

“Exoticising Patriarchies”: Rethinking the Anthropological Views on Gender in Post-WWII Greece

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Gender studies in modern Greece is a field which has attracted little historical interest. However, since the mid-1950s work on the question of gender, originating mainly from the field of social anthropology, has managed to draw a preliminary picture of the traditional Greek family and gender roles in various rural societies. The analysis that follows is focused mainly on Anglo-American literature since they were the ones that established an anthropological tradition in Greece during the 1960s and 1970s (Allen, 2004, p.91).¹ It is generally accepted that the development of anthropological research in Greece has not been autonomous from the wider ethnographical interest in Mediterranean cultures (Gizelis, 2004, p.29; Herzfield, 1987, p.11-2 and p.91). Indeed, one can find significant similarities not only in the methods and practices of the post-WWII anthropologists who have focused on Mediterranean societies, but most importantly in their findings. During this period, anthropologists chose to exclusively study very isolated rural societies. The study of these societies was limited in the discourse of similar analytical categories such as honour, shame, virginity, patriarchy, morality, public - private sphere, with minimal reflection upon issues of diversity and change. These accounts have been reproducing certain stereotypes which, according to more contemporary scholars, were elaborated to enhance a conceptual unity of the Mediterranean cultures (Kirtsoglou, 2004, p.20).² The

¹ According to Allen (2004, p.91) the works of Campbell (1964) and Friedl (1962) should be regarded as the first monographies in Greece by academically trained anthropologists. The first followed the British school of social anthropology while the second the American school of cultural anthropology. Researchers from France, Germany, Holland and Norway followed the British and American trends (Allen, 2004, p.95).

² Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers, tried to defend the work of anthropologists by stating that it is a mistake to consider that anthropologists tried to propose the conceptualization of the Mediterranean as a “cultural area”. According to

choice of rural societies was influenced by a contemporary trend situated within a broader context of Western European concerns about colonialism which tended to treat less economically and socially developed countries as exotic (Herzfeld, 1987, p.11 and p.91). In addition, it can be argued that the anthropological interest in Mediterranean societies was a result of a period of intense modernisation in the West which enlarged the public and academic curiosity to read about societies “forgotten” by change and time. In this way, by creating a unified “exotic” Mediterranean, the West was trying to describe its “other” in order to define itself. Similar approaches are reported in the influential works of Said (1978) and Todorova (1997) who describe how the West tried to locate its identity through a social, cultural, religious, historical, geographical and moral opposition to a homogenised *Orient* or *Balkan*. Thus, *Mediterraneanism* can be regarded as another product of the same concerns that created *Orientalism* and *Balkanism* placing the “other” in Europe’s periphery.

In this context, the code of “honour and shame” became the dominant analytic axis in Mediterranean anthropology on which certain moral values were attached and discussed in order to provide a basis for structuring a cultural continuity of different societies.³ According to this code, a successful male should always prove himself as a successful provider for his family and make sure that not even a breath of gossip touched the reputation of the females of his house. *Honour* was the main male virtue which was shaping masculine hierarchies and was depending on a series of moral, material and social elements. Accordingly, *shame* was the main female virtue which was depending largely on the maintenance of virginity and good reputation before marriage followed by sexual fidelity, successful management of the household and obedience to the husband after marriage. Honour and shame were extensively used to reproduce dichotomous models in the description of gender relations; the honourable male was always connected to power, authority, provision, protection of female chastity while women were related to domesticity, motherhood, subordination and shame. In these terms, the analytic value of these projects remained somewhat superficial since ethnographers insisted in the description of systems as

these authors, the treatment of the Mediterranean as a whole was only an epistemological-methodological tool and was never used in an attempt to promote cultural homogeneity (Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers, 1992, p.4). However, it is an interesting question to what extent their arguments have managed to change the reception of the existing anthropological paradigm, at least in terms of gender.

³ Examples of such works are: Peristiany (1966); Pitt-Rivers (1977).

consisting solely of heterosexual men gaining and confirming their manliness in the public sphere, and heterosexual women remaining attached to domesticity and passiveness. Gender had been repeatedly discussed within this static framework which Herzfeld intelligently describes as consisted of “exoticising devices” (Herzfeld, 1987, p.11).

The anthropological study of Greece was not an exception to this general Mediterranean model. Following the example of the homogeneous anthropological approach towards Mediterranean cultures, early ethnographers put “honour and shame” in the centre of their analysis.⁴ Their growing interest for rural micro-societies resulted in the development of a fairly solid amount of literature in terms of method, practice and findings. Moreover, the constant repetition of more or less the same analytical categories created very powerful representations of Greece that gradually became a reference point for many following historical, sociological and anthropological studies (Avdela, 2002, p.107). In some cases this elaboration of anthropological findings in different disciplines within humanities or by later anthropologists resulted in their misinterpretation. According to Herzfeld (1987, p.91-2) overall early anthropologists were quite careful not to generalise their observations to draw conclusions about Greek society or even Greek rural society as a whole. However, later researchers who used their observations (e.g. Doumanis, 1983) or carried out their own ethnographies (e.g. McNall, 1974) did not follow the same strategy resulting in the formulation of a broad typicality.

Although the work of anthropologists is admittedly important for the understanding of social institutions and gender relations during the period in question, it can be argued that it has left a series of important issues out of its research focus. This includes issues of social change, changes in gender relations, and the existence of diversity in the ways people experienced their gender roles. For example, early anthropological accounts refer to the interaction of male and female spheres, but they do not adequately decode the complex ways in which the formation of gender identities is influenced by the “other”. A deconstruction of social realities is expected to go beyond the creation of successful households, the protection of female chastity and the public/private exhibition of female obedience which have been repeatedly emphasized.

Thus, the first anthropological projects became an extended narration of a “hegemonic” and well known patriarchal model. Space, labour,

⁴ Examples of such works are Sanders (1962); Friedl (1962); Campbell (1964); Boulay (1974).

behaviour, morality, sexuality, family, the whole cosmos of rural Greece has been perceived and depicted as a single-dimensional reality, closely related to an *a priori*, dichotomous male Vs female model. Apparently, this approach left unquestioned a series of issues which could demonstrate probable diversity and plurality in gender experiences, relations and hierarchies. In other words, while gender is regarded as one of the most determinative entities in the formation of social order and distribution of power, very little is said about subordinate or alternative masculinities and femininities. One could hypothesise that even if we accept the dominance of traditional patriarchal models in rural Greece, such an unequal distribution of power and such an inflexible system of gender relations would have probably led to the formation of alternative or marginalized types of men and women. For example, within the paradigm of heterosexual hegemony, ethnographies did report anything not only about the presence but even the “absence” of homosexuality. In addition, their tendency to essentialize and naturalise the code of “honour and shame” did not leave any space for reference to men and women who “failed” to match the hegemonic moral standards like emancipated or “immoral” women, impotent *pater familias* or physically/mentally ill people. These issues are virtually absent from the agenda of the ethnographers – at least until the mid 1980s – who tended to draw upon a hegemonic model of Greek rural society. In this way anthropologists did not give voice to the weaker parts of rural societies which possibly within such powerful patriarchal model remained mute. This is an expression of a major concern in the field of social anthropology; the fact that sometimes the observation of the ethnographers becomes a hegemonic narration which does not necessarily reflect better upon the experiences and ethos of the societies under study.⁵

Furthermore, the ethnographers’ approach becomes to some extent an oxymoron if compared with what some of these social scientists declare as the very objective of anthropology. According to Friedl:

an anthropologist working in old national cultures is able to concentrate his energies in the field on that aspect of his profession for which he is specifically trained and best fitted: the observation of the behaviour of those he lives with for the purpose of discovering its regularities, its range of variation, its internal interrelationships, and its association or

⁵ The controversy between Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman about the Samoa if nothing else showed how anthropological findings can become widely accepted not essentially because of their validity but because they are oriented to serve specific needs of an audience or to offer validity to academic traditions. On this issue see: Freeman (1983); Caton (1990, p.12).

articulation with the culture of the nation of which the village community is a part.

(Friedl, 1962, p.5)

The question of why anthropologists, instead of discovering variation and discussing the complexity of the social organisation of the community under study, ended up with flat, monolithic accounts is an important one here. To an extent this can be contextualised within a broader concern of anthropology which has to deal with various complexities related to the methods, tools and research questions in field observation. Indeed, observing, describing, evaluating and contextualising social change and the inner social structures of isolated communities without ending up with simplistic generalisations, is not a simple task. It requires much broader knowledge than that of the “here and now” with which anthropology has been traditionally preoccupied (Auge, 1995, p.8). Perhaps due to this complexity and methodological limitation the early anthropologists while being aware of these parameters, often underestimated or ignored them in their accounts.⁶

Another point to put forward is that anthropologists, when analysing gender, did not equally emphasize on male and female roles. The description of Greek culture as a male-dominated phenomenon left women described merely as “mute objects”. As Kourvetaris and Dobratz argue, this idea of muteness derives from the fact that in Greece, as well as in other Mediterranean cultures, both husbands and wives when entering the public sphere used to put on a “façade” and behave according to the dominant socio-cultural norms. Thus, men always seemed to identify with the role of the “master-provider” and women with the subordinate role of “wives-mothers”. But in the less obvious private sphere, inside the rural house, significant alterations of this model may have taken place, with women exercising much more power directly and indirectly (Kourvetaris and Dobratz, 1987, p.158). This has been acknowledged by some anthropologists as “the problem of women” (Cowan, 1990, p.7-9). However, the “self-exoticism” of the object of observation has been a general concern in anthropology which by nature can offer only partial views of social phenomena especially if these hide behind the “impenetrable” walls of private spheres. In the 1980s, the acknowledgment of this “problem” led anthropologists to focus more on the lives of women as energetic agents of every society. Thus, the

⁶ It has to be noted that while social change, modernity and migration never became central in the anthropological discourse before the mid-1970s, there are works which make some reference to them. For example see Lee (1953); Friedl (1962, p.44-9); Campbell and Sherrard (1968).

extensive study of women that followed had an important contribution not only to the changing of stereotyped ideas about men and women as social actors but also to the better conceptualization and theorization of culture and society. Since the mid-1980s, this led to a more relational study of gender within anthropology which has been recognizing manhood and womanhood as mutually constitutive processes.⁷

Apart from the depiction of gender as a set of fixed roles, categories and activities, anthropological literature during the period in question paid little attention to issues connected to social change. One could challenge this argument by claiming that during the period under investigation Greece was indeed a typical example of a backward Mediterranean society in which nothing was promoting change in the social or the gender order. This idea of “backwardness” is common not only in the Greek case but also in other Mediterranean cultures (see for example: Banfield and Banfield, 1958). While not examining the case of other Mediterranean societies here, this “solid backwardness” was definitely not the case for Greece during the 1950s and 1960s. These two decades were one of the most transitory periods for an agricultural country that, recovering from a disastrous World War II and a catastrophic civil war, developed an urban-centered profile by the mid-1970s.⁸ This transition was not merely economical, political or demographical. It had a deep impact on the social status which did not leave the values, ideas, beliefs and practices related to gender unaffected. A short reference to the kinds of transitions that Greek society went through is important here to make this point clearer. The civil war, which ended in 1949, left 800.000 people refugees, a ruined countryside, a destroyed industrial infrastructure, and a bankrupt state (Gallant, 2001, p.179). However, during the 1950s and 1960s, Greece made an impressive economic recovery mainly by developing industry, merchant marine, and tourism. Nevertheless, the high rates of productivity caused increasing levels of inequality with lower classes fighting to survive.

⁷ Examples of such approaches can be found in Dubisch (1986), Cowan (1990), Loizos and Papataxiarchis (1991); Papataxiarchis, E. and Paradellis, Th. (1992,1993).

⁸ In 1951, the urban percentage of the population which was living in cities or towns with population over 10.000, did not exceed the 37.7%. By 1961 this number rose to 43.3% to reach the 53.2% in 1971, a year during which the official census showed that only 35.1% remained rural and 11.7% semi-urban. In net numbers the internal migration during the period 1950-73 was massive: approximately 560.000 migrated in the 1950s, 680.000 in the 1960s and 720.000 in the 1970s. The numbers here are quoted from McNeill (1978, p.5 and p.211); Karapostolis (1983, p.108 and p.118); Close (2002, p.61).

Furthermore, these developments and the abandonment of agriculture led thousands of people to abandon their rural homes and migrate to urban centres where they could have easier access to education and modern amenities (Close, 2002, p.61; Friedl, 1962, p.44-7). It is enough to say that the population of Athens doubled from 1.378.500 inhabitants in 1951 to 2.540.200 residents in 1971 to understand how the demographic character of the country altered dramatically (McNeill, 1978, p.4).

These internal migrants became bridges between the urban centres and their villages altering the cultural character of the cities but at the same time transferring modern ideas to the rural periphery. The urban centres were also influenced by foreign ideas which were communicated through popular media – mainly popular magazines and the cinema – and the growing number of tourists.⁹ All these contributed to the development of a material and consumer culture which had an impact on the conception of the honourable family since, as we move from the 1950s to the 1960s, men and families were judged not only by their morality but also by their ability to afford modern amenities (Karapostolis, 1983, p.66-67 and p.255). Furthermore, the way women dressed started to change since the traditional clothing was gradually replaced by modern clothes which revealed female sexuality. These are only two examples of how the media and the presence of tourists in Greece brought new cultural ideas and inevitably diluted some of the traditional moral codes. It should also be noted that during this period women's roles began to significantly alter since for the first time they started attending universities and acquired paid jobs in the cities (Lambiri-Dimaki, 1983, p.168; Kornetis, 2006, p.270). Female labour started to be appreciated as the wife's contribution to the household – since the new economic standards of the cities made it very hard for men to continue being the sole providers – and was an important step towards women's emancipation (Campbell and Sherrard, 1968, p.368; Close, 2002, p.71).

The above economic and social transformations illustrate the changes in the ways gender was conceptualised and experienced. The criteria for judging honourable men changed, women began to abandon their domesticity, young people got increased education

⁹ Tourism in Greece did not exceed the 100.000 visitors in 1938, a number that grew five times by 1961 to reach the amazing number of two million tourists per year by the late 1960s (Mouzelis, 1978, p.24). Also, from 1963 onwards the annual number of cinema tickets sold in Greece was more than 100,000,000 which in proportion with the population of the country was the greatest in Europe (Sotiropoulou, 1995, p.53).

creating in this way a generation gap between themselves and their elders, while the negotiation of traditional and modern values created alternative youth cultures and alternative conceptions of male and female identity (Avdela, 2005). Early ethnographical accounts left these issues unquestioned, insisting on descriptions of similar patriarchal systems and thus, portrayed rural Greece as one homogenous matrix. In these terms the literature in question failed to view gender identities as multiple, fluid and context-dependent (Kirtsoglou, 2004, p.23). This could be attributed to the fact that despite the tremendous social change in Greece, early anthropologists were not concerned with what was happening at the core of this phenomenon, the urban centres. Instead, they preferred to work exclusively in small peasant communities, geographically and culturally isolated from the rest of the country. Their analysis would have been much more multi-dimensional if they had included a brief study of the cities even only as a comparison point to approach the process of this urban-rural interaction. Their persistence in the selection of rural areas for fieldwork created the impression that “anthropologists work alone and that they cannot therefore grasp the complexities of the cities” (Davis, 1977, p.7).¹⁰ However, the anthropologists’ inadequacy to depict social and cultural change in Greece should not be regarded as an indigenous phenomenon. One of the major concerns in anthropology during the last decades has been how one can address and interpret social change, cultural transfers and the dissemination of new ideas through field observation. Recent works on issues like modernity, migration and globalization from a socio-anthropological perspective confirm a promising shift of the discipline towards this direction (see for example Friedman and Randeria, 2004).

To summarise, the anthropological accounts on Greece during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s can be criticised for not sufficiently decoding the complex ways in which gender identities are formulated, for providing single-dimensional accounts of rural societies, for not paying sufficient attention to alternatives and for neglecting to study change. A lot of factors can be said to have contributed to these shortcomings. Some are intrinsic to the discipline of anthropology such as the difficulty to fully describe the complexity solely through field observation, or the inability of the ethnographer to observe private places. However, there are also other factors which can help explain why the anthropological accounts of this period present the

¹⁰ The lack of focus on the cities is also acknowledged by Dubisch (1986, xi). Nevertheless, some works by anthropologists make references to interaction between rural and urban environment (Friedl, 1962, p.44-7; 1976) and the impact of technological change (Lee, 1953).

picture that they do. First, anthropologists were at the time fascinated by the study of isolated rural communities where they could reaffirm their assumptions of “exotic” social norms. For this reason they applied the same research methods, questions and theories in the Mediterranean as they did when studying “primitive” societies in the Amazon or Africa (Friedl, 1962, p.2; Herzfeld, 1987, p.92). Second, they treated the Mediterranean area as a homogeneous cultural field and thus transferred cultural traits from one place to another and applied similar research questions to the whole Mediterranean with more ease. This is not to say that Mediterranean countries did not share anything in common but that the description of social culture should have been done with more consideration for the specificities of each area. Third, as Davis states, anthropologists during the 1950s and the 1960s did not make an explicit comparison of their findings. This lack of comparison deprived their work of controversy, variation and interest for new challenges within or outside their discipline (Davis, 1977, p.5). And fourth, anthropologists of the time showed little concern to the history and time-scale dimension of their case-studies. As Davis argues:

It is quite rare to read, for example, about the systems of stratification that preceded those observed by the authors of the monographs, and writers have neglected to show how a contemporary system may be related to what is known of its precursors.

(Davis, 1977, p.5)

Through this partially “ahistorical” approach, which is not absent in the general practice of anthropology (Auge, 1995, p.8) and especially in the British school of social anthropology (Erickson-Murphy, 1998, p.101), the concepts of change and continuity were not adequately studied. All the above factors contributed to emphasising for more than two decades the same or similar categories of analysis, and describing in similar ways how gender identities and relations were conceptualised and experienced. This has been done without much appreciation of the way things were changing or the alternatives and differences that existed in each society. In other words if such a broader discussion had taken place, a more enriched analysis would have been conducted based on polyphony and multiplicity.

Concluding, anthropological literature on rural Greece seems to carry the same weaknesses as well as the same strengths of similar studies in the broader area of the Mediterranean. The discussion here does not aim to create an impression that it is unimportant or useless for contemporary researchers. On the contrary, an extended knowledge of its methods, tools, findings and limitations can provide

the background for its better understanding and thus, increase its analytical value. During the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s it was the only body of literature focused so extensively on social institutions and on the relations between men and women. Consequently, it can be fairly argued that even if it does not look at the whole picture of the Greek society at the time, it does provide important insights. In this way, it becomes a unique source for the investigation of the major values, ideas and beliefs of the Greek rural societies. Even if they do not manage to provide a multi-dimensional picture of male and female identities, anthropologists still offer valuable information towards this end by noting the values that constitute the “backbone” of a traditional Mediterranean society. It should also be added, that during the last three decades, anthropological studies on Greece have been more comparative, controversial and multidimensional mainly because of their increasing interest in social change, the interaction between urban and rural, the alteration of moral values and the impact of modernity.¹¹ Through this self-reflection anthropology has made an important effort to be released from repeated categories and methods and shift towards the search of patterns of variation in the construction of identity and personhood. Finally, acknowledging the “limitations” of the early anthropological literature does not imply its rejection but, on the contrary, allows for better understanding, interpreting and using it in a historical context.

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¹¹ Some examples of major works which initiated a new dialogue between anthropology and gender in the mid 1980s and early 1990s are: Herzfeld (1985, 1987); Dubisch (1986); Cowan (1990); Loizos and Papataxiarchis (1991); Faubion (1993); Papataxiarchis and Paradellis (1992, 1993).

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