Contested honor: the brief and tormented liaison between the Mediterranean theory of honor and colonial Latin American historical studies

In 1966, J. G. Peristiany edited a book that in some ways summarized a work that was started a few years before by a group of anthropologists led by himself and Julian Pitt-Rivers, in which they discussed the existence of a set of values, shared by and characteristic of the Mediterranean countries. These values were sex-linked and established a gender dichotomy, although complementary, of masculine honor and feminine shame. Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society, since it treated significantly Spanish society, had an impact on the studies of colonial Latin America, in particular between the late eighties and the nineties, before disappearing soon after, or surviving only as an ancillary analytical concept in the works on Spanish and Portuguese American families.

Here I will retrace the history of honor in the social and cultural historiography of colonial Latin America, with reference to the “founding fathers” of this analytical concept. My goal will be to try to understand the reason for the adoption of this anthropological method, the ways in which it was applied to the field of studies, and posit plausible explanations for its sudden decline by highlighting the limitations of said studies. Lastly, I will present, in the light of further elaborations on the concept of honor made by Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers, the ways in which honor can be revived and serve the study colonial Latin America.

Julian Pitt-Rivers in the International Encyclopedia of Social Science defines honor as follows:
The notion of honor has several facets. It is a sentiment, a manifestation of this sentiment in conduct, and the evaluation of this conduct by others, that is to say, reputation. It is both internal to the individual and external to him—a matter of his feelings, his behavior, and the treatment that he receives. Many authors have stressed one of these facets at the expense of the others; however, from the point of view of the social sciences it is essential to bear in mind that honor is simultaneously all of these, for both its psychological and social functions relate to the fact that it stands as a mediator between individual aspirations and the judgment of society.¹

In the collection of essays on the subject edited a couple of years before by Jean G. Peristiany, honor is analyzed, possibly for the first time, in a systematic way, considering it as a principle common to the whole Mediterranean area, and foundational for the hierarchical organization of its societies. The anthropological perspective adopted by the authors of this collection is, as one may expect, far from being historical, and therefore honor is adapted and adopted not only in different places, but also in a temporal span that extends at least from the middle Ages to modern times, and finds its roots in ancient Greece.² However, Pitt-Rivers is aware of this problematic feature and stresses from the very beginning, both in the essay and in the encyclopedic definition, the malleable nature of honor: in fact, it varies according to time, region and class, but it maintains a general structure which imposes and legitimizes hierarchy, providing an ideological reference that calls for reproduction in the individual and social level.

Honor, together with its counterpart shame, are considered by Peristiany social evaluations that not only determine the social conduct and sanction those who do not adhere to this behavior,

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but are also “the reflection of the social personality in the mirror of the social ideals”. These social ideals may vary, even significantly, but the scheme is applicable to every society. Instability is another important feature of honor: it might be reclaimed and asserted constantly and its public acceptance is required, even when it is inherited. This element is particularly significant because it submits the individual to the group, which establishes its own peculiar code of conduct, and at the same time ties every member to the group, to the point that the honor of the latter is the result of the behavior of its components. The fact that honor is defined by the public opinion leads finally to another consideration: the claim of honor, its assertion, as much as the behavior of an individual or of a group are meaningful only when they are public. Hence, there are not honorable (or dishonorable) actions per se; they are qualified as such only if performed in front of witnesses.

Pitt-Rivers introduces other elements that define and complicate the notion of honor. The first is the relationship between honor and political authority. The authority, at every level, assumes to govern a given body on moral basis, and therefore, establishes what is honorable. Hence, one can establish his reputation according to his moral “just” behavior, which is publicly recognized and finally ratified by the concession of honors by the authority. However, one has to keep in mind that an individual is subjected to multiple authorities, on different levels, and their criteria for evaluation can be conflicting; because of that, the public conduct of an individual may vary significantly according to the claim he is making.

The status therefore is created by honor; but since it is a hereditary feature, honor as well derives from status. This second concept contributes to complicate the notion of honor, but this very multifaceted nature makes honor a feasible category of analysis for every society and justify at the same time the established authority of the ruler and the potential social mobility of the subjects:

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4 J. Pitt-Rivers, Honour and Social Status, cit., p. 22.
on the one hand, the birth provides social capital (or, status) that protect the individual from those who dispute his honor (the higher the rank, the better the protection), on the other hand the individual can increase his honor according to his actions, and in doing so, his status grows.5

Lastly, Pitt-Rivers postulates another contradiction of honor: in fact, although the authority, just by definition, incarnates the moral values from which honor derives, at the same time it cannot regulate the question of honor through the law, or at least, it terribly struggles to impose over the physical violence that emerges from contrasts of honor. The reason is simple: if the authority intervenes in a conflict between two parties, it prevents them from gaining honor and establishing their status. Moreover, a court is ineffective because an insult cannot be compensated economically, since it is not possible to buy honor.6

As it appears, honor is thus a form of power with two distinctive traits, regardless of its aristocratic or popular nature: it is essentially transactional and, at least for the early modern period, is exercised over people and not over things: wealth can derive from status, but not necessarily. This formulation is then completed by a third feature, only hinted in Pitt-Rivers’ essay and better explained by Julio Caro Baroja: the relationship between honor and blood. This relationship is twofold. On the one hand, blood is crucial in defining honor because lineages are based on lines of patrilineal blood: one inherits the qualities of his father’s blood and therefore his honor. On the other hand, there is a more historical reason, which is particularly interesting for our field, and that is the question of purity of blood. Baroja posits that the mainly economic issue behind the Spanish opposition to the new Christians from the fifteenth century created an obsession with the idea of “purity of blood”, blood clean from the stain of Jewish and Muslim heritage. The fact that these

5 Ibid, p. 23.
“stains” precluded the possibility of being eligible for public offices or receiving honors helped to ensure that the concept of purity became synonymous of honor.7

One could wonder what part women play in this game, since all we have seen so far gives little space, if any, to female individuals. According to Pitt-Rivers, honor is a male prerogative in terms of precedence, that is to say, to receive honors from authority, while sexual purity represents the exclusive female aspect of honor. The resulting structure then organizes the roles of men and women and their interrelations; each of them has to address specific codes of conduct if they care about their families: a man, as we have seen, would have to claim his honor, vindicate his position according to his status, and protect the women of his group from possible attacks to their sexual purity. Thus he would be able to confirm and increase his social status, and his titles would have been inherited by his children. Women instead are required to be chaste, because the moral aspects of a person—the essential characteristics that determine the individual belonging to a certain social group—descend from the mother. The system of honor therefore at the same time subjugates women, endorsing the patriarchal structure and coordinates men and women as mutually necessary to each other.8 The system also includes those who cannot claim any honor, those who stand on the opposite side of the spectrum, far away from the sources of honor, such as the heretics (away from God), the convicted (away from the prince), and the outcasts (away from the community), because they contribute to the maintenance of a social hierarchy.

One last aspect of honor that is relevant for the analysis of its adoption in the field of study of colonial Latin America is the relationship with the sacred sphere. By that I do not mean to ratify the efforts made by the church to establish the moral values that determine what honor is, since the

7 J. C. Baroja, Honour and Shame: a Historical Account of Several Conflicts, in G. J. Peristiany, Honour and Shame, cit., pp. 100-102.
public opinion had never fully accepted that. Rather, what is more significant is the intrinsic sacred nature of honor: it is an ideal behavioral reference, in Platonic fashion; it is confirmed by the notion, common to many societies, that a ruler, whose status is necessarily the highest, enjoys a closer relationship with the Deity; after all, it is not accidental that God’s name is invoked taking oaths.9

I have here briefly summarized some key points of the anthropological concept of honor as formulated initially in the late sixties regarding the Mediterranean area. It clearly appears to be a strategic tool used to impose hierarchies and a paradigmatic example employed to compare and analyze societies. Moreover, the fact that this concept was heavily grounded in studies on Spanish societies, made it particularly attractive for social and cultural historians of colonial Latin America.

Ann Twinam is one of the first historians who approached the study of early modern Spanish America through the lens of honor. In the collection of essays Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America, she analyzes how the honor code that was followed by upper-class women in colonial New Spain was more flexible than the one in force in Spain. Through the study of petitions by legitimate natural offspring (gracias a sacar), Twinam argues that these women were more active agents in their private lives than their public reputation would have implied.10 She emphasizes this aspect as well by showing that premarital sexual intercourse and contingent pregnancies were tolerated in Spanish New Spain, especially if they were later followed by marriage. Twinam finally concludes that the sexual ambiguities in which these women engaged could be compared with the racial vagueness that mulattoes embodied for the Spanish colonists: “just as colonists perceived mulattoes as neither white nor black, women who engaged in premarital or extramarital sex were neither virgins nor whores. Instead, just as society acknowledged indeterminate areas where racial

9 Ibid.
mobility might occur, some sexual relationships permitted the preservation or the recovery of honor”.

It is somehow surprising that, among the contributors of a volume that aims to show how European governing norms and practices were transplanted in the Americas, and pays particular attention to family dynamics, sexuality, and purity of blood, only Twinam cites the works of Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers. A possible answer for such an oblivion—or is it a denial?—can be found in Thomas Calvo’s contribution. His study of seventeenth century families in Guadalajara concludes that, although kinship and familial ties were present among the lower social strata, these ties did not emerge in a single shared concept of a family based on marriage. In this case (and, as far as I am concerned, for the majority of the book) it seems that not only was the honor code that was adopted in Latin America more flexible than the one adopted in Spain, but the very concept of honor was not applicable to the plebeians of the New World.

Published three years after Sexuality and Marriage, another ambitious work on the social and cultural history of Spanish Mexico approached explicitly the question of honor: three chapters of Ramón A. Gutiérrez’s When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away deal with honor and its relationship to social status, virtues, and marriage. Honor is utilized here in a more articulated way than in the work mentioned above, yet in a somewhat controversial manner. Honor, with its feminine counterpart vergüenza, shame, appear to be the leading structure of the social order, disciplining not only the female body to establish and reinforce the patriarchal hierarchy, but also the racial purity of the Spanish elite, especially through its use in enhancing the control of marriages and limiting the collaborationist effort of the clergy, who were often conniving with the women in hiding

11 Ibid, p. 149.
out-of-wedlock births. Doing so, Gutiérrez underlines the relational nature of honor. In this case the transplant of governing norms from Spain to the colonies is apparent: as the collective honor of the Spaniards was created by distinguishing them from the Moors and the Jews, so they did in Latin America, by defining the differences with other groups, whether Indians, African slaves or *genizatos* (indigenous slaves in New Mexico).

Honor has therefore in this case the function of promoting social inequalities and preserving hierarchical binaries, such as noble/peasant, man/woman, Spanish whiteness/non-whiteness.

Gutiérrez adds another analytical dichotomy that is fostered by the concept of honor: the distinction between youths and elders, whose *calidad*, or status, subjected the younger generations to their elders.

Gutiérrez also presents an honor displayed through virility and physical violence: “male honor was…secured and enhanced through display of virility, notably the corruption of other men’s women”;

these actions were condemned soundly by the clergy, but the prowess in seducing someone else’s woman made a man virtuous in terms of honor. In this analysis two characteristics of honor, as defined by Pitt-Rivers and Baroja, emerge. The first one is the inefficacy of religious institution to establish the set of moral values on which honor is based. The other is best articulated by William Miller: “the shortest road to honor was…to take someone else’s”.

However, here there is either a misinterpretation of Pitt-Rivers, or an alternative theorization; the reader is left guessing, since the author does not engage with this previous literature. The problem is that Gutiérrez relies on the perception of the historical actor’s honor, which is simply his own, without further connotation. But this type of honor, that is synonymous with precedence, is a social value taken by force by a man with the aim to establish himself in the social group; it has very little to do with

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honor as a result of a virtuous behavior.\textsuperscript{16} The author needs to explain why he does not consider this feature relevant, and furthermore, needs to address the fact that this notion of honor is characteristic of the plebeians and almost inapplicable to the aristocracy, otherwise his work risks appearing simply as a careless analysis. Lastly, since his study focuses so prominently on gendered power relations, Gutiérrez could have spent at least some time discussing the semantic analysis given, once again, by Pitt-Rivers on cuckoldry and examining if it was transplanted too in the Mexican environment and with which variations.

The cuckold, \textit{cabrón},...	extsuperscript{'}has horns'	extsuperscript{'}..., phallic symbol [and] the insignia of the Devil, the enemy of virtue... Her adultery represent not only an infringement of his rights, but the demonstration of his failure in his duty. He has betrayed the values of the family, bringing dishonor to all the social group... he has fallen under the domination of the Devil and must wear his symbol as the stigma of his betrayal.\textsuperscript{17}

Such an analysis would have given Gutiérrez the opportunity to engage with the concept of honor, instead of simply using it to prove the rightfulness of his insights regarding the construction and consolidation of inequality in Spanish Mexico; instead, the anthropological definition(s) of honor and their authors are relegated to the bibliographical references, but never formally appear in the text.

Steve Stern in 1995 presented his voluminous book \textit{The Secret History of Gender}. The study of subaltern women of Morelos, Oaxaca and Mexico City, and their sexual behavior, in Stern’s opinion, is useful to understand and therefore reinterpret the social history of late colonial Mexico. The picture that he illustrates is particularly dense and sometimes fuzzy, since his effort to problematize the interactions of his characters and his dismissal of simplistic paradigms (such as the dyad honor

\textsuperscript{16} J. Pitt-Rivers, \textit{Honour and Social Status}, cit., p. 36.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid}, p. 46.
and shame, the notion of behavioral conformance or deviance, or the complicity of the woman in their patriarchal subjugation) sometimes lead to patternless territories.

For the interest of this particular analysis, I want to emphasize his dismissal of the honor/shame binary as a valuable category of analysis. He believes that a single model of an honor code is ineffective in describing the contested gendered behavior of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century New Spain, mainly for two reasons: firstly, as it often happens with analytical structures, they obscure or even worse, deny the agency of the historical actors as creators of alternative, more fluid cultural codes. Secondly, Stern finds that Mexican plebeians adapted and readapted the honor/shame system of values, but in a different fashion compared to the Spanish variation.¹⁸ Unlike Gutiérrez, Stern is clearly familiar with the double standard honor-virtue/honor-precedence, and in general, the conceptualization of honor outlined by Pitt-Rivers; yet he states that he refers to (and critiques) the body of literature on honor and shame in Latin America, since the paradigm presented by the scholarly works on the Mediterranean starts from plebeian conceptualization of honor and considers the corrupted aristocratic version as a deviance, which is the opposite of the Latin American paradigm.¹⁹ I would argue that adopting the “Mediterranean conceptualization” instead of the “Latin American model” probably would have not been useful to highlight the agency of the Mexican plebeians, but it would have been effective for Stern to make a cleaner argument about lower class understandings of honor.

Stern has a clear agenda, which is to emphasize the quasi-proto-feminist struggle that the Mexican subaltern women (and partially men, but necessarily poor) embodied in their dynamic and contingent relation with the patriarchal system. This is the first “secret”, as he calls it, of the Mexican

past. He also posits – and this is his second secret – that there are clear connections between the power dynamics in the political and in the sexual spheres, and therefore the analysis of personal and sexual interactions can provide results useful to reinterpret Colonial Mexico by large. The third secret is, in my opinion, the one in which he reveals his biased view of the schemes utilized by other scholars to study gender relationships in Latin America. In fact, he states that he recognizes in these relationships both trans-regional coherence and local variations; an observation, frankly, quite obvious, that mostly aims to critique the supposed rigidness of his colleagues. Finally, he concludes by suggesting the adoption of the “secrets” that he has revealed of the gender relationships in late colonial Mexico to other geographically and chronologically areas of study. Therefore he invites to replace the honor/shame model in favor of the ongoing plebeian challenges to the patriarchal system, since “at the level of popular culture, the conflictual dialogue between contingent right…and absolute right [based respectively on the principles of mutuality and obedience] probably constituted a more important foundation of gender culture”. Although it appears to be a convincing perspective from which to study subaltern individuals, I believe it could be problematic for the honor and shame couple, at least in its “Latin American” formulation mentioned above. The risk in this case is to exclude the elites from the power dynamics in the patriarchal society and to obtain simply a different, yet still incomplete standpoint of a larger, multifaceted field of inquiry. Once again, turning back to the work of Pitt-Rivers and elaborating on his conceptualization of honor, which tries to highlight the common values shared by a society by large and analyzes the peculiar variations within this framework, seems to me a more compelling approach to study gendered power relationships within a given social group.

20 Ibid, p. 299.
22 Ibid, pp. 308-309.
23 Ibid, p. 310.
Most of the issues analyzed by the previous bibliography are reconsidered in a volume edited by Lyman Johnson and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera. *The Faces of Honor: Sex, Shame, and Violence in Colonial Latin America* presents eight essays that try to both elaborate the trends that emerged in the works described before, in light of a problematized reading of Pitt-Rivers, and both contest and respond (mostly, implicitly) to some of them. In particular, the model that appears to be the most frequently critiqued is the approach presented by Stern. In the introduction, in fact, the common thread that emerges is a strong adoption and reassessment of the honor/shame paradigm as a valuable analytical tool to study gendered dynamics within Spanish and Portuguese colonial societies. It is widely applied geographically – from Brazil to Peru, from Cuba to Mexico – and socially – dealing with members of the elites and slaves alike, and it encompasses roughly four centuries of Spanish domination. The reason for such a vast field of enquiry is exactly to demonstrate how different honor can be according to the context and the actors involved. As stated in the introduction:

The work of anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers on honor in the Mediterranean *cultural context* (my emphasis) remains one of the most influential efforts to define its elusive qualities.

…and provides an important conceptual starting point for many of the authors…Nevertheless [they] demonstrate clearly that there is no single theory…that can be used uncritically when discussing honor in colonial Latin America.25

Even in this collection of essays, family is at least the main reference if not the principal subject of investigation. Geoffrey Spurling, in his work on a clergyman taken to trial between the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century in La Plata for his sodomitic conduct, gives an explanation for scholars’ emphasis on familial honor. He highlights the danger represented by

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25 I have given emphasis to “cultural context” because in this way the editors are conceptualizing the supposed “values of the Mediterranean” as something more global, in which the geographical boundaries are blurred. At the same time, they are giving relevance to the shaping influence that cultures have in determining these values. L. Johnson and S. Lipsett-Rivera, “introduction” in L. Johnson and S. Lipsett-Rivera (ed.), *The Faces of Honor: Sex, Shame, and Violence in Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque, 1998), p. 8.
sodomy not only because it was seen as sexually disruptive, but also, and most of all, because it “challenged the basis of the family – the fundamental social unit – and in so doing the colonial hierarchy”. Spurling’s work also gives relevance to another important feature of honor that in some ways is a response to the limits outlined by Stern, which is the importance of high-ranking status and the networks available to these people, which protect the individual from being punished for his dishonorable behavior. Although analyzing a member of the colonial elite, Spurling is relating the clergymen to a set of values common to the whole population and, together with the manipulation and seduction of individuals belonging to a lower social stratus through his hierarchical position, Spurling underlines the unorthodox, yet common, use of honor. In so doing, the author embraces Pitt-Rivers’ perspective on honor, dismissing both the subaltern view proposed by Stern and the aristocratic one adopted by, for example, Twinam.

Ann Twinam herself tries to problematize the aristocratic concept of honor, although maintaining as the subject of her research the colonial elites. Her study pushes in two directions: on the one hand, she dismisses as artificial the different qualifications of honor produced by the academic world; honor therefore must be intended as “encompass[ing] a variety of shifting meanings and situations”. On the other hand, as a consequence of this, Twinam aims to show how the colonial elite operated through this versatile concept of honor to build and rationalize discrimination. They did so by conflating the “historic meanings of honor” (which is the exclusion of non-old Christians, non-whites, and those born illegitimate) with an explicit racism that created a hierarchy among non-Spaniards. Yet, even in this situation, in which the categories appear to be unalterable, there was still room to “negotiate” honor. In fact, the monarch was able to ratify a

public persona by “changing” the condition of birth. Thus, honor, in Twinam’s formulation, appears to be a public representation, distinct from the private and individual reality. The advantage given by this public/private division is that it creates spaces to contest, deviate from, and adapt the honor system. 29

Lyman Johnson moves the focus of his book on plebeian’s sense of honor, and he starts by presenting the problems one faces inquiring in this field: the documentation is scattered and almost limited to criminal trials, which are able only to tell us the popular understanding of the concept of honor and masculinity. Relying on official justice to solve questions of honor, as we have seen before, prevents a physical clash that determines the establishment of one’s honor. 30 Johnson justifies this recourse to justice as a valid alternative to the outburst of violence by means of hierarchies: members of the elite and middle-class had access to upper-class members who could testify on their behalf and perform “on a stage” a symbolic physical confrontation. 31 Plebeians could not do so for their limited nets of contacts, which most likely did not include skilled orators, and the absence of economic resources to pay the services of a professional lawyer; hence, violence was most common among the lowest social strata for two reasons: firstly because, as I have just showed, it was the only way they had to solve questions of honor. Secondly, provoking other people, with insults and violence was a way to affirm and defend the little advantages – i.e., the honor one has over members of other groups. 32

However, it appears to me that going to court to settle questions of honor between two parties cannot be explained in such simplistic terms, not in “fictional” ones, as Richard Boyer does.

29 Ibid, pp. 77, 96.
30 See supra, pp. 3-4, note 6.
32 Ibid, p. 143.
The court deprives the disputants from gaining honor, which is the sole reason behind engaging in litigations. The “symbolic performance” therefore can be understood only if honor is not at stake, for different reasons: either because the honor of the accuser is not at risk, since his social capital is significantly greater than the one of the accused; or because the accused is hierarchically superior, and therefore the recourse to justice is the only opportunity to gain something (which, anyway, is not going to be honor); or, finally, because the parties do not have honor or, better, they simply adopt its rhetorical language, without having access to the ladder of honor.

I do not argue Boyer’s hypothesis to trace part of the inspirational and educative model of honor in chronicles and novels. Rather, my concern is related to the fact that he tends to flatten in terms of fictional discourse a social interplay that is taking place when there is a petition submitted to the king: what is the leverage that derives from a petition? Why does someone petition? Which kind of advantage would castas gain from accepting the paternalistic rhetoric typical of the patriarchal system? Unfortunately, all of these questions are left unanswered, mostly for lack of valuable documentation.

The available sources present an epistemological problem that needs to be addressed. Most of the documents on which the studies mentioned so far are based are official, governmental, or legal ones. They are written by men of letters, lawyers, for the most part male Spaniards, and they are using a language that aims to deliver effectively the substance of the messages, rather than translating accurately the words of men and women of different race and status who turn to these colonial institutions. Moreover, in the specific cases of questions of honor brought to courts, we encounter an additional problem: are they exceptional or represent the normal praxis? This point is

hardly raised in the studies here analyzed. On the one hand, the anthropologists theorized the concept of honor through an inductive approach, conceptualizing honor as an ahistorical structure, but admitting that the nature of this very structure was very much subjected to regional and sociocultural forces. On the other, colonial Latin American historians, fascinated by the potential of such analytical tool, have tried to apply in the field of social and cultural history, and in particular in the subfield of gender and family history, with arguable results. As we have seen, sometimes honor has been used in an instrumental way, to support the ideological agenda of the scholar (in particular Stern and Gutiérrez), other times in a more “explorative” fashion, as with the two collective works edited respectively by Lavrín and Johnson & Lipsett-Rivera, in which honor has been deployed onto different subjects, with the purpose being to set up an overarching structure capable of translating sexual and familial power dynamics in epitomes of broader societal tensions. I have not found any relevant work where the author’s aim was to build a theoretical framework based on the concept of honor, nor have I seen any of the authors who have tried to adopt the framework created by Pitt-Rivers, who in the majority of the essays is relegated to the bibliographical apparatus or is referenced in some endnotes as one of the first who has theorized the concept of honor, and very little else.

Probably the most successful work that utilizes the structure of honor in a pivotal sense is Twinam’s *Public Lives, Private Secrets*. Her study is an elaboration of the essay published in *Faces of Honor*, and therefore starts from the same premises: firstly, that honor was not qualified as “virtue” and/or “status” by eighteenth century elites. Secondly, she will consider honor as constantly subject to negotiation.34 These two considerations are key to structuring honor as an analytical framework. By characterizing honor at the local level, Twinam observes that it not only adapts itself (or is molded around) to different historical actors, but it depends as well on the stage of life of that

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person and even shifts, on the microscopic level, from his or her public persona to a more intimate, private dimension. Her strategy, unlike other historians, does not assume the concept of honor a priori: “anthropological studies of the Mediterranean…might provide insight into the uses of the concept of honor by colonial Spanish Americans. Such comparison, however, should be made only after the fact”.35 Thus her study investigates on the dual or multiple identities of members of the colonial elites, analyzing the “facts”, the life of these characters, and subsequently the legal process, or the negotiation, to adjust the (arguably honorable) private individual with the honorable public persona.

Another strategy that makes her study, in my opinion, most compelling, is the relevance given to conscience rationale.36 Matching honor and its normative functions for public reputation with the individual conscience which internalizes ethical and religious issues, is an astute move because it explains certain choices made by historical actors, which are at odds with the prescriptions of the honor code. At the same time, acting “in conscience” benefits the honor of a person too: most likely it signified that the individual was well ensconced in the local circles. It is also consistent with Twinam’s decision to consider honor in the terms of the people she is studying, because “conscience” is a term that can be found in the sources and is employed, in the same way as honor, to motivate choices or to demand to make certain controversial decisions. In addition, giving her subjects a conscience, Twinam makes them more “human”.

Finally, Twinam has chosen with great acumen her field of enquiry. In fact, analyzing the elites, not only does she have access to a richer and more varied pool of sources she also is able to deal with people whose values are closer to the Spanish Iberian ones (or Mediterranean, if you will). The question of legitimacy is an argument that embraces several aspects of the social and cultural life

36 Ibid, p. 93.
in colonial Latin America: from sexuality to marriage, from gender dynamics to hierarchical struggle, from codified behavior to ethical choices. Also, treating this argument in a geographic area in which illegitimate births appear to be far more numerous than in other regions, makes the question of legitimacy paradigmatic to support the thesis that honor is a fluid concept, highly influenced by and shaped according to the surrounding environment.

What is surprising to me are the similarities between her use of “conscience” with the conceptualization of “grace” made by Pitt-Rivers in 1992. In his postscript for the collection of essays *Honor and Grace in Anthropology*, in a study that is deliberately Euro-centric but that is open to other societies, he tries to define the meaning of grace and its role in societies. 37 He describes it as “something extra, over and above ‘what counts’, what is obligatory or predictable”. 38 Pitt-Rivers posits that it is a parallel principle of conduct associated with the sacred,

Which correspond to the old opposition between the heart and the head: that which is felt and that which is known, the subjective and the objective vision of the world, the mysterious and the rational, the sacred and the profane. They are governed, respectively, by the principle of grace and by the principle of law…from which pardon (grace) authorizes a departure. Under the heading of “grace” it is possible to group all the phenomena that evade the conscious reasoned control of conduct. 39

To investigate the semantic meaning of grace, Pitt-Rivers grounds his inquiry in Judeo-Christian theology, etymology and social anthropology. For the purpose of this study, I will highlight three aspects of it. Firstly, grace, in the theological sense, is an arbitrary gift from God; however, it

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37 J. A. Pitt-Rivers, “Postscript: the place of grace in anthropology”, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 1 (1): 2011, originally printed in J. G. Peristiany and J. Pitt-River (ed.), *Honor and Grace in Anthropology* (Cambridge, 1992). He shows how the concepts that he elaborates are consistent with and can be applied to the works of Malinowsky, Evans-Pritchard, and most of all, Mauss.
can be human as well, as long as it maintains the characteristic of being gratuitous, in the sense that it cannot be justified or it is not rationally explainable. He clarifies this point by offering an example of an economic transaction: if one pays another person because instigated, or does that without having been asked, but only for his or her generosity, although the result would be the same, the two alternatives have contrary social meanings, and the one who imposes his will determines superiority over the other.\textsuperscript{40} Grace therefore, and this is the second aspect, is opposed (and not contrary) to honor in several ways: it is mostly an attribute of women, it responds to the will of God (which cannot be won), and therefore ignores the clash, because it cannot be gained; moreover, its arbitrary and divine nature allows grace not to succumb to moral values and social rules.\textsuperscript{41} Consequently, as grace is opposed to honor in its normative sense, both can be deployed in a negative way: honor can become vengeance, and grace becomes witchcraft, in which the closer relationship with the divine and the supernatural is used to harm.\textsuperscript{42}

\textit{Honor and Grace in Anthropology} appears only once in the bibliographical apparatuses of the books here analyzed (including the one discussed further), and without any visible impact on the texts.\textsuperscript{43} It appears very unlikely that an avid reader of Pitt-Rivers as Ann Twinam suddenly lost track of his scholarly production, and her conceptualization of “conscience”, although significantly different from “grace”, originates from premises common to the latter. We can symbolically take \textit{Public Lives} as the turning point for a branch of cultural and social studies in the history of colonial Latin America, previously inspired from the studies of honor in the Mediterranean region. Here I can only try to come up with hypotheses to explain this disavowal. One can be theoretical in nature:

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid}, p. 432.  
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Ibid}, p. 445.  
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Ibid}, p. 434.  
\textsuperscript{43} S. Lauderdale Graham, \textit{Honor among Slaves}, in L. Johnson and S. Lipsett-Rivera (ed.), \textit{The Faces of Honor}, cit., p. 204, note 6. Oddly, she uses to describe that an honorable man is the one who win a woman, which is something theorized in \textit{Honour and Shame}, and has very little, if anything to do with \textit{Honor and Grace}.  

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honor, as defined by Pitt-Rivers simply does not fit for analyzing a society extremely more complex than the Mediterranean one(s?). Also, honor has been treated in the works mentioned here only with regards to certain aspects of cultures: mostly family, sexuality and interpersonal gendered dynamics; but seldom has honor been deployed in relation to the divine sphere, or as a homogenizing principle to “clear the ground” for a more efficient ruling. Curiously, I was not able to find any work in which indigenous conceptions of honor before the Spanish arrival were discussed, in order to investigate the processes of adoption and rejection of the imported normative rules. Furthermore, I think it worth considering the usefulness of the anthropological (and Mediterranean) theory of honor, especially if paired with those of shame or grace, to support a historical enquiry that aims to trace, as we have seen in many of the works here analyzed, the construction of inequality: Pitt-Rivers attempts to theorize how honor works in different societies which share some common values, but it does not explain why it became a governmental principle.

Whatever the case may be, at the turning of the twenty-first century, Mediterranean honor ceases to be deployed as a useful paradigm in the historical studies of gender, sexuality, and family in Latin America. Actually, as we have seen, Twinam has decided to consider honor in the light of the historical sources instead of trying to adjust them according to a theoretical framework organized around the concept of honor and, paradoxically, she has been able to organize the only work, among those here overviewed, that is truly and fully about honor. It represents a symptomatic move of the historiography of honor in the studies of colonial Latin America, which is carried even further by the cultural anthropologist Laura Lewis in her Hall of Mirrors. To study the gendered power relationships that characterize colonial society in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Mexico, she develops a binary division between “sanctioned” and “unsanctioned” domains. The first one is organized by the colonizing power: it submits Indian and African populations to Spaniards, encompasses patronage and kinship in ways that are consistent with the honor paradigm, and it has a clear top-down
dynamic. The latter mirrors the sanctioned domain, and therefore in a bottom-up fashion includes practices forbidden by the Spanish authority such as witchcraft, and gives women and Indianness a central role that is denied in the sanctioned domain. These two domains are constantly in tension with each other and clearly exemplify the transactional nature of power, which loses meaning if it is only considered on its own within the separate domains. Unlike others (among the works here studied: Stern), Lewis does not see witchcraft and, in general, the unsanctioned sphere as means of resistance to the colonial power. On the contrary, she believes that it develops and stems from the colonization:

> Witchcraft did not empower women as women or slaves as slaves; instead, it allows [them] to function as free men would function in the world controlled by Spaniards....Witchcraft provided a way for people restricted by state control to take by unsanctioned stealth what others had by sanctioned right...what other received “naturally” by virtue of their blood and their sex.45

It appears clearly that the vocabulary she is adopting is the one of honor. Yet this word can be found only twice in the whole book, and the only works cited among those here presented are Stern’s, Gutiérrez’ and Boyer’s essay. To cast into oblivion all the other studies (and in many cases, the authors themselves: Twinam’ works are completely absent, Pitt-Rivers appears in the bibliographical apparatus for a minor article, but he is not referenced in the endnotes, nor in the text) indicates a clear position that she is taking: she is refusing honor as an analytical structure, and she is trying to examine colonizers and colonized people in Spanish America through an interplay of speculative systems to consider the transplant of Spanish governing norms in the light of indigenous perspective. Although exceptional in nature and most likely quite imaginative, the case study of a

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mulatto slave woman who runs away from her master with the help of the devil, i.e. an Indian man, who gave her magical herbs, and then lives disguised as a man up to the point in which she confessed a pact with the devil, shows how subalterns could work within and between two systems.

The binary perspective that Lewis organizes is intriguing and is worth taking into consideration. However, there are two limits that are necessary to point out. The first one has already emerged in the previous paragraphs: even though Lewis’ perspective is completely dismissive of the analytical efficiency of honor, since she is using concepts, the vocabulary, and certain categories typical of the studies on and of honor, she needs to engage with the previous bibliography. Ignoring them is to be sure an impressive rhetorical gesture, but, from a scholarly perspective, it is an unfair one and it puts into question the reliability of the scholar. Another limit of this speculative perspective is that sometimes it forces Lewis to stretch concepts far too much and speculate even more in order to create appealing couple that mirror each other in the respective realms. The example that appears to me more disputable is the couple Spanish justice/Indian magic, in the sense that—if my interpretation is correct—both systems discipline people in ritualistic ways, reflecting the respective cultural schemes. Even assuming that the comparison is correct, which I highly doubt, since it is hard to think that Spanish colonizers saw Indian witchcraft as a sort of counterpart of their legal system, I wonder how it is possible at least to assume that that was the view endorsed by indigenous people.

I have here tried to trace the rise and fall of honor as an analytical category in the cultural and social studies of colonial Latin America. It appears that since the late eighties honor became of particular interest among the historians who focused their attention on gendered power dynamics in the Spanish and Portuguese territories in the New World. Often present in the bibliographical

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apparatuses, sometimes mentioned and barely discussed in the endnotes, hardly ever cited and never quoted in the works covered here, Julian Pitt-Rivers and his theory of honor in the Mediterranean formulated in the late sixties had a huge impact and his theory has been arguably one of the starting, maybe inspirational points for some Latin American historians. They have tried to understand in which ways a set of values typical of the Iberian Peninsula, and already successful in constructing inequality between Spaniards and Iberian Jews and Moors, has been imposed in Latin America and the effects that it originated on the colonial societies. All the authors here analyzed have used Pitt-Rivers formulation of honor and shame, sometimes to contest it, but never leaving it out from consideration until the end of the nineties, when his approach has been almost entirely dismissed, to the point that he has disappeared even from very generous bibliographies. His most recent work, *Honor and Grace in Anthropology*, albeit I argue that has been taken in consideration at least by Ann Twinam, who for a good decade has worked with and on Pitt-Rivers’ theories, has been ignored. I have proposed some hypotheses to explain this rebuttal, on theoretical, programmatic, and practical bases. The comparison of the works here taken in consideration has revealed the intrinsic limits of honor, especially if deployed as an analytical framework in the field of history. However, I believe that honor, especially if considered in pair with grace, could still offer interesting insights on the transplant of colonial governmental norms, especially if there is the opportunity to compare the Spanish honor system with the ways in which indigenous populations conceptualized honor, and how it was organized. But I am aware that the availability of sources could be problematic in this regard, as much as, if not even more than it was to investigate on the question of honor among plebeians.
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