

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JON P. MITCHELL, *Ambivalent Europeans: Ritual, Memory and the Public Sphere in Malta*. London: Routledge. 2002, xiii + 275 p., \$85 (US) hardcover, \$27.95 (US) paper.

The key concept defining contemporary Maltese society is, according to Jon P. Mitchell, ambivalence. Mitchell identifies oppositions between modernity and traditionalism, Europeanism and Orientalism, local and national, public and private in diverse symbolical forms related to political life, memory construction, the shaping of urban space by pulling down and rebuilding, the functioning of private sphere or to ceremonial experiences. Ambivalence, as core trait of Maltese society, is a state that the inhabitants of the island have internalized, and which is explicitly defined and experienced as integral part of political, social and religious life. At the same time, its tensions are overcome through integrating ritual constructs, more precisely, through experiences generated by Saint Paul's national, ritual holiday (*San Pawl*), "that simultaneously commemorates the national patron saint, celebrates national unity," which allows the local community and the family to draw attention away from the ambivalence surrounding these areas of life (236).

Ambivalent Europeans studies different cultural forms and identifies the symbolical mechanisms of construction and operation of ambivalence. It analyzes media debates about national history and the symbol of national identity (St. Paul's shipwreck on the island), as well as the construction and contestation of memory in the architecture of the Maltese capital. It also focuses on the relationships between the public and private spheres as manifested in the system of values (honor / shame), in gender relations (man / woman : public / private), in age relations, in marriage and fellowship rules, and in forms of debate (serious discussions or gossip). In addition, the book explores the games of political life at a small scale (especially through the mechanisms, the forms of representation and contestation of patronage and of clientelism), the social stratifications (the positioning of districts in La Valetta, the vocabulary and practices of morality, the forms of consumption) and especially, the ceremonial process related to St. Paul's *festa*.

The perspective proposed by Mitchell raises two general issues. One is related to the method of analysis; the other considers the theoretical frameworks of interpretation. Ethnographic research has developed in "classical" anthropology as a holistic method of understanding small human communities. What is the validity of this approach when applied to

a modern developed society? Contesting the validity of a holistic approach, considered excessively totalizing and even essentialist, Mitchell chooses an approach focusing on discontinuities, contest, and negotiations. His concern is not with culture on the whole, but with cultural sequences. His aim is to reveal not a Maltese cultural pattern, but the "Maltese people's debates and arguments about culture" (6). Methodologically, this leads to an enhancement of the anthropologist's ubiquity (he is present in various places) and to a shift of focus from participant's observation to the in-depth interview. Thus, we can obtain a more accurate description of the individuals' experiences and of the discourses through which they build their various symbolical systems of representation.

From a theoretical perspective, we might wonder what is the interpretative paradigm the scholar employs. At first glance, it seems to be Durkheimian in nature since it centers on the integrating function of ceremonies and on the capacity of symbolical forms to operate as representations of social structures. However, Mitchell also makes use of many other theoretical constructs, from D. Miller's consumption theory to V. Turner's ritual pattern, or from Whitehouse's psychologizing theories to Habermans' paradigm of the public sphere. As is the case with his methods of research, eclecticism also characterizes his theoretical sources. On several occasions, the author argues against "oversimplified" theoretical models that provide superficial solutions of interpretation (such as "the equation of male with public and female with domestic sphere" (87)). Faithful to his intention of studying struggles and negotiations characteristic of social praxis and the anxieties of the actors confronted with the constitutive ambivalences of Malta's modernization, he attempts to identify an adequate theoretical model for each type of phenomenon under research. Thus, the holistic attention to a specific field is replaced with a holistic attention to interconnections, and the paradigmatically unitary theoretical construction with a puzzle of methods of interpretation and theoretical models. This places the anthropological endeavor under the sign of the same fundamental ambivalence as that of the subject analyzed in his book.

Mihai Coman *University of Bucharest*