CHAPTER 14

Founding a Social Cosmos: Perspectives for a Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Lombardy

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Introduction

In the last three decades, until very recent signs of diminishing interest, anthropological studies have been widely read and discussed by Italian historians, including historians of early modern Lombardy. Comparisons with political anthropology have helped to bring into focus new protagonists in public life (factions and lineages), and in rethinking other subjects, more familiar to the historiographical tradition (communities) and, in general, relations between the centre and periphery of the state (thanks to concepts of mediation and clientage). Juridical anthropology has suggested methods of analysing conflict and the many ways of conducting it and resolving it, practical arrangements and ritual behaviours, from the system of vendetta to urban collective violence, long perceived as anomic. Economic anthropology has facilitated the interpretation of behaviours dictated by reasons other than those of the maximization of material profit, and of values attributed to things transcending those assigned to them by the market. Preceding this had been the renewal of investigations of religious and secular ceremonies and so-called “popular” beliefs, fed by a wide range of stimuli coming from cultural anthropology, but also from the history of religion and from international historiography. Finally, an impressive ethnographic enquiry, promoted by the Regione Lombardia,

1 I would like to thank Federico Del Tredici, Andrea Gamberini and Marco Gentile for their comments.
2 Beginning with Daniele Andreozzi, Nascita di un disordine. Una famiglia signorile e una valle piacentina tra xv e xvi secolo (Milan, 1993).
above all in the 1970s, could offer many suggestions to historians, and here I shall seek to bear it in mind as a background to the themes to be discussed.\(^4\)

The most recent research, however, has paid little attention to a subject of keen interest to previous generations of historians, that of cultural alterity, of the coexistence, at the same time and in the same space, of different world outlooks. Doubtless, it is no longer possible to employ the label “popular culture”, a notion which has appeared ever more inadequate over the past twenty years. The head-on clash of antagonistic “mentalities”, which were collectively assimilated by those belonging to the same social environment, has not been verified by empirical research. Peasant traditions, the programmes of the centres of power, the values of elites were articulated and communicated across the groups, and encountered one another in ways that were more complex than the model of inevitable resistance, defeat and conformity of the “subordinate” cultures to innovations coming from above. Lombard scholars, however, have not in most cases drawn methodological inspiration from the anthropological literature only for history that could be described as primarily social history. Elsewhere in Italy, in fact, research has been centred on the strategies of individuals, families and groups engaged in defining their own physiognomy, constructing their own legitimacy and pursuing their own political or economic interests. Emphasis has been placed on the use by social actors of the resources put at their disposal by institutions of lay and ecclesiastical government, as well as of languages and rituals, seen as instruments with which to confirm the identity and prestige useful in resolving conflicts to their own advantage.

Those investigating the past of Lombardy, however, have not abandoned the attempt to root individual behaviour in codes shared within particular social and territorial contexts. Nor have they wanted to follow much contemporary anthropology in describing as cultural “contaminations” and “hybridizations” the dialectic developed historically between political, economic and religious discourses linking, and which linked the higher political and ecclesiastical powers, urban elites and rural communities, academic authors and so on. Consequently, the phenomena of circularity have been analysed, as well as those of the sometimes epoch-making breaches that occurred between different social environments and different cultural codes. Thus it has emerged, for example, that in the late-medieval countryside principles of political belonging flourished founded on the personal loyalty of peasant to lord, which could

\(^4\) *Patrimoni sonori della Lombardia. Le ricerche dell’Archivio di etnografia e storia sociale*, eds Renata Meazza and Nicola Scaldaferrì (Rome, 2008).