



Honour and Shame in the Mediterranean

L'immagine che gli antropologi anglosassoni hanno trasmesso con i loro studi ha fotografato la realtà oppure no?

Orientalism in the Mediterranean

In the 1960s a new field of studies was opened to Anglo-Saxon anthropologists: the Mediterranean area. The "discovery" of the region was nothing new: indeed, it had been already made popular by Gothic novelists and Romantic poets. In addition, the processes of nation-building in the nineteenth century had been accompanied by a series of notions shared by modernizers, revolutionaries and supporting British Liberals alike, about «lords, valets, and an extremely crude populace», spoiled antiquity and inebriating nature, and a sun under which «never did a noble thought germinate» (Moe 1994:7, 23, in J. Schneider 1998:4). These literary judgements were followed by the more critically important opinions of politicians comparing the Italian South, for example, with «the negation of God erected into a system of government», according to Gladstone's indictment against the Bourbon monarchy in Naples (Moe 1994:35, in J. Schneider 1998:5).

After the Nazi-Fascist defeat, the Cold War spurred American social scholars to investigate countries where workers' parties and peasant unrest revealed friction zones between the capitalist West and semi-feudal areas, which might be conquered by Communist sirens. Hence, in the early 1950s-1960s, «there was a particularly important cross-fertilization of ideas between Southern Europe and Latin America» (Goddard, Llobera and Shore 1996:3, n. 3). Meanwhile, a number of British anthropologists, influenced «by the Oxford brand of social anthropology» (Goddard, Llobera and Shore 1996:4), and orphaned by the de-colonization movements in Africa, set about creating the Mediterranean area as a new subject of study. What they accomplished, according to Boissevain (1975, 1996), was tribalising Europe. Most of them also ignored "indigenous" scholars, such as Gramsci (1955, 1973) and De Martino (1948, 1958, 1959, 1961, 1975) as late as the 1990s, although they shared their essentialised, orientalist stance (see Rosengarten, Urbinati, Di Nola and Saunders in J. Schneider 1998).

The Mediterranean Academic "Turf"

Pioneer books such as Pitt-River's (1954) Andalusian case-study, Campbell's (1964) Greek ethnography, and Peristiany's (1965) edited volume, focused



anthropology on the Mediterranean, but there was « little attempt to discuss the North African or Middle Eastern cases», according to Goddard, Llobera and Shore (1996:5). Moreover, the Mediterranean was shaped as a culture area, a unit characterized by the key features of “honour” and “shame”, which Gilmore (1987:5) regards «as a total social fact ¼ fundamental and pervasive», “amoral familism” (Banfield 1958; Silverman 1968), “social atomism” (Gilmore 1975) and “patronage” (e.g. Pitt-Rivers 1954; Wolf 1966; Gilmore 1978). This culture area comprises as historically diverse regions as the southern parts of Portugal, Spain, Italy, Malta, Cyprus, Greece, and parts of the Balkans. Herzfeld (1980:339) correctly argues that «the terms “honour” and “shame” have been used to represent an enormous variety of local, social, sexual, economic and other standards». He also suggests that the Mediterranean category itself has to be analysed.

Galt (1985), on the other hand, sees the Mediterranean zones as less homogeneous and more subject to change than the zones north of the Alps. Furthermore, he believes that an important factor in the invention of the Mediterranean has been the tendency of a handful of scholars to create for themselves an identity within the profession. Pina-Cabral (1989) maliciously adds that the notion of the Mediterranean Basin as a culture area is useful to distance Anglo-American scholars from their subject of study. As a matter of fact, the so called traits of the area «are far from materializing everywhere», as Llobera (1986:30) puts it. In addition, one of the typical traits of the Mediterraneanists, not of the Mediterranean, was the emphasis on small-scale, rural, isolated societies. As Pina-Cabral puts it (1989:405), in «the 1950s, the ruralist emphasis of social anthropology meant that the central characteristics of European Christian civilization and Islam – their urban traditions in commerce and learning – were neglected». Indeed it is very curious that in the very geographical and historical area where the polis and its citizens, as well as politics, were invented, scholars came to study villagers who were probably peripheral even at the time of Archimedes. Fortunately, while some anthropologists (see, for example, Gilmore, 1987 and Giovannini, 1981, 1987) still wrote within the honour and shame paradigm as far as the 1980s, not all the scholars have been following their wake.

Honour and Shame?

Honour, Pitt-Rivers (1954) states, «is the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society» (p. 21); it is «irrevocably committed by attitudes expressed in the presence of witnesses, the representatives of public opinion» (p. 27). The opposite of honour is shame: the former term is usually referred to men, while the latter is more appropriate for women. «Clearly manliness and shame are complementary qualities in relation to honour. The



manliness of the men in any family protects the sexual honour of its women from external insult or outrage» (Campbell 1966:146). Peristiany (1966) argues that «honour and shame are two poles of an evaluation» (p. 9), and «are the constant preoccupation of individuals in small scale, exclusive societies, where face to face personal, as opposed to anonymous, relations are of paramount importance and where the social personality of the actor is as significant as his office» (p. 11). This formulation of the code of honour and shame, as Dubisch (1995:197) puts it, «sets up a series of cultural dichotomies», and «postulates a clear and gendered distinction between the public and the private realm». Hence, she adds, by considering women weaker and more prone to sin sexually, this code is reinforced by the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches and by the Islam.

In Tomasi di Lampedusa's influential novel, *The Leopard* (1963), set in Sicily in the second half of the nineteenth century, the reader has to go through the book as far as page 181 in order to find the word "honour", sarcastically referred to the "man of honour" Vincenzino, a Mafioso, spoken about as the father of a very minor character, made pregnant in a family feud, and whose shame is mended by a repairing marriage with the perpetrator. On the other hand, Prince Fabrizio, the Leopard, largely shared the opinion quoted from an early twentieth-century parliamentary inquiry on the Italian Mezzogiorno, according to which: «At bottom, the landowners are convinced that the peasants are not men like them» (Dal Lago 2000:7).

To cope with similar concepts of honour in Spain, Pitt-Rivers (1954:72) is forced to differentiate between honour as precedence and honour as virtue, and muses upon the social struggle behind the different meanings of the term. He muddles things up, however, when he compares what he calls «the principle of *Honi soit qui mal y pense*» (1954:37), and «the resemblance between the mores of the street-corner society and those of the aristocracy, both contemptuous of legality» (1954:31) as if the sacred status of the nobles were comparable with the being outside the law of the lumpenproletariat, according to a bourgeois concept of legality. When Marx and Engels wrote, in *The German Ideology* (1845), about the concept of honour substituted by the concept of freedom, they did not think of honour as a something belonging to the masses. Indeed, few anthropologists focused their fieldwork on the aristocracy or the street-corner society, if we exclude Blok on the Mafia (1975), Belmonte on Naples' underclass (1980), and, of course, Whyte's seminal work on a Boston Italian gang (1943), or even on the working class (with the exception of Giovannini, 1985; Goddard, 1987, 1988; Kertzer 1980). They focused instead on peasants (e.g. Pitt-Rivers 1954, 1963; Davis 1973, 1975; Du Boulay 1983; Brøgger 1971; Chapman 1971; Gilmore 1980; Silverman 1981), and shepherds (e.g. Campbell 1964; Moss 1979), only to quote a few works on the northern Mediterranean shore.



The difficulty scholars met in analysing the concept of honour arises from the pretence to apply it indiscriminately to different cultures, to the prejudice of a better nuanced definition. The semantic disparity of the term is pointed out by Herzfeld (1980:340), when he refers that the Southern Italian term *onore* operates differently from Victorian English "honour", and differentiates between *onore* and *rispetto*. Moreover, as Gilmore (1982) admits, some works (e.g. Davis 1977; Herzfeld 1980; Blok 1976, 1981 ; Pitt-Rivers 1977) refined the notion of honour beyond the undifferentiated moral "reputation" found in earlier monographies. He points out that for Campbell in Greece honour is directly tied to wealth (1964:21), and that, « since the various native words for honour also include a latent economic element, this suggests that class and power are also relevant depending upon context». Indeed, where social stratification is sharp and manual work is despised, «honour in the sense of personal moral reputation is regarded as something of a historic curiosity» (Gilmore 1982:192; see also White 1980).

Honour in Sicily

While some historians have helped to define the subject, (Braudel 1972, but also Fiume 1989; Hills 1994; or Petruszewicz 1996, only to quote a few that focused on Southern Italy), a group of them are beginning to construct a fruitful comparison between the South of Italy and the American South (Dal Lago', 2000).

In the same decades *Italian and Anglo-Saxon feminist* scholars analyzed mostly the concept of honour - since shame is actually a residual quality already pointed out by Goddard (1996:60) -, and discovered a very different Mediterranean. They demonstrated astutely that honour and shame neither are "*primordial values*" (Gilmore 1987:16), nor refer to "our" (Anglo-Saxon) roots, as Fernandez (1983) suggests. Honour (and shame), actually never constituted a strict, unchanging code in Sicily as well as other Mediterranean countries. In fact, whilst honour (and shame) must be public, there are a lot of ways to refund honour wounds; actually, honour can be lost and appropriately found again, negotiated and re-negotiated. According to Fazio (1999) groups and individuals within the community mobilized and manipulated the public opinion in order to achieve the reconstruction of lost reputations. Fiume (1989, 2000), on the other hand, has shown that the role of the ruling class and the State in the custody and, in some cases, in the reconstruction of honour, was just as important.

Indeed, the concept of honour had been the subject of governance (see Shore and Wright 1995 for this concept) through a number of laws and regulations since the Swabian monarchy in the Middle Ages, which ruled the obligation for a husband to kill an unfaithful wife. In spite of this, Fazio (1999)



comments, in Sicily as well as elsewhere, during the Ancien Régime illegitimacy taxes were very high; when a marriage was celebrated, however, the wedding day was often preceded by years of *cohabitation and* temporary marriages. The fidanzamento system and the elopement (Goddard 1987), are the fading remains of these time honoured customs. Prostitution was rampant, and taxed. The strengthening of the State, however, subjected to governance private behaviour, and especially feminine sexuality; yet, in the nineteenth century, Bourbon officials still complained about Sicilian peasants' sexual promiscuity.

According to Cutrufelli, Sicilian society did not know the concept of honour: the myth of women segregated at home was born together with that concept after the Piedmontese conquest and «the take off of the Meridione underdevelopment» (1975:19). Before the unification of Italy female work was common all over the Bourbon kingdom and especially in Sicily: women and child girls worked for a wage not only in the fields and in factories, but also in the railway building and the sulphur-mines. During the second half of the nineteenth century women were more and more expelled from factories; later mass emigration "femininised" the population (Cutrufelli 1975:31-63). Therefore, this scholar concludes, « the concept of honour is not a wreck of historical backwardness, but meets precise capitalist requirements of ideological control» (1975:66, my translation). While she may have oversimplified (Goddard 1987:171), excerpts from her own inquiry on husband-wife relationships in working class families, seem to confirm Rogers'(1975) analysis of "the myth of male dominance", which comes true by means of the processes of modernization. With the demise of the domestic mode of production, the shift of the locus of social identity outside the family and the community, and men's superior formal and legal rights, women's informal power is eroded: working class husbands appear to wield far more actual control than peasant men do (Rogers 1975:751). Furthermore, a factory worker's wife must adapt her housework to the factory timetable and has less time for a waged work in contrast with it (Cutrufelli 1975:97). Hence, women's preference for flexible, underpaid jobs, favoured by trade union leaders' prejudices, but which are compensated by their female kin network. Goddard's (1987:174) suggestions about women's opposition to wage employment outside the home in terms of "whore" charges, do not elaborate this emic viewpoint convincingly.

Public female performances and women's power.

The «verbocentric and androcentric anthropology» (Dubisch 1995:207) of honour and shame has often assumed a male public performer, despite the deliberately dramatic nature of Mediterranean social interaction in a public context (Dubisch 1995:203). *Dubisch remarks* (1995:204) that «discussion of honor and shame (which frequently are more about honour than about shame)



place women in an essentially passive role», when actually «a dramatic structure underlies much of everyday social interaction. Through gestures, tone of voice, phrasing, and appeal to bystanders as an “audience”, an individual “frames” certain statements and acts» (1995:205). Southern Italians, women and men alike, are famous for two typical customs: one is the “piazza”, that is arguing in an open space, oft-times at the balconies over a street, in a loud voice, with meaningful gestures, scoffs and witticism. The other is the “struscio”(shuffling), to date every evening, once on Fridays and Saturdays, when (once segregated) groups of young people walk back and forth along the main street or the corners of a square, in a galaxy of telling glances, giggles, and bold remarks.

Dubisch argues that all roles are “public”: «The key word here is public, for ideas about femaleness are no less publicly expressed and negotiated than those about maleness» (1995:207). Discussing the possibility of a “poetics of womanhood” (1996:206) in Greece, this author believes that religious activities provide important space for women in which they can express their emotions, socialize with others, find legitimate time away from family and home. Spending time in these activities, women display images of the suffering mother, which is seen as a strategy of empowerment, a means of protest and even resistance (1995:225). Evil-eye and witchcraft beliefs, however, may also been used to the same ends (e.g. De Martino 1961; Galt 1991; Argyrou 1993).

This «idiom of suffering» (Dubisch 1995:214), however, is more and more relegated to the older generations (Collier 1986). Friedl (1967:97) demonstrated that in most peasant societies, though men are deferred in the extra-household sphere, the family is the most significant social unit; hence, the private rather than the public sector is the place where power is most important. This is especially true where the bride brings land and/or a house as dowry, as it happens in many parts of Italy - in Sicily daughters are preferred to sons to inherit the land (Fazio 1999). Women’s power is also strengthened by a female oriented residence pattern and sororal neighbourhoods (e. g. Fiume 1999; Pina-Cabral 1986; Davis 1973) and by the alliance mother-daughter. Gilmore (1990:958) argues that in Andalusia «the woman will prevail in domestic matters because she has the unfailing support of her mother». This «matri-core», as Davis calls it (1973:22), tends to be reproduced even when members of the family move to town (Friedl 1967), since the strong ties among female kin are supported by phone calls and visits. These bonds are transformed by modernization, yet are still part of Southern women’s strategies both to defy men’s authority and to increase their «unassigned power» and «their influence over husbands, sons, and brothers» (Lamphere 1974:111).

Conclusion

During the three decades that follow the Second World War, Anglo-Saxon anthropologists have elaborated an honour and shame model as a tool to explain



Mediterranean societies conceived as a homogenous culture area. Although historians consider the Mediterranean as the cradle of urban civilization, scholars focused mostly on small scale, marginal rural communities on its northern shore, according to an extra European fieldwork tradition. Later studies tried to cope with contradictions within the concepts of honour as precedence and honour as virtue, and with a different picture portrayed by Mediterranean kinship and land tenure studies. Feminist and gender studies have proved the honour and shame paradigm unsatisfactory in explaining the complexities of Mediterranean societies and the differences caused by the processes of modernization. In fact, a more critically nuanced stance demonstrated the relative distribution of power within the rural family and community. Traditionally, men appear to control the structure of power and authority outside the house, while women centre their strategies to influence male hierarchy; actually this influence can be very strong especially when women control vital economic resources. More finely tuned studies are needed to explore transformations in the different societies on both shores of the Mediterranean, especially after the changes in the emigration-immigration patterns of the region.

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