

Make Way for the Biker: Media and Swedish Motorcycle Culture

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Prelude

Since the late 1960s, researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University, England, have studied youth cultures, trying to find a pure subculture which had not yet been corrupted and commercialised by the agents of the hegemonic culture. Since then there has been an unspoken truth that such subcultures, at least for a short period of time, really do exist. In the CCCS case, it was youth cultures such as Rockers, Mods, Skinheads and Punk. These subcultures, which were closely connected with class at one point, started out fresh and unspoiled in a local context, yet later became almost public property. One of the most important agents in this transformation, from local and pure to international and commercial, was—and to an even greater extent is—the media.

This essay will explore the interaction between specific subcultures and the media in Sweden from 1945 to 2000. My aim is to show the effect the sometimes close interaction between a subculture and the media has had on the particular subculture. The Swedish motorcycle culture contains a number of subcultures that all have the motorcycle as the central symbolic object. What generally differs between these subcultures, from an insider's perspective, is how the motorcycle functions as a cultural object which has the power to influence the behavior, style and rituals of the member of the particular subculture. For instance, owners of a Harley-Davidson chopper dress, behave and drive differently from the owner of a Japanese race machine or a German touring cycle. Most of the subcultures within the Swedish motorcycle culture share a system of norms and values, but differ in practices and style. Outsiders, on the other hand, have often regarded the different subcultures as one and the same.

I use *media* as a generic term for the press, radio and television who have had at these particular moments an open opinion concerning motorcyclists. In most cases, I consider representatives of the press. Another important actor is public opinion as expressed in the media. *The authorities* interact in the form of both national and local government, and law enforcement. Sources include interviews with people who have been and still are active in the motorcycle scene and newspaper reports both from national and local papers, journals and magazines. ^[1]The scene appeared in the late 1940s, at a point when a new subcultural phenomenon was about to emerge.

A Youth Culture is Born: The Leather Lad

After World War II, Swedish industry and infrastructure, in contrast to that of most other European countries, was intact. The land and people had been spared the horrors of war and the wheels of industry started to roll almost instantly. The depression of the 1930s was also gone. Work for everyone was the goal of the Social Democratic government and during the late 1940s and the early 1950s it was almost fulfilled. Like many generations before them, young Swedish working class boys generally finished school by the age of thirteen or fourteen to work as apprentices or delivery boys. The shortage of skilled workers and craftsmen led many to fast promotions and better pay. After a few years quite a nice sum of money burned in a

young man's pocket. In most of Europe, there was a shortage of consumer goods and one of the most desirable was a motorcycle. The car was still out of reach for most Swedes. A brand new heavy British motorcycle was rather expensive, approximately equal to what an industrial worker made in a year. Still it was a very popular object for young Swedish men and many of them fulfilled their dreams and became motorcyclists.

At the same time, the motorcycle sport restarted after the war and new sports such as speedway and scramble (later called motocross) became popular. The sports pages in the press were filled with stories about new young stars and their daredevil riding at the racetrack. Young motorcyclists made a colourful but controversial appearance among the big crowds at the motorcycle races by driving wildly to and from the races. Complaints often appeared in the letters-to-the-editor pages of both the daily press and the motor sport journals.

Soon, complaints about daredevils riding through crowded town centres became frequent in the daily press. Terms such as *motorcycle hooligans*, *motor terrorists* and *speed maniacs* were used to describe the young motorcyclists. Then, in 1949, it got even worse. A tragic and outrageous gang rape in the outskirts of Stockholm made both the press and the police aware of a meeting point for large gangs of young motorcyclists, aged sixteen to twenty, a café called Talludden located a few miles northwest of the city. The police, after an extensive investigation, established that the place was a centre for receiving stolen goods—mostly stolen motorcycle parts, oils and petrol. Young girls, mostly schoolgirls aged fourteen to seventeen, came to the café to be picked up by the young motorcyclists for a ride. Some newspapers described the place as a “hotbed of sin” and the young men dressed in leather as gangsters. In the fall of 1949, seventeen young men of the gangs at Talludden stood before the court for their alleged crimes.

Next, something strange happened. The media has often created “folk devils” and “moral panic” out of a story like this, as Stanley Cohen's classic study of this social phenomenon has described. What happened in the Swedish case was quite the opposite! After the trial there was complete silence. The letters-to-the-editor continued but there were no stories by journalists. Why?

These young motorcyclists were as difficult for the media to catch as they were for the police in the streets and country roads. The problem was that, by this time, quite a large number of young men were riding motorcycles and the “speedfreaks” were not in any way a majority. Many of them were respectable young men who had saved their hard earned money for this fully accepted means of transportation. They couldn't easily be accused of reckless driving, theft or immoral behaviour. It was also somewhat difficult to create an obvious connection with immorality because at that time it was linked to spaces such as dance halls and cafés. The third and perhaps most important reason was that no one had been able to come up with a catchy name for these young speed freaks. America had its hot-rodders, Britain would soon have its Teddy Boys, Rockers and Mods, and Germany and Austria their *Halb-starke*. **The Swedish media and public lacked a catchy name around which to build a stereotype. Only then could the media, the authorities and the public join forces to condemn, or for that matter support, the members of a particular subculture. Whether the young speed freaks themselves needed a brand will never be established.**

In the case of the emerging Swedish youth culture or motorcycle culture, the essential naming and branding step took place in September 1950, when a famous columnist in Sweden's largest newspaper came up with the name *skinnknutte*.^[2] It was an immediate success. From that moment everybody knew who it was roaring through streets at night, standing on the street corner loudly yelling at the others while firing up his engine, attracting all those young girls and lying there in the ditch at the side of the road bleeding from a broken skull after some disastrous high speed manoeuvre. It was the *skinnknutte*. All the pieces came together and the blurred picture became clear.

The name, which soon became a concept, was brilliant. In English, it means the "Leather Lad." At that time, the term didn't have a homosexual connotation. The young motorcyclists were dressed in leather, *skinn* in Swedish, the same as their idols on the racetrack. The word *knutte* was a slang expression for a man who, in his own eyes or in those of others, was a fan of and an expert about something, a little bit above others in a certain kind of knowledge or skill, for instance motorcycles. In this case this was implicit since he was obviously not an expert on leather. The name was not only extremely catchy; it was also in many ways positive. It did not openly ridicule the carrier as the name Teddy Boy did. Nor did it condemn the carrier as a menace or assailant. No, the *skinnknutte* was a young man dressed in leather, who rode a motorcycle loudly and wildly. The motorcycle was his prime interest—his whole life. There was nothing wrong except for his so-called "twisted" interest in the motorcycle and high speed driving. He could easily be the boy-next-door. The fantastic thing about this creation of the Leather Lad is that the gang rape and all the criminal activity exposed in the press only a year earlier were forgotten. Unfortunately, these kids drove like mad and died very young in road accidents, but were not immoral young criminals. On the contrary, the media's picture of them contained several positive traits such as being helpful, a good sport and technically-skilled. This characterization raised their status in the eyes of the public, and so did the well known fact that the Leather Lads neither drank alcohol nor danced—two of the perceived main sources of decadence.

How could this happen? This subculture emerged before the big delinquent youth debate, before young people became a general social problem in the Western world. Immorality was related to places the Leather Lads didn't frequent. Also, among the young, only an isolated few were criminals and rapists. A common explanation for the existence of criminal youth gangs was that mentally or socially underdeveloped boys (more often than girls) were forced to join by strong but socially deviant leaders. The Leather Lads were quite the opposite. So, it became impossible for media to attack the Leather Lads for any other reason than reckless driving and the brutal noise they made. There was no chance of creating any moral panic over them, even though there were gangs and individuals among them who really could be condemned as delinquent youth. In a way, they were a rather light kind of folk devils, if only because they were never popular.

The Leather Lad was a rather complex figure or stereotype not equal to the American scorcher. The latter was a more mythical figure who, as described by Sammy Kent Brooks in his doctoral dissertation "The Motorcycle in American Culture: From Conception to 1935," lacked any deeper characteristics other than being a suicidal night rider dressed in black. If the scorcher as an archetype was meant to be mythical, quite the opposite was true of the Leather Lad. In his case there seemed to be a need

to explain his style and behaviour. If the public could just understand who the young man inside really was there was no need for alarm. This important difference can be in the contrast between two motion pictures of the time, the American *The Wild One* and the Swedish *Farlig kurva* (*Dangerous Curve*).

The two motion pictures were released about the same time in 1954 and were based on purportedly true stories. The Swedish film was based on the events at Talludden in 1949 mentioned above and the American film on the now infamous incident in the small California town of Hollister: two historic moments of young men raising hell. In the opening of the Swedish movie, the viewer follows two motorcyclists from behind. The scene emphasizes speed in a social but non-oppositional way. In the next scene, a young Leather Lad tries to force himself on a young woman, but she pushes him away. The angry young man then leaves her by the side of the road. Soon the young man meets other Leather Lads and it becomes quite clear that he is a despised loner of whom the others are not afraid. The public has no cause for alarm: the crook is dangerous but also an isolated sociopath that society can handle. *The Wild One's* characters are the opposite: an anonymous bunch of young and perhaps dangerous men without any direction or goal. They might even come to your hometown, and God knows what could happen then. They are mythical characters, just like the scorcher, but in contrast to the scorcher, these young rebels on motorcycles do not act alone. The Swedish media, accordingly, viewed this as an American phenomenon not possible in Swedish society. The young motorcyclists—the Leather Lads—were neither angry nor desperate or socially lost. They were just common working class youngsters with, at worst, a twisted interest in motorcycles and speed.

By the mid 1950s, the Leather Lad subculture had reached its peak. There were thousands of Leather Lads all over the country in cities as well as in the countryside. On the saddle behind him sat a girl, a *speatta*. The origin of the name has not been established and it has at least two meanings. Literally, a *speatta* is a kind of flatfish, as the girl flattens herself against the driver's back when riding. On the other hand, she is an ornament like the fishtail exhaust pipes popular at the time. Although the name was deprecating, the stereotype was not completely negative. Of course, it was always suspicious when young girls didn't follow the strict norms of behaviour, but the *speatta* was a rather tough and independent character who could take care of herself. Her main interest was to ride on a motorcycle, and the young man was secondary. In the movie *Farlig kurva*, two *speattor* play important and positive roles at odds with the traditional female roles of the era. They are not picked up by a Leather Lad; they choose with whom they ride and speak their minds freely. In reality, the *speattor's* position depended on a Leather Lad's willingness to take her along.

The fear of being left on the corner when the gang rode off was always present. In the late 1950s, by the time the delinquent youth debate was struggling to reach the absolute top of the agenda, the Leather Lads were still a large youth culture. The term had also come to refer to a young hooligan with leather jacket, high fashion among the tough young boys. The reputation of the Leather Lad was starting to become slightly tarnished. At this time a new youth culture built up around a strong stereotype appeared on the scene—*Raggaren*. This name is very difficult to translate into English, but roughly it means a man who picks up women with sexual intentions. A Swedish-English dictionary gives us a better explanation: a "member of a gang of youths who ride about in cars." If the Leather Lads deep down inside were good guys, the *Raggare* were bad to the bone. They were a combination of Teddy Boys and

Rockers in style, and, instead of driving around the towns of Sweden on motorbikes, they drove in big American cars. With the emergence of the immoral, violent, heavy-drinking and anti-social *Raggare*, a moral panic hit Sweden in 1959—probably even to a greater extent than the British panic about the Rockers-Mods that Stanley Cohen described. From the moment the *Raggare* appeared, the Leather Lads disappeared. For almost eight years there were no articles whatsoever about Leather Lads or young motorcyclists in the larger Swedish newspapers—a fact that will have a great importance later on in the development of the Swedish motorcycle culture.

Hells Angels, Easy Riders and the Comeback of the Motorcycle

Around 1967, inspired by American chopper movies, a new subculture came into existence within the Swedish motorcycle culture.^[3] In the beginning, the members of this new subculture did their best to copy the American style. How would media react when the Swedish counterparts to the American “outlaws” started to show up in the streets? Would the media see them also as wild, extremely dangerous and sexually perverted dope addicts? No.

This was because the media was unable to compare the Swedish chopper riders, as they were soon to be called, with the American outlaws. It didn't matter that dope was common, fights took place and some of the gangs had a provocative style. The picture of a young man on a motorcycle still was equal to the picture of the Leather Lad of the 1950s. When journalists went to the archives for background material, they not only found the stuff about the loud and hard driving, but also the quite friendly Leather Lad. The outlaw lifestyle, the violence and sexual perversion, was already firmly associated with the *Raggare* in the Swedish media. It seems that Sweden did not have room for more than one. The media and the public already had their scapegoats and were not willing to let in another group modeled after some foreign “bad boys.” The Swedish chopper riders had no outlaw reputation to fulfill. The violence soon disappeared from the scene and cultural entrepreneurs among the chopper riders continued their work in peace without the media's attention. Other youth cultures occupied the headlines, and, by 1969, the non-violent main characters of *Easy Rider* had become the role models of the steadily growing chopper culture.

The chopper culture became focused on rebuilding—chopping—bikes. The old status order of the Leather Lad that ranked those with technical skill higher was still very much in force. The chopper became an even more powerful totem in the chopper culture. The machines became more and more extreme but also better built. Whereas the Leather Lad had showed off by driving fast and skillfully, the chopper rider showed off by his skillful mechanical and artistic modification of his bike. Their eagerness for rebuilding motorcycles in this extreme way gave the chopper riders problems with the authorities. The traffic safety debate was hot in the beginning of the 1970s, and chopper riders drove their bikes straight into it. The motor journalists of the leading newspapers were clear on this point: choppers were dangerous and should be banned. The legal system in Sweden didn't work that way, though. Throughout the years the authorities have been restrictive, issuing bans of all kinds concerning motor traffic. More often, however, the solution was to create a system of precise regulations for how to drive or how a vehicle should be equipped or built. As a result, Sweden, unlike most other European countries, didn't have any law against rebuilding one's vehicle. The chopper was really a golden opportunity for the newly established National Roads Safety Department to prove their existence and

brilliance. Soon alarming reports from the department showed that the motorcycle, whether it was rebuilt or not, was a very dangerous means of transport. One evening paper published on its front page the portraits of twenty young Swedes who had been killed in road accidents with motorcycles. By that point, the focus of the media's and the authorities' attention was fixed on the motorcycle and not the driver. It was no longer a means of transportation; it was a dangerous toy. The skill of the driver was of no importance because it was understood that he (still at that time) couldn't resist putting the powers of the machine to the test as the Leather Lad did. So, in this debate, everything remained focused on statistics and technical issues for several years.

During this decade, roughly 1972-1983, both the public and the media regarded the motorcycle as nothing but a dangerous toy. Despite this, or maybe because of this, the popularity of the motorcycle rose rapidly during the first years of the 1980s. The number of motorcycles in the country doubled in three years. The owners were still generally young men, but new groups, such as young women and middle-aged men, were also buying bikes. This revived popularity of the motorcycle in the early 1980s is difficult to explain. The next great rise in popularity, which started in the closing years of the decade, is easier to explain. That rise was not a local Swedish phenomenon—it was almost global.

Buy, Buy this American Pie

In the 1980s, when the commercial commodification of the Harley-Davidson brand reached Sweden, the newspapers began reporting about the experience of pleasure and freedom that came with riding a motorcycle. The danger was almost gone; the machine was no longer a toy, but a means of experience (Bai). Demographically, the motorcyclists were older. Young motorcyclists didn't sell their machines when they married and started to raise a family, and the typical customer was now middle aged, not a pimply young man. The Swedish motorcycle culture was shaken to its very foundations. The chain of reproduction, which had been unbroken since World War II, was under heavy attack. Mechanical skill meant less now when the machines just kept on running. Speed was no longer interesting. It was all about cruising. The biker style was so masculine and powerful there was no need to prove oneself worthy. For the chopper riders this seemed puzzling at first, but since they didn't feel threatened, they just shook their heads and smiled indulgently. Soon they found out that these new bikers were the perfect customers because they generally didn't do any repairs or rebuilding jobs themselves. Chopper riders established dozens of small repair shops all over the country. Bikers had money to pay for these services, also something new in the Swedish motorcycle culture.

What occurred was a clash between the old—and in many ways genuinely modern—subculture and the reality of the post-industrial society. All modern subcultures are, in one sense, consumer cultures since they are in one way or another built around commercial products, but they were never entirely about consumption. As the CCCS research so clearly showed, modern subcultures, at least from their origins, did have a connection to a local or class-based context. They emerged from people's daily life and were in many ways tied to the norms and values of the class or local society. Sometimes subcultures grew out of frustration and openly revolted against the powers dominating everyday life. This is not necessarily the case with consumer cultures of the post-industrial society. These consumer cultures could establish

themselves in a society where the members have no social or historical connection to the culture at all. The member and the post-industrial subculture do not need to have any social or historical roots in common, as exemplified by the American-Swedish biker connection.

In the wake of the establishment of the biker culture in Sweden, a space for another subculture opened. There were no “outlaw” clubs because the chopper riders, who were their closest cultural relatives, were not particularly interested in the American way of fraternal life on the margins of society. They were fully aware of the trouble it meant, since they had only to look over to Denmark to see all the great interest from the police. Nor did the chopper riders want the hierarchical system of the American subculture. In Sweden there had never been any sensational fights over territory. Any such fights were generally regarded as useless, because the clubs didn’t have any territorial claims to begin with. No club stood above any other club and their internal hierarchy was seldom strict.

In my interpretation of the outlaw biker culture in Sweden the media plays an important role. First, the media, by willingly adopting the claims of corporate American commercial cultural production, made way for the subculture by changing its attitude towards motorcycle riding, which translated to an invitation to new categories of potential customers. Second, the media showed an enormous interest in the few clubs that in the early 1990s tried to establish themselves as hard-core “outlaw” biker clubs. The latter pushed the marginalisation towards a *de facto* outlaw existence for these clubs and their members. Naturally, establishing Hells Angels and Bandidos clubs was a complex process, with many agents. But if the imagined purpose of these clubs was to establish themselves as notorious kings of bikers in the country, they really were aided by the media. If that was, or still is, the case, at least the Hells Angels used the media in a magnificent way. The club got free advertisements—front-page headlines and articles, on the one hand, shouting how ruthless they are, and, on the other hand, how well they take care of their own. These elements combined perfectly to scare away the unwanted and invite those searching for a strong masculine identity and a solid fraternity.

Thus, since 1993 the relative innocence of the Swedish motorcycle culture began disappearing, which some of its carriers still bemoan. Thousands of new bikers have emerged since then. The typical motorcyclist is now a forty-five-year-old (or older) middle-class family man who sold the sailing boat or caravan to try something new. These bikers have nothing to do with the “outlaw” biker clubs, but in a way they are benefiting from the aura of danger that surrounds those clubs.

The Media and Swedish Motorcycle Culture

Over such a long period of time a subculture goes through changes. The subculture adopts new influences both from outside and from inside. A late-modern consumer culture is as genuine in its time as the modern subculture was in its original context. No subculture is more genuine in its own time than any other subculture. One of the signs is how the media describes a subculture during the period in time when the subculture establishes itself. This official statement helps both the public and the members of the subculture construct an identity. The media functions as a mirror in this respect. In another dimension, the media’s function as a shaper of public opinion helps establish the image of the subculture and its members for both the public and

the authorities. For the Swedish Leather Lad of the 1950s and his followers over the years, this image and identity shaping was very important. Instead of being branded as a moral and criminal problem for society, as for instance *Raggare* and Rockers were, the Leather Lad became a rebel of another kind: noisy and careless, but not a menace to society. In the early 1970s this image was passed on to his follower, the chopper rider, and was still valid when the outlaw biker made his entrée in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The stereotypes created by the media are strong constructions almost impossible to change. If a subculture is built around a mainly positive stereotype, then there are only some rotten apples among the fresh in the basket that stand for all the bad. If, on the other hand, the subculture is built around a negative stereotype, all the fruit is perceived to be rotten. This is not by any means a new discovery, but I have tried show how resistant both the stereotype and the subculture built around it proved to be in the case of the Leather Lad. The Leather Lad as a stereotype for the Swedish motorcyclist endured for well over twenty-five years after he pulled his bike off the road. He, in one sense, saved the chopper riders from being mixed up with American-style “outlaw” bikers. When he then saw himself in the media mirror and read the reactions of society he understood that he was no outlaw but a Leather Lad. To break the stereotype it is necessary that the only actor who can change roles in the play does so. This is exactly what the media did. They broke the spell by giving the motorcycle a new and, according to society’s system of norms and values, appropriate function. This time the function was not as a means of transportation but as an experience—not as something useful in the old modern sense, but as something consumable in a late-modern sense. In other words, the media made way for the biker.

¹For a more thorough description of my material and how it was collected, see Lagergren.

²*Dagens Nyheter*, 29 September 1950. The columnist, who wrote under the pseudonym “Red Top,” was one of Sweden’s most popular at the time.

³About the chopper, also see Wolf 43-49.

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