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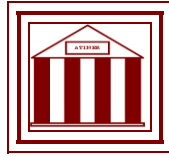# ATINER

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Sicily: Towards the End of an 'Everlasting' Problem of Category Ascription

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Abstract

This article deals with cultural polyphony in Italy and more specifically with Sicily; it brings to the fore Italy's problematic national integration and Sicily's issue of category ascription in the Mediterranean and the West. While Palermo and Sicily must be understood in the context of both Mediterranean and Italian ethnography, the unique factors which lead to the subordinate economic position of Sicily have also resulted in distinct ethnic and identity politics. Transforming an economic issue into a cultural one helps perpetuate stereotypes which fuel tensions between the North and the South. Recent ethnic conflicts in Europe, as well as conflict over European Union expansion, have questioned the stability of national borders. Now that the dust has settled on battle field it is time to address processes of national integration and identity construction. In this case, it is timely to explain how Palermo and its residents are shaped through relationships of unequal power between the centre and the periphery in a North/South division of both Italy and Europe.

I concentrate on the conceptual cluster of honour, the family, social networks and power as the means by which different levels of society interact, in order to explain the dynamic relationship between local and national identity. Out of contrasts as such emerges an identifiable Sicilian, if not Palermitan, identity. I conclude that Palermitans purposly resort to sites of agency, and that Sicily's integration into the European Union, paradoxically, appears to resolve several ongoing issues of national integration.

Keywords: Italy, Sicily, Palermo, Mediterranean, European Union, anthropology, national, ethnic, integration, identity, tension, conflict, economy, culture, borders, stereotypes, unequal power, honor, society, local, national, agency.

Moreover, I cannot but acknowledge the important contribution of Durham University to my academic career but also that of my professors, namely Stephen Lyon and Paul Sant-Cassia, to my understanding of the so called "Italy's Southern Question."

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"Sicily: Towards the End of an 'Everlasting' Problem of Category Ascription."

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Cultural Polyphony and National Integration: a Problem

'Italy has been made. Now it remains to make Italians', or 'We have made Italy. Now we must make Italians' writes Massimo D' Azeglio in his memoirs at the end of the nineteenth century[1]. Making Italians seems to be an unsuccessful issue ever since. Among others, the anthropologist Jane Schneider publishes *Italy's "Southern Question": Orientalism in One Country*, proving that the North/South division still held strong in 1998. Duggan addresses the same issue in 2007 and supports that nothing has really changed since the Unification.

Probably the most critical turning point of the Italian history is the *Risorgimento* in the mid-nineteenth century A.D. not only because it signifies Italy's birth as a nation but also because it was crucial in what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) call 'invention of tradition'. Lyttelton (2001:27) argues that 'the Napoleonic cyclone shook the foundations of belief in the old territorial states.' Italy had to invent her own history that would bring together diverse histories of regions and municipalities it consisted of after 1860 into a common history that would 'prove' the Italian nation's continuity. However, Ascoli and Von Henneberg (2001) suggest that 'the metaphor of the dormant and pre-existing proved problematic when it came to the south.' (p.7). Cavour[2], the central figure in Italy's Unification war and Italy's prime minister from

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[1] Marquis D' Azeglio (1798-1866) was Piedmont, born in Turin, and of noble descendant. He was a politician, novelist and painter. Both kings Charles Albert and Victor Emmanuel II offered D' Azeglio political authority. His memoirs, or *I Miei Ricordi*, was written toward the end of his life and was eventually published incomplete two years after his death.

[2] Cavour (10 Aug. 1810-6 June 1861), or Camillo Paolo Giulio Benso, Count of Cavour of Isolabella and of Leri, was born in Turin. He started his political career in Piedmont and thanks to successful economic reforms he managed to become Prime Minister of Piedmont in 1852. He was equally successful in empowering Piedmont by leading it consecutively through the Crimean War, and the Second Italian War of Independence. Cavour moved strategically between the French, King Victor Emmanuel II and Garibaldi, and achieved Italy's Unification after the annexation of the Papal States.

17 March 1861, saw the Italian south as threatening the Piedmont dreams of a unified Italy. Carlo Farini, the chief administrator of the South writes to Cavour in October 1860[3]: 'But, my friend, what lands are these, Molise and the south! What barbarism! Some Italy! This is Africa: compared to these peasants the Bedouins are the pinnacle of civilization. And what misdeeds!' (p. 129).

During the same period, Lady Holland writes to Cavour: 'It is remarkable that in the entire Kingdom of the Two Sicilies the new government will discover that everything remains to be done…All the cities of Naples and Sicily are in the state of indecency, almost inferior to that of the ancient tribes in Africa…' (p. 129).

Cassinis, the Minister of Justice concludes: 'In a certain sense it is necessary to remake the country, to remake or, better, create the public conscience; it is necessary to render these men capable of living under the constitutional system of government. And it would be something to despair over, to consider impossible, if this very land, so far from the ideas of progress and civilization, didn't offer us special opportunities' (p. 129).

However, Chubb (1982) suggests that southern Italy's elites attempting to maintain their *status quo* played an equally important role in the maintenance of the south's backward image. Although the integration of the North and the South may became problematic as early as the polemic between Cavour and Garibaldi started, it should be seen as the complex outcome of a peculiar interaction on the political level that filtered down to the Italian society in the course of time. Overall, the Risorgimento failed as the base upon which national identity could be built because it brought to the fore local interests and strong regional identities that Italians preferred to protect against national integration (Dainotto 2001).

Neither under fascism, nor in democracy after World War II did the gap between the North and the South was ever bridged, for the differences between the two regions remained in Italians consciousness as vast as these differences were in the second half of the 19th century. In fact, political and economic elites proved capable of protecting their interests until now, at the expense of what the Italian War of independence started for, leaving practically unchallenged the conceptions of citizenship and political community that were diffused through the French Revolution.

Sicily's Issue of Category Ascription in the Mediterranean and the West

During the fifties anthropologists many of whom consisted of the elite of the discipline shifted their interest to the Mediterranean. The seminal work of the anthropologists mentioned above is pioneering in the ethnographic establishment of a 'cultural landscape' (Braudel 1972: 276-352, Boissevain 1979: 8). Participants disengage from colonial territories to satisfy western voices that challenge what was thus far considered politically correct. In the aftermath of the Second World War, anthropologists shed light on issues of social solidarity within the newly built nation-states. Goddard, Llobera and Shore (1994) argue that in the Cold War climate, southern European countries were seen as unstable and potentially vulnerable to the spread of communism (p.2).

In addition, Moe (1994) argues that due to the process of nation-building Europe was divided into two opposite poles, the North representing advancement and innovation whilst Southern Europe by contrast represented antiquity and laziness

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[3] The examples of the correspondence between Cavour and his envoys used in this text are quoted from N. Moe's *'This is Africa': Ruling and representing Southern Italy, 1860-1* in A.R. Ascoli and K. von Henneberg (2001).

where sunlight would not allow the rise of a nobility (Schneider 1998). Therefore, this first attempts to studying cultures 'closer' to home, expressed mainly in the Mediterranean, was strikingly linked to methods, models and interests applied in African societies (Goddard, Llobera and Shore 1994). Consequently, the focus was on those areas that deserved anthropological enquiry, these being areas considered marginal and distant.

What was *the* link among all these societies if we take into account that what they shared was equally important with what they did not? Even if perceived to hold similarities attributed to common history and ecology, and thus to constitute a set of societies so similar to each other to form a distinctive cultural pattern of civilization (see Sweet and O' Larey 1969), there were also great differences (see Wolf, 1969, Herzfeld 1980, 1984) among them in regards to economy, politics and sex-roles.

The pan-Mediterranean focus initiated by Redfield (Gilmore 1982), was taken further by Pitt-Rivers and Peristiany who explored the distinctiveness of the area. The field was bound together theoretically in 1971 by Jane Schneider who 'published a paper on the origins of the Pan-Mediterranean honor-shame complex ... that was important because it was the first to demarcate a continuum of material variables which hypothetically constituted the basis of Mediterranean unity.' (ibid: 175). The field was consolidated with Davis and Boissevain conducting comparative studies within the Mediterranean in 1977 and 1979 respectively, but it was 'honor and shame' that became the tool that conjoined the theorization of economics, politics and gender to kinship and the family (see Schneider and Schneider 1976, Loizos 1977, du Boulay 1987).

It is suggested that shame and honor is a set of social values that play a vital role in Mediterranean daily life, and are seen as a fundamental and total fact (Gilmore 1987). This binary opposition is related to *amoral familism* (Banfield 1958, Silverman 1968), *social atomism* (Gilmore, 1975) and *patronage* (Pitt-Rivers 1954, Campbell 1964, Wolf 1966, Davis 1977). Preceding work on structure and function, kinship and political and economic relations constituted the basis of the above (Goddard 1994). But what was defined as honor and shame?

According to Pitt-Rivers, honor is 'the value of the person in his own eyes, but also the eyes of the society.' (1954: 21). It needs to be publicly demonstrated and defended (ibid: 27) and pertains to male virility and the protection of the chastity of female members of the family (Campbell 1964). Shame on the other hand is a value upheld primarily by women and related to their moral integrity as well as their reputation for being virtuous (Dubish 1995: 196). Honor and shame were not just social values that 'tied' Mediterranean peoples (Peristiany 1966: 11) but crucial traits of social stratification (Davis 1977: 89-101) that organized social and political life in the Mediterranean "village", explained competition between households and elevated the household (and not the individual) as the basis of Mediterranean selfhood.

From Economic to Cultural Isolation

Albera and Blok (2001) argue that the Mediterranean became the experimental laboratory of the discipline of anthropology where diverse anthropological methods were applied for a number of diverse interests. Pina-Cabral (1985) explicitly argues that the conception of the Mediterranean as a cultural area served western anthropologists change of focus in a specific era. Moreover, as the danger of communism lurked and especially in areas where feudalism was still present, the Mediterranean along with Latin America was seen rather as belonging to the 'Orient'

in the 'West/Orient' political division of the world (Goddard, Llobera and Shore 1994, see also Schneider 1998)[4]. Polyphony led scholars to discount one another's findings, especially those of indigenous anthropologists, and thus comparison remained poor (Sant-Cassia, personal communication).

The neat conceptualization of the Mediterranean as presented above was well countered from its beginnings. Galt (1985) argues that southern Europe is less homogenous than its northern counterpart, and since the South is subjected to changes its conception as a whole becomes problematic. Moreover, there may be commonalities among the subjects of study but their differences are of the same importance in the process of understanding these subjects (Wolf 1969, Goody 1983, Herzfeld 1980, 1984).

Another important issue discussed by Herzfeld (1980: 348), Dubisch (1995) and Just (2001: 45) was the problem of "cultural translation", challenging the manner in which certain terms like honor were perceived and theorized by earlier anthropologists. Argyrou also demonstrates that the uniqueness of Mediterranean values is 'not unique' after all (1996: 158) using the work of Bourdieu (1984) on the identity of French working-class men and Willis's (1981) study of working-class high school boys in England.

The anthropological methods transferred to the Mediterranean were problematic in their application towards the understanding of national integration. Focus areas were small-scale societies at the periphery of nations, and focus groups were usually the poorest (i.e. Moss 1979, Chapman 1971). Given the climate of the political preoccupations of the time, such groups were stigmatized as threatening to national integration and 'exoticized' as the 'inner other'. At the same time, research on other social classes was rare, i.e. Whyte (1943), Belmonte (1980).

The case of Sicily and especially of Palermo fits accurately into the above problematic situation: Sicilian culture is perceived as an entity that is not part of the Italian one, and is mostly approached as an exception in the anthropology of the Mediterranean. Starting from Italian integration, anthropologists focus mainly on the Mafia linking every other Sicilian cultural aspect to it. There seems to be a perpetuation of Cavour's preoccupation with national integration as it is witnessed in his correspondence with his officials in the South. Both the existence of the Mafia and the lack of a conscious middle class, due the persistence of feudalism, render Sicilian society closer to the African model (Blok 1966).

Stereotypes and Conflict

The major interest of all the anthropologists mentioned so far is social conflict, and the question that springs from the above context is why there is a means other than the law that regulates social life. Instead of focusing on how to explain the South's instability within the national context, this issue becomes common for all Mediterranean societies in juxtaposition to Northern Europe and/or the West. I suggest that the only means that can explain the differences between North and South at the European level is the unequal distribution of resources between the two poles.

Although the southern economy is agricultural and the problem should be traced in the distribution of land, the backwardness of the South is perceived by northern Italians to be the outcome of a turn never taken, this being a turn to other resources.

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[4] The criteria used for such a division and which were primarily cultural, economic and political, legitimised the West's superiority over the Orient.

The turn to other resources would be interwoven with structural changes, or in other words with conflict. Nevertheless, in the South, conflict is diffused because of honor. Either if it is defined as respect, reputation, status and so on, honor gives an individual a value that has nothing to do with wealth and social class. Unequal power relationships were thus far perpetuated due to scarcity of resources, a large body of clients, and corrupt administration.

The establishment of such relationships and on such a large scale, that affected Italian political life, was until recently the main threat to Italy's cohesion according to northern Italians. Add to that the idea that "amoral familism" prevails in the south, and that honor grew strong enough to cross-cut institutions and create other social networks that serve dark political ends. No northerner, however, would ever admit that the Italian political system is still based on laundering northern money in southern Italy in such a way that, even if the float of money in the south is enormous, it cannot lead to economic development.

Identity and Sites of Agency

Maybe the island's natural boundaries make it easier to Sicilians and others to 'imagine' (see Anderson 1983) the content of the island as homogenous, although in reality it may not be so (Brown and Hamilakis 2003). In any case, some aspects of identity are formed reflexively and others do 'not always require the mediation of consciousness, but [they] can be to a certain extent the direct result of power relations' (Kirtsoglou 2004: 31, Foucault 1980). As identity building is a dynamic process, Gellner's (1983) argument on the role of elites in the building of nationalist ideologies must be taken into account. He supports the idea that ethnic and national identities are up to a point the outcome of power relations. Ethnicity is a very particular part of an individual's identity because it is 'dressed' with vague sentiments that are analogous to those attached to other groups, i.e. the family and the locality (Smith 2003, Kirtsoglou 2006). It is definitely affecting individual action (Cohen 1985).

Like kinship, ethnicity is rather a perception of common origins (Banks 1996, Barth 1969, Cohen 1994). Ethnic identity is often constructed on the basis of folk conceptions of blood and biology which follow kinship metaphors. Though, Barth claims, ethnic groups are not always based on cultural similarities and differences (1969:14), and Bentley (1987) stresses that individuals are able to strategically maneuver within various groups. Individuals move from group to group in order to achieve the best possible representation on various levels and contexts (Rapport 2002). The individuals' contested selection of groups reflects not only personal interests, but also the economic and social balance of groups within a society.

Sökefeld (1999: 418) argues that a way to explain the interaction between individual and society is by focusing to the internal plurality and multiplicity of the subject. Devereux (1972: 162) holds that variations between subjects instead of dividing them allow them to group, because they are alike, through a 'human identity'. Foucault (1979) sees the individual as a constructed self, but after Cohen's suggestion for the rehabilitation of the self (1994: 192), Rapport (1997: 2) stresses that individuality is the root of the social and the cultural. 'Culture' also has its own course in the social sciences because of shifting approaches of its relation with the individual (Cuche 1996).

Alter (1994) stresses that individuals identify themselves with various entities, such as a family, a religion, a class and so on, but also with a nation and a region, and they

can move between these identifications according to the situation at hand. Barth (1969), as well, suggests that individuals can change groups, although this does not affect the groups' boundaries. Alter argues that there can be tension between centre and periphery, the periphery struggling for political, economic and social equality with the centre, while the nation-state tries to preserve its integrity and cohesion (1994: 98). I believe this to be the case between Sicily and Italy.

The European Union Resolving the Issue of Italy's National Integration

Nowadays, a number of reasons underlay the change of balance between center and periphery within Italy. Modernity has become an end in itself for the traditionally outward Italian south as a "warm culture" it is (Buttitta, pers. Comm.). This change is observable in family, politics, and social conflict. Raw numbers provided by ISTAT, the Italian national institute of statistics, prove that the gap between the north and the south has been bridged but from economy.

On the qualitative side, Sicilians consciously discard *clientelismo* because of the negative effects such practices have been proven to have on their society. A new meaning of "honor" has been filtered down to society due to the continuous actions of the conscious and educated middle class at the local level. The war against the Mafia and the way it is articulated by the Mass Media has also played a major part in this development. Honor, family and social networks have been re-defined and southerners resort to these sites of agency in order to group and promote better common interests.

Therefore, conflict over the scarce resources has shifted level. Dynamic the relationship between local and national identity as it is, it is a matter of transfer to suggest that Italians are culturally allowed to struggle for a "direct" relationship with the European Union. The need for such a relationship is not local but pan-Italian; it manifests itself Italians' desire to be represented by institutions that have taken analogous steps with those their society has taken. In other words, Italians prefer to be represented by more stable and more transparent political institutions. This unites Italians as a nation through new criteria of inclusion and exclusion within the newly established borders. Paradoxically enough, the EU appears to provide Italy's age long issue of national integration with a solution, thing that was until recently perceived as untenable.

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