



Vigilant Citizens: Vigilantism and the State

Ray Abrahams

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Vigilantes operate in the shadows rather than the bright lights of mainstream political consensus. They have arisen at many times in different regions of the world as defenders, often by force, of their view of the good life against those they see to be its enemies. Recent reports of their activities in Britain, Ireland, mainland Europe, Africa, and America have appeared in the press. Yet they have been relatively little studied outside the United States, where they hold a special if at times romanticized position in the nation's history. It may be that their common involvement in the defence of power, property and other "bourgeois" interests has been less attractive to scholars than the more radical activities of bandits and revolutionaries. Nonetheless, it is surprising that their often independent stance towards the State has not received more attention from both critical and friendly analysts of that institution.

The book explores the "frontier" conditions in which vigilantism emerges as a solution, full of ambiguities, to problems of perceived disorder which official instruments of law and order do not handle to the vigilante's satisfaction. Contemporary and historical case material - from Africa, North and South America, the Philippines, Europe and Britain - is examined within an analytic and comparative framework, as are the often fuzzy boundaries between vigilantism and other forms of "informal sector" activity, such as state death squads, mafia, and banditry.

This book will be of value to undergraduates and graduates in anthropology, political sociology, criminology and history. It will also provide stimulating reading for all who are interested in issues of law and order.

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