

Review

Post World War II Generations and the Vanishing of the Dowry in Italy

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This paper is on interdisciplinary Geography. It concerns Social Geography and Economic Geography. Dowry is the hook that connects the two. Dowry is the gift that a woman brings from her family to the future husband. Hemp is a rediscovered natural resource and recently liberalized, in the form of cannabis, in several states like a medicine. Before the criminalized use as a drug, its fibers were utilized for ropes, tissues, for sheets, towels etc... which constituted the female dowry in Italy, until few years ago. The author has a special memory of that, since she is born in a countryside, where her mater was a hemp worker

Keywords: hemp, dowry, women

INTRODUCTION

Italy is one of the most powerful industrialised countries included in the G-8 ranks, but until the World War II it was predominantly a rural country with almost 50% of active population employed in agriculture (The Italian National Census of 1951 (ISTAT) refers the amount of 42% of active population occupied in agriculture). Until then the economic level was generally low and, as it is usual in poor countries, the socio-political condition of women was indigent. Women obtained the political power only in 1948, two years after the creation of the Italian republic. A decisive progression toward a modern society was State's compulsory education until age 14 for all boys and girls, in 1962, related to the prohibition to work before this age. Economic improvement after the sixties permitted teenagers to prolong their school period beyond the compulsory years.

Rural economy in Italy in the past

New economic development, mechanisation of agriculture, and higher education encouraged peasants to leave the land and opened doors to jobs in services and industries. Rural emigration was directed toward big cities, especially from south to north Italy or toward north Europe. The rate of population employed in agriculture has declined and now includes only 5 % of active population (ISTAT, 2001).

Thanks to schools and work, girls avoided the strict control of traditional families and new economic and sexual behaviours took place.

With the disappearance of agricultural work the activities tied to the agricultural production also disappeared, especially activities practised by family members during the winter seasons, periods free from duties connected to the soil. Off seasonal works, which occupied men and women, women used to weave hemp at home and to embroider linen (Ragazzi, 1950).

Linen with furniture and household furnishings were considered the richness of the family and marrying girls should bring them to the husband's family (Sitti et al, 1982).

No money or animals were requested as dowry, only linen in an amount sufficient for the whole lifetime, even if a monetary value was attributable to them. The richer the family, the richer the dowry. Although a maximum wasn't defined, a minimum was established: as set of 6 sheets, 3 top-sheets, 3 under-sheets; 2 blankets, an heavy one and a lighter one; and 3 sets of pillow slips. In theory, a maximum should be calculated in 30 pieces of all the items above cited, but richness was usually expressed in hand embroidery to which girls were trained since childhood (Nanni, 1939).

One of the first schools for girls, founded near Bologna in 1842, was only dedicated to religious lessons and needle work (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Home loom

Hemp production in Italy

A special situation may be described for the low plain of the Po River, where hemp was cultivated until fifty years ago. Italy was the most important European producer of this fibre and exported the majority of its output to Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Luxemburg, and Spain (Marchetti, 1928).

Hemp finds in the drained soils of the Po delta an ideal territory because soil is resistant and water for steeping is easily situated at the low depth of only six meters (Zucchini, 1955).

Hemp, or *Cannabis sativa*, is a plant coming from China, even if it grows spontaneously in Russia. It was introduced into Europe by migrating Arabs at about 1500 years B.C.. In the Po plain it was introduced later by Romans, cultivation was abandoned in the Middle Ages and it reappeared only in the XVII century, especially in the province of Ferrara, where the best hemp of the world was produced. Before the second world war in Italy 85.000 hectares were dedicated to the hemp, with a total production average of 1.097.000 quintals and unitary of 12,7 q per hectare. The major production was concentrated in Emilia region (where the mouth of Po river is located) with more than half of the national cultivated surface. The second region was Campania with a third of national surface. It occupied the half of the agrarian surface, the other half was dedicated to corn.

In the period 1936 -1939 the region Emilia produced 630,000 quintals over 1.097.000, Campania only half of that, but with major return of 13,7 q per hectare.

The city which produced the maximum was Ferrara, with a stock of 446.182 q in the period 1938-1939, mostly of the best quality. Italy was mainly an exporting country towards Germany, France, UK, Belgium and Luxemburg. (Zucchini., La canapa, Soc. Anonim. Ed.

Dante Alighieri, Genova, 1948. The Emilia region, where Ferrara is located, produced more than half of the Italian production, estimated at 1.097.000 quintals and the province of Ferrara produced the half of this regional production. At the end of the XVIII century and at the beginning of the XIX century, hemp was an important production for Italy, whose cultivation integrated the grain cultivation, enriching soils, instead of impoverishing them as flax does (Zucchini, 1948).

The processing of fibres occupied workers outside of agrarian seasons. The fibres manufacture requires a large quantity of work so men and women dedicated themselves to this job, cutting stalks, steeping them with leaves, drying, dyeing, weaving, and sewing. Hemp textiles were less expensive than wool, because the Po region isn't a breeding area, or cotton which was imported. Flax can also be regarded as expensive because it absorbs minerals from the soil, impeding further cultivation. In favourable contrast, hemp can be inserted in the three-crop rotation system (Figure 2).

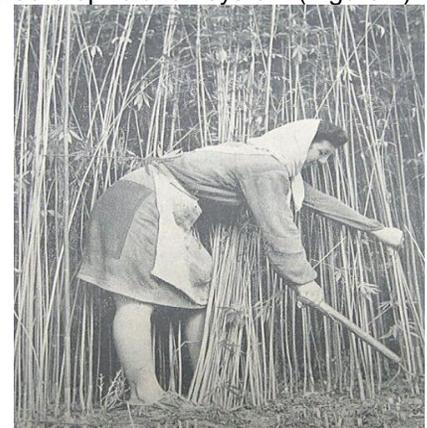


Figure 2: Hemp cutting



Figure 3: Hemp drying



Figure 4: Transforming hemp into fibres

The crash of hemp market

Hemp was a fundamental element in the agrarian economy, it was used for ropes, sails, sacks, clothing, and linen, making rural families self sustaining from this point of view. Every rural house had its loom and the sale of fibres and textiles permitted a limited monetary economy.

Italy was the most productive country in Europe until the hemp market suddenly crashed, because of increasing cotton importation and the appearance of new artificial fibres utilised in industrial production (Poni, Fronzoni, 2005).

Household production and weaving also disappeared suddenly, as the fashion of clothes changed, and girls, who once dedicated a large quantity of hours to weaving and to sewing their hemp dowry, started to buy

cotton and nylon for their clothes and dowries, until the hemp totally disappeared in an unexpected way, even causing failures and bankruptcies.

Women didn't sew any more. They became wage earners. In the economic boom of the seventies a good job and a decent education were considered the best dowry, especially in periods of birth decrease and ageing of the population (Figure 3 and 4).

Personal experience

My personal experience is tied to this situation. I was born in the geographical area where the best hemp of the province of Ferrara was produced. My mother, born in a rural family, worked with hemp until my birth, after the Second World War, and, as a consequence, she



Figure 5: Hemp clothes of 1929

produced the fibres, the texture and the laces of all of her dowry. Even if she changed her social situation with the marriage, coming into the service sector, she considered it her duty to provide a dowry for her daughters, as her mother did. But the hemp having already disappeared, she bought cotton linen and enriched them with laces and embroideries, because the daughters refused to do that.

At the end, one of her daughters never married, so her dowry remains unutilised, the other had a daughter herself, who is terrified to think about her dowry. She thinks only about clothes fashion changing every day, as linen does, and she buys sheets only when she needs them.

Some experiments are trying to reintroduce hemp in the Po plain, but it will be finalised to be manufactured in industrial facilities, because anymore is someone weaving at home (Ranalli, 1998, Scarin, 1999) (Figure 5).

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