watch the bikes as they came and went. For these reasons, it was believed some local residents may have complained. Secondly, that a small number of individuals had been behaving irresponsibly; that is, pulling 'wheelies' and 'doughnuts' (spinning a motorcycle around a rotating front wheel). Lastly, that a national motorcycling magazine, *Performance Bikes*, having been informed about the Wednesday gatherings, had indicated an intention to attend in order to write a feature on the venue. The local rider who had contacted the magazine subsequently distributed leaflets, without the permission of the magazine, promising a mini-racetrack and wheelie and doughnut competitions.

Yet the central contention for the motorcyclists was what they perceived as a 'heavy-handed police operation' (Radio MW 17 August 1995). The behaviour of the riders at previous gatherings had not occasioned the extent of

the reaction, the landlord insisted. There had been no fights or arrests and the atmosphere was good. Indeed, the District Assistant Commissioner (DAC) was later to confirm there had been no arrests throughout the actions and stated that although the bikers had been 'upset' they were 'stoical' (Meeting with Warwickshire Constabulary 21 August 1995). As such, various questions arose amongst the motorcyclists all of which centred around the issue of why, if a few individuals were acting irresponsibly, had the police not taken the cheaper and more appropriate route of prosecuting them as individuals? Further, if the attendance of *Performance Bikes* reporters was the problem, then a police presence to insure that that one evening did not create problems should have sufficed. What caused even more concern and indignation was that both the police and landlords involved informed the motorcyclists that the issue was merely about the Wednesday night, and that the bikers could drink in any local pub on any other night. Overall, therefore, there was a considerable amount of bewilderment in the face of unexplained blanket action seemingly out of proportion to the events, and a feeling that individual rights to travel and congregate freely were being infringed (Radio WM 17 and 18 August 1995).

On subsequent days the extent of the motorcyclists' reaction to the police action became apparent. Complaints were made to the police, articles appeared in the local press and local radio, and the *Motor Cycle News* (MCN), Britain's largest weekly motorcycling newspaper, in addition to carrying an article, editorial and letters about 'The Waterman', received telephone calls from around the country from concerned motorcyclists; many of whom apparently intended to write to their MPs. In all of these media the actions of the police came under intense criticism and thus the British Motorcyclists' Federation (BMF), in an attempt to discover the reasons underlying events and seek a resolution between the various factions, sought a meeting with the police on 21 August 1995, to which I was invited as an independent observer.

At this meeting, as on local radio, the police stated that the action had resulted from complaints from the landlord and local residents[1] and, through extracts from five hours of video-recording taken on 2 August 1995, that their campaign had been justified due to the presence of a 'mindless minority'. It was those, the video revealed, who had been responsible for the three wheelies and one doughnut which had led to the clampdown. Yet they were also quick to emphasise that they wished a resolution of the matter that involved police, residents, the landlord and the motorcyclists; as the DAC stated, 'a community solving its own problems'. Nor did the police object to BMF proposals to start the Great Northern Bike Run for charity from 'The Waterman' in October 1995; indeed, they were later to participate in, rather than just police, the run. Further, they agreed to police the Wednesday evenings in the future should the landlord wish to restart them; although they stressed that they would appreciate BMF assistance.

This was exactly the decision reached by the landlord after his meeting with

the police later that same day, and 23 August 1995 saw motorcycles return to 'The Waterman' in considerable numbers; being guided in by six marshals in BMF bibs along cordoned routes into the lower field behind the pub. The police did make a low-key appearance over the next two weeks in a self-confessed 'public relations exercise', but confined themselves to socialising with the assembled riders. By 6 September, with darkness falling by 8 p.m., and steady rain throughout the evening, only about 200 motorcycles arrived, and the police put in no appearance at all; which appeared to confirm the riders' belief that police action had been unnecessary, and that the British summer would establish its own regulation. To all extents and purposes, the affair which had become known as 'Watermangate' was officially over.

However, this was not the case as far as the BMF were concerned. Over the next nine months the possibilities for legal action against the police were explored; even though at a meeting with the residents, BMF and landlord on 4 March 1996 the police had declared that they had no plans to stop the Wednesday evening gatherings. But events had gathered momentum as the problems surrounding one rural public house were extrapolated onto a wider national base. On 15 May 1996 the MCN joined with the BMF to launch a fighting fund to pay for a court case. With headlines saying, 'WE'LL BATTLE THE BIKE BANS!' the paper argued, 'the right to travel freely is a basic civil liberty. But last year the police denied that right to motor cyclists. Not because they had committed a crime or were even likely to commit one. But simply because they were motor cyclists.' Arguing that campaigners felt the Waterman action may herald 'the start of a major threat to riders' rights', it continued:

> If the case fails, the results could be catastrophic and far-reaching. The police around the country will be able to use the action in Warwickshire as a precedent for similar clampdowns on bikers' gatherings anywhere in the country . . . If biking is to keep its spirit of freedom, we need your help now!
>
> (MCN 15 May 1996)

Two weeks later, with £2,000 already donated for the Right to Ride fund, it seemed this warning was already being realised in Stratford-upon-Avon, where a local councillor was trying to get residents to sign a petition banning motorcycles from the Waterside area of the town by putting up barriers. One 54-year-old echoed similar sentiments to the MCN comment above:

> It's a great pity that in 1996 this country is still prejudiced against bikers. I wonder if [the councillor] agrees with Stratford Council's anti-discrimination policy. Because this is discrimination as much as anything else. I bet he wouldn't feel the same way if it was the Lotus car owners club instead of a load of bikers meeting up here.
>
> (MCN 29 May 1996)

The court case which was to deter such actions did not, however, come to pass. By July 1996, with half of the target for the Right to Ride fund having

been raised, legal action was dropped for a variety of reasons. Partially, the BMF wished to protect the landlord who was worried about having to make a statement, but it was also due to bad legal advice which failed to inform the BMF that it was beyond the time limit for registering an action. Fears of the potential escalation of costs were also part of the withdrawal. Yet the BMF does not see this as a failure for, as their Press and Public Relations Officer argued that month, the increase in awareness generated by the affair has focused attention on riders' rights. Further, it gave the organisation important lessons; for example, of the need to keep permanent legal advisers for the organisation. It admits it has learnt that it needs better organisation, with a more professional approach. The then-editor of MCN agrees:

> The major lesson is that the response from motorcyclists, or any motorcycling group, to the police's action needs to be much more unified, much more professional, and much more prompt. I think it was responded to in a kind of piecemeal, amateurish, bumbling fashion, and we're paying the price for that now.
>
> (Fieldwork interview)

Yet despite the collapse of the Waterman case, and a summer without incident, it continued to be an issue for, as the BMF Press Officer had said, it seemed that the Waterman had, indeed, heightened sensibilities to the possible infringement of riders' rights. For example, in August 1996, the National Committee of the second of Britain's two riders' rights organisations, the Motorcycle Action Group (MAG), was concerned with what it perceived as heavy-handed police action towards motorcyclists on the A44 in Wales and at a public house in Nottingham. In both cases officials were eager to avoid 'another Waterman'. Whilst, therefore, Watermangate was over, the implications of it continued to resonate:

> . . . the Waterman problem is one of principle, in that, I believe, the police took unreasonable action by simply road-blocking motorcyclists, preventing them travelling on public roads, simply because they were motorcyclists. Even people who were not necessarily travelling to the pub. And I think that's a very serious infringement of people's freedom . . . That's the problem, really, and that fact hasn't been recognised by anyone, and I think it *has* to be recognised to prevent it happening in the future.
>
> (Fieldwork interview)

As can be seen from the above quotations, motorcyclists appear to believe that they have been subject to such actions precisely *because* they are motorcyclists; that is, that they are on the receiving end of discriminatory actions as a result of their affiliation to a specific social grouping. As such, we can see how the Waterman affair has come to be included within 'biker history' as a representation of the types of discrimination that they believe they face; 'the Waterman' has come to stand as shorthand for 'anti-biking' prejudice in general. In this sense, the actions of the police, whether it was to a perceived problem or, as motorcyclists believe, as a result of negative imagery and

discrimination against bikers, is irrelevant. What is important is that motorcyclists *believe* this to be the case and, consequently, it informed their reactions to the Waterman affair and subsequently. In the next section we explore biker perceptions of themselves and how these underlie the creation of self-imagery.

Perceptions of Images

Motorcyclists frequently refer to the negatively-held prejudices in society deriving from popular perceptions of motorcyclists. Such imagery comes from a variety of sources. Film and television stress the hedonistic and rebellious imagery perhaps most clearly characterised in such films as *Easy Rider, Every Which Way But Loose* and *The Wild One*. Similarly images also percolate through the written media. Thus, for example, even in articles concerned with serious issues such as EU legislation, we receive images of 'burly bikers, wearing reinforced leathers and menacing boots clustered around the pinball machine sipping pints of bitter while trying to roll cigarettes' (*Guardian* 25 March 1993). Much of this imagery is held to relate to the 1960s, when the clashes between Mods and Rockers captured the public imagination:

> I think it still lingers, the image of the '60s still lingers . . . scruffy, dirty machine, leaking oil, riding irresponsibly, generally being anti-social in other respects . . . I think that that sort of modern rocker era left us a *legacy* that has done us no good for many years.
>
> (Fieldwork interview)

Academics are also indirectly implicated in this regard, in that most British work on motorcyclists is concerned with this period (Willis 1978; 1992; 1993; Cohen 1980). Whilst it is not being argued that this image was wrong at the time of the fieldwork (for it is now impossible to refute), the use of such imagery today is no longer strictly valid for two main reasons. The first, prosaically, is that stringent legislation has largely eroded the distinction made by Willis between the 'motorbike boy' and the 'conventional motorcyclist' in the 1960s; for all must now wear helmets, pass two tests and obey laws on capacity limits. Secondly, whilst clearly motorcycling is a very physical activity which, to some extent, must involve danger,[2] and, equally clearly, this is attractive to some people and not others, the clear-cut equation drawn in earlier work of motorbike/male/working-class/violence is problematic. It is this typology which formed the crux around which much of the discussions of the motorcyclists focused.

Throughout the events surrounding the police action at 'The Waterman', motorcyclists felt that they were being stigmatised by this outmoded stereotyping of 'the biker' as socially dysfunctional rebel and layabout. Hence the repeated references to themselves as responsible, productive members of

society. As one biker expressed it, 'I've got a mortgage and a job. I've never been on the dole in my life and I've got a Peugeot 306 at home. It's just because tonight I'm wearing a leather jacket.' Two other quotations pick up on this theme that bikers are 'ordinary' people being criminalised for their choice of collective membership:

> Warwickshire police have turned me from a 49-year-old, suburban, semi-detached, law-abiding citizen into a biking demon almost overnight. Three weeks ago I was a Volvo owner who rides a Honda 250 Super Dream. But after visiting 'The Waterman', the media described me as one of a 'few thousand Hell's Angel types'.
>
> (MCN 30 August 1995)

> 'I was threatened with arrest last week and I really object to that,' said Keith Thabber, 51, a college lecturer who has been riding since 1960. 'There's never been any trouble here. But the only people who respect bikers are bikers, it's always been that way.' Mr Thabber had found himself talking to Paul Tropman, 39, a managing director, who has three in his garage, worth about £30,000. 'The sort of people here are not hooligans at all,' said Mr Tropman.
>
> (*Guardian* 25 August 1995)

One of the consequences of this, as can be seen from this quotation, is the motorcycling camaraderie alluded to by Willis in the 1960s. This sense of community is strong amongst bikers, partially because they are a minority, but also because they feel themselves as a community under threat – from public imagery; European and national parliaments, police, car drivers etc. Thus, we may view motorcyclists as forming a symbolic community in which identity is drawn from the sense of boundary (Cohen 1985). One letter makes this clear 'Police action was taken because of a handful of bikers. But it was an appalling invasion of individual liberty and should only have been aimed at those breaking the law. Imagine the outcry if the same had happened to car drivers' (MCN 30 August 1995). An accompanying editorial from MCN, written in the aftermath, draws a more cautionary conclusion:

> Sense appears to have prevailed in the 'Watermangate' affair. Warwickshire police have U-turned on their ban on motor cyclists meeting at the Waterman and other pubs in the county. Quite bloody right. The lesson the police must take away from this shambles is plain. That simply talking to motor cyclists is far more likely to produce a rapid, amicable and fair solution to any biker problem than storming in with riot vans ever will. And for the bikers involved there is also an important message. That however much we may think our image has changed, it only takes a little unruly behaviour combined with a big crowd for all of us to be branded mad hooligans.
>
> (MCN 30 August 1995)

This perception of motorcyclists as inhabiting a community under threat is not merely one to be found amongst regulars at 'The Waterman', but generally among bikers. A report on the annual BMF rally in 1992 quotes the spokesman for the Barrel Bikers of Buckinghamshire.

> 'We have a lot of trouble with the way we're portrayed in films and on TV,' said Mr Booth. 'When we go into a pub some people think we're going to beat everybody up and burn the place down, but not one member of our club has been arrested in the last 13 years. We're human people, not like the bad-arsed bikers from southern California who rape, pillage and then ride on to the next place like Brando in *The Wild One*. We raised £2,000 for handicapped children last year.'
>
> (*Independent* 24 May 1992)

The continuing nature of earlier stereotyping is again dealt with in an article in the same newspaper, which also draws attention both to the discrimination faced by motorcyclists and a sense of status incongruence (M. F. Hall 1995), to be dealt with in a later section:

> If you're reading this while stuck in a traffic jam or sitting on a train, just think; it's quicker by bike. But is biking for you? Among motorcyclists the line goes: 'There are people who are bikers and there's the rest of the world.' And as a biker in Britain, you are often made to feel like a second-class citizen. Arrive by bike at a hotel – booked in advance by credit card – and you feel the warmth of welcome reserved for the Nineties British equivalent of a leper. It does not matter that the clothes you are wearing would cost the average British worker a month's salary, or that your 150mph superbike costs the best part of £10,000. In contrast, go to the Continent and you will find a warm welcome, and jealous admirers, in every town. Two outdated misconceptions concerning motorbikes are still prevalent in this country: bikes are a cheap form of transport; and they are driven [*sic*] by spotty teenagers who scream around city centres for a cheap thrill. Some memories extend back to the Sixties bank-holiday clashes between Vespa and Lambretta-borne mods and Norton or Triumph-toting rockers.
>
> (*Independent* 20 October 1993)

Not only do these quotations criticise prevalent mythology surrounding bikers and indicate ways in which negative stereotyping may create a sense of injustice which may come to underlie both identity and action (Klandermans 1995), they point also to a perceived feeling within the community; that bikers feel the myth surrounding them is no longer, if it ever was, valid. In other words, motorcyclists believe that the invalidity of the myth is grounded in objective social conditions. Therefore, we need to assess, on an empirical level, whether the implications that there are objective material differences between the myth and the socio-economic profile of British bikers is correct. The importance of this for the field of social movements is that, given debates about the relevance, or not, of material factors in the production of collective identities and action between structuralist and cultural explanations (Melucci 1989), data indicating, firstly, that actors themselves see such factors as relevant and, secondly, their perceptions may be accurate, will enable us to offer more complex and convincing empirical accounts of collective beliefs and actions.

Socio-Economic Profile of the Motorcycling Community

Clearly, any conclusions about whether or not there have been changes within

the target community within the last thirty years must remain tentative as, due to a lack of empirical data from earlier periods, it is impossible to assess accurately the extent to which this is the case. As such, one can only infer whether earlier portrayals of motorcyclists as young and working-class were based on fact. However, even if differences between generations cannot be adequately ascertained, it may still be possible to gain a profile of the contemporary motorcyclist which allows us to understand how the status incongruence between myth and fact may fuel a sense of biking identity as the sense of self comes into conflict with perceptions of social worth.

The first clear factor is that, overall, motorcycling has been in decline in Great Britain since 1986. In 1994 there were fewer motorcycles in use in Great Britain than in any year since 1950; 751,900 and 761,500 respectively. The peak years lie between 1957 and 1966, with the highest single year being 1960, when some 1,795,000 were in use. The subsequent decline from the late 1960s picked up slightly from 1975, but by 1987 the numbers of motorcycles in usage, 978,000, fell below one million for the first time since 1953. Further, within this decline, we can uncover a significant change in motorcycle usage which provides a key indicator of socio-economic change in the motorcycling profile in that, over the last five years, we can uncover a growing trend for a reduction in numbers of smaller capacity motorcycles being newly registered, whilst growth in the industry is stemming from motorcycles of over 750cc; that is, sport/touring, supersport, touring and custom machines. Thus in 1989, there were 58,412 motorcycles under 750cc registered, compared with 31,211 registered in 1994. In the over-750cc capacities, there were 10,323 registered in 1989, and 13,520 registered in 1994 (Motor Cycle Industry Association Statistics 1995). If we look at the smallest segment of the market, motorcycles under 125cc, we can detail this fall from 37 per cent of all new registrations in 1988 to 28 per cent by 1993, with moped sales falling by 65 per cent; from 24,400 to 8,459 units (MINTEL Report 1993). In the same period, there has been a slight decline in motorcycles between 125–750cc from 25,958 to 21,303 (Motor Cycle Industry Association Statistics 1995). As such, we are witnessing a trend whereby larger, and thus more expensive, machines are taking an increasing share of the market.

Much of this change can be attributed to increasing ownership of cars and lessening life chances for young people:

> The cost of purchase and ownership of a new motorcycle has become prohibitive for many young motorcycle owners primarily as a result of the recession and unemployment. Consequently, sales of second-hand machines are accounting for a higher proportion of sales among motorcycle owners generally but, more significantly, a greater number of young moped and motorcycle owners are opting for car ownership instead of motorcycles. This is because of the increase of availability of reliable, low cost, used cars.
>
> (MINTEL Report 1993)

Related to this, however, are both public perceptions of the dangerous nature of motorcycling which grew in the 1970s and the subsequent attempts of government to make the pursuit more safe. As Tom Waterer, the Executive Director of the Motor Cycle Industry Association (MCIA), argues:

> Remember the 'Think Bike' TV campaign which graphically showed a car and motorcycle colliding. Intended to raise awareness of motorcyclists among car drivers, it actually was the most negative publicity that could have been devised for motorcycling. Every mothers' son became the lad on the bike in that commercial, and so no wonder Britain's mothers put their maternal feet down and stopped their offspring from riding motorcycles. Ten years later research in schools showed that over 90% of schoolchildren were forbidden to have any form of powered two wheeler . . . The increase in sales during the 1970s brought with it an increase in motorcycle casualties that society found unacceptable. This social concern was expressed in the media and in political pressure on MPs and the Government to 'do something about it'. That something was the 1981 Transport Act. The Act introduced the Two Part Test and the 125cc Learner bike. As a barrier to getting on a motorcycle, it proved very effective!
>
> (*Motor Cycle Dealer*, July 1995)

Put together, we can see that the difficulties involved in starting to ride a motorcycle in the 1980s, with time limits on testing and power restrictions on small vehicles (one could no longer just buy a 250cc machine and ride it indefinitely on a provisional licence), at a time of increasing availability of good second-hand cars exacerbated the decline in motorcycling. What became clear by the late 1980s was a change within the shape of motorcycling, what Waterer calls the change from a 'need' to a 'desire' based market, which is a reflection of a combination of factors.

Firstly, the legislation and move to car-ownership mentioned above meant that motorcycling, perhaps for the first time in Great Britain, was no longer a commuter necessity but a leisure pursuit. Although data by specific categories is not available over a long period of time due to reclassification of type categories in 1993, we can get an indication of the extent of this trend in that by 1994 commuting motorcycles constituted only 19.06 per cent of all vehicles registered, whilst the larger categories mentioned earlier constituted 59.05 per cent (Motor Cycle Industry Association Statistics 1995).[3] Additional factors accentuating this trend have been the great commuter distances travelled and the increase in women workers, for whom the 'dangers of motorcycling are . . . more acutely perceived' (MINTEL Report 1993). Women who do ride powered two-wheelers are heavily concentrated in the moped/scooter and under-125cc categories (57 per cent), whilst constituting only 14 per cent of owners of machines over 500cc. Secondly, demographic factors have affected the profile of the motorcyclist in that the numbers of 15–24 year olds, the traditional core market for motorcycles, are declining in the 1990s with a resultant 500,000 lost potential riders (MINTEL Report 1993). However, the 'baby-boomers', those who accounted for the upturn in trends

in the 1960s and 1970s, are now in the 30–59 age range. It is these, with disposable wealth and company cars, who now constitute the major profile for motorcycling.

These data are confirmed by the Automobile Association (AA). In their research into the profile of motorcyclists, they found 42 per cent had ridden for longer than ten years; with this trend being most pronounced amongst those with more powerful machines. Breaking riders into age groups, 81 per cent were over 25 years old; including a small, but significant, 7 per cent over the age of 55. The leisure nature of the pursuit is also supported by this research, which indicated that 51 per cent of motorcyclists also owned cars; with 21 per cent of those who did not having owned one within the last five years. The research concluded that very few motorcyclists ride from necessity, and that the pleasure element was strongest amongst more experienced motorcyclists (AA 1995).

It is this older rider, therefore, who is the main owner of the larger, more expensive motorcycle; a factor enhanced by prohibitively high insurance costs for younger riders. Seventy-eight per cent of motorcycles over 500cc are owned by people over 25 years old [86 per cent of whom are male]. Further, 40 per cent of these fall into classes AB or C1 (MINTEL Report 1993). This appears to indicate that the polarisation of motorcycles is accompanied by a slight socio-economic trend. Big bikes have a tendency to be owned by older, higher-class males.

These tentative findings are supported by EMAP research which found that 80 per cent of motorcycle usage was for on-road leisure. Within the profile groups, the largest (22 per cent) was characterised as the older biker (46 per cent over 40 years old) who rides tourer/sports tourers for leisure, 53 per cent of whom were AB/C1s, and the second largest group (21 per cent) were the over-30 year olds, riding expensive race replicas/sports tourers as 'accessories', of whom 47 per cent were AB/C1s (13 per cent) ('Bike Facts' 1995, EMAP National Publications Ltd).

Yet these data are not merely of statistical interest, for they are accompanied by a potentially significant socio-political relevance. Research carried out by the BMF indicates that this older and, perhaps, higher-class rider is also more likely to be a member of a riders' rights organisation; that is, an organisation dedicated not just to an interest in motorcycles but in motorcyclists and their political rights. Of the sample of 3,030 BMF members,[3] 52.1 per cent only rode their bikes for leisure, with another 38.5 per cent using them equally for work and leisure, with 61.8 per cent owning a vehicle over 750cc. This is supported by the figure of 73.7 per cent owning a car, with another 9.0 per cent having access to a company car. In terms of age, 86.1 per cent were over 30 years old (6 per cent over 60 years), and 74.9 per cent of the sample had held a licence for over ten years. Whilst class was not mentioned, 23.6 per cent recorded earnings of over £25,000 per annum, with a further 42.4 per cent earning £15,000–£25,000. Data from other sources

indicate that organisational membership may also be related to size of vehicle. The AA found that although only 19 per cent of those motorcyclists interviewed were members of a club or association, this rose to 37 per cent for those with machines over 500cc (AA 1995). This older, higher-class rider on a larger powered two-wheeler would appear also to be more interested in political issues. In terms of their support for BMF functions, 71.3 per cent of the BMF sample saw political lobbying as 'very important', with a further 19 per cent seeing it as 'important', and 66.9 per cent saw political lobbying in Europe as 'very important' with a further 19.9 per cent seeing it as 'important'. These two functions had over twice as much support as any other activity of the BMF.

Given the above, the response to events at 'The Waterman' and subsequently become more easily understandable. Modern motorcyclists ride for pleasure away from the stress of work where they earn the money to pay for expensive machinery; biking is an expensive leisure activity, not a necessity. Further, such riders are more likely to support political lobbying in favour of riders' rights. Clearly, one does not wish to over-emphasise this, as the statistics also infer that there are younger, lower-class riders. However, the implications are that the person referred to colloquially as a 'Rubbie' – a rich, urban biker – dominates the motorcycling community. In this context, the liberal emphasis being laid by the bikers on themselves as decent, law-abiding citizens whose individual civil rights were under attack, reflects both their own sense of standing within society, but also seems to indicate that these self-images are supported by the empirical data. Overall, therefore, the picture that emerges is one wherein both perceptual and material factors appear to play a part in motorcyclists' beliefs, and that the disjuncture experienced by the individual motorcyclist between social and motorcycling identities indicates that motorcycling constitutes only one part of a more complex social identity.

Representation, Myth and Meaning

The Waterman affair may thus be seen as operating on at least two levels. On the surface it appeared to be merely about riders' rights to congregate and was fought against the authorities as a civil rights issue. Yet it contained elements concerned with motorcyclists' beliefs that myths surrounding bikers, a legacy from a previous era, underlay the action. This contestation of myth was grounded in the perceived disjuncture between the legacy and current senses of self-identity. The resulting status incongruence felt by riders would appear to be as much a concern as any more overtly 'objective' factors surrounding the police action.

Such a conclusion fits within current debates about the NSMs. As Scott (1990) argues, the NSMs demonstrate a concern for civil rights issues and for a freedom from official interference that is in ample evidence amongst the

motorcyclists' views concerning the Waterman. Firstly, the goal was to overturn the decision to ban the biker gatherings; thus there was, on the surface, a clear 'instrumental' goal (Melucci 1989; Tarrow 1994). Yet the reaction to the police action may be seen as an attempt to focus on a perception that motorcyclists are more susceptible to having their individual rights denied than other social groups (Bauman 1992). It is at this juncture that the explanation moves from the political to the cultural, for the bases upon which such observations are made are founded upon a sense of myth. As I have argued elsewhere (Najam 1988;1990), knowledge of the past may form part of a legacy, a 'significant history' which codifies key episodes or ideas in ways which carry ramifications both for group identity and action; that is, that significant history comes to form a constitutive part of individual and group identity, beliefs and actions, irrespective of its historical accuracy. As part of a group's cultural repertoire, a legacy is drawn upon in the present, 'situated history', and thus informs actions which carry consequences for the future. The Waterman indicates clearly how this operates in that mistaken past understandings of bikers were held to underlie the police action. Yet, by using the idea of the myth as part of the explanation for the Waterman, the bikers have ensured that it becomes part of the present; thus giving the belief in the myth a current legitimacy. Further, in so doing, the Waterman itself becomes part of the legacy and acts into the future; whether as lesson to be learnt, process to avoid or whatever. The Waterman is now part of motorcyclists' calculations about the future of riding.

The Waterman thus accords with the concept of a contestation of codes (Melucci 1989), in that riders have challenged, and continue to challenge, what they see as outmoded representations of bikers through their repeated references to their rootedness in everyday life and social roles. They do this by 'playing down their differences before the media and the country' (Tarrow 1994:10) thus referring to their 'normalcy'. In this way, motorcyclists try and gain control over social definitions. The Waterman may therefore be viewed as an attempt to 'mobilise to gain control of their own action. [To] try to reclaim the right to define themselves' (Melucci 1989:61). One clear example of this are organisational attempts to replace disparaging terminology with more 'value-neutral' substitutes. Thus, one finds in riders' rights literature that words such as'bikes' and 'bikers' are dropped in favour of the less emotive 'powered two-wheelers' and 'motorcyclists' which avoid 'invidious' valuations (Lash 1990:19). It is in this sense that one can understand Melucci's claim that power 'hides behind . . . the construction of names and meanings. Making power visible is possible when other names, other meanings are offered to the society by the practice of collective action' (Melucci 1995:114). In other words, the attempt to control self-definition is critically related to a perceived need to challenge dominant cultural codes to avoid the stigmatisation associated with the myth. Motorcyclists are thus akin to other social groupings who 'struggle to create affirmative identities and communities, to

gain social legitimation for their feelings, desires and lifestyles' (Seidman 1992:52). They hope that, by changing definitions and establishing new cultural identities, they may change attitudes (Tarrow 1994).

This struggle to recapture definitions of motorcyclists would appear to be grounded within a disjuncture between the individual sense of identity held by riders and the nature of biking myths; a disjuncture which evidence suggests to be supported by the socio-economic profile of British motorcyclists. As such, we can agree with Klandermans that inconsistencies between elements of an actor's status lead to a gap between expectations and outcomes that may engender participation in collective behaviour due to a feeling of injustice (Klandermans 1995). What is also revealed by this is the complexity of the subject group on both collective and individual levels.

Collectively, the evidence would seem to suggest that cultural understandings of motorcyclists are more internally monolithic than is actually the case. Indeed, rather than being a young, working-class activity, the data indicate that, not only is the profile more complex than that, but the skew is towards older, more middle-class riders as large vehicles come to dominate the market. Although not the concern of this paper, this may mean that the inclusion of biker culture within sociological understandings of youth culture may thus need to be reworked (Bocock 1992), if such definitions refer to specific chronological age groups rather than to the more subjective phenomenon of not 'acting' one's age (Bradley 1996). The biggest and, perhaps, only truly significant ratio lies in the fact that the vast majority of motorcyclists are still male although, even here, sources suggest that an increasing number of women are beginning to take their test.[5]

On an individual level, two factors are important. Firstly, 'motorcyclist' is clearly not a given, nor exclusive category (such as black/white, male/female, etc.) but a chosen identity. This accords with NSM understandings of actors freely adopting to lead their lives in particular ways, of choosing which identities, communities and lifestyles to which to adhere (Hall and Jacques 1990; Bauman 1992). Individuals have thus constituted themselves as belonging to the motorcycling community, but may leave as interest wanes. Motorcycling thus fits within postmodernist concerns about the 'politics of choice'. Further, as the quotations attest, riders fit into, and see themselves as fitting into, a variety of social categories, which carry ramifications for self-identity. As Hogg and Abrams argue, 'People derive their identity (their sense of self, their self-concept) in great part from the social categories to which they belong. . . . Individuals belong to many different social categories and thus potentially have a repertoire of many different identities to draw upon' (Hogg and Abrams 1988:18–19). Not all of these, however, will be draw upon all of the time but only in 'specific political contexts' (Aronowitz 1992:ix). This plurality of memberships means, therefore, that different aspects of an individual's identity will be in evidence as they move between relevant social categories (Bradley 1996).

This does not necessarily mean, it is felt, that individuals therefore necessarily experience themselves and their identities as a 'mass of contradictory fragments' (Moore 1988:170). The evidence from the Waterman appears to suggest that, rather than seeing identities as mutually exclusive, accessed sequentially or in conflict, individuals may simultaneously use one identity to bolster or support another. Thus, for example, an individual's sense of grievance to the road blocks may be precisely *because* they are a motorcyclist *and* council-tax payer contributing to the upkeep of the highways; that is, the police undertook action directed towards 'bikers', but the motorcyclists responded unexpectedly by using other aspects of their identity in addition to this (M. F. Hall 1992). This indicates that we need to understand the complex and dynamic ways in which different social identities overlap, and the means used by individuals to negotiate a course through potential alignments in differing circumstances.

Yet whilst the Waterman events indicate the ways in which complex social individuals may come to confront what they define as simplistic and negative imagery, the concern over self-definition exhibited by the riders' reactions exists not merely within the realm of culture but carries political overtones by virtue of the way they perceive this negative stereotyping underlying a denial of civil rights. Thus, the Waterman motorcyclists could be seen as falling within Scott's categorisation of those social movements which, through a concern with themes of civil rights and citizenship, make political demands (Scott 1990). We can also, using his idea of a continuum from informal network to formal association, see how all levels are represented at the Waterman in that, whilst initially the events had grown as word spread through the informal networks of the biking community, when the police action was initiated, motorcyclists turned to the riders' rights organisations to formulate the response. It was largely due to the efforts of the BMF that Watermangate gained, and retained, national attention amongst motorcyclists. Thus, we can see how, rather than varying forms of association being discrete, different levels of association may come into play dependent upon the circumstances.

In this sense, it is hard to separate out the relative importance of social and political, as the way bikers fused civil rights and cultural imagery together in a complex way when offering explanations for what happened to them means that it is difficult to assess the relative importance of cultural versus political. Melucci has argued that it is reductionist to assess a social movement in terms of its impact on the political system and that only rarely do social movements enter the public sphere but exist largely in the non-instrumental networks of everyday life (Melucci 1989). Such is clearly the case with the biking community, although its distinctiveness on the road means it is never invisible to the broader society, and it was as an informal social network that 'The Waterman' nights began. Yet subsequent events transformed this into something more complex. As such, whilst not over-emphasising the political, neither should one be insensitive to how the political, in its broadest sense, weaves through apparently non-political episodes.

Overall, therefore, the Waterman incident the ways in which particular communities may mobilise on an issue for differing reasons. The Waterman may be seen both as a political issue concerning civil rights, and yet may also be viewed as containing a sub-text revolving around cultural definitions and negative stereotyping. Further, we have seen how riders' claims of contestation were seen being based in the objective social reality of their existence. As such, arguments surrounding whether objective structural conditions or subjective understandings, political or cultural factors are more central to understanding NSMs may thus be too simplistic, for it is the complex interplay of all levels which constitutes one of the factors which makes the Waterman events of concern. Yet the location of Watermangate on the past/present/future continuum is also of relevance, for the Waterman is not merely an isolated incident existing in time/space, but an event that looks both to the past and the future. An attempt has been made to indicate how this former operates, but the latter also is of interest.

Before August 1995, one had the spectacle of thousands of individuals massing together for a joint personal interest. Further, these were individuals living in a country allegedly committed to the rights and freedoms of the individual to make their own choices (Perryman 1994). For many of the bikers, perhaps especially the younger ones, that may have never been queried. Yet the events galvanised people into action. Years of marginalisation were crystallised into a clearer understanding of political forces. From discussing the Waterman, talk moved to the discrimination suffered on the roads, the criticisms of increasing stringent EC regulations or whatever. Thus the Waterman appears to have created a new sense of identity and community. Further, the role played by the BMF within events has served to confirm and legitimise the role of the motorcycling organisations. The 'traditional' biker, therefore, perhaps, if the image has any grounding in fact, the supreme individualist and hedonist, is potentially moulded by events such as these into a new entity. The police action may therefore have helped the politicise the Waterman bikers. Such a progression is not linear. After the ferment of events, the community has become more quiescent, but the potentiality for action exists, for Watermangate now holds a place within biker memory as a legacy that may be drawn upon in the future. At the time of writing, with a biker war in Denmark between rival outlaw gangs making the news, this progression becomes more difficult as violent images of bikers cross television screens.[6] Clearly, this disturbs the community which feels, as we have seen, that the public makes no distinction between outlaws and 'conventional' motorcyclists and which treats them all alike. The coming period may, therefore, see an intensification of episodes such as the Waterman. Yet, in a sense, any perceived attack on the biking community – whether from the police, public or politicians – is seen as 'beneficial' for riders' rights organisations because they politicise people:

> . . . the biggest recruiting aid that the BMF can ask for is when either a national or a European politician proposes something unpopular and appears to be proceeding with it . . . Because when you get this sort of adversity, that's when people start joining . . .

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to Mike Wyness and Graham McBeath from Nene College for their helpful comments, to Paul Fowler of the Motorcycle Media Bureau, Frank Finch of the Motor Cycle Industry Association and Paul Stafford of the Driving Standards Agency for their invaluable assistance, and to Sean Warwick, formerly of *Motor Cycle News*, and Trevor Magner of BMF, for allowing me to draw upon their expertise. A particular debt of gratitude must go to Jeff Stone of the BMF for his kindness, help and patience at having been embroiled in my research. Nene College, Northampton, provided funding.

Notes

1. Both of these are still very much open to question. The landlord has always argued that pressure was put on him by the police to terminate the events and that the 'licence was mentioned'. It is also unclear whether, and in what numbers, residents complained (Radio WM 17 and 18 August 1995).
2. Clearly, since Willis undertook his fieldwork, legislation (such as compulsory helmets, introduced in 1973) and advances both in the technology of the machinery and clothing have combined to make the pursuit less dangerous. 'The absolute number of fatalities and severe injuries among motorcycle riders and passengers declined by 52% and 56% respectively between 1981 and 1991. Over the same period, fatalities among car drivers and passengers declined by only 10%, while severities increased by 23%. Although casualty rates are higher as a proportion of the motorcycle parc, which reflects the vulnerability of motorcycle riders and passengers, casualty rates among motorcyclists in the UK are among the lowest in Europe' (MINTEL Report 1993, 'Motorcycles in the UK', p. 7).
3. The remaining categories are on/off road and traditional.
4. 10,791 individual members were canvassed, indicating a slightly low response rate of 28.1 per cent. The survey was carried out in December 1995.
5. E.g., the BMF Riders' Training Scheme which puts learners through their motorcycle test.
6. E.g., Channel Four news, 10 March 1997.

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