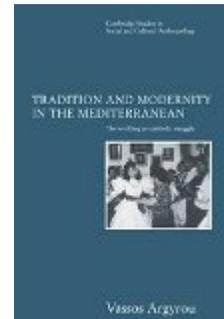


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Vassos Argyrou. *Tradition and Modernity in the Mediterranean: The Wedding as Symbolic Struggle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. x + 210 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-56095-5.

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The analytical categories “tradition” and “modernization” have had a rough ride in anthropology over the past ten years. First, tradition turned out to fall into the category of the modern, having often been of quite recent invention.[1] Meanwhile the dreams of modernization theory turned into the nightmares of the “Green Revolution,” the horrors of resurgent ethnic nationalism and war, and the straightjacket of IMF-imposed structural adjustment schemes. At the same time, a curious thing happened: just as anthropologists seemed ready to jettison this outworn analytical dualism, they noticed that the cultures they studied had eagerly adopted these terms. However misleading, tradition and modernity had become a “story people tell themselves about themselves” all the more powerful as such because of its imprimatur from the State. Comaroff & Comaroff express this view in noting that “[Modernity] has come to circulate, almost worldwide, as a metaphor of new means and ends, of new materialities and meanings. As a (more-or-less) pliable sign, it attracts different referents, and different values, wherever it happens to land.”[2] In a new ethnography of Cyprus *Tradition and Modernity in the Mediterranean*, Vassos Argyrou poses these issues in a somewhat different form. He asks the question: In manipulating the categories of tradition and modernity as part of their own status quest, how do Greek Cypriots actively participate in reproducing their symbolic domination by the West? As he frames it: “The main argument is that during the last sixty years or so the notion of the West has emerged as the dominant idiom through which a series of relations of inequality are both resisted and legitimated: between social classes, age groups, men and women, city dwellers and villagers, mainland and Cypriot Greeks, and between the two main communities on the island, Greek

and Turkish Cypriots” (p. 2). Argyrou’s focus is on how some of these social differentiations are expressed through changes in wedding rituals from the 1930s to the present. The guiding theoretical spirit is Bourdieu: Argyrou is interested in all those micro-practices and attitudes which go into the creation of social distinctions within a society. But Argyrou hopes to frame this exploration within the wider context of international inequalities, to show some of the processes by which Cypriots have gotten caught up in a global game in which they can only lose.

Argyrou, himself, is a Greek Cypriot, born in the town of Paphos where he situates the “rural” part of his study and raised in Nicosia, in which he situates the “urban” part. But unlike other recent ethnographies of Greece written by “native” anthropologists, Argyrou does not wish to focus analytical attention on “subjectivity” and “objectivity” per se. Instead, he suggests that detachment from one’s object of study is not a matter of one’s identity but one’s approach: “it can be achieved” (p. 14). Textually, this leads to an interesting inversion. Instead of trying to establish authority by proving to the reader that he was accepted, at least provisionally, as “one of them,” (a strategy epitomized in Geertz’s “Notes on the Balinese Cockfight”) Argyrou inserts himself into the text to show how alien, and alienated from the people and their habitus, he is. Thus a visit to a nightclub in Nicosia with a working-class friend is an opportunity for Argyrou to show how unadepth he is at the local rules of hospitality, and how he is incapable of making conversation with a young woman with whom he has been fixed up. Similarly, his first trip back to visit relatives in his home-town of Paphos, and to settle into the house in which he was born, is filled with ambivalence and alien-

ation:

Loukia was one of those estranged relatives in Paphos whom I had never met, basically because I chose not to. When I was still living on the island, I refused to meet relatives with whom, I had decided, I had nothing in common. I could not see the point of doing so -being relatives was not enough for me. Now I needed her help, and here I was rushing to the village to meet her as if I always wanted to do so but somehow I did not manage before now ... I had never felt guiltier in my life (pp. 26-27).

No sooner has he arrived among his relatives that he alienates them by whipping out a tape-recorder and causes further problems when they try to feed him and he admits to being a vegetarian. It is interesting that Argyrou situates most of his blunders at the level of habitus, the micro-practices and bodily attitudes that he has in fact come to study. At the same time, his choice of the wedding celebration as his analytic topic seems similarly motivated by his sense of distance. As he admits, before deciding on this study, he had always refused to attend weddings, seeing them as part of the culture from which he wanted to escape. But the reason Argyrou wishes to position himself as an outsider at home is not simply in order to prove his "objectivity" and to validate an anthropological methodology that many have rejected. Rather in carefully detailing the different ways that he sees himself as implicated in that which he wishes to study, Argyrou hopes to make a larger point about the role of anthropology and the position of the anthropologist in helping to create the symbolic "subjectification" that we may, in fact, deplore. But I am running ahead of the story.

Chapters One and Two contain brief political, economic and historical backgrounds to the study. Argyrou stresses the major economic changes in the past sixty years that led to the opportunities for many Cypriots to escape the extreme poverty of rural life through education and the concomitant rise of an educated urban bourgeoisie. This marked a major power shift away from the rural farmer to the urban school teacher or government worker, and a similar loss of power of the older generation over the younger generation. Argyrou notes the irony of the fact that the strong value placed on education by villagers as a way to increase one's status led to the very "modernity" and undermining of extended family life that these same villagers now rail against: "The multitude of individual strategies of Cypriot villagers, then, which aimed at the alleviation of their poverty and the enhancement of their status in the village, led to their eventual downfall as a group" (p. 37). Students of Greek

society will find much that is familiar in this picture of parents working hard to give their children a better life, and yet feeling that somehow they had undermined the very value of hard work by making life too easy for their children.

It is in these chapters that Argyrou also provides a sketch of Greek Cypriots' relation to the Turkish Cypriot community and to mainland Greeks. His discussion of the polarities of Greek identity—caught between golden images of the Classical past and modern images of Turkish or Eastern pollution—is familiar. The stress is on the way Greek Cypriots claim the Classical past as their own, in contradistinction both to the "oriental" Turkish Cypriots and the mainland Greeks who are often described in similar terms. Thus the Greek Cypriots claim a more "European" identity than their mainland "brothers" or their Turkish Cypriot neighbors. But they also claim Cypriot "customs and traditions" as essential aspects of their true identity, although these customs are often seen in terms of village "backwardness." Unlike Herzfeld, Argyrou does not see this binary identity primarily in terms of self-display (of the classical past) vs. self-knowledge (of the oriental past), but rather sees them as legitimizing strategies in the Greek Cypriot class struggle. But once again Argyrou's stress is on irony here, for in reproducing this dichotomous view of "Europe" and "the East," Greek Cypriots are accepting the very terms that will always classify them as backward in relation to Western Europe. A small quibble here: Argyrou's political history of the island does not give a strong sense of the deep involvement of England and the United States in the tragic events that led to the Turkish invasion in 1974 and the division of the island. Without a clear statement on this point, the reader might be tempted to conclude that Argyrou sees Western domination as residing only in the realm of the "symbolic."

Chapters Three and Four describe changes in wedding practices over the past sixty years. In Chapter Three Argyrou combines older ethnographic descriptions with informant memories to build a picture of weddings during the 1930s, that is, before the emergence of the Cypriot bourgeoisie. His analysis is based on Van Gennep and Mauss: he sees these weddings (which took place over five days) as classical rites-of-passage, the key vehicle by which children were incorporated into adult status. But he also sees weddings as potlatches, that is, as competitive displays by which Cypriot fathers showed their generosity and their manly disregard for monetary concerns. Chapter Four focuses on the undermining of these wedding practices which reflected the shift in power rela-

tions between the generations. With the rise of universal education and opportunity for employment in the city, fathers lost their monopoly on the control of resources (land) and thus lost their absolute power to make decisions for their children. The wedding became less important as a marker of adulthood for young people who now had other markers: schooling, jobs, moving to the city. Thus, Argyrou claims that *pace* local beliefs, the wedding did not shrink from a five-day affair to its current one-day celebration because of economic or other concerns, but because it no longer had such a crucial role to play as a rite-of-passage. Argyrou also traces these changes through attitudes toward virginity and the display of the bloody sheets on the morning after the wedding. Even in the 1930s this custom was in retreat, as it caused ambivalence through crossing the boundaries of public and private space for the family. By the 1950s the custom had ceased, and indeed the demand for virginity at marriage was giving way to an increasing willingness by parents to allow couples conjugal relations after the declaration of an engagement. But Argyrou sees this as a way that parents, particularly the bride's parents, held on to their power under the guise of recognizing their children's greater freedom: since once a man was having sex with a woman it became very difficult for him to withdraw from an engagement. Such allowances on the part of parents, then, were a strategy to "tie down" the prospective groom. There is much of interest in Argyrou's detailed analysis here, and I would offer, once again, only a small quibble: his description of the dominance of fathers over children and the importance of weddings as potlatches, or contests over male status in the earlier periods, tends to elide the role and the consciousness of mothers. While he shows that mothers often were chiefly responsible for such customs as the display of wedding-night sheets, he insists that the woman was "granted the power to deal with such delicate matters by her husband" (p. 85). Or elsewhere he writes of the mother as moral guardian of the household, and the character of her daughters: "a task assigned to her by the family head, and she made certain that she completed it successfully" (p. 89). One wonders how much such views of male agency reflect retrospective shadings of Argyrou's informants. The Greek ethnographic literature is rich with examples of women giving men the *appearance* of authority, while actually following their own strategies, particularly concerning issues such as marriage arrangements. A bit greater attention to feminist formulations of issues of women's consciousness and agency would perhaps have helped Argyrou in his stated dilemma over portraying Cypriot gender relations without providing fodder for Western stereotypes

about Mediterranean backwardness.

Chapter Five is the heart of Argyrou's argument, where he describes the present-day differences between village weddings and urban "champagne" weddings, and the implications of these for class distinction. Village weddings are partly about performing "tradition," about self-consciously reproducing a sense of Cypriot authenticity. But they are also, like urban weddings, "rites of distinction": a way that people naturalize and reproduce their class identities. But from Argyrou's point of view people are also "misrecognizing" their class identities by inscribing them in matters of taste and lifestyle. While rural weddings show continuities with the weddings of the past, in that they can still be seen as scaled-down rites-of-passage and potlatches, urban weddings are said to be about bourgeois attempts to distinguish themselves, both within their own class and between themselves and the rural, working class. This reader would have liked to hear more about this first type of endo-class distinction, but Argyrou's focus is very much on the latter: the way that village and urban weddings are always performed in opposition to the other. Village wedding receptions, for example, take place in people's homes. They involve the provision and consumption of large amounts of food and drink, dancing, the conspicuous presence of children, and other signs of disorderly high spirits. Urban "champagne" weddings take place at fancy hotels, involve the consumption of small amounts of hors d'oeuvres and champagne, no children, an orderly reception line, and no subsequent dancing. From the point of view of village weddings, urban weddings seem the height of effete snobbery and lack of spontaneity: the bourgeoisie don't know how to enjoy themselves. Lack of a meal both suggests a lack of commensality and the kind of precise calculation of expenses which is the antithesis of Cypriot village manliness. Thus, Argyrou's village informants are vociferous in their criticisms of their bourgeois counterparts, inverting their signs of class distinction as signs of alienation and lack of authenticity. For the bourgeoisie, the village weddings epitomize rural backwardness and disorder, exemplified by gender distinctions (the groom standing in front of the bride), and in the ubiquitous "disorder" exemplified by the category mistake of villagers wearing their Sunday best, and then sitting down to eat "in the dirt," i.e., at unclean, informal tables. This "category mistake" is in fact an act of resistance to symbolic domination: the rural working class have appropriated the bourgeois sign of fine clothing, while simultaneously devaluing it by bringing it into contact with "dirt." Here Argyrou makes a key point: while the rural work-

ing class can criticize urban weddings directly, the bourgeoisie cannot verbally criticize rural weddings. This is because of their association with Cypriot custom and authenticity, the same authenticity that connects Cyprus with the classical Greek civilization, and hence, with European identity. “The Cypriot bourgeoisie, then, being a crusader of modernity, has a vital stake in advocating tradition. But it has an equally vital stake in avoiding practical association with it” (p. 134). The way out of this dilemma is to “let symbols speak for themselves:” i.e., to perform their difference. Through serving luxury foods that do not fill the stomach, through holding weddings during the week, when most people must work, through holding weddings in the culturally intimidating space of the luxury hotel, in all these ways the bourgeoisie perform their freedom from working class “necessity.” Here Argyrou relies on Bourdieu’s depiction of French class culture in terms of bourgeois concern with “form” and “aesthetics,” as opposed to working class concern with “function” and “practicality.”

In Argyrou’s concluding two chapters, the Cypriot wedding is left behind for more general theoretical considerations. In Chapter Six, Argyrou makes an “occidentalist” critique of Westernization and global homogenization. How can the world be homogenizing, Argyrou asks, when the “West” itself is fraught with difference and otherness? He makes his argument through schematic examples: through showing that the ideology of Honor and Shame used by anthropologists to characterize Mediterranean societies, can be seen as part of working class culture in Western societies. Here he relies again on Bourdieu’s descriptions of the valorization of the male body in French working class culture, as well as Paul Willis’s classic description of working class “lads” in England, *Learning to Labor*. Willis highlights the code of male sexual virility and willingness to fight over matters of jealousy and that of female sexual passivity and timidity. Thus, Argyrou argues, Honor and Shame exist at the heart of the West. How can they be used to exoticize the Mediterranean (Argyrou makes a parallel argument concerning the notion of “Gift” vs. “Commodity” economies). Argyrou could have extended his argument by considering the ways that the ideology of the male body have become part of middle-class “Western” culture as well, in the fascination in the 1980s and 1990s with working out and body building, which contradict Bourdieu’s rather static and out of date depictions of class cultures (similar points could be made about recent fads among the middle-class for hearty, healthy, simple peasant cooking). But this leads me to a difficulty with Argyrou’s argument. Argy-

rou’s criticism of Honor and Shame as a gatekeeper concept used by anthropologists to carve out an academic specialization, is certainly on the mark. But I had some hesitations concerning the specifics his depiction of these concepts. Contrary to the rather simplistic formulations of some writers who focus on male swaggering and female modesty as particularly Mediterranean “values,” in classical works, such as Campbell’s *Honor, Family and Patronage*, these moral concepts were not reduced to issues of physical violence, sexual jealousy and passivity. Rather they were seen as integrally connected to a wider social system that involved close-knit extended families and ties of political patronage. To prove that ideals of “manliness” and sexual dichotomies exist in other societies is to attack Honor and Shame in its weakest, rather than its strongest, incarnation. If we are to reject the idea of Honor and Shame, as I think we should, we must first give it its full conceptual due.

Argyrou concludes this chapter with a brief argument to the effect that anthropologists have missed such complexities in Western society because of their own need to reify the West in order to criticize it from the point of view of their dominated position within western societies, i.e., although they possess cultural capital (specialist knowledge), they possess little economic capital, and thus are prone to make alliances with other dominated peoples. But in reifying the West, and in worrying over the Westernization of the “Rest,” anthropologists “inadvertently no doubt and against their best intentions, participate in the very ideology they mean to debunk.”

This point forms a bridge to Argyrou’s final chapter, in which he restates his argument made through the wedding, that the Cypriot bourgeoisie participate in their own domination. For, in criticizing the “backwardness” of their country—in attitudes toward virginity, for example—they do so by appealing to the authority of the West and Europe. Nor do working class villagers escape this dilemma, what Argyrou calls the “dialectics of symbolic domination”—since in rejecting bourgeois culture, they commit themselves to their dominated position in the sociocultural order and victimize themselves even further (p. 176). The other side of this coin is found in the attitudes of Westerners—tourists, travellers and anthropologists—toward Cyprus. Cypriot striving toward “modernity” and “Westernization” will always be seen by these Westerners as a poorer version of the Western “original” and a loss of Cypriot “authenticity.”^[3] Thus Argyrou concludes that the West is not a destination to be reached: “if the West is an identity, then ... it is so only in a superficial sense. For identities are for shar-

ing, while the West has been historically deployed to denounce and deny" (p. 177). While this insight applies to many "third world" countries, there is a particular irony here for the Greeks, given that the West has never felt inauthentic in aspiring to build itself on the identities of Ancient Greece and Rome.

On my first reading of *Tradition and Modernity in the Mediterranean* it struck me as strange that Argyrou placed these two chapters at the end, rather than at the beginning of his analysis. These images and counterimages of domination seemed more appropriate as a starting than an ending point. But as I re-read, and took in the flavor of Argyrou's dominant trope: tragic irony, this placement made more sense. While Bourdieu's analysis is highlighted throughout the book, the guiding spirit is more Foucauldian: Just as for Foucault, the "sexual revolution" was a delusion masking the continuities of power, in this book there is an overwhelming sense that there is no escape from the technologies of power in which we are ensnared. Even Argyrou himself seems to recognize that he is forced by his own social positioning, which he painstakingly lays out in the first few chapters, to reproduce some of the chestnuts of classic Modernization theory in writing about the Cypriot wedding. These include notions of the increasing independence for women and the shifting of power from the older to the younger generation as part of the changing of authority from the farm to the state bureaucracy. While some may want to disagree with the specifics of his prognosis, I found his relentlessly bleak perspective to be a refreshing antidote both to those political scientists and economists who speak a language that still equates modernization with

westernization, and to the trivial utopianisms of much of anthropology and critical theory that finds "resistance" hiding around every corner. This book will engage you, as the length of my review should indicate. It is a book that should provoke some welcomed debate and a fresh perspective on otherwise tired issues. I have used this book in the classroom and received extremely positive feedback from students, who appreciate Argyrou's lucid expositions of theory and rich ethnographic descriptions. I recommend it highly.

Notes:

[1]. See Fog Olwig, Karen. "Between Tradition and Modernity: National Development in the Caribbean." *Social Analysis* 33 (1993): 89-104; Rofel, Lisa. "Rethinking Modernity: Space and Factory Discipline in China." *Cultural Anthropology* 7 (1992): 93-114; Sutton, David. "Tradition and Modernity": Kalymnian Constructions of Identity and Otherness." *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 12 (1994):239-260.

[2]. Comaroff, John, & Jean Comaroff eds. *Modernity and its Malcontents*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

[3]. As detailed, for example, by Christopher Hitchens. *Hostage to History: Cyprus from the Ottomans to Kissinger*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1984.

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