Honour, History, and the History of Mediterranean Anthropology

(Article begins on next page)

02 May 2024

Honour, history, and the history of Mediterranean anthropology

Paola Sacchi & Pier Paolo Viazzo
(University of Torino)

Honour

The cultural syndrome of honour and shame, as conceptually developed by anthropologists working in the Mediterranean in the third quarter of the twentieth century, came under attack in the early 1980s, when it was dismissed by Michael Herzfeld (1980: 349) as a mere 'summation of "translated" terms'. Herzfeld's critique ignited a prolonged and at times fierce debate. Some anthropologists defended the legitimacy of studying honour and, indeed, its centrality as a unifying Mediterranean value (Blok 1981, Gilmore 1987), while others, like Unni Wikan (1984) or Lila Abu-Lughod (1986), sought novel ways to address honour – and shame – largely inspired by feminist perspectives. Most participants in the debate, however, appeared to consider honour more and more as 'a red herring', to quote the title of a paper published in those years (Lever 1986). By the end of the 1980s the notion of honour was widely regarded to be not just unsuitable but positively dangerous for comparative work. João de Pina-Cabral's 1989 article in *Current Anthropology* is commonly referred to as being the last nail in the coffin of both honour and the Mediterraneanist anthropology that had been built around it.

This is a well-known story, and there is no need to linger over it. There is, on the other hand, another story – a partly related and partly parallel one – which is not so well known, and yet deserves in our opinion not to be neglected. A useful starting point to introduce this story is a passage from Dionigi Albera and Mohammed Tozy's introduction to their edited book of 2005, *La Méditerranée des anthropologues*. As part of their plea for a more polyphonic Mediterranean anthropology, they take as an example of the asymmetrical relations between Anglophone anthropology and what might be called the 'vernacular' anthropological traditions of Mediterranean countries

> the contrast between the strong impact exerted by the seven-page article in *Current Anthropology* by Pina-Cabral (perceived as the spokesman of the autochthonous view and the gravedigger of the Anglophone anthropology of the Mediterranean centred on the study of honour) and the almost non-existent impact of a book published in the same year in Italy which offered a very wide and articulated discussion of the theme of honour and contained contributions by John Davis and Jane and Peter Schneider as well as by researchers from different disciplines (anthropologists, historians, specialists of oral literature, sociologists) and different nationalities: Italians, French, Tunisians, Palestinians… (Albera and Tozy 2005: 12).

The book evoked by Albera and Tozy is *Onore e storia nelle società mediterranee*, edited by Giovanna Fiume, a modern historian, and printed by a rather unglamorous publishing house based in Palermo. One reason why Albera and Tozy select it as an example is certainly to show how valuable work could easily be ignored if published in a non-hegemonic, albeit Mediterranean, language. Another reason is, possibly, that in the same year as Pina-Cabral was effectively arguing in favour of a separation, so to speak, of southern Europe from North Africa[1], the scholars contributing to Fiume's book came from both shores of the Mediterranean. We would like, instead, to underline that this book was edited by a historian and the bulk of the volume was made up of chapters by historians who looked confident that the notions of honour and shame they were borrowing from anthropology would prove useful to investigate in a fresh way family and gender

---

[1] He warns against the risk of exoticizing southern European peoples, exaggerating their differences from northern Europeans while tying them up to the Islamic societies of the southern shore.

relations in the past. We would also like to add that this was not an isolated case. In Italy, two feminist historians and exponents of the micro-historical movement like Sandra Cavallo and Simona Cerutti (1980) had already resorted to anthropology in an influential article on female honour and the social control of reproduction in early modern Piedmont. Rather paradoxically, however, it is in the years around 1990 that historians appear to make extensive recourse to the anthropological notion of honour, as testified by David Cohen's and Eva Cantarella's contributions to the book on the Italian family edited by Kertzer and Saller in 1991 or, again, by several studies published by Italian women historians (Ferrante, Palazzi and Pomata 1988, Guidi 1991).[2]

Indeed, it should be noticed that the historians who in that period retrieved and relaunched the notion of honour were mostly women; and also that some of them were drawing on the work of feminist anthropologists (often specialists of the Middle East like, most notably, Wikan), who had pursued in the 1980s a line of critical reflection running largely *parallel* to the 'critical mainstream' associated with the names of Herzfeld or Pina-Cabral. These feminist anthropologists had found fault with the generalisations on honour and shame offered by previous anthropologists for being just mirrors of an abstract ideology removed from the concrete situations of everyday life, but at the same time they had emphasized the need to explore – precisely at the level of everyday life – how this ideological construct revolving around notions of honour and shame was nevertheless shared and affected, in different ways and to a variable extent, both the behaviour and the relations of women and men.

History

Throughout the 1990s the decline of honour and shame as allegedly distinctive Mediterranean values progressed further among anthropologists (Goddard 1994), and by the end of the millennium next to nothing seemed to remain of what had once been the anthropological gate-keeping concepts of the area. However, the case has been reopened – rather surprisingly and from the outside, as it were – by the publication in 2000 of the monumental volume by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, which devotes its final chapter to a careful and well-informed analysis of the anthropological literature on honour and shame and significantly ends with a section entitled 'The case for Mediterraneanism'. The authors, a medievalist and an ancient historian respectively, feel that too much anthropological effort 'has been expended, not entirely fruitfully, on the questions of what honour *is*' (Horden and Purcell 2000: 502). Since they believe, on philosophical grounds, that 'conviction can only be carried by the details', they prefer to take instances of the term's varying application and changing idioms around the Mediterranean shore in order to raise the question of whether notions of honour and shame can be found right across the region.[3] Impressed by the cumulative testimony provided by ethnographic reports and by the wide geographical distribution of these notions, they feel confident to assert that 'no other topic of contemporary anthropological concern has produced so much evidence that so strongly suggests a high degree of Mediterranean unity' (*ibid.*: 503).

This is not the right place to scrutinize Horden and Purcell's reassessment of honour and shame, let alone the more general argument advanced in their book, namely that the Mediterranean should historically be seen as a complex system of interacting microecologies.[4] We would rather

---

[2] Note that an English version of Cavallo and Cerutti's article also appeared in 1990.

[3] 'Counterexamples to any generalization are […] inevitable; but they are not inevitably damaging. Local variation should be the constituent, not the enemy, of the comparative analysis. […] For all this diversity, recurrent features emerge […] the differences which resemble are continually striking' (Horden and Purcell 2000: 507).

[4] Horden and Purcell (2000: 517) are inclined to believe that 'ideas of honour have evolved in the Mediterranean under a wide variety of stimuli, radiating outward both geographically and socially from numerous different centres inside and outside the Mediterranean', which makes any search for a single origin ultimately futile and definitely less fruitful than an attempt to account for the remarkable durability of honour in the Mediterranean. Since a strikingly recurrent feature of honour and shame in both space and time is represented by broadly ecological explanations related to husbanding

draw attention to Horden and Purcell's intimation – in the first page of their chapter on honour and shame – that 'there is nothing new about Mediterranean anthropology. In a sense, the ethnography of this minutely divided cultural domain dates from Herodotus' (*ibid*.: 485). This is not simply a *boutade*. In the introduction to their book Horden and Purcell warn the reader that they will often move 'between prehistory, history and ethnography', and in particular that the last two chapters will be devoted, they write, 'to exploring just how far ethnography helps us understand the durability and unity of Mediterranean microecologies' (*ibid*.: 3). Indeed, as noted by an appreciative anthropological reviewer, 'throughout their book Horden and Purcell find it necessary to turn to the anthropological record in order to illuminate distant periods. They use ethnographic material not only for confirmation, supplementation, and substitution of historical evidence but also for new questions, for theoretical ideas, concepts, and new methods, and, most importantly, for validation of Mediterranean continuity' (Driessen 2001: 530).

We are aware that, while both the erudition and the cleverness of Horden and Purcell have been universally recognized, not all reactions have been favourable. Objections have come not only from the first and foremost anthropological critic of honour and shame as ubiquitous and distinctive Mediterranean values (Herzfeld 2005)[5], but also from historians who have advanced doubts both about the book's main theses (Harris 2005; Abulafia 2005) and about the need to devote its final chapter to Mediterranean honour (Algazi 2005: 240-241). It cannot be ignored, on the other hand, that the heuristic value[6] of the concepts of honour and shame as fashioned by anthropologists had independently been praised in the early years of the past decade by another reputed historian (Saurer 2002) and that a recent survey of the literature by Carolyn Osiek (2008) demonstrates, in fact, that basically 'classic', if sophisticated, anthropological notions of honour and shame are thriving among ancient historians of the Mediterranean.[7]

This raises, in our opinion, questions of considerable significance for both anthropology and history, their interdisciplinary relations, and their epistemological status. We must, first of all, wonder why honour lost its grip in anthropology while remaining, according to many practitioners, a fruitful or even innovative concept in history.

Anthropology and history

The reason, or at least one reason, might reside in the theoretical lag that is a frequent feature of attempts at interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation. In a 1980 article on the relationships between history and anthropology, John Davis complained that anthropologists often had 'a slightly antique air' when they ventured to produce a little history of their own, as they relied on the historians' models

---

and the need to defend or appropriate scarce resources, not least the scarce resource constituted by women, they 'suggest that honour and shame might suitably be interpreted as the values of Mediterranean microecologies' (*ibid*.: 518). This formulation is worth comparing with the characterization of honour and shame as 'the values of Mediterranean society' offered in the subtitle of the seminal book edited by Peristiany (1966). It may also be noticed that a partly similar if sketchy proposal to conceptualize the Mediterranean area as a complex ecological system, whose emergent properties are not found in its individual parts, had already been put forward by Magnarella (1992).

[5] For basically favourable reactions from anthropologists, in addition to Driessen (2001), see Sant Cassia and Shäfer (2005: 2-11) and Albera (2006: 122-123).

[6] On anthropology as provider of 'heuristic devices' to history, see Cohen (1991: 112).

[7] This is especially the case of the biblical scholars collectively known as the 'Context Group', who draw heavily and programmatically on socio-cultural anthropology and the other social sciences to study the ancient Near and Middle East. This approach was pioneered by Malina (1981) and has considerably developed over the past three decades. On the use of the anthropological notions of honour and shame in New Testament interpretation, see especially Moxnes (1996). Osiek (2008: 336) warns about the greater caution exerted by Roman historians, but the most recent and comprehensive overview of the studies on Roman honour (Lendon 2011) grants a crucial role to the concepts and perspectives provided by Mediterraneanist anthropology. For a largely similar approach to honour in classical Athens, see Brüggenbrock (2006: 9-39). For a non-specialist, yet significant, blending of history and anthropology to suggest continuity of practices and norms surrounding honour killing from Antiquity to the present time, see Jafri (2008: 26-32).

of twenty years before, and the same could be said of historians asking anthropological questions about the past: in his view, since 'practitioners continue to propose marriages which are not only interdisciplinary but intergenerational as well, they will continue to fail to exploit to the full the vigor and explanatory potency of the prospective spouse' (Davis 1980: 535).

A partly similar point has been more recently made by another anthropologist, Berardino Palumbo, in a stimulating reflection, largely based on his own experience as an apprentice historical anthropologist in the 1980s, on the use of anthropology by Giovanni Levi and other leading exponents of Italian microhistory. In some cases, Palumbo suggests, this use was mainly rhetorical and tactical: quoting from anthropological works served as a 'diacritical feature' – to use Fredrik Barth's term (1969: 6) – which allowed these historians to draw a boundary that separated them from other historians (Palumbo 2006: 254). In other cases, however, their use of anthropological tools was not merely tactical, but their effort to make the most of what anthropology had to offer to historians was hampered by the 'intergenerational effect' mentioned before: instead of keeping abreast of the developments under way in anthropology, which was moving towards the study of such topics as agency, emotions, and especially the body and incorporation (*ibid*.: 252, 280-293), 'they rediscover notions like those of mediator or encapsulation, which in the anthropologists' eyes look less and less relevant […]. While addressing, in the very same years, a set of similar theoretical issues, the trajectories of anthropologists and microhistorians deflect in opposite directions' (*ibid*.: 273).

What has been said in the previous sections definitely points to a lag between anthropology and history in Mediterranean studies, or indeed to a paradox, as rightly remarked by Albera and Tozy (2005: 17) when they write that 'in the 1980s and 1990s the anthropology of the Mediterranean loses its prestige – and is sometimes even vilified – in international anthropological milieus, yet it continues to exert a considerable influence in other fields of research'. They stress, in particular, that 'the anthropological literature on honour had a large impact on several historiographic domains' (*ibid*.), and go as far as suggesting that, owing to a sort of feedback effect, an important contribution to the revitalization of a Mediterranean comparitivism in anthropology has recently come from historiography, most notably from Horden and Purcell's book, which is praised for the value they attribute to the '"classic", ruralist monographic approach' of Mediterraneanist anthropology (*ibid*.: 18-19).

It is interesting to note, in this connection, that Horden and Purcell have been accused – again, paradoxically – by a distinguished historian of indulging in 'ruralization' and neglecting the importance of urban life in the portrait they depict of the ancient Mediterranean: 'here Horden and Purcell are almost symmetrically at odds with the dominant trend in anthropology, and their approach seems *retardataire*, since it echoes what De Pina-Cabral [1989: 405] has called "the ruralist emphasis of social anthropology" characteristic of the 1950s – and still detectable in the 1990s. Meanwhile, the anthropology of consumption and a variety of other interests have led anthropologists more and more to town' (Harris 2005: 30). This charge raises the question whether the incontestable fact that anthropologists are now increasingly studying cities in a greatly urbanized world should justify a 'retroactive urbanization' of the ancient Mediterranean and, more generally, whether new models are invariably to be preferred to their predecessors. Opinions clearly diverge. In the case of Mediterranean honour and shame, however, the issue looks even more complex than usual because there are reasons to believe that those anthropologists who accorded undisputed centrality to this alleged cultural syndrome and those who rejected it were studying societies that had gone through significant and yet not always fully recognized changes.

Anthropology in (contemporary) history

A striking feature of the works of historians employing anthropological concepts is how frequently at least some of them – from Cohen's 1991 pioneering analysis of the social and cultural context of

the Augustan law of adultery up to the latest studies (e.g. Lendon 2011: 397) – use the adjective 'traditional'. Cohen's essay is a good case in point: by repeatedly talking of ancient Rome and 'other traditional Mediterranean societies' (Cohen 1991: 113, 117, 120, 122), and more often than not referring to anthropological ethnographies based on fieldwork conducted in the 1950s and 1960s, he posits a basic similarity and therefore a long-term continuity between imperial Rome, or indeed classical Athens (*ibid.*: 120-121), and the Mediterranean societies studied by anthropologists around the middle of the twentieth century.[8] The same stance is to be found in Horden and Purcell's book. As Henk Driessen (2001: 530) correctly observes, 'the final part of their study is entirely devoted to anthropology and the question of continuity and discontinuity. Horden and Purcell assume rather than demonstrate that in the course of the twentieth century Mediterranean unity has been shattered by the turmoil of modernization […]. This is a delicate matter in view of their rejection of dichotomies, turning points, and watersheds in the three thousands years of Mediterranean history prior to industrialization'.

In fact, the reasoning of Horden and Purcell ultimately rests on a 'traditional' vs. 'modern' dichotomy, which is all the more problematic since it implies that no drastic discontinuity is detectable before recent modernization. Such a reasoning surely needs to be smoothed and qualified. This is not to say, however, that the transformations experienced by Mediterranean societies in the course of the twentieth century, and their influence on the history of anthropology, should be belittled. In fact, we may wonder, as already intimated by George Saunders (1988: 141) in his review of Gilmore's *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, whether and to what extent the different attitudes of scholars belonging to successive cohorts[9] of ethnographers doing fieldwork in the Mediterranean reflect changes in the surrounding social, political and cultural conditions.[10] The pioneers of Mediterraneanist anthropology could easily perceive the secluded rural societies they had selected for research, and their values, as a traditional world whose history was flowing 'in slow motion', to quote Fernand Braudel's (1972: 23) famous phrase, and therefore agree with Braudel that in the Mediterranean region one could detect 'permanent values'[11]. These values had either faded or possibly utterly dissolved when a new breed of anthropologists flocked to the Mediterranean. Interestingly, this possibility is hinted at by Pina-Cabral himself (1989: 404-405) in his 'seven-page article':

> Furthermore, relative cultural homogeneity cannot be assessed ahistorically. The conditions of marked underdevelopment that have characterized southern Europe in the post-war period are fast changing.

---

[8] The issue of similarity and continuity was already central to some arguments advanced by Richard Saller (an ancient historian) and David Kertzer (an anthropologist) in the introduction to their edited book on the family in Italy from the Antiquity to the present. They suggested that one of the main values of the collection lay 'in its historical depth, which allows testing of hypotheses concerning historical continuities and changes'. In particular they contended that, contrary to the suggestion 'that the cultural complex centering on the concept of family honor, often described for medieval and modern Italy, derived from Islamic influences', the volume demonstrated 'the existence of familiar Mediterranean notions of honor not only in classical Rome but also much earlier in classical Greece […] showing some striking lines of continuity as well as change' (Saller and Kertzer 1991: 3). While acknowledging the existence of considerable similarities between the Greek and Roman family and the domestic arrangements attested in some Mediterranean areas since the late Middle Ages, Emmanuel Todd (2011: 331-333) has recently denied such a continuity and reaffirmed the crucial role of the Arab expansion in giving rise to family forms that are morphologically close but historically unrelated to the ones documented for the ancient Mediterranean.

[9] While largely coinciding with that of 'generation', the notion of 'cohort' as an aggregate of individuals experiencing the same event within the same time interval (Ryder 1965) is to be preferred as it helps distinguish between the (possibly combined) effects exerted by birth (when/where), training (when/where), and fieldwork experience.

[10] 'The past two decades have seen significant cultural change in the region, and several of the chapters indicate that some of the features of "honor" as described in the Peristiany volume are now almost laughable to Mediterranean men and women. […] Whatever economic, social, and psychological conditions might have led to honor and shame as important values in the past have certainly shifted in substance and style in recent years' (Saunders 1988: 141).

[11] Although this agreement is no doubt remarkable, it should be noticed that the original 1949 French edition of Braudel's *Méditerranée* exerted a limited direct influence on the beginnings of Mediterranean anthropology and Braudel himself demonstrated rather less interest in anthropology than in other social sciences (Burke 2002: 123-129).

The physical similarities between Moroccan and Spanish villages that probably struck the ethnographers of the 1950s may be less apparent in the 1990s. Today, male enforcement of female chastity in Andalusia […] must surely appear radically distinct from practices in Morocco, Libya, or Saudi Arabia. This can be interpreted in two ways: either the similarities in the 1950s were only superficial or political and economic changes since the 1960s have resulted in a redrawing of the ethnographic map. Because all similarity is relative, both interpretations may well be correct.

Pina-Cabral's view that post-war southern Europe was characterised by a condition of 'marked underdevelopment' presumably shared by the southern Mediterranean shore, and that in the last three or four decades of the twentieth century things changed rapidly and radically, is worth some comments, the first one being that he seems here to concede that after all the two shores were not as distant, in the past, as they have now become. Since the 1960s, however, southern Europe developed and modernized at a quick pace, thus catching up with northern Europe – a huge social, political and economic jump forward which urged anthropologists to 'uncouple', so to speak, the two shores of the Mediterranean, since they had trodden divergent paths and had therefore become culturally dishomogeneous. Or, perhaps, they had become culturally dishomogeneous because the northern shore had dynamically moved towards northern European standards and values, whereas the southern shore had remained statically the same.

Although there is certainly some truth to this reconstruction and its theoretical underpinnings, we would like to argue that especially as far as 'honour and shame' are concerned *both* shores underwent change, that significant similarities can be detected alongside divergences, and that it is not correct to reduce the processes of change to a contrast between the 'Europeanization' of the northern shore and the rooting of political Islam on the opposite shore. We would also like to add that, while on the southern shore such change has been studied through its different stages, the same cannot be said (paradoxically, once again) for the northern shore, where ethnographic studies of transformations of unquestionable anthropological relevance were for a long time few and far between. On the northern shore, one of the 'failures' of Mediterranean anthropology – as Davis (1977: 5-10) would have put it – was undoubtedly its reluctance or inability to pay enough attention to these changes when they were occurring (as distinct from subsequent attempts to study them retrospectively) and to document them ethnographically. While it would be silly to imagine that anthropologists doing fieldwork in Italy, Greece or Spain after the Second World War were unaware that agriculture or pastoralism were declining and people were moving in increasing numbers to the cities, they left a series of important issues out of their research focus, the most prominent among them being the ones related to social, economic and cultural change, not least in the domain of family, marriage and sexuality. Yet, the third quarter of the twentieth century was marked almost everywhere in southern Europe by a shift 'away from honour' which was part and parcel of broader economic and social transformations largely triggered by feminist movements and is best symbolised in Italy by the abolition of legislation condoning the 'crime of honour' in 1981 (Bettiga-Boukerbout 2005) – exactly when 'honour' was epistemologically dissolved by Herzfeld in his landmark article.

Mediterranean feminist histories

In the final page of *The Corrupting Sea*, Horden and Purcell (2000: 523) concede that in their discussion of honour, while resorting on several occasions to ethnographic evidence provided by feminist anthropologists, they have not attempted 'to engage with the full agenda of feminist anthropological theory'. This admission helps us realize that it would be misleading to lump together all the historians who have made use of anthropological notions of honour and shame. As we have seen, since the late 1970s there have been historians – mostly women (and not infrequently micro-historians) – who have read their archival material, or ancient texts, through the double lens of the anthropological literature on honour and shame *and* feminist theory as developed both within

and outside anthropology. The latter has proved instrumental – as emphasized by Edith Saurer (2002: 215-216) – to fulfil the 'innovative potential' offered by the anthropological analyses of Mediterranean values and to turn them into probing devices possessing 'not only a heuristic but also a political relevance' (*ibid.*: 224) in directing historical research towards previously neglected areas such as the ideological legitimation of social hierarchies, the negotiation of patriarchal relations, the ambivalent forms of support and control that institutions devised for dishonoured or vulnerable women and, not least, past conceptions of the body. Mediterranean histories have thus been written that would have been otherwise difficult or utterly impossible to imagine.[12]

In a different vein, a consideration of feminism and feminist movements should encourage anthropology and history to join forces and shed light on connections whose relevance for any reflection on cultural continuity and change in the Mediterranean can hardly be overlooked. We are referring, first of all, to the long history of relationships between the women of the two shores, a mutual gaze nourished by exchanges of ideas but also by stereotyped representations of women's condition, dating back at least to 1923, when Huda Sha'rawi, just after returning from the International Woman Suffrage Congress in Rome, famously removed her face veil at the Cairo railway station. In some respects it is true, as argued by Margot Badran (2007: 339-341), that since the early twentieth century on both sides of the Mediterranean women have built 'transnational feminist alliances' while actively engaging in autochthonous feminists struggles, and also that Western feminists have often been able to form a very different idea of Islam from the one epitomized by the stereotype of the 'oppressed Muslim women'. However, when historically examining Mediterranean feminist claims we frequently come across 'reciprocal distinctive constructions' (Rey, Martin and Bäschlin 2008: 5) in which stereotyped representations also have a large part, the southern European female self being often defined in opposition to the veiled and submitted women of Islamic countries and, reciprocally, the Islamic female self in opposition to the objectification of women and women's bodies by Western consumerism. As suggested by the same authors (*ibid.*: 6-7), these reciprocal constructions provide an instructive illustration of Christian Bromberger and Jean-Yves Durand's contention that in the Mediterranean area 'everyone identifies oneself, perhaps even more than elsewhere, through a game of mirrors (of habits, behaviours, convictions) with one's neighbour […] It is these reciprocal oppositions between Others who are neither too close nor too distant that define, to a large extent, the specificity of Mediterranean space' (2001: 743).

It is also patent that on the two shores women's claims have often followed different, at times diverging, courses when it comes to 'honour and shame'. On the northern shore the discourse on virginity and modesty was wiped out by feminist movements which challenged the family and patriarchal society and aimed at redefining gender relations and building a new female subjectivity through a reappropriation of both the female body and women's sexuality, thus transforming these symbolic spaces of 'honour and shame' into crucial domains for the expression of female autonomy and self-determination.[13] On the southern shore of the Mediterranean we find, on the other hand, feminist movements and women's claims which may differ from one another, especially since the late 1980s, but increasingly contribute to the definition of an Islamic feminism where secular and religious perspectives converge (Badran 2009, Latte Abdallah 2010, Pepicelli 2010). Even those women who belong to Islamist movements, which often resist a self-definition in feminist terms, may take advantage of the newly-acquired rights to interpret the Qu'ran, to reread the history of the

---

[12] A corollary of the centrality accorded to the body by feminist historians – hardly surprising if one considers that a crucial feature of feminist movements was a 'weave of corporeality and theory' (Bravo and Fiume 2004: 9) – has been a sensible narrowing of the gap lamented by Palumbo between the work of historians and the new developments in anthropological theory.

[13] It is this feminist cultural politics and the process of change it sets into motion in the northern Mediterranean countries that remain out of the ethnographic focus. It should also noted that in southern Europe further dynamics were at work, as exemplified by the case of Italy, where values and behaviours were differentially redefined in the northern and southern regions according to specific strategies (Goddard 1987; Oppo, Piccone Stella and Signorelli 2000).

Islamic community at its origins and to preach to other women. An especially telling case is provided by the women's mosque movement in Cairo (Mahmood 2005), whose claims and projects for change rest on body politics that are analogous to those of northern Mediterranean feminisms even if they move in the opposite direction: a re-signification of the ideal of female modesty and reserve as instruments of devotion and ways of approaching God, which, while granting a central place to the body, decrees a destiny for these values and models of behaviour that differs both from their effacement on the northern shore and from a mere continuity of tradition. All this is clearly relevant when talking about 'Mediterranean honour and shame'. Besides reminding us that the southern shore has not been as culturally immobile as is often assumed, it also indicates that similarities can be detected behind seemingly radical differences.

Conclusion: honour and the history of anthropology

The paradoxically different fortune encountered by the anthropological concepts of honour and shame in anthropology and history over the past decades highlights a number of significant issues. In this article we have suggested that the roots of this surprising difference may be partly traced back to the first anthropologists' failure to adequately focus on the changes that were occurring in the Mediterranean countries at that time. Several factors may be held responsible for this shortcoming. As has been recently suggested, some are probably 'intrinsic to the discipline of anthropology, such as the difficulty to fully describe the complexity solely through field observation' (Hadjkyriacou 2009: 24). In addition, anthropologists were no doubt wrong-footed by the speed and suddenness of a moral revolution (Appiah 2010) hinging on the rejection in the countries of the northern shore, and especially in some parts of them, of what was more and more perceived as an oppressive and obsolete honour code: as a result, as pointed out by Fiume (1989: 6), in the late 1980s 'honour could still be studied in Sicily', whereas its vestiges looked 'inconsequential in southern France or northern Italy'. However, disciplinary blinkers may also have made anthropologists at least partially blind to transformations that were attracting the professional attention of other social scientists: still in the 1980s the chances that an ethnographic study of, say, a Mediterranean feminist movement might receive recognition as legitimately anthropological would have been dim at best, and this probably even more in southern Europe than in Britain or the United States.[14]

Nevertheless, changes were under way not only in the Mediterranean but also in anthropological theory: the demise of honour and shame, and more generally the crisis of the Mediterranean as a category of regional comparison in anthropology, were part of 'an epistemological conjuncture that undermined the efforts aimed at establishing comparative frameworks' (Albera 2006: 112). A detailed analysis of the doctoral dissertations submitted at Oxford and based on fieldwork carried in the Mediterranean convincingly shows that 'after 1970 there were profound changes in the style of Mediterranean ethnographies' (Carbonell 2010: 8). On the one hand, this was due to the decision of doctoral students increasingly to select urban settings for their research: in the early 1970s the anthropology of the Mediterranean was no longer exclusively an anthropology of the rural world. On the other hand, theoretical changes were impinging on anthropologists working in the Mediterranean, shaping and delimiting not only their interests but also their perceptions. The dissatisfaction with the honour and shame pair already visible in the Oxford theses written in the 1970s is largely influenced by the rise of semantic anthropology (Crick 1976), soon to be followed by the even more pervasive advent of interpretive

---

[14] Whereas much has been written on the hegemony, bordering on theoretical colonialism, exerted by Anglo-Saxon anthropology over the scholarly traditions of Mediterranean Europe (Albera and Tozy 2005: 21-26; Narotsky 2006: 133-141), the reluctant attitude of 'native' anthropologies towards the study of change at home, more often than not left to sociologists, has rarely been noted and would deserve further enquiry.

and post-modern approaches. The influential objections advanced in 1980 by Herzfeld, himself the author of one of these Oxford theses, were born into this new theoretical climate.

The semantic and epistemological dissolution of the two gate-keeping concepts of Mediterraneanist anthropology discouraged ethnographers from focusing their work on the various stages and trajectories of the changes undergone by values and behaviours displaying family resemblances with honour and shame, maybe 'red herrings' for anthropologists and yet at the core of large processes of rejection, redefinition or re-signification. Sight was therefore partially lost of a very Mediterranean story that was unfolding in the second half of the twentieth century, a story of divergences but also of convergences, whose Mediterraneanness originated not so much from a common and fatally doomed cultural heritage as from a web of prolonged connections, mutual gazes, complementary differences and mirror effects between the two shores (Albera and Tozy 2005: 19).

References

Abulafia, D. 2005. Mediterraneans. In *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, (ed.) W.V. Harris, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Abu-Lughod, L. 1986. *Veiled Sentiments. Honour and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Berkeley: California University Press.

Albera, D. 2006. Anthropology of the Mediterranean: Between Crisis and Renewal. *History of Anthropology* **(17)2:** 109-133.

Albera, D. & Tozy, M. 2005. Introduction: fractures, filiations, contiguïtés. In *La Méditerranée des anthropologues*, (eds.) D. Albera & M. Tozy, Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose.

Algazi, G. 2005. Diversity Rules: Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's 'The Corrupting Sea'. *Mediterranean Historical Review* **(20)2:** 227-245.

Appiah, K.A. (2010). *The Honor Code. How Moral Revolutions Happen*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company.

Badran, M. 2007. Il femminismo islamico. In *L'alternativa mediterranea*, (eds.) F. Cassano & D. Zolo, Milan: Feltrinelli.

Badran, M. 2009. *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences.* Oxford: Oneworld.

Barth, F. 1969. Introduction. In *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*s, (ed.) F. Barth, London: Allen & Unwin.

Bettiga-Boukerbout, M.G. 2005. 'Crimes of Honour' in the Italian Penal Code: An Analysis of History and Reform. In *Honour Crimes, Paradigms, and Violence against Women*, (eds.) L. Welchman & S. Hossein, London: Zed Books.

Blok A. 1981. Rams and Billy-goats: A Key to the Mediterranean Code of Honour. *Man* [n.s.] **(16)3:** 427-440.

Braudel, F. 1972 [1949]. *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II.* London: Collins.

Bravo, A. & Fiume, G. 2004. Introduzione. *Genesis*, **(3)1**: 5-15.

Bromberger, C. & Durand, J.-Y. 2001. Conclusion. Faut-il jeter la Méditerranée avec l'eau du bain? In *L'anthropologie de la Méditerranée / Anthropology of the Mediterranean*, (eds.) D. Albera, A. Blok & C. Bromberger, Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose.

Brüggenbrock, C. 2006. *Die Ehre in den Zeiten der Demokratie. Die Verhältnis von athenischer Polis und Ehre in klassischer Zeit*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Burke, P. 2002. Civilizations and Frontiers: Anthropology of the Early Modern Mediterranean. In *Early Modern History and the Social Sciences. Testing the Limits of Braudel's Mediterranean*, (ed.) J.A. Marino, Kirksville, MO, Truman State University Press.

Cantarella, E. 1991. Homicides of Honor: The Development of Italian Adultery Law over Two Millennia. In *The Family in Italy from Antiquity to the Present*, (eds.) D.I. Kertzer & R. Saller, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Carbonell, E. 2010. 'Exactly What I Had Been Looking For'. The Anthropology of the Mediterranean 1950-1970'. *(Con)textos. Revista d'Antropologia i Investigació Social* **4:** 5-22.

Cavallo, S. & Cerutti, S. 1980. Onore femminile e controllo sociale della riproduzione in Piemonte tra Sei e Settecento. *Quaderni Storici* **15(2):** 346-383 [English trans. in *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective*, (eds.) E. Muir & G. Ruggiero, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990].

Cohen, D. 1991. The Augustan Law of Adultery: The Social and Cultural Context. In *The Family in Italy from Antiquity to the Present*, (eds.) D.I. Kertzer & R.P. Saller, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Crick, M. 1976. *Explorations in Language and Meaning. Towards a Semantic Anthropology*. London: Dent.

Davis, J. 1977, *People of the Mediterranean. An Essay in Comparative Social Anthropology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Davis, J. 1980. Social Anthropology and the Consumption of History. *Theory and Society* **(9)3:** 519-537.

Driessen, H. 2001. The Connecting Sea: History, Anthropology, and the Mediterranean. *American Anthropologist* **(103)1:** 528-531.

Ferrante, L., Palazzi, M. & Pomata G. (eds.) 1988. *Ragnatele di rapporti.* Patronage *e reti di relazione nella storia delle donne*. Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier.

Fiume, G. (ed.) 1989. *Onore e storia nelle società mediterranee*. Palermo: La Luna.

Gilmore, D. (ed.) 1987. *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*. Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association.

Goddard, V.A. 1987. Honour and Shame: The Control of Women's Sexuality and Group Identity in Naples. In *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, (ed.) P. Caplan, London: Routledge.

Goddard, V.A. 1994. From the Mediterranean to Europe: Honour, Kinship and Gender. In *The Anthropology of Europe*, (eds.) V. Goddard, J.R. Llobera & C. Shore, Oxford: Berg.

Guidi, L. 1991. *L'onore in pericolo. Carità e reclusione femminile nell'Ottocento napoletano*. Naples: Liguori.

Hadjikyriakou, A. 2009. 'Exoticising Patriarchies': Rethinking the Anthropological Views on Gender in Post-WWII Greece. In *E-pisteme* **(2)2:** 17-29.

Harris, W.V. 2005. The Mediterranean and Ancient History. In *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, (ed.) W.V. Harris, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Herzfeld, M. 1980. Honour and Shame: Problems in the Comparative Analysis of Moral Systems. *Man* [n.s.] **(15)2:** 339-351.

Herzfeld, M. 2005. Practical Mediterraneanism: Excuses for Everything, from Epistemology to Eating. In *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, (ed.) W.V. Harris, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Horden, P. & Purcell, N. 2000. *The Corrupting Sea. A Study of Mediterranean History*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Jafri, A.H. 2008. *Honour Killing. Dilemma, Ritual, Understanding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Latte Abdallah, S. 2010. Les féminismes islamiques au tournant du XXIe siècle. *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée* **128:** 1-17.

Lendon, J.E. 2011. Roman Honor. In *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*, (ed.) M. Peachin, New York: Oxford University Press.

Lever, A. 1986. Honour as a Red Herring. *Critique of Anthropology* **6(3):** 83-106.

Magnarella, P. 1992. Conceptualizing the Circum-Mediterranean for Purposes of Social Scientific Research. *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* **(2)1:** 18-24.

Mahmood, S. 2005. *Politics of Piety. The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Malina, B. 1981. *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. Atlanta: John Knox.

Moxnes, H. 1996. Honor and Shame. In *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation*, (ed.) R.L. Rohrbaugh, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.

Narotzky, S. 2006. The Production of Knowledge and the Production of Hegemony: Anthropological Theory and Political Struggles in Spain. In *World Anthropologies. Disciplinary Transformations within Systems of Power*, (eds.) G. Lins Ribeiro & A. Escobar, Oxford: Berg.

Oppo, A., Piccone Stella, S. & Signorelli, A. (eds.) 2000. *Maternità, identità, scelte. Percorsi dell'emancipazione femminile nel Mezzogiorno*. Naples: Liguori.

Osiek, C. 2008. Women, Honor, and Context in Mediterranean Antiquity. *Hervormde Teologies Studies* **(64)1:** 323-337.

Palumbo, B. 2006. Scuola, scala, appartenenza. Problemi di identità tra storia e antropologia. In *Giochi di scala. La microstoria alla prova dell'esperienza*, (ed.) J. Revel, Rome: Viella.

Pepicelli, R. 2010. *Femminismo islamico. Corano, diritti, riforme*. Rome: Carocci.

Peristiany, J.G. (ed.) 1966. *Honour and Shame. The Values of Mediterranean Society*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Pina-Cabral, J. de 1989. The Mediterranean as a Category of Regional Comparison: A Critical View. *Current Anthropology* **(30)3:** 399-406.

Rey, S., Martin, H. & Bäschlin, E. 2008 Identités et conflits en Méditerranée: un jeu de miroirs au détriment des femmes? *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* **(27)3:** 4-12.

Ryder, N.B 1965. The Cohort as a Conception in the Study of Social Change. *American Sociological Review* **(30)6**: 843-861.

Saller, R.P. & Kertzer, D.I. 1991. Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on Italian Family Life. In *The Family in Italy from Antiquity to the Present*, (eds.) D.I. Kertzer & R.P. Saller, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Sant Cassia, P. & Shäfer, I. 2005. 'Mediterranean Conundrums': Pluridisciplinary Perspectives for Research in the Social Sciences. *History and Anthropology* **(16)1:** 1-23.

Saunders, G.R. 1988. Review of D. Gilmore (ed.), 'Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean'. *Anthropological Quarterly* **61(3):** 141-143.

Saurer, E. 2002. Auf der Suche nach Ehre und Scham. Europa, sein mediterraner Raum und die Mittelmeeranthropologie. *Historische Anthropologie* **(10)2:** 206-224.

Todd, E. 2011. *L'origine des systèmes familiaux*, vol. 1 (*L'Eurasie)*. Paris: Gallimard.

Wikan, U. 1984. Shame and Honour: A Contestable Pair. *Man* [n.s.] **(19)4:** 635-652.