

HONOR AS PROPERTY*

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Foreword

Since 1980 I have been conducting research on the administration of criminal justice in the Italian countryside earlier in this century (Cottino, 1983), focusing both on the local courts' functioning and on peasants' law-breaking behavior. In particular, my focus has been on conflicts within the local community and between the local community and the State.

Early on in this project, the striking, constant overrepresentation in the criminal records of cases of insult and defamation raised my curiosity about the importance attributed to honor. In many disputes, no matter what the conflict is about, the parties sooner or later attack each other by pointing out what they believe - or want to make other people to believe - to be a serious failure or a weakness in the opponent's moral standards (usually in the field of sexuality when women are involved, in the field of honesty and capacity for hard work in the case of men). A second, and no less intriguing feature is the gap between the apparently minor importance of the value at stake and the intensity of the conflict which develops around it. There is no apparent limit to the blame one peasant man directs towards another, when one of the parties has taken a spade of earth from the neighbor's field. I recall the case where a dispute over the right to sit on a balcony which was common to two neighbors developed into a long list of offensive actions and phrases. One side accused the other of murder and theft, the other side replied by spreading rumors over the neighbor's dubious moral and physical condition, saying that he was a great liar and a person with bad health - literally 'with rotten legs'.

* I am indebted to N. Christie (Christie, 1979) for the title of this article.

This article constitutes an attempt to explain this peculiarity of peasant culture.¹ The data presented here come mainly from three sources: criminal records, proverbs, and unstructured interviews. The Provincial State archives (located in the three Piedmontese towns of Cuneo, Asti and Turin) have provided the quantitative information about the criminal trials in the various provinces. Geographical criteria (the rural location of the district) and the quality of the records (the completeness of the time series) have decided the choice of the courts. In one instance only (in the case of Rocca d'Arazzo's local court) a dozen interviews with the elderly of the village were carried out. The proverbs were taken from collections of Italian or Piedmontese folklore.²

1. The centrality of conflicts concerning honor

The diffusion of conflicts concerning honor in the peasant world and, more generally, in pre-capitalist society, is widely documented, both for the contemporary era³ and for earlier historical periods.⁴ Two elements emerge from this body of research which have not been evaluated with sufficient attention despite their potential theoretical relevance: on the one hand, the frequency with which such conflicts accompany disputes on a wide range of questions connected with the land, and on the other hand, the frequent presence

1 A first attempt to utilize some of the data collected in the original investigation was made in an earlier contribution (Cottino, 1986). Subsequently a paper was presented at the IUAES' Symposium in Zagreb (1988) on 'Legal Pluralism in Industrialized Societies'. This article is a revised version of that draft. Fred Bailey, Elisabetta Forni, Mirella Larizza, Luisella Pesante and Pino Rutto, who have read earlier versions of the article, have made many valuable suggestions.

2 One can certainly question how much relevance should be ascribed to the proverbs. The fact that they are undated (and how could they, as they belong to the oral culture of the popular classes?) could cause one to challenge their scientific value. My long term acquaintance with peasants, however, makes me rather comfortable about the plausibility of two assumptions about peasant proverbs: a. that they constitute an essential part of peasant culture; b. that peasants ascribe to them both a descriptive and a prescriptive function.

3 Halbwachs, 1955; Foster, 1965; Peristiany, 1966; Abel, 1970; Du Boulay and Williams, 1987; Cutileiro, 1971; Castan, 1974; Bourdieu, 1972; Pigliaru, 1976; Davis, 1977; Starr, 1979; Sharpe, 1980; Verdier, 1980; Signorelli, 1983; Meloni, 1984; Zagnoli, 1986; Fatela, 1986.

4 Lotman and Uspenskij, 1973; Cavallo, 1980; Oesterberg, 1982; Ferrante, 1983; Farr, 1987; Ruggiero, 1987.

of a pattern for addressing, and sometimes resolving conflicts, modalities which the official law considered, respectively, assault and self help. The data extrapolated from the abovementioned investigation on peasant criminality in the countryside⁵ do not contradict this overall picture. In fact, a study of the court proceedings⁶ of the *Tribunale* of Cuneo, the *Pretura* of Garessio (in the province of Cuneo), the *Pretura* of Ivrea (in the province of Turin), and that of Rocca d'Arazzo (in the province of Asti) show insult, defamation, assault and self help to be among the most frequent crimes (tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: Occupation of the defendant and type of conflict, Tribunale of Cuneo, 1901- 1903; 1912-1914 and Mondovi, 1901-1903.

type of conflict	occupation of defendant							total	%
	peasant	craftsman	worker	trader	bourgeois	marginal*			
insult	166	50	30	25	55	14	340	14.2	
self-help	39	2	0	0	1	0	42	1.7	
assault	219	68	60	24	18	11	400	16.5	
other	772	272	121	241	91	142	1639	67.6	
total	1196	392	211	290	165	167	2421		
%	49.4	16.1	8.7	11.9	6.8	6.8		100	

* This category includes vagrants, prostitutes and people with no occupation.

5 Cottino, 1986. It should be added that the investigation (which is almost concluded) covers a limited geographical area - the local courts of three provinces in central and southern Piedmont (Piemonte) - and a brief time span ranging from 1898 to 1914.

6 Two types of courts are investigated: the *Pretura*, the lowest court, which deals with misdemeanours and petty felonies; the *Tribunale*, which deals with more serious offences and hears appeals from the *Pretura*.

Table 2: Occupation of the defendant and type of conflict, Pretura of Garessio, 1901, Ivrea, 1901-1904, and Rocca d'Arazzo, 1901-1905.

type of conflict	occupation of defendant							total	%
	peasant	craftsman	worker	trader	bourgeois	marginal*			
theft	29	2	0	0	0	1	32	9.4	
embezzlement	1	0	0	0	1	0	2	0.5	
insult	48	4	2	5	4	5	68	20.0	
contempt of auth.	6	0	0	0	0	0	6	1.7	
self-help	14	1	0	5	1	0	21	6.1	
peculation	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.2	
assault	26	3	1	2	1	2	35	10.3	
threat	11	1	1	2	2	1	18	5.3	
drunkenness	3	1	2	1	0	0	7	2.2	
other	101	13	19	6	5	5	149	43.9	
total	240	25	25	21	14	14	339		
%	70.7	7.3	7.3	6.1	4.1	4.1		100	

In this article, I will argue that in the peasants' view there is no clear-cut separation between different types of conflicts (whereas the structure of legal categories recognizes clear differentiations) and that honor and land represent two pivotal, interchangeable values within a larger system of equivalences including women and livestock. It is clear to me that the issue of honor directly concerns fundamental values, problems of *production* (land and livestock) and *reproduction* (woman). Thus one should look for causal explanations at the infrastructural and structural levels (Harris, 1979). In this essay, however, I do

not aim to offer some explicitly articulated set of propositions relating variables to a causal theory.

2. Honor in the peasant world

The best known, most discussed and most often criticized hypothesis advanced in the last thirty years to explain the frequency of disputes concerning honor is that offered by Foster (1965) in his essay "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good". According to Foster,

... broad areas of peasant behavior are patterned in such fashion as to suggest that peasants view their social, economic and natural universes ... as one in which all of the desired things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor ... *exist in finite quantity* and are always *in short supply*, in as far as the peasant is concerned....⁷

As a corollary to the Image of Limited Good, it can be said that any individual or family improvement will occur at the expense of others; therefore, violent reactions that cast doubt on a man's honor "appear to be a function of the belief that honor ... exists in limited quantities ...".⁸ Peasants' cognitive orientation becomes the main factor shaping the functioning of social institutions, the value system, personality and, of course, patterns of behavior. But, as Piker (1966) rightly pointed out:

... for the purposes of identifying the presence of the master cognitive orientation, it is not sufficient to argue that much of the peasant's thought and behavior is consistent with hypotheses derived from the model corresponding to it. For if the model has any explanatory value, it resides in generating hypotheses ...; and to use the presence of the hypothesized behavior as an index of the presence of the master cognitive orientation that justifies the application of the model in the

⁷ Foster, 1965:304.

⁸ In this necessarily sketchy presentation of Foster's main thesis, I neither do justice to his very stimulating (although in my opinion mistaken) contribution, nor do I take into account the minor modifications he later (Foster, 1976) made.

first place, would indeed be committing the fallacy of tautology....⁹

Other writers, as Cutileiro (1971) and Davis (1977), have stated that honor is important in the peasant world because, to the extent that it is associated with wealth, it constitutes a principle of social stratification. In particular, Davis suggests examining honor as the language through which peasants signal differences in terms of fortune. Signorelli (1983) argues against this view saying that Davis' conception of honor does not make much sense,

... since all the complex code and the no less complicated ritual of honor would be a ... useless and therefore inexplicable way to point out who is richer than whom.¹⁰

One must ask, therefore, why the social system needs to express differences in the relative standing of individuals through honor at all, and not directly through wealth.

Earlier (Cottino, 1983), a proposal was advanced in favor of considering honor not so much as a limited, and therefore rare good, but rather as a unique good. This expression was meant to suggest the existence of a value which is, by definition, unrelinquishable. So much so that, should this good be threatened, such a threat would represent an attack upon the psycho-physical identity of the subject, and thus bring about a "*crisi della presenza*",¹¹ following the terminology of De Martino (1959). As Lombardi Satriani and Meligrana have shown (1974),

Individual dignity constitutes an absolute value, which cannot tolerate the smallest scratch. This is understandable when one bears in mind that the need for dignity is directly proportional to the lack of recognition of the personality of subordinate persons whose conditions of oppression, frustration and humiliation develop in them the need for the recognition of their importance, a need whose satisfaction is essential to psychic and cultural survival.¹²

9 Piker, 1966:1204.

10 Signorelli, 1983:60.

11 By "*crisi della presenza*" De Martino (1959) means the threat to one's existence posed by situations of extreme physical and psychological deprivation.

12 Lombardi Satriani and Meligrana, 1974:293.

In an early phase of research (Cottino, 1986), this hypothesis found some confirmation in the quantitative data which, though limited by a very restricted number of observations, revealed an overrepresentation of marginal persons (including vagabonds, prostitutes, students etc.) in legal cases heard concerning honor. The result therefore seemed to confirm the plausibility of the idea that in situations of great material deprivation, where little or nothing remains to defend, honor assumes its full significance, its full unrelinquishability. Since then, additional data from other courts' proceedings complicate this interpretation; the larger figures do not show an overrepresentation of marginals. The hypothesis appears to call for reassessment.

3. Land in the peasant world

Much has been written about the love which ties the peasant to the land. Often the writer descends to mere rhetoric, or takes up the class-oriented attitude of those who consider such an attachment to be irrational and reactionary (for a critique of this attitude to the field of peasant studies in particular, see Ortiz (1971) and Bailey (1971), and in the social sciences in general see Boudon (1983)). The findings of Mendras, however, are important in regard to such social science conventions. He not only points out that the drive to hold on to or to acquire new land is the rational response to the demands arising from technological progress and the market economy,¹³ but also emphasizes the fact that "to be landowners has meant, *historically*, to be free, to be citizen with full rights".¹⁴ Thus he evokes a vision of a world in which necessity and liberty can coexist harmoniously, at least at the meta-historical level. As the peasant proverbs so clearly express, reality is very different.

There are three components to a good peasant life: house, fields and forest. As the saying goes "as much house as you can live in, as many fields as you can plow, as much pasture as you can manure, and as much woodland as you can get". But most of these goals are unattainable. A few may be successful, but at the price of perennial conflicts: "he who owns land gets war". In the peasant view, to be at peace is to be dead: "dead man makes soil; living man makes war". Thus material scarcity and, in particular, scarce land are related to conflict, to its permanence, to its normality. Material scarcity determines what types of social relationships are possible, and how stable they can be. The typically marginal person - the vagabond with no money and no land - is unable to establish social ties. But to a major or a minor extent all social ties are

13 Mendras, 1976.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

unstable, since, as anthropologists have shown, people are torn between competition and dependence, conflict and solidarity. Mistrust and envy can rule even among the closest kin: "brother's love, knife's love".

4. Which honor and which peasant world?

Two kinds of problems emerge from the study of honor in the peasant world. First, a general theory of honor is an elusive goal, even when the attempt is restricted to Mediterranean society.¹⁵ As has been shown by various scholars,¹⁶ the term honor is used in a variety of ways. As I said above, it is associated by some scholars with wealth (Davis, 1977; Cutileiro, 1971); by others with an expression of an egalitarian ideal (Pitt-Rivers, 1954). For still other authors (Campbell, 1964; Lison-Tolosana, 1966) it is independent of economic power.¹⁷ Thus, as Di Bella has stated, there is "a lack of consensus on the meaning and use of the term (and a difficulty in its becoming) a truly operational concept in any comparative study".¹⁸ To the writers such as Di Bella who disallow the possibility of formulating an explanatory model (as such a model could not take into account the true heterogeneity of the term honor), one could reply that this variety in meaning does not constitute, in and of itself, an insurmountable obstacle. Formulating a general explanation of the importance of honor in the peasant world remains feasible, *provided that*, above and beyond the diversity of contexts, comprised under the heading 'Mediterranean society' or 'agro-pastoral society', one can identify a common denominator. To this end, we can turn to the position of those who emphasize the connective function which honor serves between the individual (and his family) on one hand, and the community on the other (see, e.g., Meloni, 1984). As this writer states,

... honor is a symbolic property, inherited or acquired ...
continually subject to the judgments of others, to social
controls, and to face-to-face relationships.¹⁹

15 Mediterranean society is a term currently referred to, to indicate the agro-pastoral areas of Southern Europe, sharing the Greek-Latin cultural tradition.

16 See Herzfeld, 1980; Di Bella, 1980; Lever, 1986.

17 A general review of the theories of social honor and a defence of the non-materialistic approach (the autonomy of honor systems vis-à-vis patterns of material inequality) can be found in Hatch (1989).

18 Di Bella, 1980:607.

19 Meloni, 1984:236.

A second problem which cannot be overlooked is the fact that 'Mediterranean society' refers both to pastoral and peasant communities, that is, to two different economic structures. While making no claim to be exhaustive, I maintain that one can indicate a few fundamental and common characteristics. In the first place, the economies involved are, in large part, subsistence economies which, by definition, lack the production of a surplus. This mode of production, also referred to as the agro-pastoral mode of production, does not imply anything like isolation from the broader socio-economic context in which it is placed. The relationship between this agro-pastoral system and the broader context which surround it is not necessarily only one of conflict but also of cooperation. As Pigliaru (1976) points out, in the pastoral society of Barbagia²⁰ the existence of a local legal system based upon "*vendetta*" does not automatically exclude the shepherds' access to the State legal system. When the local community believes that, in a given case, the latter may give better guarantees in terms of efficient criminal justice, the vendetta system is put aside and the case is taken to court. Another characteristic is the emphasis on "us" as a group, in opposition to others: it may be the Sarakatsan family as a corporate group (Campbell, 1966) or the Sardinian kin group (Pigliaru, 1976). The 'us' as a group can be seen most vividly in the case of the 'vendetta' - an institution traditionally widespread in many Mediterranean countries - when what Verdier (1980) has labelled 'capital de vie'²¹ is threatened.

Turning next to the problematic use of terms like 'peasants' and 'peasant world', here I propose to adopt the expression 'peasant condition'. This term is suggested by Cirese (1977) who emphasizes, following Marx, along with the concept of appropriation of the means of production, the suitability of a second concept, "*the ownership of the very conditions of labor*" (Marx, 1972). Thus, the peasant condition, or, better still, the agro-pastoral condition, "includes not only the techniques of work in a strict sense, but also the modes of operation both within the periods of work and the daily and seasonal pauses, as well as behavior in domestic and social life".

20 Barbagia is the inland area of the province of Nuoro, a Sardinian town.

21 'Life's capital' is defined as "the whole of people and goods, strength and values, beliefs and rites that build the unity and cohesion of the group" (Verdier, 1980:19).

5. The defense of property: 'he who owns land gets war'
(Piedmontese proverb)

Let us turn our attention to this 'being in the world' of peasants and shepherds; let us seek to discover the underlying links and connections that form the multiplicity of social relations. These links may become visible often in the actual words of the protagonists themselves, sometimes in the dry language of the clerks of the court. Let us begin with the *Pretura* of Garesio. Approximately half the disputes dealt with by this court are concerned with land, its products, and the tools and resources for its exploitation:

a) "Phthysic, full of lice! All your family is phthysic. Ass!", says Carlo Pernione to Gio Carlo Borgna, who sits outside of his house with some friends. The plaintiff (Borgna) believes that Pernione has insulted him because of a dispute between the plaintiff himself and the defendant's brother *over a question of irrigation*.²²

b) On 10 July, 1901, Antonio Alberto says in the presence of several persons that Domenico Bologna (the plaintiff's husband) is "not that honest". He had seen him encroaching upon other people's property. The following day, Antonio Alberto says in the presence of the plaintiff, who is in the company of many other persons, the following words: "I don't act like your husband who *trespasses on my land* and takes chestnuts from my trees to put in his own wood".²³

Often the conviction that one's rights are well-founded leads to immediate action.

c) Giovanni Vinai is sentenced to a fine of £ 10 for having cut grass on a *spot* he claims to be his property.²⁴

In a number of cases it is difficult to know what the real conflict is about. In several instances, insult, scandal, physical threats and violence are probably only pretexts. The act of which the defendant is accused also can be either the triggering factor or retaliation for a previous offense. The complexity of these patterns of interactions is well exemplified by the case of Angela Averana and her husband Stefano charged with defamation and threat (*minaccia a mano*

22 Cirese, 1977:22.

23 Cottino 1983: 126-127, italics mine.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

armata). This dispute (whose conclusion is unknown) is a story of small landowners who live, as the proverb goes, in a situation of war.

d) In March, 1902, the couple publicly "defamed Teresa Gallo by saying in the presence of several other persons that she got rid of a four-month fetus by crushing it". Angela's husband, Stefano, had added: "and remember that it was a boy". The same accusation was repeated in July. On June 19th, Angela Averana, armed with a stone, met the plaintiff in the street and threatened her with the following words: "If you don't go into the coffin by yourself, I will help you to do it - even if I have to die in prison". The defendant denies she has ever said that the plaintiff got rid of a four-month fetus: "I heard it said by somebody publicly and I told myself not to say it to anybody". "From the 19th of June until today", says the plaintiff Teresa Gallo in her second claim, "the above mentioned Angela Averana has gone around the village of Ceresole saying that Teresa Gallo stole potatoes and squash from her garden. She keeps saying these things anywhere and anytime, even in front of Teresa Gallo". Angela Averana declares: "I do not exclude the possibility that, when I was complaining about the theft perpetrated in my garden by unknown persons, I said that my suspicion fell on Teresa Gallo. She has been angry at me because of a certain thing she believes I have done to her; but the truth is that the evening before the vegetables were stolen, I met her on the way back from my garden where I picked a basket of potatoes, and she said, in the presence of Virginia Gallo: "Nice potatoes you have there: but I am going to let you have more and bigger". The following morning I discovered that my potatoes in the garden were gone, and I immediately thought of Teresa Gallo. We are neighbors, you see, and I heard her husband saying to her: "You really did a good job; pray God that they don't find you: You behave like the people from Erbi" (according to the saying, these people take revenge at night). I have also found female footprints and stickholes. Teresa Gallo walks with a stick".²⁵

e) A landowner of Niella Tanaro, was condemned to six months for personal injuries inflicted on a neighbor with whom he was engaged in a lawsuit regarding the *boundaries* of their respective *properties*.²⁶

f) A baker of Sale Langhe was condemned for self-help because he attempted, with violence and threats, to exercise a *right of ownership* over a saucepan.²⁷

25 *Ibid.*, p. 127-128.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 128-129.

27 Cuneo's *Tribunale*, sentence n. 147,1898.

g) A father and a son, both peasants, were condemned for *damaging a dam and assault*: the dam impaired *the irrigation of their land*.²⁸

h) The peasant woman, Berta, born in 1903, narrates: "Land was the most important thing; sometimes for a scrap of land we fought and even killed each other. Someone plowed a furrow a little bit beyond the *boundary* of his land, and the owner of the field struck him on the head with a cudgel and killed him. Someone else cut his brother's throat because he had not given him *the land* which he did not cultivate. A woman was struck repeatedly by another woman who *owned the field*, she crossed to go to a fountain. I myself beat a woman who always used to come *to rob us* of our figs. One day we waited for her, my cousin and I, and we really made her feel it, and then to show our disrespect we went and rolled around in *her field* in the tall grass"²⁹ (emphasis mine). Attilio, born in 1912, added: "Here there was only misery, and a tremendous ill will existed between persons: they were jealous. They fought all the time, there was even a man who bought quarrels (sic!). They killed each other for a *right of way*. Even my mother had to struggle for a *pathway*: someone had caused a landslide because he did not want that path to cross *his land*, then he said to my mother: 'You are in the right, but I have money and I'll pay until I won't be in the wrong'. That's the way things were"³⁰ (emphasis mine). As Fatela (1986) remarked, reflecting on the condition of the peasantry,

... les nombreux conflits autour de la terre que rythment l'histoire de l'homicide, attestent de son importance vitale pour l'homme de la campagne: ici, l'avoir se confond avec l'être.³¹

Thus land represents a pivotal point around which conflicts explode. First of all land is a scarce and highly valued resource. Encroachment, abusive banks and ditches, illegal cutting of grass and the like, they all represent attempts to gain land or its products. But land also provides the arena where hostilities can begin and develop:

There is something of a ritual in taking fruits and vegetables from somebody else's field. Taking something away from a neighbor does not have to be the enforcement of a customary

28 *Ibid.*, sentence n. 57, 1898

29 *Ibid.*, sentence n. 3, 1914.

30 Interviewed in Rocca d'Arazzo in 1986.

31 Fatela, 1986:20.

right or the answer to unendurable living conditions: it can simply be a declaration of hostility.³²

The proverb quoted above, "he who owns land gets war", should be interpreted in this way as well.

6. Honor, land, wealth, house and woman: a system of equivalences?

I have attempted to illustrate so far the thesis expressed in the peasant proverb "he who owns land, gets war". My discussion has affirmed that land constitutes the triggering element in an arena of action where the other factors which enter into play refer either to the moral integrity of the persons involved (damaged by insult, defamation and the like) or their physical integrity (threatened by violence). Anthropological documentation, although it is sparse and far from systematic, provides further indications which permit us not only to enlarge upon the picture already drawn, but also to suggest hypotheses as to the relations which connect the various factors. In the Barroso region (Portugal) - as Fatela (1986) tells us -

... when the bridegroom goes to knock on the door of his future wife on his wedding day, he finds the house closed up, immersed in a profound silence, as if it were uninhabited. From within the house the bride's father calls out to him, asking the young man: 'What are you looking for?' The young man responds: 'Woman, land and honor.' Then the girl opens the door saying: 'Come in. Here you'll find all that you seek.'³³

In Terras de Bouro, the marriage ritual is similar, but with one difference: the young man responds to the question of his future wife's father: 'woman, land, honor and money'. In Northern Bourgogne, it is a matter of honor to keep the land within the family (Zonabend, 1980).

Thus material and immaterial elements form part of the same universe. As Meloni has aptly summarized, speaking of Sardinia:

32 Meloni, 1984:243.

33 Fatela, 1986:19.

... the honor and prestige of a pastoral family are tied up in possession and control of property (livestock, land and house) which guarantee autonomy.³⁴

But why speak of a system of equivalences? In this regard too, some indications, while scarce, are to be found in the literature. It is true, as Meloni observes, that "a high symbolic capital cannot *easily* be exchanged for a high economic capital ... since honor and wealth are not precisely equivalent",³⁵ yet this type of adjustment *can* take place. The studies of Cabral (1984), referred to by Fatela, are significant in this respect. In her studies of two communities in Portugal, the author shows, among other things, the differing significance a premarital pregnancy can have, depending upon the economic circumstances of the girl's family. She can 'regularize' her situation without any serious problems if her parents come from a rich and powerful house; but such a solution will not be possible if the girl does not possess land. As a result, in both communities the majority of bastards are children of day laborers or servants. Fatela remarks:

... *sans terre, pas de mariage, pas de maison, pas de prestige, pas d'honneur...*³⁶

7. Honor as property

The period between the ninth and thirteenth centuries was a critical one in European history, in that landed property, money and service due to a feudal lord became increasingly interchangeable within what we could call a system of equivalences. The central element in this evolutionary process is the concept of *service*. Services were rendered, particularly when they were demanded for the defense of a given territory. Such service was rewarded by the concession of land, and this type of remuneration was called an honor. If a man who had been granted land, along with the duty to defend it, showed himself to be incapable of doing so, he lost the land. In this way, he also lost honor.

Let us proceed to reconstruct, step by step, the linguistic changes which have characterized the use of two words: *benefice* and *honor*. The term *benefice* (in Latin, *beneficium*) connoted the land granted to a vassal in exchange for a service. Unlike many other words of Latin origin, *beneficium* survived only in the feudal chancelleries, and we do not find any direct derivative in common use

34 Meloni, 1984:243.

35 *Ibid.*, italics mine.

36 Fatela, 1986:21.

in the romance languages. But from the ninth century onward, one finds, carrying the meaning of beneficium, the word *fief*. According to Bloch (1968), the word *fief* is associated with the term *vieh*, found in the old germanic languages, and bearing a significance not dissimilar to the Latin word *pecus*. *Pecus*, as many will recall, stood for money, for a flock or herd of animals, and for personal property in general. In the gallo-germanic languages, *vieh* became *fief* (*feu* in Provençal). Until the 10th century, *fief* meant any kind of personal property. Later, the term lost all its original and more specific connotations, and came to mean any type of recompense, whether in the form of real property or in that of personal property. This held true, Bloch tells us, in the Latin countries in particular.

In a manner analogous to this evolution, the concept of honor, in the course of the 11th and 12th centuries, underwent a process of semantic transformation which reflects, again in Bloch's opinion, a change in the relation of power between Monarchy and Aristocracy. Honor, which in Charlemagne's time was equivalent with the defense of a given territory (and this function of defense could be demanded by the emperor at any time), was transformed in less than a century to a fixed right to the land. In other words, honor became synonymous with *fief* (Robreau, 1981).

In this period one finds frequent references to '*honors de terre*', '*honor terriene*' and similar expressions. Honor, which initially referred to enormous feudal properties, now came more often to mean also *small land-holdings*. It is not surprising, considering the fact that folk culture is predominantly oral, that written references to the land and honor are difficult to find. I will give below just one example from a medieval text, written in Occitan, which describes, in popular terms, the myth of Adam and Eve and the serpent (Auerbach, 1956):

Adam: Dis moi, muiller, que te querroit li mal Satan? que te voleit?

Eve: Il me parla de notre honor.³⁷

Eve succeeds, after a certain amount of effort, in overcoming Adam's initial (peasant) diffidence, and convinces him to eat the apple. Once the fruit is eaten, Adam acquires honor. As Auerbach remarks, in this context as well as, more generally, in '*La chanson de geste*', the word honor has a strong material connotation. Adam now enjoys all possible benefits, including power.

37 Adam: Tell me wife, what did he ask you?, the evil Satan?
What did he want from you?

Eve: He spoke to me of our honor.

I will not take into consideration at this time other significant aspects of this question, such as the legal aspect. It is sufficient for now to have touched upon the historical development of such concepts and terms as honor, money, flocks and land, all of which became ingredients in the same economic, social and linguistic process, whose various mutations bear witness to an interrelationship of equivalences between the land and personal property on the one hand, and honor on the other.

8. Concluding remarks

It is now possible, on the basis of the preceding observations, to formulate an answer to the question posed above - why is honor a central issue in agro-pastoral society? I shall summarize my arguments below, in an intentionally schematic form:

1. Land, in that it is a limited and/or rare good, is frequently the object/occasion/site of conflicts.
2. In the world view of the peasants, other goods/values tend to coalesce around these conflicts, including honor, love and friendship. These then shape the modalities of interaction with the externally imposed legal order, and result in actions characterized by that order as offenses, assaults, etc.
3. The relationships which interconnect all these goods/values are not random, nor caused merely by the passage of time, and they cannot be considered simply of an analogous nature. If we consider, for example, the concrete acts of war against the land of others (in the form of direct seizure of the land itself, seizure of the land's products, or, even more indirectly, of fundamental resources, like water), one sees that they were thought to be equivalent to those concrete acts of war directed against the honor of others³⁸ (as when a woman is called a whore or a man a vagabond).
4. The history of honor is the history of the land and its defense. It is the story of land during a state of war, or in the near anticipation of war. It is the story of wars won, because he who loses land is dishonored.

38 I cannot neglect to mention that it was Richard Abel who put me on this track several years ago.

5. In the peasants' world view, the defence of honor is *also* the defence of fundamental goods which ensure the production and reproduction of the peasant family: land, money, livestock and women.

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