

An outlaw motorcycle club

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Bikers have always been seen as “ outcast” - they don’t always live the lives of the majority, and usually refuse the typical values the society imposes on us by engaging in outrageous behavior. The Hells Angels are members of the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club who typically ride Harley Davidson motorcycles. Despite common inclination towards spelling their name as “ Hell’s Angels”, the official site claims the missing apostrophe represents many types of “ hell”. However, grammatically correct, there still should be an apostrophe after Hells, even if using it in a plural sense.

There are different points of view on the Hells Angels, as some see them as being an organized crime syndicate while others admire their passion for motorcycles and “ free” lifestyle on the road. Despite evidence of their criminal activities, the club refuses to take responsibility for the acts of its members, as Hells Angels encourage individuality. As Ralph “ Sonny” Barger, the most respectable Hells Angel, stated in 2001, they are all complete individuals and the only thing they have in common is their love for motorcycles.

However, it is not only the fact that the members are usually covered in tattoos and wear leather jackets that encourages the public opinion of the Hells Angels being dangerous. According to BBC News, in December 2003, 57 members of Hells Angels were arrested for running guns and murder conspiracies across the United States (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/this_world/3311057.stm). It is also known that smuggling of drugs is their main source of income, with some saying “ bikers” is only a camouflage for “ criminals”.

Hells Angels managed to found business interests in many illegal activities and, according to Federal Government, they make millions of dollars off of it. What started off as a simple motorcycle club has today transformed into business - the Hells Angels created their slogan and logo, became incorporated and gained publicity. Despite their negative reputation the club takes effort to perform good acts for the public, such as their ride for "Toys for Tots" charity. However, continuing arrests of the members of Hells Angels are on public display more often than their participation in charities.

The Hells Angels Motorcycle Club originated in Fontana, California in 1948. Several motorcycle clubs started to appear in the post-war era thus making the modern-day's Hells Angels origins somewhat of a mystery. At that time motorcycles were cheap and veterans who returned from the World War II were fond of joining the club of drinking bikers. It was probably due to the fact that they struggled with finding their place in the society after being absent for a long time.

The society they knew no longer existed, and as veterans of the war, they most probably had problems finding their way back into the normal world. As they all had something in common, they started identifying with one another, which provided them with a sense of security and safety. They desperately needed to "belong", and being a part of motorcycle enthusiast club gave them exactly that. Being critical to everything that was happening in the world around them, they decided to live by their own terms, thus protesting against the mainstream and popular trends. They believed in what America used to be, opposing the fast growing capitalism.

One could argue they didn't have the right qualities to become someone and therefore drinking, riding a motorcycle and being violent were the ways to boost their egos. Today, the Hells Angels are seen to be a part of American culture - patriotic "cowboys of the Wild West" on Harley Davidsons. The club encourages individualism, as staying true to American tradition is its key element. The Hells Angels Motorcycle Club is of a family concept with semi-autonomous chapters, called the charters, across the world. They are mainly across the United States and Europe, but are also present in Russia, Turkey and South Africa.

According to the Irish "Folklore" journal, Hells Angels is an "archetypal outlaw club with an international network" (Linda M. Ballard, "These Youngsters Change All These Traditions": A Perspective on "Outlaw" Motorcycle Clubs in Ireland, Folklore, Vol. 108, 1997, page 107). According to Statista.com, most chapters are located in the United States (77 charters), with Germany being second (49 chapters), and Canada third with 35 chapters, followed by Great Britain, the Netherlands, Australia and others (<http://www.statista.com/statistics/232377/hells-angels-and-bandidos-motorcycle-clubs-worldwide/>).

As writes Paul Elias, reporter for Boston.com, the U. S. Department of Justice says there are as many as 2500 members in 250 chapters in 26 countries across the globe. Members of the club claim to have a strong sense of "brotherhood". They all know each other by their nicknames that are often colorful. There is a massive competition between various motorcycle gangs for example in Scandinavia, where gangs fight for criminal monopoly over a particular area.

The fights are always extremely violent including guns and knives. Sometimes, entire families of certain members get killed - either as a threat or as a vengeance. However, the Hells Angels complain about the mass media constantly trying to only present a bad side of the club. If there are conflicts between the Hells Angels and other motorcycle gangs, the former are usually held responsible. Today, there is another motorcycle club that crosses the path of the Hells Angels - the Bandidos. Fights between the two have been present especially in Scandinavian countries.

Becoming a Hells Angel is difficult and as members say, if you have to ask how to do it, then you probably aren't ready to be a member. They are defensive of their customs and try to maintain a great amount of secrecy regarding the inner workings in the club. It is impossible to find out about becoming the member by using the internet or by simply filling out the form. As Hells Angels are an exclusive organization, future members should meet certain requirements such as being a white male, having a driver's license, never having worked at the police or never being a child molester.

However, it takes a lot more than that to get accepted by other Hells Angels, as they believe a man should never be trusted unless he has done some time in prison. Despite presenting themselves as a club with strong sense of "brotherhood", the Hells Angels still remain greatly suspicious of one another. Their rule of "three men can keep a secret when the two of them are dead" speaks for itself. Their community has a strong hierarchy and it might take years to become a "full patch" - a real member.

A "full patch" gains access to special events organized by the club, and gets to wear a leather jacket with "Hells Angels" on the back. However,

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downward mobility is also possible if a member betrays his community or harms it in any other way. In serious cases a member can get expelled and/or even murdered. In my opinion, the Hells Angels would agree with Emile Durkheim to some extent, as he also did not believe in traditional social and religious ties. His view of sociology as purely holistic would apply to the view of the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club that argues they should be studied as a society at large, instead of being concerned with individual actions.

They would also identify with “ The Motorcycle Jackets” as “ live fast, die young” is a common motto for many rebels. Like Charles Wright Mills, most of the Hells Angels are looking at the world from the standpoint of radical social change as they are angered by the conditions they see around them. They believe living on one’s own terms is what the United States of America were built on, and are concerned with staying true to the tradition. Staying true to tradition and opposing capitalism and multiculturalism could probably, in some ways, link the Hells Angels with Karl Marx.

However hard the club tries to convince the public of its good intentions, and whatever the reasons may be for forming such a club, evidence remains clear that the Hells Angels nowadays portray a highly dangerous criminal organization. Despite some members’ effort to ensure “ association of criminals” doesn’t get confused with “ criminal association”, the Hells Angels are not just a peaceful association of motorbike lovers. Engagement in drug dealing, human trafficking, gun running and murders is evident and cannot be concealed by any good acts for the community, which the club tries to perform from time to time.