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From Mary to Modern Woman: The Material Basis of Marianismo and Its Transformation
in a Spanish Village

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from Mary to modern woman: the material basis of Marianismo and its transformation in a Spanish village

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In 1963–64, the married women of Los Olivos (pseudonym), a small village in the mountains of Huelva, southwestern Spain, seemed typical representatives of Mediterranean culture. When housewives gathered at the public fountain to wash clothes, they wore drab, shapeless outfits, and many wore mourning. Most were overweight. Washing clothes and attending funerals were their most public activities. In the evenings married women stayed home or visited the sick. Twenty years later, in the summer of 1984, the new generation of married women presented a very different picture. Instead of wearing drab, shapeless clothes, most wore outfits that showed off their figures. And most had shapely figures. They worried about gaining weight, although some were notably more successful at dieting than others. Married women no longer stayed home every evening. Rather, they spent weekend evenings with their husbands in the local bars, where they sat around tables dressed in their most fashionable outfits, with heavy makeup and elaborate hairdos.

How do we understand such a radical shift in married women's presentation of self? The explanation offered by many ethnographers of Spanish villages—and echoed by residents of Los Olivos—is that rural Spain has “opened up” (see Aceves and Douglass 1976). Massive emigration from the countryside and the spread of television into remote villages have exposed the present generation of rural Spaniards to ideas and choices not available to their parents and grandparents. Villagers in Los Olivos, for example, say that 20 years ago their village was *atrasado* (backward). People followed outmoded customs, they say, because they did not know any others. But now everyone has city relatives and a television set, and many people have cars. Today's adults have been exposed to city ways. Now everyone below the age of 60 wants to be “modern.” Married women want to dress nicely and go out with their husbands. And young adults think that former village customs, such as delaying marriage until age 30, or wearing heavy mourning for 10 years after the death of a parent, are *tonterias* (stupidities). Such “backward” village customs are to be discarded.

The “opening up” explanation is not wrong. But it is not very illuminating either. To begin, the village was not isolated in 1963–64. There may have been only two television sets in town, but everyone had radios. Women also had excellent knowledge of how urban fashion setters

In one generation, married women in an Andalusian village appeared to have turned from emulating the Virgin Mary to emulating the modern woman of Spanish advertisements and TV. Drawing on the notion that gender conceptions are aspects of cultural systems through which people negotiate relations of inequality within complex social wholes, I suggest that a concern for female chastity gave way to a concern for personal capacities and preferences when inequalities in income and life-style among villagers no longer appeared to rest on inheritance, but on the urban, salaried jobs people obtained. [Mediterranean society, gender, political economy, honor code, ideology]

lived and dressed. Many girls worked as servants for wealthy families before returning to marry in the village. And glossy magazines depicting royalty and movie stars circulated among village women. Local dressmakers and hairdressers were, in fact, so successful at copying city fashions for unmarried women that I had difficulty distinguishing dressed up village maidens from stylish urban dwellers (see also Martinez-Alier 1971:208).

Given that villagers knew a great deal about the customs and life-styles of middle- and upper-class urban dwellers in 1963–64, the “opening up” hypothesis cannot explain why married women’s presentation of self changed drastically in 20 years. Rather, what is needed is an explanation of why city ways became attractive to today’s adults when they had not been so for their parents. In addition, the “opening up” hypothesis does not explain the content of the “traditional” and the “modern.” Why should married women in 1963–64 have worn drab clothes, cultivated plump figures, and stayed home in the evenings? And why should today’s generation of married women wear bright clothes, try to stay thin, and join their husbands at bars on weekends? Similarly, why should young people today think it “unnatural” to delay marriage until age 30, and why should they call village mourning customs “stupidities”?

In this paper, I shall suggest answers to both the content and the change questions. As to content, I will argue that cultural conceptions of gender must be interpreted as aspects of cultural systems through which people manipulate, interpret, rationalize, resist, and reproduce relations of inequality within complex social wholes (see Collier and Rosaldo 1981). To understand conceptions of gender, we cannot look at what men and women are or do, but rather must ask what people want and fear, what privileges they seek to claim, rationalize, and defend. To understand gender, we must understand social inequality. And, if gender conceptions are idioms for interpreting and manipulating social inequality, then we should expect notions of femininity and masculinity to change when one organization of inequality gives way to another.

Twenty years ago, Los Olivos seemed indistinguishable from the Andalusian village Pitt-Rivers described in his 1954 book, *The People of the Sierra*. Their gender system was a typical example of the Mediterranean values of “honor and shame.” A man’s honor was a function of his mother’s, sisters’, and wife’s sexual chastity. A family’s reputation depended on the sexual shame of its women and on the readiness of its men to defend, with violence if need be, its women’s purity.

A cultural concern for female chastity is not unique to Mediterranean peoples. Rather, all complex agrarian societies, including India and China, have forms of the “virginity complex” (Ortner 1976). The association of virginity with agrarian systems thus suggests a first-level explanation for its occurrence: in stratified societies where rights and privileges are vested in status groups, female chastity becomes a cultural concern because legitimate birth is the primary idiom people use to claim, rationalize, and defend status privileges.¹ Legitimate birth is, of course, not the basis of status inequalities. Such inequalities result from unequal access to the means of production as maintained by coercive force. But individuals living within such societies rarely have occasion to contemplate the wider structure of inequality. Rather, people engaged in everyday, practical action are concerned with asserting their own rights and privileges against the challenges of particular others. As a result, people talk and act as if inheritance were the basis of status inequalities.

In a world where people claim, defend, and justify privileges on the basis of legitimate birth, illegitimacy is the idiom people use to challenge or deny others’ claims to precedence.² To question the chastity of a man’s mother is to question his right to the status he claims as his. In such a world, women’s bodies appear as gateways to all privileges. But women’s bodies are gateways any man may enter. Women’s penetrability is their most significant feature. The status and reputation of a family thus rest on the degree to which its women are protected from penetration—by women’s own sense of sexual shame, by being locked away, and/or by the courage of family men in repelling seducers.

While an understanding of stratified agrarian societies may provide a first-level explanation for “virginity complexes,” any particular instance of the complex must be understood within its specific historical context. Women’s chastity may be a primary idiom used by people in stratified agrarian societies for negotiating claims to unequal privileges, but it is not the only idiom. Such societies are complex. They contain many status and ethnic groups. Women’s chastity may not matter to some. And, as Mediterraneanists realize, the “values of honor and shame” are not uniform throughout the area (Peristiany 1966; Herzfeld 1980). In order to understand how “honor and shame” are lived in any particular time and place, therefore, we need to examine the specific privileges people seek to claim, rationalize, and defend.

In 1963–64, Los Olivos was a small village of less than 800 people where inheritance appeared to determine people’s occupations, incomes, and life-chances. Although the community appeared egalitarian (the wealthiest landowners lived outside in nearby, more significant towns, and beggars rarely stayed overnight), the village was nevertheless divided into three status groups: (1) a small number of resident landowners who hired workers and did not do manual labor themselves, (2) a larger number of landowners who worked their own land but did not have to work for others, and (3) many people with little or no land who worked for others as day laborers. Long before 1963–64, Los Olivos was integrated into the capitalist world system. The larger landowners produced for the market, and half the villagers worked for wages. But inheritance still appeared to be the major determinant of people’s life-chances because, in a labor-intensive system of mixed-crop agriculture, workers knew as much or more about the entire agricultural process as their employers.³ As a result, villagers lived in a world where the most obvious explanation for differences in occupation, income, and life-style was that some people had inherited *capital* (land or small industries) while others had not.

Although Los Olivos appeared to be a “traditional” Spanish village, the “tranquil” community we observed in 1963–64 was, in fact, only one moment in an ongoing historical process. As Perez Diaz (1976) notes, change in Spain has been continuous. In Andalusia, a process of class polarization, begun during the last century and intensifying as the accumulation of land by entrepreneurial landlords created an increasingly large and impoverished class of landless rural laborers, was contained by various mechanisms, including naked force (see Martinez-Alier 1971). For a brief period in the early 1930s class warfare erupted in Los Olivos. An active union of agrarian socialists wrested control of wages and working conditions from landowners (Collier n.d.). But during the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39, all vocal socialists were killed or exiled and Franco’s victorious troops gave control of village government to the town’s wealthiest landowners, who thereafter ruled with the aid of a resident contingent of Civil Guards.

Before the Civil War, working-class women married at a younger age than women of the propertied class, and many were pregnant at marriage. But after the war, these differences in behavior by class disappeared (Collier 1983). Not only were many working-class women forced to delay their marriages by the war and subsequent famine, but the town’s elites, who enjoyed uncontested control of economic resources, focused on a woman’s virtue when considering her, or her family’s, requests for aid.⁴ It was also true that, even for working-class families whose estate consisted of labor power rather than *capital*, the wealth parents accumulated determined children’s dowries and the spouses they could attract (see Price and Price 1966b). In 1963–64, landowners’ uncontested control of village affairs ensured that all people, whether from propertied families or not, lived in a world where the resources and reputations of parents appeared to determine the status of their children.

Given the apparent role of inheritance in determining people’s occupations, incomes, and life-chances, people’s actions, whatever their ostensible purpose, were always open to being interpreted as statements about a man’s courage or a woman’s sexual modesty. Whatever practical reasons, for example, a couple may have had to delay marriage until the bride’s 29th or 30th year, such a delay offered visible proof of the bride’s ability to deny and control her sexual impulses. Similarly, the woman who dutifully observed 10 years of mourning after the death of

a parent demonstrated—by wearing heavy black wool summer and winter—her ability to mortify the flesh. And the married woman who never spent a *perra* on herself demonstrated both her capacity for self-sacrifice and her lack of interest in being sexually attractive to men. On the other side, of course, the pregnant bride, the mourning woman who laid aside her shawl while working in the sun, and the wife who bought herself a new dress were all appropriate targets of gossip.

Although a woman's sexual modesty was never without significance, maidens enjoyed a freedom apparently denied to married women.⁵ Marriage marked a major turning point in people's lives. Due to the system of equal, partible inheritance, family estates were not maintained through time, but rather constituted anew each generation with the birth of children who united the separate inheritances of their parents. As a result, marriage, with its possibility for producing legitimate heirs, marked the point at which a man and woman passed from dependence on parental estates to responsibility for the future estate their children would divide. Unmarried young adults, as people without responsibilities, were expected to *divertirse* (enjoy themselves). Maidens were thus encouraged to seek amusement and to follow the latest fashions—as long as they did not violate community norms of modesty. Married people, in contrast, had *obligaciones* (obligations). A married woman was expected to sacrifice herself to build the estate her children would inherit. *Divertirse* and *obligaciones* stood in stark contrast. For a married woman to “enjoy herself” was, by definition, to squander her children's inheritance.

By 1984, Los Olivos was a different world. Heavy outmigration has reduced the permanent population to under 300 and overturned the class structure. The migration of landless workers to city jobs left landowners with the choice of farming their own land or migrating too. The poorest and most overworked people in the village are now the landowners who stayed, while poor workers who migrated first, and so participated in the industrial boom of the 1960s, enjoy month-long vacations in village houses they have renovated with cash from city jobs.⁶

The decisive break occurred in the mid-1960s. 1963–64 was, in fact, the end of an era. During the 1960s, ongoing developments in Spain became “so acute that the point [was] reached where the traditional framework, maintained for about a century, [lost] its fundamental characteristics and [disappeared]” (Perez Diaz 1976:123). In Los Olivos, the labor-intensive agricultural system finally collapsed, due to rising wages and competition from capital-intensive agricultural enterprises elsewhere in Spain. Records beginning at the turn of the century indicate a steady rate of emigration from Los Olivos before 1963–64, but the people who left were either members of the wealthiest class—who were regionally, rather than locally, based anyway—or landless laborers, many of whom had, in one way or another, lost their “honor.” Given high rates of unemployment throughout Andalusia, and the general suspicion of strangers, most people who could make a living in Los Olivos stayed there. In the mid-1960s, however, when the agricultural system collapsed, children of landed and honorable families began migrating to city jobs. The generation of people who came of age in the 1960s, whether they emigrated or remained in Los Olivos, thus entered a different world.

For members of this generation and their children, inheritance no longer appears to be the major determinant of occupation, income, and life-style. Rather, people experience their occupations and incomes as determined by their personal choices and abilities. Schoolteachers, nurses, postmen, policemen, and banktellers talk about how hard they studied and how well they did on national or firm exams. Bus and truck drivers talk of learning to drive and acquiring licenses. And villagers who inherited small enterprises talk of the skills they acquired and the capital improvements they made. On the other side, people blame the poor and unemployed for their failure. Everyone recognizes that Spain has a very high rate of unemployment, especially among young people, but when explaining why a particular youth has been unable to find a job, people talk of his poor school record or his lack of initiative.

In short, the people of Los Olivos, both its migrants and those who are still in the village, now live in a world where personal choice and ability is the primary idiom people use to claim,

rationalize, and defend inequalities in working conditions, income, and life-style.⁷ Personal ability is, of course, not the basis of inequality. The distribution of income and jobs in Spain, as in most of the developed world, is organized through a market shaped by the fiscal policies of core state governments, maintained by coercive force. But, just as people living in stratified agrarian societies talk about legitimate birth, so people facing an array of possible jobs talk about personal desires and qualifications. And, just as in agrarian societies, a woman's penetrability is her most important feature, so in industrial societies, a woman's most important feature is the "womanliness" that differentiates her from, and makes her attractive to, men.

In a world where people's inward capacities and preferences appear to determine their occupations, a woman's biological capacity to bear children seems to determine her apparently primary occupation of housewife and mother.⁸ And, in a world where a homemaker's life-style is largely determined by her husband's income, a woman's status and life-chances appear to depend on the kind of man she can attract. As a result, a woman's physical appearance is always open to being interpreted as a statement about her moral and social worth. A woman's appearance also provides evidence for assessing the judgment and character of the man who is her husband or lover, although a man's job tends to be the primary standard by which his worth is assessed. Whatever a woman's appearance, therefore, it is never without significance. The woman who takes care of her body and dresses attractively, particularly as she grows older, displays her "womanliness" and testifies to the good judgment of her man. The woman of slovenly appearance, on the other hand, suggests both inward and outward failure. Among Los Olivos natives under 60, for example, a fat, uncared-for body and drab clothes are the sign of a country hick. They proclaim a family's status as unskilled laborers on the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Today's parents are concerned—as their own parents were—to provide their children with the resources children need for succeeding as adults. But today, education, not property, appears to be the most important determinant of a child's future income and status—at least for this population of working-, and lower-middle-class families. Many parents thus sacrifice themselves to enroll their children in private schools, and/or to provide music lessons, English lessons, typing lessons, and so forth. "Sacrifice," however, has a very different meaning to modern parents. *Divertirse* and *obligaciones* are no longer cultural opposites. Because investment in a child's education, unlike investment in family property, may or may not pay off, parents who have done all they can for children see no reason not to spend leftover money on themselves. More importantly, today's adults are expected to spend their money and leisure time in ways that enhance their enjoyment and enrich their experience. The consumer products people buy, and the uses they make of leisure time, testify to their sense of taste and knowledge of modern ways.

In this paper, I have focused on gender conceptions, arguing that notions of masculinity and femininity must be understood with reference to the idioms people use in negotiating practical social relations within complex social wholes. I suggested that the married women of Los Olivos in 1963–64 wore drab clothes and ran to fat because they lived within a system of inequality where legitimate birth was the primary idiom people used to claim, rationalize, and defend unequal privileges. In such a system, a married woman's drab clothes and sexual unattractiveness testified to the legitimacy of her children and to her concern for building their future property. As of 1984, in contrast, the people of Los Olivos, both migrants and those still in the village, live within a system of inequality where a person's capacities and desires appear to determine the job or spouse he or she acquires. Today, the woman who keeps her figure and dresses fashionably testifies to her own worth and to her capacity for attracting and keeping a desirable man, even as the married woman who visits a bar with her husband demonstrates, not a lack of interest in her children's future, but rather her sophistication. Twenty years ago, the women of Los Olivos were judged according to how well they emulated the Virgin Mary.

Today they are judged according to how well they emulate the Modern Woman of advertisements and TV.

Although I have used implicit models of “agrarian” and “industrial” societies to analyze the content of gender conceptions in Los Olivos, I have also argued that the gender conceptions of particular peoples can be understood only in relation to their specific historical experiences. The Modern Woman of Spanish advertisements and TV may look a great deal like her North American counterpart, but the lived experiences of Los Olivos women are not those of their North American age mates. As Southern Europeans, the modern women of Los Olivos draw on a different cultural heritage. They seem more concerned with dressing and decorating their bodies than with their bodies themselves. They also seem—to me, at least—more self-confident and less dependent on men than American women. Spanish mothers of young children, who have difficulty finding and keeping jobs, are, like their American counterparts, only one man away from destitution, but divorces among Los Olivos couples are still infrequent, and the few women whose husbands left them are not blamed for having failed to keep their men. Even the enemies of a woman whose husband left her with four small children blame the husband rather than the wife. Similarly, mothers are pitied, not blamed, when their children turn out badly.

More importantly, the women of Los Olivos have lived, and are living, through a different history. Today’s adults have, in their lifetimes, experienced a radical cultural break. The women who came of age in the early 1960s grew up, courted, and perhaps married within the value system of “honor and shame” (see Price and Price 1966a). They lived out the cultural requirement to enjoy themselves, expecting to assume later the *obligaciones* of marriage and parenthood. But their lives turned out differently. As the labor-intensive agricultural system collapsed, many migrated to cities as workers and/or wives of migrating men, while those who remained in the village found that farming shifted from a way of life to a way of making a living (see Harding 1984). The generation of people who came of age in the early 1960s, who grew up within a cultural system of “honor and shame,” have thus been living their adult lives within a cultural system that emphasizes personal initiative and abilities.

Not only have today’s adults lived through a cultural break, they continue to live it each day. Given that Los Olivos was never isolated from outside ideas, I expected to find evidence of a gradual shift from one cultural system to the other. I thought that people who lived through the 1960s would embrace aspects of both systems, or at least understand them both. But I was mistaken. Instead, individuals seem to live within one system, and to misunderstand the other.

The cultural break appears gradual because members of both generations act in ways they hope will please the other. Elderly widows, for example, often exchange their mourning costumes for dark print dresses in order to please their children, even as younger women whose parents have died will don black dresses to please elderly relatives, particularly when visiting the village. But even as young and old act to please others they care about, they seem to lack a deep understanding of why those others care.

When elderly widows explain why younger women have abandoned mourning costume, they say that young women fear adverse gossip from urban dwellers who look down on those who wear black. Young women, however, never mention gossip. Instead, they talk of grief as an inward feeling. They see no reason to display personal grief publicly by wearing black. And they actively condemn the “hypocrisy” of those who continue to wear mourning long after grief could be deeply felt. I have often heard younger women explain their reasons to elderly mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, but I have never heard an older woman who advanced the “gossip” explanation either suggest she understood the younger woman or spontaneously produce the “feeling” explanation herself.

Similarly, young women seem to misunderstand their elders. Even those who came of age in the 1960s, and so grew up within a cultural system of “honor and shame,” seem to misunderstand that system today. When explaining why elders adhere to traditional mourning customs, young people say elders have *otra mentalidad* (another mentality). Elders, however, never men-

tion “mentality.” They say that people must show “respect” for the dead. Following mourning customs has nothing to do with an individual’s desires, feelings, or intentions. Instead, wearing mourning testifies to a person’s or family’s reputation. Given elders’ statements, young people are not wrong when they attribute elders’ actions to their *mentalidad*. Elders do have a different “mentality.” But in interpreting elders’ actions as testifying to their inward desires and intentions (their mentality), instead of to the reputations of their families, young people reveal how thoroughly they live within the cultural system of personal initiative and abilities, and how thoroughly they fail to comprehend the cultural system of honor and shame.

notes

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¹In this paper I suggest that female chastity is an idiom people use to talk about (and fight over) social inequality in complex agrarian societies with private property where status appears inherited—whether such societies have effective central governments or appear anarchic. Others have, of course, advanced different explanations for the “honor and shame” complex in Mediterranean societies (for example, Schneider 1971; Schneider and Schneider 1976; Pitt-Rivers 1977), and for “virginity complexes” elsewhere (for example, Ortner 1976). This paper is too short, however, to compare explanations.

²Female chastity is not a single, coherent idiom with a single cause. Rather, it is a complex, multiply-determined symbol. In a world where legitimate heirs are distinguished from illegitimate non-heirs, a mother’s chastity guarantees her children’s right to inherit. Where only virgins are eligible to become mothers of legitimate children, a daughter’s virginity may represent her family’s hopes of upward mobility and political patronage (see Ortner 1976). Men, as managers of inherited estates, whose life work is to guard such estates for their children, experience the begetting of bastards on their wives as rendering their lives meaningless. In areas of southern Europe where daughters inherit property, the man who seduces a maiden is, in a real sense, “stealing” some of her family’s estate. In societies where the presence of a “state” or “civil society” creates “the family” as a symbolic category, women, as representatives of the “family,” may come to stand for the family’s status. Their inviolability may then represent the inviolability of the family estate, in a world where net downward mobility—caused by the fact that rich people produce more living offspring than the poor—ensures that most people spend their lives trying to “hang on” to what they have. And so forth. . .

³Martinez-Alier, for example, attributes Andalusian laborers’ persisting belief in *reparto* (agrarian reform)—and hence their view of the existing system of land distribution as illegitimate—to their belief that they are technically competent to manage the estates on which they work, due to their good understanding of the productive process and the ease with which they become tenants (1971:117).

⁴Maddox (n.d.:Ch. 7) writes that regional elites before the Civil War glorified the virtues of working-class women even as they denigrated the honor and moral capacities of working-class males. Elite authors, in the regional newspaper, represented poor women as guardians of family virtue and piety, whose natural *vergüenza* (sense of shame) inclined them toward raising patient, humble children who would uphold the existing order instead of seeking to overthrow it out of “selfish” motives.

⁵Maidens, in fact, had far less freedom and power than married women. In Los Olivos, the woman who lacked *obligaciones* had no culturally valid reason for refusing to do what others requested. Maidens were thus always at others’ beck and call.

⁶Outmigration did not completely overturn the class structure of Los Olivos. The most privileged families in 1963–64 remain the most privileged today, because elites took advantage of their wealth and personal connections to educate their children for professional positions before the labor-intensive agricultural system collapsed. Landowners just below this elite stratum, however, who stayed in the community, are now among its poorest and most overworked members.

⁷The idiom of personal choice and ability is, of course, as complex and multiply-determined as the idiom of inheritance. Individualism, voluntarism, rationalism, and so forth are intersecting discourses whose usages and consequences vary widely according to historical circumstances. Female chastity also figures in voluntarist idioms, but with a different significance than in the idiom of inheritance. Within the idiom of personal choice and ability, a woman’s chastity testifies to her inner capacities and desires, not to her family’s reputation. So, chaste women may appear “naturally” asexual, within a set of gender conceptions that casts men as active/rational and women as passive/emotional, or as rationally withholding their sexuality in order to trap a man into marriage.

⁸The casting of housework and childcare as an “occupation” is, of course, also a result of an industrial

system of inequality. Caring for her *casa* (house) was, and remains, a major preoccupation of Los Olivos women, but the meaning of *casa* has changed drastically. In 1963–64 the woman who cared for her *casa* was co-manager of the estate her children would inherit. If her husband abandoned her, she kept the estate. Today, the woman who cares for her *casa* is an unpaid homemaker, as economically dependent as her children on the wage her husband brings home.

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