

Southern Italy Patriarchal Family: The evidence and critique of Gabriella Gribaudi's counter argument

Tom Verso (May 20, 2008)



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In my 5/16 blog entry "Sinatra – the dialogue with Joey Skee continues," I wrote: "...paternalism was a part of southern Italian culture. That, I believe, is an empirically verifiable proposition; at least I am



aware of a great deal of empirical data to that effect." In the comments section, the following request was made: "Please provide the data you have."

It is the purpose of this note to describe the evidence supporting the contention that southern Italian family structure, at the time of the great migration circa 1880-1920, was patriarchal. Part I will describe the evidence. Part II will discuss its veracity in terms Gabriella Gribaudi's counter-contention, that patriarchy was not representative of southern Italy, in her article "Images of the South" published in an anthology "Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction", edited by David Forgacs, Robert Lumley; Oxford University Press, 1996

Part I The Evidence

ORAL HISTORY:

I am old enough (and fortunate enough) to have known the pre-WW I southern Italian immigrants. As a boy I experienced the behavior of immigrant grandparents, relatives, neighbors, etc., and I listened to their recollections of southern Italy. Reflecting, as an adult, on those experiences and stories left me with a distinct sense that the patriarch family ("the man is the head of the household") was the norm in southern Italy. Virtually, all the southern Italian families with which I was familiar manifested some degree of patriarchy. One example to illustrate: I worked in a grocery store owned by a southern Italian immigrant. His wife worked in the store with him and their children. One day one of the daughters took her mother in her car to shop or visit or some such innocuous event. The mother had been reluctant to go. They were speaking Italian and I did not understand what was transpiring. At the time the husband/father was not in the store. When he returned and was told that his wife had gone off with his daughter in the car, he was incensed. When the wife and daughter returned a short time later he vented his anger. Again, it was all in Italian and I didn't know what was going on. Later, I asked the daughter what happened and she told me that he never wanted her mother to go any place without him. She said, contemptuously: "He thinks he's still in Italy." I saw variations on this family patriarch theme many times in many families in my youth. This is not to say I saw many family arguments. Indeed, there were few such arguments. Rather, the tacit patriarchal rules were accepted and governed behavior by consent or tradition.

TRAVELER'S REPORT

When I began reading books about Italy, I found traveler's reports that reinforced this patriarch perception. For example, Booker T. Washington traveling in Sicily in 1910 wrote:

"Sicilian women, who are looked upon by the men as inferior creatures and guarded by them as a species of property, live like prisoners in their own villages. Bound fast, on the one hand, by age-long customs, and on the other surrounded by a wall of ignorance which shuts out from them all knowledge of the outer world, they live in a sort of mental and moral slavery under the control of their husbands"

And: "For this reason, the journey to America is for the woman of Sicily a real emancipation. In fact, I do not know of any more important work that is going on for the emancipation of women anywhere than that which is being done, directly and indirectly, through the emigration from Sicily and Italy to the United States, in bringing liberty of thought to the women of Southern Italy"

LITERATURE

Also, I found patriarch representations in literature; e.g. Lampadusa's "Leopard" being the quintessential patriarch. Also, in Sciascia: one scene in particular comes to mind from "The Ransom". The guest says to the Don: "May we have a word in private...Mother and daughter arose ... and at a nod from Don Raimondo left the room... Later, Don Raimondo sent the maid to inform the ladies that they might return."

INDIGIOUS REPORTS

Gabriella Gribaudi, reports on southern student surveys she conducted: "I have examined students of contemporary history at the University of Naples on a text which amongst other things dealt with the family in European history. I tried many times to ask students what type of family they thought was prevalent in Southern society, and they all replied: the patriarchal family".

SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC REPORTS

In that same article, she reports the work of Edward Banfield, "an anthropologist and political scientist, who lived with his family for a year in a poor and isolated village in Basilicata." He saw "extended patriarchal and patrilineal family" characteristics of southern Italian families.

Such is the type of evidence (but not limited to these anecdotes) that I base my characterization/generalization of southern Italian families as patriarchal.

Part II Veracity of Evidence

The above evidence does not prove beyond a doubt the patriarchal family structure of southern Italy. Indeed, in the very same article cited, Gabriella Gribaudi challenged virtual all of the evidence I presented and concluded the opposite; i.e. southern Italian families were not patriarchal. I will revisit each of the above categories of evidence in terms of Prof. Gribaudi's interpretation and, in turn respond to her.

1. Literary evidence

The literary examples I cite (and the many more that could be cited) depicting southern patriarchal families, would be considered irrelevant by Prof. Gribaudi because they depict aristocratic/bourgeois families, which she concedes are patriarchal but not representative of southern families. She writes: "...patriarchal family practically does not exist [in the south] (if one excludes bourgeois and aristocratic families of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which were in any case patriarchal throughout Europe at that time)."

She provides no historiographic or epistemological justification (or references) for excluding a whole body of documentary evidence and a whole segment of the society described in those documents from the analysis and characterization of southern Italian society. She simply stipulates that southern aristocratic/bourgeois patriarchy is not representative of the south. Rather, it seems Southern Italian aristocratic/bourgeois families are a European class that just happen to live in the south of Italy. They are 'in' but not 'part of' southern Italian society. I wonder: what about the European class characteristics of southern peasants; e.g. feudal? To the extent that southern Italian peasants are part of a feudal economy, should they be considered part of Europe and removed from analysis and characterization of southern Italian society. More generally, should any group

manifesting class characteristics that are trans-national be excluded from the analysis and characterization of the society they live in?

Accordingly, until sound historiographic or epistemological justification is provided to the contrary, I believe that the historian's motto that "no document can be ignored", when describing the society that produced those documents, should prevail. Otherwise, the historian could, as they say, "cherry pick" the evidence; i.e. pick and chose the evidence that supports his/her contentions. In sum, if there is a literary pattern representing patriarchal families in the society such as seen in Lampedusa, Sciascia, etc., then that pattern must be taken into consideration and reconciled with other evidence when analyzing and characterizing that society. It cannot simply be ignored ('ruled out of court' - so to speak).

2 Observational evidence

Examples of three categories of observation were described above reporting patriarchal patterns of (non aristocratic/bourgeois) families: mine, Neapolitan student's and Booker T. Washington's. They also are not relevant by Prof. Gribaudi's standards because they are not reports of experts. In her words: "The experts in the field are practically the only ones who avoid this mystification." This is a classic example of the fallacy argumentum ad verecundiam (Latin: argument to respect) or ipse dixit (Latin: he himself said it) or its reciprocal 'ad hominem attack'. In short, Prof. Gribaudi is an expert, therefore what she says is true; or, you are not an expert therefore what you say is false.

Even if one grants such a self-serving epistemology, what about Edward Banfield, "an anthropologist and political scientist, who lived with his family for a year in a poor and isolated village in Basilicata"? Is he not an expert?

In sum, according the Professor, anyone who does not agree with her observations is either not qualified to make the observation or if qualified like Banfield is wrong.

3. The Truth according to Gribaudi.

"[W]omen have a 'traditional' power [in the South] which is unquestionably greater than that of other Italian women -- division of wealth between the sexes according to an equitable method, careful protection of the dowry throughout a woman's life and its direct inheritance by her children, enormous moral and contractual power within the family, and so forth."

To my mind none of these descriptions of southern Italian women negates the proposition that southern Italian families were patriarchal. To say that a family is patriarchal does not imply that women have no power or prerogatives. Rather, those powers and rights are subordinate to the patriarch's. For example, in the store where I worked, the wife was a very tough de facto manager of the day-to-day operation of the store. Similarly, she held a great deal of sway over the running of the household and raising the children. However, these rights and powers were exercised in a context determined by the husband, which in turn were determined by tradition. For example, the decision to own a store or to sell the store where his and his alone. Decisions about what was appropriate behavior of wife and children, etc. were his and his alone to make. He may be cajoled. But, he could not be ignored.

Similarly, Booker T. Washington observed that men often went to work in the fields for a month at a time. Clearly, this would entail allocation of household power to their wives. Also, women at grape harvest and winemaking times left their families and villages to work in fields and wineries. Again,



this would entail a degree of independence.

In sum, while the nature and character of southern Italian families is still open for discussion, there is a significant body of evidence supporting the contention that the southern Italian family was generally patriarchal. It is not historiographically or epistemologically sound to reach conclusions by selecting data that fits one thesis.

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