Mafia Burlesque: The Profane Mass and the Moral Order of Bourgeois Cliques in Sicily

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Long dominated by an economy dedicated to the production of cereals on large estates in alternation with pastoralism, Western Sicily displays a settlement pattern in which peasants live clustered around urban nuclei, rather than dispersed in villages, hamlets or homesteads on the land. The resulting, widely spaced "agrotowns" are compact and large, ranging in size from around 2,000 to over 50,000 inhabitants. In addition, they are sufficiently complex and stratified to contain within them a number of full-time, non-agricultural specialists such as merchants, artisans, bureaucrats and professionals. In the late 1960s, we conducted field work in one such locality, an agrotown of approximately 7500 population that we call Villamaura.

During our residence in Villamaura, the butchers' cooperative that monopolized the local retailing of meat entered into a truce with a family firm of meat wholesalers from Solera, pseudonymn for another, slightly smaller, agrotown about an hour and a half drive away. A year before this event, the two parties had quarreled over the Villamaura butchers' refusal to place an order for meat that, according to the Solera wholesalers, they were obligated to buy under a prior agreement. Instrumental in arranging the truce was a third group, the leader of which, also a butcher, brought the litigants together in the back room of a butcher shop in Villamaura. This third group, the initiators of the truce, lived in a small city, here called Palazzoverde, almost as far to the west of Villamaura as Solera is to the north, and having a population of about 31,000. The back room negotiation also included a fourth party, the merchant who had supplied Villamaura's meat since
the quarrel. His home town, pseudonym Montebello, is one of the smaller and more isolated of West Sicilian settlements, its barely 3000 inhabitants nestled in the shadow of a medieval castle on a high promontory that is visible from Villamaura, being a half-hour drive away.

The truce had a great deal going for it, especially the prestige of its organizers, who came from the most commercially developed center of the southwest Sicilian interior, and were well connected to the political machine of the regional Christian Democratic Party. The presence of the Montebello merchant also augured well for peace. This man was a dilettante in the commerce of meat, and had felt uneasy in his role as temporary competitor of the powerful wholesaler from Solera, fearing that he might in the end lose the affection of both sides to the quarrel. Yet no one present felt convinced that handshakes, hugs, and a round of toasts could guarantee the new agreement. Modern, capital-intensive processing plants were threatening to reorder the commerce of meat and, furthermore, some of the participants were mafiosi - men known to settle disputes arising out of economic competition without resort to the law courts of the state, where necessary resorting to violence or its threat.

And so the Palazzoverde peace-makers proposed a tavoliddu, a feast to celebrate and cement the truce. As it turned out, five banquets materialized in four different places over a period of about three months, and Peter Schneider, having been present at the initial peace-making, was invited to each. As such he was witness to a pseudo-religious ritual that highlighted the banquets, becoming more and more outrageous as time went on. Performed the first time with apparent spontaneity, its main components were nonetheless familiar, having many parallels in Sicily and other European settings over the past several hundred years. This paper confronts the problem of how to account for such parallels without treating contemporary manifestations of a ritual theme as vestiges of an eternal, or "primordial" tradition; and also without analyzing this theme
in terms of an abstract function such as "the maintenance of social order".

To begin, a description of the feasts. The first banquet unfolded in a rustic country house outside of Palazzoverde, where the peace-making hosts, assisted by local friends, prepared a splendid fish stew, followed by roast meat, vegetables, fruits and desert, and accompanied by abundant wine. No women either attended this affair, or contributed cooked food - this was the case as well on subsequent occasions. The central figure of the host group was Don Totò, a butcher who was nicknamed "Vescovo" (Bishop) because in his youth he had wanted to be a priest, and now lived unmarried with a spinster sister, as priests often do. Vescovo (names and nicknames are fictitious in this account) was closely connected to the diocese of Palazzoverde, and was reputed to control several hundred votes - enough to be a king-maker for Christian Democratic politicians in the area. He was joined by his cousin, Mimo, an accountant for an exporting firm in Palazzoverde, and Pippo G., reputed to be of gentry background and a "man about town" who was not regularly employed.

Vescovo, Mimo and Pippo sat at the middle of a long table, immediately surrounded by other close friends and relatives from Palazzoverde. At one end of the table sat the meat wholesaler, his son, and a distinguished elder statesman mafioso from a settlement near their home town of Solera. Facing them at the other end of the long banquet table were three butchers of Villamaura and their friends. The merchant from Montebello and his support group (consisting of a cheese merchant, two animal traders, and a building contractor) shared the middle of the table with the peacemakers from Palazzoverde. Vescovo was master of ceremonies, frequently standing to propose toasts - to the elder statesmen present, to the value of friends, to the greater importance of friendship than money, and to the meal as an occasion for friends to get together.

Towards the end of the dinner, he, Mimo and Pippo disappeared into a small store room for a few
minutes, to emerge ringing a bell, and draped in
tablecloths and other paraphernalia as priestly
vestments. With Pippo holding a beach umbrella
over his head, and Vescovo assisting, Mimo, the
accountant, sang a mass. This liturgy had the
rhythm and tone of an official Latin service, but
was sung in dialect, and was a ribald commentary
on the people who were present, the food and wine
they had consumed, and the behavior of their wives
and daughters. Instead of "amen" at the end of
each verse, the congregation was led to chant
"minghia" (prick). This transformation broke the
tension that had been building during the verse,
and left members of the congregation doubled over
in laughter. The mass was then followed by singing
and dancing, in which some of the bon vivants
from Palazzoverde performed erotic parodies of
women doing a strip tease.

At each subsequent feast, both meal and mass (now
nicknamed the "messa minghiata" became more
elaborate. On the second occasion, the butchers
of Villamaura prepared octopus, goat stew, and
roast lamb, which they served at a rustic restaur-
 rant in the countryside near town. At Montebello,
three weeks later, the banquet took place in the
summer house of an employee of the public utility
company, a friend of the interim meat merchant.
There was an even greater abundance of food at
this event, and wine flowed through two tubes
with spigots attached, that were suspended over
the table from barrels on the second floor. Just
as the last chorus of the mass was fading out,
everyone was startled by a great burst of fire-
works from outside the villa.

By the Montebello banquet, which was number three,
the roster of guests had grown to over 50, as the
principal participants began to invite other
friends. A few of the additions were of lower
status than the men in the original four groups -
for example, a drummer whom Pippo knew, and three
soccer players from Palermo invited by the whole-
saler's son. Others were of equal or higher status,
being notables or professionals of the town
involved. In fact, the mayor, vice-mayor, veteri-
narian and two priests from Villamaura so enjoyed
themselves at the second and third banquets that they joined in hosting a fourth one, held in the same country restaurant as the second. Inspired by events at Montebello, the Villamaura butchers also commissioned a fireworks display as a finale to the mass at this banquet. Unfortunately the fireworks specialist, jeopardizing his future career as a pyrotechnician at religious festivals in southwestern Sicily, failed to show.

He redeemed himself, however, with a brilliant display at the last banquet, which the Solera wholesaler and his friends hosted at a large resort area restaurant on the southern coast. Nearly a hundred people attended this occasion, including the fire chief and veterinarian of the port city in whose territory the restaurant was located. As someone quipped, only the police were missing. All present welcomed the opportunity to mingle in an atmosphere that by its congeniality encouraged the consolidation of agreements and deals. Here, moreover, the "entertainment committee" - still Pippo, Mimi and Vescovo - outdid itself, Pippo having brought along pink silk women's underwear with lace trim, a pink satin nightgown and a hooded black satin cape. Creating an illusion of breasts with plump Sicilian oranges, he spent the latter part of the evening cavorting about in drag.

Several aspects of the banquets evoke Christian imagery, or its opposite. First, they partook of an ancient feasting tradition which the Reader's Guide to New (Cambridge) Bible traces to the belief that "a common meal creates a close bond". From this the word, company, whose Latin root, co-panis, means to break bread together. Vescovo and others consistently referred to the assembled guests as "la compania". The best known feast of the New Testament is of course the Last Supper, where Jesus explicitly chose food and drink to be the symbols of the body and blood that he would sacrifice for the redemption of humanity. Perhaps Vescovo had this meal in mind when on the occasion of the first banquet, he placed himself at the center of a long narrow table, from which position he delivered speech after speech on friendship. More than familiar with the Last Supper's ritual
representation in the Catholic mass, where table is altar, he knew the message that "by means of a meal, two or more persons unite their lives as they share human sustenance". The mass creates the "family of the Christian Church", explains the New Catholic Encyclopedia. "No Christian who understands what takes place in this sacred assembly of God and people can withdraw into an isolated world of individualism".

But the banqueters also understood another message inherent in Last Supper symbolism: that among the participants there may be a potential traitor, a person who, after enjoying the pleasures of eating and drinking in company, is nevertheless capable of committing a hostile act. Most no doubt knew the myth of the classic mafia-style murder, recorded by Alongi in 1886. The killer, or his agent, attracts his victim, already condemned for vendetta, to a clamorous tavoliddu for the purpose of feigning a reconciliation sealed by food, drink, toasts to the health of adversaries, a hug and a kiss. This kiss, wrote Alongi, is a Judas kiss of coming death when the friendliness of the banquet, warmly remembered by witnesses, will serve to convince a judge of the killer's innocence (1886: 151).

In fact, the tension of the butchers' quarrel with the wholesaler, which had occasioned the banquets in the first place, never dissolved except when laughter obliterated every other emotion. The wholesaler's son invited three friends, semi-professional soccer players from Palermo, to the banquet at Montebello. As they were also friends of Vescovo, and without sensing that they were only marginally part of the company, they began to tease him and mock his more or less serious attempts at preaching. Provoked by their rudeness, another person who was close to both Vescovo and the butchers of Villamaura, became angry and heatedly rose to denounce them. The soccer players were offended and stormed out of the house, closely followed by the wholesaler's son shouting, "you have insulted my friends!" It took another peace initiative on the part of a lawyer from Villamaura together with the mayor from that town,
to bring the four young men back into the room, and Vescovo's defender did not appear at the subsequent gatherings.

If the banquets called to mind a great deal of Christian symbolism concerning food and social relations, they also mocked the Church, emphasizing transgressions that in theory it abhorred. For example, in contrast to the supposed asceticism of monks and clergy, the tables were laden with tempting foods, meat playing a central role. Indeed, two or more courses of mutton, sausage, goat, ragu of beef or innards, supplemented a fish course at every meal, and were in every case the sort of red flesh that threatens piety. Even more provocative was the titilating mass, built around obscenities and the blurring of male and female. Banquet entertainment, in short, consisted in those rituals of reversal that, with carnival burlesque, have enlivened Christianity for hundreds of years.

How do social scientists interpret such rituals and what kinds of interpretation best illuminate the reasons for, and characteristics of, the sacreligious pattern of banquet revelry described here? For many historians, folklorists and early anthropologists, inversions and reversals constitute magical rites of pagan past whose contemporary presence is not all that problematic. Consistent with Tylor’s understanding of all survivals, such rites are said to persist, however diluted in form, because "force of habit" carries them forward from an "older condition of culture" into new conditions that evolve (1873: 16). A more complex perspective on survivals points to an historical process through which the official religion tolerated pagan practice, because the costs of totally eradicating it were prohibitive, or because tolerance was politically savvy. By letting the people "play the fool and make merry", the forces of order channeled resentment into catharsis and recreation, thus avoiding - with occasional exception - an open rebellion against established norms. Natalie Davis summarizes this position among historians of European folk culture as follows: rituals of reversal offer relief when
a structure has become too authoritarian, but although they "can renew the system (...) they cannot change it (...) A world turned upside down can only be righted, not changed" (1975: 97, 131).

Even as it draws attention to a long trajectory, with roots in a "pre-religious" past, this mode of interpreting rites of reversal is curiously similar to the functionalist perspective in modern anthropology. In common are assumptions regarding the existence of an "established order", or established norms, that are reflected in, and bolstered by, religious institutions, and the idea that farcical, mocking rituals in the long run reinforce that order. Whereas the historian/evolutionist locates the conservative mechanism in the recreational and diversionary aspects of ritual, however, the modern functionalist sees it also in symbolic content. Thus Victor Turner, in a general commentary on ritual process, argues that rites of inversion "make visible in their symbolic and behavioral patterns social categories and forms of grouping that are considered to be axiomatic and unchanging (...)". While emotionally, nothing satisfies as much as extravagant or temporarily permitted illicit behavior, "it is also the case that cognitively, nothing underlines regularity so well as absurdity or paradox" (1969: 176). By turning men into women, the mass into farce, abstinence into gluttony, upside-down rituals dramatize the parameters of their opposite: an ordered social world.

It should not surprise us that there are continuities between the evolutionism that is implicit in a long historical trajectory, and the idea, so pivotal to Turner's thinking, that ritual must be understood in terms of what it does for society. At the core of Durkheim's social science are the interwoven concepts of, on the one hand, vastly different orders each held together by mechanical or organic forms of solidarity, and, on the other hand, a quite straight-forward process of increased differentiation and division of labor as the means for moving from one of these orders to the other. Nor does organic solidarity replace its mechanical
forerunner in Durkheimian thought. The latter persists at the level of family and community from whence, in ritual form, it bursts through the organically integrated structures of estate and class to temporarily reassert its fundamentally egalitarian and undifferentiated ethos. In Turner's view, the principle of group unity keeps the principle of hierarchy in some sort of balance or proportion. Exemplary are rituals in which the low mimic and degrade the high, laymen their priests, serfs their lords. At one and the same time such rituals foster the experience of community solidarity and "underline the reasonableness of everyday culturally predictable behavior between the various estates of society" (Ibid.: 175-76).

Turner, in discussing the connection between rituals of reversal and the reinforcement of a hierarchically organized social order, suggests that the message is strengthened by structural regularity. Thus such rites tend to be calendrical: associated with fixed or moveable, annually recurring festivities such as, in the Christian calendar, Carnival, Hallowe'en, Christmas mumming (Ibid.: 177). Already we have a problem with our mafioso banquets where an obscene and topsy-turvy mass developed with apparent spontaneity as a unique event. Most participants, upon being asked if they had witnessed such goings-on before, said no, although a few had and most knew stories about other, similar occasions. A return visit to Sicily in 1977, eleven years after the cycle, provided the information that there had been no elaborate ritual tavoliddi involving the meat trades in the interim.

Apart from their non-calendric aspect, the mafia banquets and their associated rituals pose another problem related to the kinds of people who attended. An evolutionary functionalist understanding of mocking rituals leads us to anticipate their appearance in the periphery, on the margins of society, in the most "primitive" groups. By implication such arenas lie closer to a remote and pagan past, an egalitarian and undifferentiated baseline, an experience with mystical (as distinct from social) power - perhaps even to a social form
in which human instincts are relatively unre­pressed. Frequently this expectation has a geo­graphy. Thus LeRoy Ladurie observes that in the South of France, the devil resided where people were "entrenched in their crannies", isolated by the rugged Pyrenees from the Catholic mass. Here, in these magical mountains, mythical thought regularly turned the world upside down (1969: 169).

Our case suggests a different pattern for, although the meat dealers and butchers, the cheese merchants and elder-statesmen mafiosi, had social and genealogical antecedents in the semi-pastoral groups that once dominated the mountainous Sicilian interior (see Schneider and Schneider, 1976), they were also entrepreneurs in a commercially developed country. Like the contractors, businessmen, and public officials whom they invited to join the "company", they were "middle class". In other words, the messa minghiata of the mafioso banquets was neither a calendric ritual nor the folk practice of backward peasants magically bringing down their overlords. Hardly a regular event of the isolated, it was an isolated event among much engaged men. Rather than deal with it as an exception to a general rule, however, we have looked for parallels elsewhere.

An interesting example is suggested by a brief and incomplete description of events at Bohemian Grove, in contemporary North America (Anderson 1981). There, each year, the exclusive San Francisco Bohemian Club organizes a two-week encampment in the California redwoods for such national leaders as Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Caspar Weinberger, Richard Nixon, David Rockefeller, William French Smith, William F. Buckley, Gerald Ford and others (some 2000 in all). Far away from public scrutiny and in all-male company, the participants eat, drink, carouse and revel at "the world's most elegant stag party". Rituals highlight their good times. In one, a torch of fellowship ignites a symbolic representation of "Dull Care" in a cremation ceremony that is intended to abolish every nagging reminder of worldly responsibilities. In another, "a feminine touch is provided (...) by club members who dress as women and put on bur-
lesque shows" (Anderson 1981: 16). No more than at the mafioso banquets in Sicily do these rituals constitute a sentiment-laden attack on structure, paradoxically supportive of hierarchy in the end. For at elite and fraternal gatherings, burlesque means something else. What follows is an historical reconstruction of some aspects of fraternity and hilarity in Europe intended to project two quite different functions of ritual reversal. It helps order social relations among men involved in commercial and related activities in which mutual trust and the predictability of rules are at issue, and it lends to such men a measure of autonomy from religious institutions and ideas. Autonomy, and an alternate moral order, rather than emotive opposition to structure, are, we propose, key social processes underlying various examples of profanity and burlesque among emergent bourgeois cliques.

Before proceeding, let us briefly examine the concept "bourgeois", in many ways so nuanced by its association with industrial capitalism as to no longer convey its simple (and original) meaning - namely citizen or freeman who is neither lord nor peasant, and who lives in a more or less urbanized settlement. Defined as such, the word is convenient shorthand for the heterogeneous nexus of shopkeepers and artisans, traders and professionals who in the past articulated local populations with a mercantile network of long distance trade. "Bourgeois" in this sense did not refer to the great merchant-financiers who controlled the purchase and sale of imported luxuries, who capitalized indigenous cloth industries through the putting out of raw materials, and who were close to, or wanted to become, nobles. It did, however, identify a social stratum that arose because, over centuries, the expansion of foreign exchange, and of manufacturing within Europe, drew even remote populations into a money economy in which some, though never all, goods were produced for local and extra-local exchange. Nascent bourgeois were the specialists - often the semi-specialists - who managed the more local and regional aspects of this circulation process, and whose workshops and small factories produced
imitations and substitutions of luxury wares for local consumption. Such direct producers and smallscale traders influenced the surrounding rural populations in which they were embedded without, however, seriously disrupting them. We would recognize their descendants today in what we call "local business communities", the middle class elites of neighborhoods and small towns. Because in the interim the word bourgeois has become a synonym for manufacturers who, in the wake of the industrial revolution, invest in capital-intensive technology and mobilize wage labor, we now qualify its application to local businessmen calling them "petit bourgeois".

A recent book by Michael Tigar, assisted by Madeleine Levy, Law and the Rise of Capitalism (1977), provides us with a useful entre into the problems of a fledgling and internally fragmented medieval "bourgeoisie", attempting to forge its own institutions in a sea of customary or feudal, and ecclesiastical or Canon, law. Neither legal system was sympathetic to activities that took place outside the jurisdiction of feudal lords, of whom the Church was the greatest, for although both lords and Church encouraged trade and craft manufacture from which they stood to benefit, they did so only to the extent that they could control these enterprises themselves.

The development of relations between Church and merchants is especially instructive. Canon law incorporated enough of Roman Law, as codified by Justinian, to enable ecclesiastical courts to invite cases having to do with the enforcement of contracts, and limited liability in corporate groups. Moreover, as Tigar and Levy point out, the Church "could not ignore the great wealth that trade accumulated, for only by tapping that wealth could ecclesiastical rulers build cathedrals and universities and live in the style to which they had become accustomed" (Ibid.: 41). And so we find the Church supporting merchants "against monarchs or feudal lords" and attempting to "bring commerce within its universal system of theology, morals and law" (Ibid.: 41-42). Yet an insurmountable trap ensued from the fact that merchants could not
know where they stood in relation to Canon Law. In some times and places it was policy to permit, in others to suppress, such practices as taking interest on loans, monopoly pricing and the expropriation of debtors (Ibid.: 106). Even where the Church helped businessmen to evade its strictures (since it "stood to gain when they succeeded in business"), it persisted in the message that had been a cornerstone of its ideology from the days of Jesus and the apostles - that an overly rapid accumulation of wealth was anti-social and jeopardized a merchant's soul. Of course, a soul in jeopardy could be saved through substantial contributions to the Church, but this stood squarely in the way of wealth accumulation in private hands. Only long-distance traders, located in commercially and financially precocious core regions such as northern Italy, escaped this dilemma; here, in fact, merchant families were bankers to, and creditors of, the papacy, and even gave rise to popes (Ibid.: 102-10).

The ambivalent position of small-scale merchant and artisan groups in relation to the Church's moral and legal order was the source of a great deal of autonomous institution-building on their part. Such were the groups which, from the Middle Ages, formed associations, fraternities and guilds whose corporate status and commitment to a formal equality among members resembled, and yet opposed, the monastic cell. These associations made their own laws - a kind of "third law" as some call it - and set up their own tribunals. Their associates co-swore mutual aid in the name of brotherhood and friendship, under oaths that took precedence over testimony in other courts. Tigar and Levy show that the most developed form of bourgeois association in the Medieval period was the "commune", a collective of "several dozen to several hundred artisans, lords' officials, minor clerics, peasants, runaway serfs and others" who pledged not only internal equality and mutual aid, but commitment to a life of struggle for the removal of "all manufacturing and trading functions (...) from the body of feudal life". According to these authors, the "oath to struggle for such a severance of feudal bonds was called 'communal', and the
term 'commune' variously described the oath, the oath-swearers, and the area" in which the right to make laws, administer justice, regulate artisans, protect escaped serfs, hold daily markets and periodic fairs, was claimed (Ibid.: 83-87). Although communards had an active religious life, "they paid little attention to the Church hierarchy and had little patience with tithes" (Ibid.: 88).

Through a series of strikingly similar charters, feudal and ecclesiastical lords - also a few monarchs and princes - granted legal status to communes in cities and towns along routes of trade. It is a reasonable hypothesis that ritual innovation helped form the resulting "communities", both internally and in relation to other domains. Such, at least, is a conclusion implicit in the work of Natalie Davis, an historian of culture in urban France of the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries. Her account of Misrule Abbeys will illustrate this point. A Misrule Abbey was a group of men who constituted themselves as a court with jurisdiction over a small settlement or neighborhood in a town or city. These courts punished certain vices or faults, intervened in domestic crises, suppressed dissent, patched up quarrels, and generally promoted peace and amity. But they did so through means quite alien to the rival ecclesiastical courts, city councils and rudimentary judicial arms of parliaments or kings. Their principal means of law enforcement was the performance of outlandish and hilarious rites, aimed at humiliating wrongdoers and encouraging rivals to suppress their emnity in frolic. In Davis's words, the Abbeys had a "carnival licence" to conduct charivaris and impose fines. They were not unlike other forms of popular recreation, fools' societies, play acting groups, that developed in similar places and at similar times (1975: 97-124).

Two things strike us as significant about the Misrule Abbeys: their social composition and their mockery of the Church. Regarding the former, Davis notes that in the earliest centuries of their existence, and in the most rural settings, the abbeys were often joined by young, unmarried men,
not yet regularly employed. But later, and in more urban contexts, craftsmen, merchants and lawyers formed the courts. The merchants were of the small and medium type, as distinct from great merchant-financiers, and the lawyers were also "petit", although they were literate (Ibid.: 111-15). These were precisely the sorts of emergent bourgeois for whom Canon law was such an obstacle and it is interesting how much anti-clerical burlesque was involved in the idea of "misrule". For example, words like Pleasure, Folly, Sexuality and Improvidence were part of the Abbey names and in a mocking commentary on the presumed sobriety of real monastic life, "judges" in the misrule courts regularly masked, mummed and dressed as women. Davis reviews the various interpretations of transvestite imagery that anthropologists and historians have put forth, including its capacity to communicate a blurring of social boundaries and overturning of power relations - its capacity also to serve as a symbol of fertility. Her conclusion is that from a very early time, the most powerful message of transvestitism was "its carnivalesque derision of the celibate priestly hierarchy" (Ibid.: 138). Priests and bishops, cenobetics and mendicants, were the targets of a ridiculing attack.

The idea that nascent bourgeois sought to establish a moral order autonomous of ecclesiastical institutions, and that they did so through a rich associational and cultural life, is substantiated by the Church's tendency to alternately suppress, regulate and coopt fraternities, guilds and carnival-type rituals. Above all in the wake of the Reformation, at the Council of Trent, bourgeois associations were looked upon as, in John Bossy's words, "something like an alternative model of the Church (...)" (1970: 58). In the name of papal authority the Council not only designed a system of parochial conformity to be spread through education, confession and the obligatory partaking of communion; it also took away the independence of fraternities by bringing them "under a rigorous regime of episcopal authorization and supervision" (Ibid.: 57-60). From this effort there developed centralized fraternity-federations
or arch-confraternities, attached to papally sponsored devotions like the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Eucharist. The diocese of Agrigento in Sicily legitimized local branches of four such confraternities for Villamaura between 1536 and 1631 (Giacone 1932). As in other cases, legitimacy was predicated upon the dedication of fraternity brothers not to a rigid asceticism - that was reserved for monks and clergy - but to sobriety, zeal and charitable good deeds. A growing presence of miracle-working Jesuits in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, plus the promise of free and automatic indulgences to brothers of the new associations, encouraged the ascendance of restraint over the fraternal rowdiness of the past.

In a way one must see the post-Reformation Church competing for souls not only with Protestants, but with the bourgeoisie of all those regions of Europe that emerged from the Religious Wars still in the Catholic camp. This meant curtailing the ability of merchant and artisan guilds to adopt as patron saints personalities who had not been canonized by Rome. Nor was it encouraged for guilds and fraternities to turn their saints into foci of popular devotion, such that followers would begin to offer sums of money and property to bourgeois associations rather than the various wealth-accumulating bodies of the Church. Where confraternities staged processions and festivals in honor of a saint, they could take up a collection to meet expenses, but episcopal authorities siphoned off accumulations that moved, as surplus, into fraternal mutual aid funds - as indeed bishops and priests still do today.

In Villamaura for example, there is right now a contest between the archpriest, an outsider appointed by the bishop, and the confraternity of artisans and wealthy peasants that manages the town's patron saint. The contest is over who shall control all the lire, dollars, and jewelry that this lady collects in the course of her annual celebration, with the archpriest staking a claim to everything laid at the statue's feet while it is still in the church, before the processional, and leaving to the confraternity everything else.
The dispute has high stakes because this particular saint, the Madonna of Udienza, is a famous fund-raiser. In the early 1900s, when the confraternity failed to get a papal grant that would have bestowed on her and her baby two gold crowns paid for from a Vatican fund, the people of Villamaura brought coins and jewelry to the town's central piazza where a little burner was set up to melt them down. The resulting bullion weighed 6.432 kilograms and was valued at 10,000 lire. It was sent to Palermo to be made up into the desired symbols of regalia, independently of the Pope (DiRuberto 1904: 130-36).

It is surely symptomatic of Church hegemony over the confraternities that many of them contribute substantially to the renovation and upkeep of religious buildings. Also symptomatic is the prominence that Holy Week, and especially the Good Friday processional, now has in the religious calendar. For, during the period of the Counter-Reformation a special effort was made to elevate this observance over all other Saints' celebrations. The penitential tone and death symbolism so characteristic of the rite gained reinforcement from various sources, for example the Reformed Franciscans who constructed catacombs, even in rather remote places like Villamaura (Giacone 1932). Popes and bishops, meanwhile, tried to confine carnival burlesque to a single day, the Sunday before Lent. Their purpose, according to the Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics (the New Catholic Encyclopaedia has no entry for "carnival") was to "render popular festivities innocuous by associating them with Christian ideas (and) by a rigid arrangement of the Christian year" that took away "all opportunity for their celebration" (pp. 225-29). Thus Carnival coalesced as a relatively unthreatening feast of revelry, folly and license that said farewell (vale) to meat (carne) on the eve of Lent. Its link to bourgeois culture seems nonetheless clear, both from the extent to which famous carnivals are associated with great cities and in the cart (carro) - ship (navale) symbolism of this day of pleasure.
Despite a well-organized effort, neither papal authority, episcopal regulation, nor the expanded powers of the parish priest, nor even the teachings of the Jesuits, could canalize the ritual energies of merchants, artisans and their lawyer friends into the festivities of a single day. Thus, when the seventeenth century bishop of Cefalù, on Sicily's northern coast, attempted to mobilize the fraternities of his diocese to stage Good Friday processions in conformity with the new devotional spirit of the Counter-Reformation, he found himself totally bogged down in correcting abuses: the fraternity members wore masks to carry the Virgin and with rough and vulgar chants they went about inciting laughter instead of piety (Giarrizzo 1978: 65-67). More to the point was the tendency, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for new fraternal associations, uncontaminated by episcopal cooption, to form not only among merchant, artisan and professional men in towns and cities, but also among an important new category: bourgeois or gentry landowners whose emergence as a class owed everything to the liberal state's expropriation of Church lands. These new fraternities, of which the Freemasons were the most well-known, also proliferated in Protestant countries where bourgeois interests confronted a religious establishment committed to Puritanical values if not to celibacy. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to explore Masonic ritual, except to emphasize how important the gourmet and libertine pleasures of eating and drinking in the company of others were to the men involved.

Now, over the centuries, the Catholic Church became enmeshed in a great many struggles besides those that it waged with the fraternal associations of merchant, artisan and professional groups. Most serious were the challenges posed by the many so-called heresies that sought a return to apostolic poverty and the reform of a clerical hierarchy too corrupted by worldly things to do the will of God. Serious also was the challenge to follow Christian adventurers and kings as they expanded the domain under their control far beyond the boundaries of Europe. To keep up on these two fronts, one inter-
nal and one external, the Church could not fall behind in the interrelated tasks of developing new orders of itinerant friars; allocating funds to dioceses and parishes; building, purchasing and restoring real estate; and acquiring productive resources to consolidate gains. It was the need to expand, and the compulsion to retain hegemony over souls when "heretics" threatened to mobilize them, that led to increased demands and restrictions on still-Catholic bourgeois. We suggest that burlesque rituals of reversal helped the latter counteract these impositions. Aimed neither at eliminating religious authority, nor at reinforcing it, such rituals ordered relations among these bourgeois, at the same time erecting some semblance of a boundary between them and the Church. In other words, through ritual, bourgeois groups created their own set of rules, independent enough of the clerical establishment that they could benefit from a growth environment, too.

This interpretation differs from the evolutionary functionalist understanding of topsy-turvy, where the emphasis is on "changeless oscillation between hierarchy and non-hierarchy", estate-ordered society and undifferentiated, emotionally bound communitas. As Richard Werbner has suggested in his introduction to a collection of essays on African religious cults (1977: xxxiii), this "all-too familiar pendulum model is inadequate to understand changing interdependence" - in our case between two overlapping modes of resource mobilization, one based on a religiously-sanctioned feudalism, and the other on small manufacturing and mercantile exchange. These modes did not differ significantly with respect to order. That is, there is little to be gained in portraying one - the feudal-religious one - as "the" social order, when both modes consisted of many distinct and competing parts that, as they expanded and contracted over time, evidenced moments of order, moments of chaos, moments of structural consolidation and structural demise.

Nor did the two modes differ with respect to the presence or absence of community, this being a concept of significance to both, but for different
reasons. In Christian theology, community meant communion; that is, the formation of a fellowship in Christ through sharing in a ritual meal. The mass, however, was never just a spontaneous outpouring of sentiment in which all are equal. Following policy set down at Trent, bishops and priests made this ceremony an obligatory sacrament, and organized confraternities whose mission it was to further eucharistic devotion. Meanwhile, among bourgeois, community meant "commune"—an institution whose commitment to formal equality had more to do with creating a favorable climate for various contractual relationships than with furthering solidarity of the whole.

If rituals of reversal served to consolidate bourgeois communities so that they could expand on a par with the Church, they seem to have done so most explicitly and intensely where these two institutional matrixes evolved in relative isolation from a third force, the state. As Tigar and Levy stress (1977: 42-49), bourgeois groups eventually discovered monarchs to be the best endowed and most constant protectors of their interests, preferable by far to lords and Church not only for the increasing efficiency with which they constructed roads and bridges (later canals and railroads), and eliminated internal barriers to trade, but because their judiciary and police apparatus provided a more reliable structure than other courts and customs for the social protection of "freely moving goods". As forming states separated lords from the judicial, police and military prerogatives once attached to feudal domain, their alliance with bourgeois interests took on an ever more concrete form. Royal courts enforced legislation that facilitated the expansion of business and protected it from foreign competition, while merchants and craftsmen repaid the state through taxes, duties and financing for foreign wars. The alliance was neither harmonious nor everywhere possible. Significantly, where it was most effective, bourgeois groups also embraced Protestantism; that is, they perципitated a revolt against the Church that went far beyond rebellious rituals to actually bring about a drastic contraction of religious ceremonial and ecclesiastical domain. Contraction on this scale paved
the way for a true counter-hegemony, leading to new relations of production based on wage labor.

To find the contexts in which rituals of reversal were and are most significant, we must look to the centuries that preceded the consolidation of modern states in Europe, and to those domains where the institutions of these states, bolstered by industrial capitalism, were slow to penetrate. We are reminded in this search of Gerald Sider's interesting (1976) interpretation of Christmas mumming in nineteenth century Newfoundland, in which he shows that roving clusters of men and women, dressed as their opposites or as animals, extended and underlined relationships of significance to independent producers who sold processed codfish to trans-Atlantic shippers. According to Sider, the culture of mumming had an especially salient role to play in the ordering and reproducing of social relations among these small-scale entrepreneurs because, in their articulation with great mercantile companies, they had no institutions beyond family and community to organize them.

Sicilian mafiosi are in a similar structural position, although not because the Italian state is absent from their world. In their case a relative separation from processes of state formation is the consequence of mafia cliques having challenged the police and judiciary. One can therefore ask about their rituals, as Sider asked about mumming, in what specific ways they helped create a moral order?

First of all, the banquets were good for business. In the hour or so before each dinner was served, men gathered in pairs and small clusters to explore the possibility of various deals and contracts. Many of those present also took the opportunity to enlarge social networks, joking and talking with others who had theretofore been strangers but who, because of the feasts, became "recommended" friends. Younger participants may even be said to have experienced the banquets as an initiation ceremony, in which they learned the most fundamental rule of all commercial activity:
that it cannot advance in the absence of trust among friends. Toasts and conviviality called attention to this maxim, and made it an ideology.

This did not mean, however, that friends must be equal, except in the formal sense that all are equally obliged to make good on their word. On the contrary, status differences played an important role in the proceedings. Elder-statesmen mafiosi sat in special seats and did the honors of cutting the cake. These statesmen, the notables present, and all of the participants from Palazzoverde, wore white shirts, ties and suit jackets, whereas most of the others were dressed in flannel shirts or casual sweaters. From time to time Vescovo, the master of ceremonies, commented to a few of the central participants on the defects of guests whom he felt did not measure up. Such commentary, also woven into the mass, fostered an atmosphere of inclusion and exclusion that made the included feel privileged.

According to Arthur Koestler (1964), a good joke is constructed by gradually bringing together two contradictory planes of thought so as to create a tension that must then be resolved. The intersection of priestly authority and the solemnity of the mass with a chorus of minghias and a feminized clergy is, for Catholics, potentially a riotous joke. Yet someone might take offense, and the banqueters knew this. Conversations with the Villa-maura butchers after the first banquet indicated that they were nervous with regard to the capacity of the Montebello men to understand the sophisticated antics of Mimo and Pippo. Perhaps they would mistake the transvestite clowning for homosexuality instead of urbane theater; perhaps they would even walk out of the next banquet in disgust. As it turned out, however, the entertainers enjoyed prestige by virtue of their urban provenience and noone wanted to appear stuffy and provincial in their presence. Men who were reluctant, at first, quickly convinced themselves to relax and have a good time. Thus the Montebello contingent not only laughed heartily at the vulgar mass, but with considerable delight arranged the surprise burst of fireworks when it was their turn to host the
festivities.

What happened to the Montebello participants was representative of a general process: the more outrageous the entertainment became, the more the "company" felt supportive of the entertainers. How many other people would have had the guts to stage so daring a performance? Significantly, among the funniest clowns were the very mediators who had brought the butchers and the wholesaler together and negotiated their reconciliation. It would be misleading to argue that the topsyturvy mass took place just to help Vescovo paper over a serious quarrel. But, if anything could reduce a conflict so potentially disruptive of commercial relations, then one that played on risqué humor, and the prestige of inclusion in the culturally sophisticated circles that embellished it, stood a good chance. At the very least, risqué humor neutralized the tensions that had necessitated the banquets so that barbed remarks and unpleasant exchanges could not easily surface to undo the peace.

An so we see that the mafia banquets provided a context for dispute settlement, and a forum for articulating an ideology of friendship and trust. As such they reinforced not "the" social order, but a kind of moral order among participants. It should be noted that this order had little to do with participants' responsibilities to a wider world of clients, constituents, customers, employees, and so on - responsibilities that in theory, at least, are a concern of religion or "Dull Care". This is consistent with our argument that bourgeois culture necessitated autonomy from the hegemony of the Church, both because the Church was also in the "business" of mobilizing people and resources, and because at its core were ideas about the danger of usury, indebtedness and foreclosures to its very life blood - the souls of the common people.

The argument about autonomy is speculative and difficult to prove, yet it seems to us worth pursuing because it accounts as no other explanation can for the content of the banquets' major
ritual - an abscene and vulgar mass performed by men in women's clothes in mockery of the priesthood, also in mockery of women for their blind allegiance to the Church.

Given this Church's continued capacity to mobilize people and resources, acquire property and expand in the world, given also its continued potential to convincingly stigmatize profit-making as an immoral and anti-social activity, it is perhaps significant that the "company" took special pleasure in having two clerics (also a communist mayor) witness their burlesque goings-on.

References cited


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