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GENDER, WORK AND PROPERTY

An Ethnographic Study of Value in a Spanish Village

campus

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Introduction

While doing fieldwork in a small village in Spain near León (I will use “San Julián” as a pseudonym), I came across something that perplexed me. The family farm businesses were relatively prosperous—people could and did build new houses and had good cars and all the main household consumer items—and many young men were staying in the village to work on their families’ farms. But the young women were leaving, and some of the young men were finding it difficult to marry and form families. When I asked about this, the young men and the older generations told me that the young men “liked” living in the village, but the young women did not. The young women, however, said they would like to live in the village but could not because there was no work for them there.

In the previous generation, both men and women seemed to “like” living in the village just fine. How could this suddenly have changed? How could living and working in the village continue to have value for the men, while ceasing to have value for the women? Or were women for some reason unable to fulfill their ideal of living in the village? Had the values changed in the space of one generation? These were the questions that motivated the research that I will present in this volume. While this research did, in fact, become a doctoral dissertation, this book is definitely not that dissertation. I have substantially reworked my material and my analyses, taking into consideration suggestions that many colleagues have generously made. My intention is to answer the questions in the previous paragraph and shed light on what happened in one particular place over a specific period of time, hoping by this to illuminate processes in a broader range of places and times.

In order to do this, I will use the concept of value as defined by Pierre Bourdieu. I will analyze the concept of *casa* as people use it in the village, show how gender is the axis along which life and work in the village are organized, and show how small changes in the life course, such as the age when one has to decide whether to continue in school or leave to work, can greatly affect later outcomes. So this book will be of interest to a wide variety of people: anthropologists and ethnographers, of course, but also anyone interested in the study of work and property, in recent changes in rural life, in value theory, in how culturally constructed gender differences affect people’s lives, or in how schooling works on already-existing situations, among other things. Although the discussion will center on San Julián and what has happened there, the situation that I will describe is, with local variations, common to many villages not only in Spain, but in Italy, France, Germany, and other areas in Europe. So what I will present here is a study of value in a local context.

Using the concept of value, which I will discuss shortly, and the organizing axes of work, gender, and property, I will interpret the events and processes of the second half of the 20th century, and the very beginning of the 21st, in the village. We shall see how the values that people enact and express in their life-course decisions and discourse locate them in specific places in the social field, and how in different time periods changing conditions on the national and international scale have altered the shape of this social field and the options available, altering the results of people’s decisions. Up to the middle of the 20th century, the positions people occupied on the social field led to the reproduction of the *casa* and the family farm; in the sixties and seventies, this was so only for some people, while others emigrated. By the end of the century, the organizational logic of work and gender, against the changing conditions of economic crisis, a decrease in job opportunities, and schooling, led to important changes in the way family farms were set up and worked and to the situation that originally inspired this research: men who stayed on the farm, many unable to marry, and women who left the village to work and marry elsewhere.

Fieldwork and methodology

The fieldwork that provided the material for this analysis was carried out in a small village, which I will call San Julián, about 30 kilometers south of the city of León in north-western Spain, as well as in some nearby villages, for comparison. In 2010, the village population was 188, having fallen consistently over the years from its maximum of 334 in 1960. The fieldwork was extraordinarily long-term, carried out mostly between 1996 and 2001, although I gathered my first data in 1988 and I have continued to monitor the situation up to the present. The main reason for the duration of the fieldwork was that it was not intensive but rather commuting fieldwork, due to my personal work and family situation. Over the years, I was present in the village more than a full calendar year, and I was careful to be present more than once at any given time of the year, not only during the summer and holidays. I would have preferred a more intensive, continuous type of fieldwork. However, I found certain advantages to my long-term research. The people in the village, who originally accepted me because of family connections, came to know me better and I became part of the scenery, someone who was interested in their lives but who could be trusted with confidential information. More importantly, I was able to get a longitudinal view, not just through people telling me about the past, but by observing things happening over time. As we shall see, this was fundamental in enabling me to analyze the transformations that occurred over time, something that would not have been possible in a single year of intensive fieldwork.

Following anthropological tradition, I used a multiplicity of techniques to gather my data: participant observation, interviews, and informal conversations. I also carried out archival research using the municipal population records and parish records. The combination of talking to people and using archives was very illuminating because each source helped to elucidate the other. If a person disappeared from the municipal records, I could ask what had happened to them, where they had gone, if they had married. I could discover that someone had actually emigrated, although they continued to be registered. And I was able, of course, to confirm and revise the information people offered me about the past, where our memory of dates and events may be less than perfect.

Using this dual approach, I made diagrams of each family unit or *casa*, as reflected in the earliest complete record, the 1957 Status Animarum, which I took as the baseline. I followed each *casa*, as well as the new ones that appeared, in the later Status Animarum from 1961 and then in the municipal records from 1975, 1981, 1991, and 2001. This gave me a picture of the changes each family underwent over the second half of the 20th century. These diagrams enabled me to see how the different families were related and made processes that would otherwise have been hard to capture visible. This combination of sources also allowed me to make life-course models that helped me to see how the possible pathways, timing of events, and vital conjunctures or decision moments in people's lives changed over time. This, in turn, became an important theme in my analysis.

I assured the people who assisted me in my research that what they told me would be kept confidential, insofar as I would not replay the recordings of interviews to others in the village or publish the transcripts associated with their real names or with the real name of the village. Hence, the pseudonym of "San Julián" and the indications of "Farmer, male, age 56" or "Couple 7." Most of the information and quotes are general public knowledge and I have omitted any material I feel the people I worked with would object to seeing published.