

## Anthropology and the Cold War Mediterranean

Jane Schneider

In the early 1950s, American anthropology, taking stock of community studies from Asia and Latin America, attempted to theorize a new subject matter, the peasantry. Robert Redfield's exploration of Mexican villages pointed to a defining characteristic: peasants, as distinct from "tribesmen," are integrated into the "wider society" – the cities, markets, and state institutions -- of which their communities are "a part." Around the same time, a few anthropologists in Britain and France departed from fieldwork in colonial possessions to study the peasants of large "complex societies." With his ethnography of a village in Andalusia, published as *The People of the Sierra* in 1954, British anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers made the opening foray into the Mediterranean area, long of interest to archaeologists, historians and literary scholars, but not to "social" anthropologists.

Pitt-Rivers was initially defensive about doing "real" anthropology in Spain, fieldwork having theretofore been defined, at least in Oxford, by hardship. The die was cast, it seems, for anthropologists of the Mediterranean to steer clear of cities, documenting family and kinship relations, subsistence practices, informal relationships, and moral values in remote and small communities. The question for us is how this research articulated with, or challenged, the Cold War hegemony of the United States. Two tropes of Mediterranean anthropology during the 1960s – "honor and shame" and "amoral familism" – point to somewhat inconsistent, and very provisional answers, as suggested below.

### From Community Studies to Honor and Shame

In 1959, at the initiative of Pitt-Rivers, the Wenner-Gren Foundation sponsored a conference to compare community studies taking place around the Mediterranean. The participating anthropologists included one American, five British, four French, two Greek, one

Spanish, one Italian and one Libyan; a handful of classicists and literary scholars also took part. *Mediterranean Countrymen*, the volume of 1963 edited by Pitt-Rivers, covers the social structures of rural communities in Spain, Egypt, Algeria, Greece, Corsica, Morocco, Lebanon, Turkey, and France. Pitt-Rivers laid out the following generalizations in his introduction: The Romans had built their empire around this sea for the good reason that its restricted distances and “kindly” waters enabled conquest, colonization, trade and piracy. Continuous maritime contact over subsequent centuries meant “a high degree of technological homogeneity” and exposure of the entire littoral to not one but two great religions, Islam and Christianity. Overarching ecological conditions, highlighted by Braudel in the 1940s, were also noted. Later summarized by Louise Sweet (1969), these included “an urban character of peasant life (in agrotowns), the predominance of large estates for the production of grains, and transhumant pastoralism of sheep and goats” – all underpinned by “a similar climate, mountain topography, flora and fauna” in which vines, figs and olives, wheat, barley and beans, found a place” (Albera and Blok 2000: 18).

Nevertheless, Pitt-Rivers emphasized, although Mediterranean geography had a certain coherence, and was favorable to “unification by military force, settlement and, as soon as the commanding power relaxe(d), rebellion,” it was not supportive of “integration into a homogenous culture.” Political and religious hierarchies replaced one another but left local communities more or less “faithful” to their traditions; nor had these communities been effectively absorbed, in modern times, under their national flags. Rather, they “possess both more similarities between different countries and more diversities within their national frontiers than the tenets of modern nationalism would have us believe.” The goal of *Mediterranean Countrymen* was, in effect, to subvert the stereotypes of national “cultures,” and “discover continuities which run counter to the varying political hegemonies, observing the exigencies of the ecology or the entrenched conservatism of the local settlement” (pp. 9-10).

Contrary to what many have thought, the theme of “honor and shame” was addressed on

only one of the six days of the Wenner-Gren conference, and only appeared within a discussion of cultural practices surrounding friendship and hospitality. Land tenure, inheritance, kinship, local economics and demography took precedence, along with the relationships of communities to cities and states as mediated by networks, brokers, and patron-client relations.

In the end, however, participants found the “greatest homogeneity” to be in “conceptions of the self and in values relating to the sexes” (Silverman 2000: 46-47). One of the collaborators, Greek anthropologist J.G. Peristiany, garnered support for continued discussions in 1961 and 1963 from the Social Sciences Centre of Athens and the Greek Ministry to the Prime Minister’s Office – Press and Information Department, with an additional subsidy, in 1963, from Unesco. One presumes the project had support from then Prime Minister Konstantinos Karamanlis. The result was the famed 1966 volume which Peristiany edited, *Honour and Shame: the Values of Mediterranean Society*. The Mediterranean peoples discussed in this book (Spanish, Greek, Cypriot, Kabyle, and Egyptian Bedouin) were, Peristiany proposed, “constantly called upon to use the concepts of honour and shame in order to assess their own conduct and that of their fellows.” Additionally, the concepts were intensely salient for a reason: Mediterranean societies offered up “an insecure, individualist, world where nothing is accepted on credit, the individual is constantly forced to prove and assert himself ... he is forever courting the public opinion of his ‘equals’ so that they may pronounce him worthy” (p. 11). The insecurity and instability of status hierarchies meant that vindication of one’s honor was constantly required – not unlike medieval chivalry in Western Europe or street-corner gangs of the time.

A follow up “series of seminars,” supported by the Social Research Centre of Cyprus, resulted in Peristiany’s editing of another collection, *Mediterranean Family Structures*, in 1976. Covering an even wider range of “cases,” the twenty chapters of this book describe kinship and family dynamics among Maronites in Lebanon, Arabs in Israel, several communities in Tunisia, Morocco, Turkey, Spain, Italy and Greece, and one in Albania. The

variety notwithstanding, the theme of honor constitutes a thread of continuity, resonating with the struggles of nuclear and bilateral families to express their “moral heritage” and “social achievement.”

Peristiany characterizes these struggles as agonistic -- “a contest before a chorus, a commenting and evaluating audience” (1976: 23). Contributions to the collection from Greece, in particular, give “the stark impression of a society in which every family is a self-contained moral entity defending its honour against all comers, when not actively engaged in replenishing its anti-reputation armory for future use.” As in the earlier volume, Peristiany concludes that “the putting to the test of a person’s worth is a sign of status insecurity in a society where all may claim to be equal, the lack of a clear gradation between ideals, and thus of a clear hierarchy of prescriptive rules, is a reflection of this type of egalitarian, unclearly structured and thus ‘anarchic’ social order” (1976: 23-25).

The index of *Family Structures* includes roughly 30 entries on “honour” scattered throughout the text, and a half dozen on chastity or virginity, also widely distributed. In the Mediterranean, it seemed, the male-female relationship rendered male honor dependent upon, and vulnerable to, the behavior of close female relatives. By this time “Mediterranean modes of thought” were believed to include the ideas that women be excluded from public space, that brides be tested for virginity on their wedding night, and that adulterous wives be murdered (Peristiany 1966: 9). Whether intended or not, a sexualized understanding of “honor and shame” had risen to the top of a Mediterranean “trait list.”

By the 1980s, a new generation of anthropologists was challenging this model. Troubled by a picture so “ahistoric and essentialized,” from which differences and flux were eliminated, critics questioned the very notion of the Mediterranean as a homogeneous “culture area” (see Herzfeld 1980; Blok and Dionigi 2000: 19). Notwithstanding the initial role of a Greek anthropologist, Peristiany, in drawing attention to “honour and shame,” critics argue that “the complex,” now described as “alleged” or “so-called,” emanated from the ethnocentrism of Anglo- and American Orientalist traditions. Arjun Appadurai’s observation is apt. “A few

simple theoretical handles become metonyms and surrogates for the civilization or society as a whole: hierarchy in India, honor-and-shame in the circum-Mediterranean, filial piety in China ... all ... gate-keeping concepts ... that seem to limit anthropological theorizing about the place in question ... that define the quintessential and dominant questions of interest in the region” (quoted in *ibid*: 19)

Today, after more than three decades of self-reflexive criticism, most anthropologists would agree with Frank Stewart that “not all peoples living on the shores of the Mediterranean have been affected to the same degree by their proximity to it; and even if we take groups like the Catalans and the Lebanese, who *have* been deeply affected, this fact does not entail that they should resemble each other more than they resemble their inland neighbors to the north and the east, respectively” (Stewart 1994: 78). At the least nothing remains of Mediterranean “modes of thought.” In 1992, none other than Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers co-edited a collection on “honor and grace,” not “shame.” Although the introduction and several of the chapters evoke competition for rank among men and women’s threat to honor through illicit sexual activity, some of the examples derive from non-Mediterranean societies and, moreover, other themes are given equal weight. If anything, the emphasis is on variation, the editors having absorbed some of the criticisms of their earlier attempts to identify a “Mediterranean concept of honor” (see Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers 1992).

In the end it could be notable that “honor and shame” became the Mediterranean’s “gate-keeping concept” in conjunction with U.S. Cold War hegemony in the area. Without knowing of the construct’s resonance with funding bodies, media outlets, and publishing houses in the 1960s and 1970s, one can only speculate. To me, both the “orientalizing” thrust of the “honor and shame” trope, and its tendency to assimilate the rural populations of Southern Europe to North Africa and the Middle East, were congenial to the power projects of the United States whose architects were obsessed with the vulnerability of southern European peasants to communist ideology. Anthropologists of the time surely devoted more energy to theorizing problems surrounding women’s seclusion than to probing such Cold War issues as

the resonance for peasants of left political parties and ideologies, or the urgency of land reform. (I take myself as a case in point; see Schneider 1971).

### **The Second Strand: Amoral Familism**

In 1963, anthropologists from the University of Michigan, together with colleagues from Seville, Paris and London, met at a conference in Ann Arbor on “The Village and its Setting in the Mediterranean Area.” The conveners of this meeting, Eric Wolf and William Schorger, who had conducted fieldwork in the South Tyrol and Morocco, respectively, subsequently obtained a grant from the Ford Foundation, paving the way for several Michigan students to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in Sicily, Spain, and Morocco and to attend -- along with students and scholars from the L.S.E., University of Kent, and University of Amsterdam -- two Mediterranean Studies workshops in Aix-en-Provence and Canterbury, in 1966 and 1967, respectively. Among the topics discussed at the conference and workshops was political scientist Edward Banfield’s *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, published in 1958. Based on fieldwork conducted with the help of his Italian-speaking psychologist wife in her community of origin – the small rural town of Montegrano in the Province of Potenza – the book attributed Southern Italian poverty and “backwardness” to a cultural ethos of “amoral familism” according to which people “maximize the short-run advantage of the nuclear family and assume that all others will do likewise.” Thus the peasants of Montegrano seemed unable to delay individual gratification for the sake of long-term collective goals -- a result of attitudes that had been culturally transmitted over many generations.

Skepticism toward Banfield’s unabashedly Protestant thesis was nurtured by participation in the anti-Vietnam war movement, strongly present on the Michigan campus in the early 1960s, and by Wolf’s contributions to the new field of peasant studies. Influenced by Marxism and by his personal experience as an Austrian Jew escaping the Holocaust, Wolf resisted determinative culturalist explanations of human behavior. Praising Anthony Wallace’s 1961 call to think of culture as “the organization of diversity” rather than “the

replication of uniformity,” he departed from the “Culture and Personality” orientation of his former teacher, Ruth Benedict, which presumed that whole societies -- the Kwakiutl, the Zuni, the Dobu -- and even whole nation states – Japan or Russia – could be characterized by discrete clusters of traits reproduced through time as a consequence of child socialization. Wolf also weighed in on the peasant concept in the 1950s, arguing against Redfield’s culturalist emphasis on peasants as carriers of primordial folkways, defined as value-saturated, timeless, homogeneous. A 1964 book entitled *Anthropology* explored the history of the lay understanding of culture as something interior, down home, and “ours” as opposed to “civilization” which was outside and cosmopolitan. Here, and in later work, Wolf traced how this notion of culture came to the fore in Europe at a time when some nations were contending for dominance while others were struggling to achieve separate identities and political independence. An ardent opponent of nationalism’s excesses, he feared the misuse of a culture concept more attuned to emotion than to reason. Theories of culture such as Banfield’s that postulate a supposed inner unity, and continuity from primordial beginnings, are, he believed, close to racism and politically dangerous.

### **Myths of the Mediterranean, a Sicilian Case:**

I count Peter Schneider and myself as among the Banfield-bashers, having been sensitized to the “amoral familism” debate before beginning our fieldwork in Sicily in 1965. Since Italian Unification, outside observers had represented Sicily as a timeless island whose inhabitants, although buffeted by foreign tides, clung to their homegrown passions, homegrown habits of crime and corruption, and a homegrown pessimism about change. Many Sicilians rendered the same stereotype, giving it even greater weight. The resulting “myth of Sicily” evoked a more or less racialized past, outside of history, that was argued to account for the existence of Sicily’s renown institution, the Mafia. The myth also furthered the mistaken assumption that Sicilian movements for social and political change – peasants’ struggles for land reform or, more recently, the urban movement against the Mafia and

political corruption -- depend for their coherence on ideologies of modernity imported from outside.

In effect the stereotype depicted Sicilians as unable to solve problems, organized crime among them, because, like the Montegratesi studied by the Banfields, they lacked the cultural capacity to organize themselves to promote the common good. Tapping a very different vein, in the 1980s and 1990s, we followed the impressive collective action of the *antimafia* social movement which, it turns out, had to confront both a cultural milieu conditioned by organized crime, and the equally conditioned political institutions of the regional and national state. Greatly advancing our analysis was the growing historiography clarifying the role the Cold War played in this political corruption – for example: Allied support for mafia-protected landowners at the end of World War II; American support for postwar governments that marginalized the Italian Communist Party, even if this meant that Christian Democrats and later Socialists used mafiosi to “make elections;” the 1970s strategy of virulently anti-communist plotters in “deviated” Masonic lodges to invite selected mafia bosses to join the Freemasons and participate in coups; and (probable) mafia access to weapons stockpiled in support of the NATO “Stay-Behind” project, known in Italy as Gladio (for bibliography see Schneider and Schneider, 2003)

Thanks to these developments, summarized by historian Francesco Renda as “that wicked deal,” the Italian state was unresponsive to the escalation of the Mafia’s power over Sicily’s modern urban growth, which took off chaotically in the 1960s generating a litany of real estate and construction scandals. More shockingly, the state turned a blind eye as two great factions of mafia *cosche* competed for control of the global traffic in heroin in the 1970s, both assisted, when it came to money-laundering, by “deviated” Masonic bankers. Like the honor and shame trope discussed above, “amoral familism” is a gate-keeping concept that obfuscates understanding such social forces and relations. And yet, the “myth of Sicily” persists, as illustrated by Robert Putnam’s *Making Democracy Work; Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, published in 1993, a decade after the first stirrings of *antimafia*.



For Putnam, Sicilians resist change for cultural reasons that are rooted in a “very deep” history. From the thirteenth century the Island’s governments, at once feudal, bureaucratic, and absolutist, did little but attempt to impose “hierarchy” over a potent “latent anarchy” (Putnam 1993: 123-30). As a consequence, Sicilians have continued to “lack” civil consensus, public faith, a “spirit of association,” and to be prey to inept and arbitrary justice, factionalism and corruption. Putnam was aware of, but seemed indifferent to, the fact that his assessment is reminiscent of Banfield’s text, by then subject to several trenchant criticisms, two of which he cites: (political scientist) Sydney Tarrow’s of 1967 and (anthropologist) Sydel Silverman’s of 1968.

### **Banfield Back Home**

Banfield is remembered by scholars on the Left (for example his student, Francis Fox Piven) as a decent but extraordinarily cranky conservative whose early history as a New Dealer in the Farm Services Administration paved the way for his deeply disillusioned critique of government interventions against poverty. Indeed, before he and his wife left for Southern Italy, they lived in agricultural communities in the American West where they encountered 1930s assistance programs that seemed to produce more harm than good. Upon his return to the U.S., where he took up teaching positions in political science at the University of Chicago and Harvard (with an interlude at Penn), he became an ever-more outspoken opponent of redistributive policy, railing retrospectively against the New Deal and, as it unfolded, the Great Society. His book of 1968, *The Unheavenly City, the Nature and Future of Our Urban Crisis*, is a classic in the “culture of poverty” literature – a platform, too, for counseling Nixon on the futility of welfare programs as head of his presidential task force on model cities, and for wholeheartedly participating in neo-conservative networks, institutions, and think-tanks.

For what it is worth, in 1963, the American Enterprise Institute published a 65 page essay by Banfield analyzing foreign aid doctrines. The text (revised from an earlier, 1961 article in

*Public Policy*) is a lengthy diatribe against both the doctrine of “indirect influence,” according to which aid can be expected to democratize the outlook and institutions of the recipient society by raising per capita income, and the doctrine of “direct influence,” aimed at fostering pro-American good will among business or political or intellectual elites, and through them with their governments. Neither doctrine held water, he argued, any more than did doctrines unrelated to national security such as those that rested on concepts of altruism or community in world affairs. To Banfield, the promotion of the welfare of other nations was a new and novel idea in political thought, and a silly one, too, because “doing good,” despite the best intentions of the do-gooders, may well make things worse. Preserving liberal democracy in the West is best accomplished, he argued, not by foreign aid, whatever its justification, but by military action. This, or its credible threat, is the only realistic and efficacious way to hold back the advance of the Soviet Union, and communist domination (p. 28, pp. 31-34).

To dramatize the point, Banfield imagined that even if all of the underdeveloped countries were to fall into communist hands, robbing the U.S. of missile sites, military bases, and listening posts near the Soviet border, long range missile technology would save the day. “So long as our enemies cannot prevent us from exploding a large number of nuclear weapons on their territory, we shall be safe from any attack that might threaten our national existence – as safe, that is, as anything we could do would make us – and if we maintain large conventional forces in Western Europe we can probably prevent an attack there too” (p. 34). Given that America’s existence as a nation was not dependent upon giving aid, “possibly we should rely entirely upon military assistance, rather than upon aid, to check Soviet imperialism” (p. 36).

Banfield’s pessimism rested on several of his prejudices: that in underdeveloped countries, any gain in the standard of living was likely to be immediately offset by population growth; that aspirations rise faster than incomes, creating frustration and instability when unmet; and that some societies are incapable of development because their culture is an obstacle. Citing the Navajo as a prime example of the latter, he goes on to argue that

“underdeveloped countries which are not primitive may (also) lack certain cultural or other prerequisites of development,” among them “at least a small class of persons having talents and incentives that lead them to organize, innovate, and take risks,” and a cultural milieu that respects concerted action for the common good. A footnote refers readers to *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (p. 9). After all, the people of Montegrano had proved that the redistributive transfer of wealth to those who are culturally ill-suited for “development” promises no rewards. Perversely enough, it is “impossible” to use large amounts of non-military aid with effectiveness (p. 11).

In a final reflection on the sorry state of doctrines rationalizing foreign aid, Banfield cites the Marshall Plan as necessary for the reconstruction of war-torn Europe but an unfortunate model for assistance to the underdeveloped world. I have no idea who read his essay or what influence it may have had. One assumes it resonated with the hawkish conservatives he thanks in the acknowledgements footnote. It is intriguing, though, to put ourselves back in the early 1960s: in Greece, Peristiany was raising funds for the encounters that would lead to the “honor and shame” volume; in Sicily the Christian Democrats were weaving the *intreccio* that would so empower the Mafia; and in the United States Edward Banfield, reassured by his Southern Italian sojourn that some people’s cultures are hopeless when it comes to “achieving self-sustaining economic growth or ... governing themselves reasonably well,” was proposing that foreign aid may not “on balance be in the interest of the United States or, indeed, of civilization” (p. 53).

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