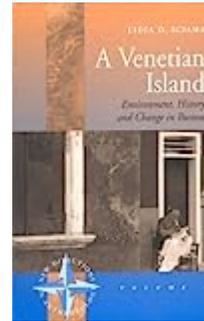




Lidia D. Sciama. *A Venetian Island: Environment, History and Change in Burano.* New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003. xix + 250 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57181-920-8.



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Hanging from a Thread: Marginality and Identity in an Island of Lace-Makers

The tiny island of Burano, in the northern reaches of the Venetian lagoon, has long been economically, politically, and socially marginal in relation to the city of Venice, of which it has been a dependency since the thirteenth century. At the same time, at least since the sixteenth century, Burano has found worldwide fame for the exceptional and unique quality and beauty of its lace, made by the island's women. This rather special place is the focus of Lidia Sciama's *A Venetian Island*, an anthropological study of Burano based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the 1980s as well as on historical sources and local memory. The aim of the book is to document islanders' perception of their own community in relation to Venice and the world beyond, and also in relation to its past. More broadly the local setting of the island is for Sciama a vantage point for analyzing relations between center and periphery in the Venetian lagoon. The city of Venice and its lagoon form a unique configuration with a unique history, that now has unique problems of "conservation and change" both environmental and cultural (p. xvii). Much has been written about Burano, but this book is significant in being perhaps the first English-language account (and certainly the first anthro-

pological account in English) of the views and perceptions of some of those who inhabit it.

The book offers a comprehensive view of island life, with chapters devoted to local history, social structure, kinship, religion, and politics. These form the context for the discussion of lace-making that, in my view, is the most compelling part of the book. This shows how this humble (though exceptionally skilled) craft, carried out by poor girls and women in their modest houses, in fact mediated the island's relations with Venice and the outside world; the islanders with the Catholic Church and the dominant classes in Venetian society; and the genders within the island and in the wider society. So too, the decline of lace-making in the twentieth century is convincingly related to changing relations of the island with the wider world and of women with the wider society. This discussion of lace-making will interest students of gender, material culture, and heritage. More broadly, along with anthropologists, the book will interest geographers and Italianists. In spite of its sub-title, the book has less to offer to those interested in environment and landscape, themes that underlie the whole account but are not dis-

cussed in any sustained way.

The book opens with an account of the problems in island life in the late-twentieth century, including environmental pollution (which severely threatens one of the island's main sources of income, fishing) and the decay of the urban fabric, both of which contribute to the other significant trend, depopulation. These trends are common to the whole lagoon including the city of Venice, and center on the contradiction between preserving ancient buildings and the fragile ecosystem of the lagoon, and accommodating modern expectations of comfort and living standards. In Burano, the problem of reconciling the two is complicated by the island's distance from the city center, which discourages tourists and underpins the neglect of local authorities who are based in Venice and are apparently reluctant to invest efforts and resources in what they perceive as a remote periphery.

Burano's marginality is not new: as a chapter on "A Sense of History" shows, the island's history is little documented and little known, a striking silence when compared with the mass of documents and historical works about Venice. This silence is filled by islanders' oral versions of the island's origins linked to the earliest settlement of the lagoon before the foundation of Venice. Stories also abound about the islanders' fierce independence and their cunning and volatile character. Sciamia documents these stereotypes in Renaissance and early modern documents, and sees both their origin and their persistence in local consciousness as a response to the perceived abuses and humiliations inflicted on Burano by Venice, that ground the islanders' sense of otherness and independence.

Burano's difficult relations with Venice are also attributed to its religious history. Sciamia suggests that the Venetian Republic resented the presence on Burano of several religious houses and churches as well as the island's strong religious identity, because it saw the Catholic Church as a rival political power and at different times made efforts to limit its power within the Venetian territories. The chapter on religion also documents the decline of the Church's influence in more recent times, as islanders have become less devout and have come to criticize the Church's moral authority. This has not, however, weakened the islanders' sense of independence that, for Sciamia, is also tied to their traditional economic specialization in fishing. Fishing was historically and is now considered a form of entrepreneurship in contrast to the farming, dominant in the Venetian mainland, that entailed the subjection of peasants to landlords. Au-

tonomy in employment continues to be a core value in Burano in today's more favorable economic climate, underpinning individual and familial efforts for economic and social advancement. Sciamia links this outlook with a tenacious egalitarian ethos in the island, rooted in its past of poverty and marginality but persisting in new conditions.

This same outlook is manifested in the context of kinship, that combines emphasis on the independence of individuals and nuclear families from the wider universe of kin with a strong attachment to close kin. So, for instance, young couples now want a separate dwelling, but typically want one close to the parents of one or both. The old pattern of cohabitation of young couples with the man's parents under their authority, related to the transmission of property from father to son (including houses and fishing equipment and expertise), is now universally rejected, along with former patterns of familial transmission and patriarchal authority. At the same time, Sciamia shows convincingly that in the 1980s the family remained the main reference point in islanders' life trajectories, so that, for instance, few young people opted to leave the island or even commute in order to get higher education, preferring to leave school at fourteen and seek employment in glass factories in nearby Murano. Women especially appeared to marry early, seemingly satisfied by a destiny defined by marriage and motherhood. However Sciamia also documents island women's rejection of notions of womanhood centered on modesty, sexual restraint and subjection to authority. In line with other parts of Italy and the Veneto, this rejection occurs at the level of familial and sexual mores, with the growing acceptability of sex outside marriage, divorce and abortion, but in a uniquely local way this rejection was also associated with the rejection of lace-making.

Sciamia's argument is that lace-making developed and flourished in Burano as part of an organized operation of social and moral control over poor unmarried women on the part of the Catholic Church, assisted by upper class "benefactors." Both saw lower-class young women as prone to sinning and moral and sexual misconduct, and from the sixteenth century identified lace-making as an activity that would keep their bodies and minds properly occupied and controlled. The choice of lace-making is linked by Sciamia not only with the level of focus and concentration required by the work but also with the symbolic connotations of textile work in Christian and other Mediterranean (notably Hebrew) traditions, that link it with female sexual purity, chastity, and humility. So too in Burano at the so-called "Lace School," lace-making was

taught to girls and women as a form of discipline and a way to keep them away from sin. Sciama also sees it as an instance of male power exerted over women through the concept of “shame,” enforced by the Church but incorporating wider societal notions about gender and gendered morality as documented in other parts of Southern Europe by anthropological studies of “honor and shame”, to a critical discussion of which Sciama devotes a chapter of the book.

Lace-making also put Burano in direct touch with the rich and powerful who commissioned and purchased the lace, but the workers received a minimal share of the wealth generated, as they were paid a pittance and only received that once they reached eighteen years of age. Exploitation and harsh discipline dominate the memories of women who worked for the school before it closed in the 1970s, and they were the reason why women left the school once attitudes changed in the wider society, leading to its demise. The same memories made women unenthusiastic about the reopening of a Lace School partly as a tourist attraction in the 1980s, with most active lace-makers preferring to work independently and sell lace informally, or in their words to be “free” to work, voicing the same bid for self-determination and autonomy found among men.

The themes of freedom and autonomy are also shown to be central for the community as a whole in the chapter devoted to Burano’s interaction with municipal authorities in the 1980s. This chapter examines debates about environmental degradation and health provision on the island. In relation to the former, Sciama shows that islanders claim superior understanding and knowledge of the lagoon’s environment against the ignorance of public policy-makers. In practice, however, they tend to demand immediate solutions to problems that threaten their livelihood and well-being, such as lagoon water pollution and flooding, dismissing longer-term, more environmentally sound solutions. This suggests that the notion of environmental degradation is appropriated by islanders to express a more general grievance, the perceived neglect of local interests by the center. Buranelli’s emphatic defense of local interests against public authorities echoes autonomistic and regionalist ideas that took hold in the Veneto and Northern Italy in the 1980s, but Sciama attributes islanders’ strong sense of independence to the local past as a marginal and excluded com-

munity. This relative lack of comparative scope is at once the main strength and the principal weakness of this account.

An almost exclusively local focus is a strength because it allows for a high level of detail both about life in the island in the 1980s and about other historical periods that is a significant contribution to the anthropology of the lagoon, previously not studied in English-language anthropology. The careful and fascinating account of lace-making is also an important contribution to the study of craft and skill, particularly gendered skill, that remains underdeveloped in the English-language anthropology of Italy and indeed of Europe. More broadly, this book successfully offers a poignant portrait of a tiny community that is at once proud of its unique skills and achievements, and dismayed and humiliated by its continuing exclusion from the wealth and power of the city, with “a deep-rooted sense of [its] own marginality” (p. 6).

What this local emphasis prevents is a comparison of Burano’s case with developments in mainland Veneto in the late-twentieth century. By the 1980s the Veneto was one of the wealthiest regions in Europe as a result of massive participation in the global economy through export manufacturing. At the same time, notions of local belonging echoing those found in Burano and referring to tradition, autonomy and independence founded on hard work and on skill were widespread, animating localistic, anti-state and xenophobic politics. The anthropological questions that this scenario raises concern the politics of identity and specifically the issue of whether globalization is pushing people to return defensively to older foci of identity (locality, territory), or whether, in response to globalization, these old ideas are used to express completely new notions of place and belonging. These are key questions in the anthropology of Italy and of Europe that Sciama’s study could have helped to illuminate. As she mentions in the conclusion, Buranelli is now “very dynamic in participating in the local economy” by marketing in their shops “Burano” lace made to specification in the Far East (p. 227). This is a new twist in the island’s history of being suspended between local obscurity and global renown, and it could have been discussed more fully in a wider comparative frame to broaden the scope of an otherwise evocative and interesting study.

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