



**HAL**  
open science

# The never-ending debate about The moral basis of a backward society: Banfield and ‘amoral familism’

Emanuele Ferragina

► **To cite this version:**

Emanuele Ferragina. The never-ending debate about The moral basis of a backward society: Banfield and ‘amoral familism’. *Journal of Anthropological Society of Oxford*, 2009, 1 (2), pp.141-160. halshs-01314030

**HAL Id: halshs-01314030**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01314030v1>**

Submitted on 10 May 2016

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

THE NEVER-ENDING DEBATE ABOUT  
THE MORAL BASIS OF A BACKWARD SOCIETY:  
BANFIELD AND 'AMORAL FAMILISM'

EMANUELE FERRAGINA<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *This article analyses Edward Banfield's book, The moral basis of a backward society. According to this American scholar, prioritizing present orientation over future planning is the distinctive character of backwardness. For this reason, in understanding backward rural contexts, cultural factors are far more important than socio-economic factors. His research is extensively discussed in the first section of the article. Then, in the second part, the main criticisms in both international and Italian debates over the book are presented in order to contextualize the reasons for the strong scholarly interest generated by the theory of amoral familism.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Il vedermi con una sorella muoveva uno dei loro più profondi sentimenti: quello della consanguineità, che, dove non c'è senso di Stato né di religione, tiene, con tanta maggiore intensità, il posto di quelli. Non è l'istituto familiare, vincolo sociale, giuridico e sentimentale; ma il senso sacro, arcano e magico di una comunanza.<sup>2</sup> (Levi 1990: 78)*

In his famous 1945 book, *Cristo si è fermato ad Eboli*, Carlo Levi described the socio-economic conditions of a small village in Basilicata, the same region where Edward Banfield undertook his sociological study ten years later. While Carlo Levi is a non-academic writer, his understanding of the reality of peasant life contributed to the general public interest, already manifested in the political and academic worlds, in the so-called

---

1 Please direct all correspondence to Emanuele Ferragina, Dept. of Social Policy, University of Oxford, Barnett House, 32 Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2ER England. Tel: 01865 270325; e-mail: [emanuele.ferragina@gtc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:emanuele.ferragina@gtc.ox.ac.uk); Website: <http://www.emaferragina.altervista.org/>. I am indebted to the comments and advice offered by Jonah Rimer, Peter Pritchard and Kate Fayers-Kerr.

2 'Social organization and amoral familism in Chiaromonte: criticisms of Banfield's thesis by a familist'.

*questione meridionale*<sup>3</sup> (Compagna 1963; Franchetti and Sonnino 1974; Gramsci 1952; Rossi-Doria 1948, 1958, 1967; Salvadori 1977; Villari 1961; Vöchting 1955). Discussion of the economic and social backwardness of southern Italy involved many generations of writers and social scientists: for this reason, the publication of Banfield's book contributed to fostering an intensive debate that has a number of implications for social scientists today.

Banfield introduced the topic with clarity, but he had to face the reactions of an entire generation of Italian social scientists. According to them, Banfield's approach was stereotypical and simplistic, disregarding completely the historical development of the south. The result was a biased analysis, which contributed to the creation of a false paradigm: the structure of familial life in the south of Italy is the core reason for the absence of collective action and economic development.

*The moral basis of a backward society* was not the only research undertaken by American sociologists describing the characteristics of families in rural areas of the south of Italy. Norman Douglas, in his book *Old Calabria* (1915), anticipated the interest in these regions, and during the 1950s many American sociologists undertook fieldwork in the area, revealing to the Anglo-Saxon scholarship community the complexity of this part of the world, in which modernity and backwardness coexisted in the same nation. In general, this interest in Italy can be correlated with the massive Italian immigration to the United States, the escape of Italian intellectuals like Gaetano Salvemini from fascism and Italian books such as *Cristo si è fermato ad Eboli* mentioned earlier (Mazzarone 1978).

American sociologists (Friedmann 1954b; Moss and Thomson 1959; Lopreato 1961) had the merit of inaugurating a season of sociological study. In particular, Friedmann conducted participant observation in Matera with the aim of understanding how to manage the displacement of populations from the *sassi* to social housing without having a negative impact on social relations. He was struck by the dignity of Italian peasants in their way of coping with the so-called *miseria*. Nevertheless, Banfield was the only one to generate significant interest among scholars.

The success and distinctiveness of *The moral basis of a backward society* go beyond its description of the rural context and the reasons for the underdevelopment of southern Italy. Success can also be attributed to Banfield for providing a simple and straightforward explanation for a problem that has interested generations of writers, philosophers and social scientists. It has been said that, 'Theories that won't die are those that confirm our most basic assumptions' (Thompson 2005: 446). Amoral familism doubtless belongs to this category of theories.

---

3 Thomson 2005: 446.

After being discussed for twenty years, Banfield's book has been rediscovered in the last decade thanks to the wave of interest in social capital. Robert Putnam (Putnam et al. 1993), in *Making democracy work*, follows the same path of analysis. He tried to strengthen Banfield's methodology and to improve his historical argumentation.

What follows is a critical discussion of Banfield's theoretical model, highlighting the main criticisms proposed and demonstrating the importance of this topic to current academic debate.

### *1.1. Banfield and his interest in the south of Italy*

Edward Banfield was an American social scientist who, apart from a short stay in Pennsylvania, spent his entire academic career at the universities of Chicago and Harvard. His wife, Laura Fasano, was the daughter of two Italian immigrants, who both came from two small villages in the Salerno area (Colombis 1992).

Banfield's interest in the mechanisms driving the generation of collective action and the increase in generalised trust started with unpublished research he conducted in Utah in 1952. He studied the south-western part of the state, an area considered chronically underdeveloped. The aim of the research was to understand how local peasants managed an environment that lacked primary resources. Banfield suggested the possibility of creating a 'sociology of efficiency' in order to explain the conditions that influence the proper use of the land and the other resources involved in agricultural activity. Culture, social structure and the mechanism of social change were the main categories of his analysis (Colombis 1992).

He led the research in a small village, assuming that only a small-scale study would be able to reveal the ethos of the inhabitants. Disappointed by his results, after his research in Utah he decided to apply the same methodology in another cultural context. He selected Italy because of a recent agrarian reform there and because his wife was able to understand Italian and its southern dialects.

He decided to focus on a village of less than 10,000 inhabitants, as he believed it would then be easier to understand the functioning of the economy as a whole and its relation to the cultural background. When he arrived in Italy, with the help of Manlio Rossi-Doria and Gilberto Marselli (one of his students) he travelled the south, finding in Chiaromonte—called Montegrano in his study—a perfect environment for his research. *The moral basis of a backward society* represents the turning point of his academic career. After its publication, he obtained a professorship at Harvard and intensified his consultancy activities for governmental agencies.

During his career, Banfield compared rural and urban contexts. He had an active role in policy-making, acting as a consultant to the US federal government during the Nixon administration and working in the field of urban development and poverty issues.

His research interests are well explained by his two main works: *The moral basis of a backward society* (1958) and *The unheavenly city* (1970, 1974). In these two books, Banfield constructed his analysis of 'amoral familism' and 'lower-class present orientations' using similar deterministic arguments. He argued that there is something embedded in culture that makes people behave in a certain way, with which public intervention cannot deal directly. Liberal scholars often accused him of reshaping old theories in an appealing way to affirm a conservative political ideology. However, with a background in agricultural studies, a passion for ethnography, and much experience in urban planning and the alleviation of poverty, he had the opportunity to write about many social issues, raising great interest and controversy in both the academic and political spheres in the process.

## 2. THE MORAL BASIS OF A BACKWARD SOCIETY: AN INTRODUCTION

*The moral basis of a backward society* begins with two quotations: Hobbes describing the difficult condition of England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and Tocqueville glorifying 'the Science of Association' as the mother of all sciences. The book's content was well explained by the premise that the south of Italy was in a disastrous situation because the 'Science of Association' was being ignored, and people were not able to formulate collective strategies in order to react against poverty.

Banfield states the aim of his analysis clearly, telling the reader that the cause of the region's backwardness is to be found in the lack of common actions to achieve long-term improvements. This idea of an inability to transcend short-term material interests is also a distinctive characteristic of the description of the lower classes in *The unheavenly city*. In *The moral basis of a backward society*, the inability to plan and associated endemic backwardness is explained by the presence of an amoral vision of the family, the so-called 'amoral familism'.

Amoral familism is generated by three circumstances: the first is socio-economic, leading to a high death rate; the second is historical, resulting in certain conditions of land tenure; and the third is purely cultural, namely the absence of the institution of the extended family. This final circumstance is considered the most important by the American scholar and is analysed diffusely in his book.

### 2.1. Associative life in Montegrano: exploring the cultural reasons for 'backwardness'

The lack of associative life is thoroughly considered by Banfield. It is interesting to note that all the indicators he used were revived 35 years later by Putnam for his famous quantification of social capital through macro-indicators in *Making democracy work* (Putnam et al. 1993). In this sense, Banfield's analysis addresses themes that have become central in social capital theory.

The evidence given for the lack of trust and collective action includes the absence of local newspapers or of charities, the existence of a single club, the strong control of the central administration from Potenza, the poor condition of the public schools and unstable voting at political elections. All these indicators are apparent signs of the villagers' inability to take collective action to improve the situation of the village. Banfield's exploration of social trust resembles the first conceptualization of social capital outlined by Hanifan (1916), in which she stated that rural communities can improve only if people work together to build social capital.

Banfield outlines common theories of underdevelopment: poverty, ignorance, apolitical behaviour reflecting class interest and antagonism, landowner conservatism, the inefficiency and remoteness of institutions, fatalistic attitudes; however, none of them can fully explain Montegrano's situation. The extreme poverty cannot justify the total absence of civic awareness among Montegrano's population. There seems to be something cultural that prevents people from acting together to improve the community. Banfield does not offer any further arguments about poverty or give any socio-economic reasons for backwardness. In this environment, there is no space for collective strategies. People are able to act rationally only out of their own self-interest. A clear example of this is provided by villagers' self-enforced regulation of the number of offspring to guarantee a better future for their sons. According to Banfield, this demonstrates that people appear pessimistic only in regard to collective action, not individual action.

Southern culture makes problems worse, since the *miseria* is not considered an economic issue. As Banfield states: 'What makes the difference between a low level of living and la miseria comes from culture. [...] There are primitive societies in which the level of biological well-being is even lower, but in which people are not chronically unhappy' (1958: 64-5). Culture makes people 'chronically unhappy' more than any other socio-economic cause. This point of view is demonstrated from the perspective of social class and the fear of decreasing social mobility. Even people at the bottom of the social scale fear degradation, and this is entirely a cultural problem.

Economic concerns do not affect notions of correct behaviour, any more than do the ways people think about themselves in relation to the rest of society. The risk of failing is always present; however, people do not similarly consider the opportunities for upward mobility. The only possibility to move upward is intergenerational. For this reason, families have progressively reduced themselves in size and invested heavily in one child.

The analysis of social class is completed by a consideration of the relationship between the lower and upper classes. Communication is mediated through the gift, which demonstrates that a person of lower class is not on a level of parity with those

above. The gift demonstrates the existence of a 'feudal' social structure, an idea that was reconsidered and expanded by Putnam (1993) to demonstrate that the lack of collective social action has a historical genesis.

### *2.2. The postulate of amoral familism and its implication for analysis*

In the chapter entitled 'A predictive hypothesis', Banfield assumes a positivist approach and defines the postulate of 'Amoral Familism' and all its consequences. The success of Banfield's work is dictated by the clarity of his propositions; the main drawback is the lack of data to support his hypothesis. His approach has often been regarded as methodologically incorrect (Marselli 1963).

The basic explanatory hypothesis for the backwardness of southern Italy, the 'amoral familism' theory, is clearly announced: 'Maximize the material, short run advantage of the nuclear family; assume that all others will do likewise' (Banfield 1958: 85). This proposition implies that everyone will act for the short-term gain of the family, thereby destroying every opportunity for collective action. This premise shapes all other relations in society, affecting the behaviour of civil servants and voting decisions, and destroying all opportunities for concrete change. The primary consequence of Banfield's theory is that people will have public concerns only when there is a potential for individual gain.

The only people for whom it is acceptable to show an interest in public affairs are officers and civil servants; if a private citizen were to take part in public affairs, he would be deemed abnormal and would likely be accused of self-interest. It follows that citizens cannot control officers, therefore only officers (superiors) can check other officers.

This condition will reduce the efficiency of control and the quality of the work of officers. In the context of self-interest and amoral familism, officers will use their position as a weapon against other citizens, rather than for the communal benefit as a whole. Officers will always be accused of bribery and improper behaviour without sound evidence.

These problems do not only exist among public services and officers. In an amoral familist society, there is no space for cooperation, trust or collective action in any situation; the general context of non-cooperation will make the law less applicable and disregarded if there is not a certain punishment attached.

This state of fear and short-term interest pushes the weakest people in society towards conservatism. They would prefer to be poor under the present order rather than totally ruined by a new one. In such an environment, it is not possible for leaders to recruit people to support serious intentions for political change. Even if a leader were able to prove his capacity, he or she would be viewed with distrust. The only approximation to leadership is the relationship between patron and client, but even this is not based on

pure leadership. The client will follow the patron in an attempt to maximize his or her own and family's self-interest (Banfield 1958: 100).

As with law and policy, electoral behaviour is said to be driven by the logic of the amoral family. Public and class interest do not affect the choice to the same extent. Everything is dictated by the principle of short-term advantage. Also, the vote does not have any stability because there is no political machine. According to Banfield, this happens for three reasons: first, the secrecy of the vote does not allow a secure agreement; secondly, there are not enough short-term benefits to justify investment in an electoral machine; and thirdly, it is economically unsustainable to maintain an organisation of this type in a context of poverty. In fact, this lack of electoral machinery and instability does not seem to respond to the general southern condition. While it is true that Banfield commented on the situation in Montegrano, the Communist Party and Democrazia Cristiana were actually prominent there at this time, and national elections showed an impressive stability from 1948 to 1992. In fact, Democrazia Cristiana, with the cooperation of other small parties, ruled the whole country in this period without any significant opposition.

### 2.3. *Ethos and possible future solutions*

After setting out and exploring his theory, Banfield describes concisely the ethos of Montegrano's inhabitants and how it impacts on their general behaviour.

First, an individual, and in particular adults, may not exist outside his role as parent. Secondly, people are pessimistic and believe in destiny, against which nothing can be done. Using TAT (thematic apperception tests), Banfield notices that the great majority of life histories he collected speak about calamities and misfortune: 'Only two or three of the 320 stories were positively happy in tone' (Banfield 1958: 109). The portrait created by Banfield is reminiscent of Giovanni Verga (1881) and his *Malavoglia*: to succeed in life, it is important to be lucky. In fact, all the conditions for improving one's own position are beyond one's control as an individual.

Thirdly, observing social links between fellow townsmen, Banfield approaches the subject of social networks and anticipates social capital theory. An illustration of this is where he describes bonds of trust between individuals as only functioning in the presence of possible punishment or direct control.

The current amoral ethos is embedded in history and derives from the particular conditions relating to land tenure. The land has always been in the hands of the aristocracy, making it impossible for small countrymen to work together and benefit from their own work. For this reason, people become suspicious even of members of their own extended family, with everyone trying to survive through a direct relationship with the



landowner. This hierarchical structure destroys all horizontal ties, making people selfish and interested only in their nuclear family.

Banfield does not want simply to contribute to descriptive research; in fact, in the final part of the book, he highlights the utility of his study for redesigning and implementing new policies. The only way of changing this amoral ethos is through the presence of an outside group that will become the agent for change, assuming leadership and forging a new path for the citizens of this backward area:

The possibility of planned change depends upon the presence of an 'outside' group with the desire and ability to bring it about. If all Italians were amoral familists, no such group would exist. In fact, the political left, the church, and the industry of the north all contain elements which might inspire and support reform in the south. (Banfield 1958: 164)

Yet even if there were an opportunity for change, the conclusion of his analysis is pessimistic. Examining the evolution of southern Italy, we can regard his final judgment as a prophecy:

Such changes will not at once be reflected in a new ethos. The present ethos will tend to perpetuate itself for a long time, even though many of the circumstances which gave rise to it no longer exist or no longer operate in the old way. Long established ways of thinking and valuing have a life of their own independent of the particular conditions which gave rise to them. This is what has been called 'cultural lag'. (Banfield 1958: 169)

In fact, after more than fifty years southern Italy remains underdeveloped, without any sign of economic convergence with standards in the north.

### **3. CRITICISMS: THE ITALIAN PERSPECTIVE**

Banfield's strong conclusion and his ability to discuss a central topic among Italian scholars in a new manner sparked a long debate that still stimulates academic and political discussion today. The most important criticisms will be highlighted here, while also mentioning authors who wrote about the same issues from different perspectives.

The first section is dedicated to Rossi-Doria's arguments about the agrarian origins of southern backwardness. The second concentrates on the initial anthropological and sociological criticisms of Banfield. The third develops the criticisms advanced by Colombis in the 1970s. The fourth looks at the debate about the relationship between family structure and economic development in the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, the fifth reviews the debate aroused after the publication of the third Italian edition in 2006.

### 3.1. Rossi-Doria and the agrarian origin of southern backwardness

Manlio Rossi-Doria, a famous professor of agrarian economy, was the first Italian academic to communicate with Banfield. He provided basic information to Banfield while he was visiting the south of Italy seeking a village for his study. Rossi-Doria's work (1948, 1958, 1967) deserves mention because, without directly criticising Banfield, he wrote extensively on the reasons for the absence of collective action in the south. However, he gave a very different explanation from that presented by Banfield in *The moral basis of a backward society*. According to Rossi-Doria, the absence of collective action in the south has been generated historically by the agrarian system and the poor conditions of the peasants.

In 1958, the same year Banfield's book first appeared, Rossi-Doria published his *Dieci anni di politica agraria nel Mezzogiorno*. In the first chapter of the book, he reviewed the development of Italian agriculture since the agrarian reform of 1950. He described the reasons for the backwardness of southern agriculture, the fascist policies of *autarchia* and the increased divergence from the north. Northern agriculture, based on cereals and animal husbandry, conformed to the needs of Mussolini's regime. Southern agriculture, by contrast, was based on wine and oil. The massive conversion of agriculture there in the 1950s did not produce any increase in productivity because the soil was not suitable for the new types of cultivation.

Agricultural problems, the tremendous demographic increase and massive emigration weakened the economic and social fabric of southern regions. The agrarian reform was not able to reverse a situation of exploitation that had existed for centuries. After Italian unification, peasants went from being dependent on the feudal system to being *braccianti* or day labourers. Little by little, the southern bourgeoisie became absentee landowners, and southern peasants became completely dependent on their idiosyncratic decisions. In this phenomenon is to be found the root of the deviant social and political behaviour of southerners (Rossi-Doria 1958).

Frightened by the fragility of agrarian contracts, conditioned by overpopulation and the consequent unemployment, under occupation, obtaining small parcels of fragmented land after the reform and perpetually lacking capital, credit, technical assistance and organisation, the peasants became suspicious of one another, competing to buy small plots of land rather than cooperating. In this situation, horizontal solidarity was destroyed, and with it the hope of developing a modern democracy with efficient institutions regulated by shared collective norms (Rossi-Doria 1958). In Banfield's book, with some minor exceptions, the historical argumentation is completely absent. The amoral familist peasants are not embedded in their historical and socio-economical contexts, therefore his analysis appears incomplete.

### 3.2. *Initial criticisms: anthropological and sociological perspectives*

In this section, Banfield's first direct critics will be highlighted, mostly Anglo-Saxon scholars with the exception of Marselli and Pizzorno. The criticisms can be divided into two groups: the anthropological perspectives of Frank Cancian (1961), Leonard Moss and Stephen Capannari (1960) and Sydel Silverman (1968, 1976); and the criticisms of the sociologists Gilberto Marselli (1963, 1976), Johan Wichers (1964), Alessandro Pizzorno (1971 [1966, 1976]) and William Muraskin (1974).

Cancian (1961, 1976) was the first scholar to discuss Banfield's book critically. In 'Southern Italian peasant: world view and political behaviour', he showed how Banfield's theoretical model can only account for peasants' political behaviour, not for their entire ethos. Banfield had compared American farmers with Italian peasants, but in the south of Italy the perspectives are different: a peasant struggles for survival and does not aim for accumulation. Banfield had also used an external perspective. Peasants are only a dependent variable of history, and their behaviour does not depend on internal decisions. According to Cancian, instead, the lack of collective action is directly correlated with internal causes, such as the lack of trust in the future and lack of confidence in control of the environment.

Moss and Capannari (1960) mentioned Banfield in their study of a village in Molise. They show how he disregarded the importance of *comparaggio* or grandparenthood. The theory of amoral familism does not explain the importance of grandparenthood, nor why grandparents normally live in other villages. Following Moss and Capannari, Silverman (1968) argued that the theory of amoral familism cannot be extended to the south of Italy as a whole: only certain backward zones have the characteristics highlighted by Banfield. She also agreed with Cancian's criticism that amoral familism cannot be considered a pure ethos, but only an explanation of certain behaviour.

The critiques of the rural anthropologists were softer in tone compared to those of the sociologists and agrarian economists writing in the same period. According to the latter, Banfield's theory had to be completely rejected.

The first sociological critique, mainly a methodological one, was formulated by Marselli (1963) in his article 'American sociologists and Italian peasant society: with reference to the book of Banfield'. Marselli rejected Banfield's methodology, focusing on the incoherence between the strong conclusions of the latter's work and the fieldwork he had conducted on which they were based.

First, interviews were used to demonstrate ideas already mentioned by the author as the drivers of his research. For this reason Banfield, according to Marselli, had carried out 'populist sociology', merely citing peasants to reinforce certain affirmations of his own. All these interviews, in fact, did nothing to support Banfield's position.

Secondly, Banfield applied an incorrect methodology in over-emphasizing psychological research methods that, while useful in urban contexts, are not applicable to a rural society. Peasants cannot struggle against the attitudes of the upper class, but have to conform themselves to the environment in which they live.

Marselli's argument appears forced: in fact, he criticised Banfield for asserting his theory of amoral familism on the basis of a weak methodology when in reality Banfield never asserted an absolute position, remaining quite cautious in the first part of the book: '... our intention is not to "prove" anything, but rather to outline and illustrate a theory which may be rigorously tested by any who care to do so...' (Banfield 1958: 11). Banfield replied with a short note placed in an appendix to Marselli's article: 'Hardly a sentence of his article reveals any comprehension of what we were trying to do' (Banfield, in Marselli 1963: 338).

The debate was now open: even if Marselli's analyses were incomplete and based upon anecdotes rather than systematic demonstrations, his contribution started a germane discussion among experts of Italian conditions. A year after Marselli's contribution, in the same review (*Sociologia Ruralis*), another critique appeared of Banfield's book, formulated by the Dutch sociologist Wichers (1964), who based his article on the lack of historical context in Banfield's work.

Banfield had compared a community in United States with Montegrano, pointing out the presence of voluntary associations as the main difference between the two communities. The lack of vibrant associations in the Italian small village had been determined by the absence of the extended family structure there. For Wichers, instead, the difference is historical and embedded in European culture. There is a different tradition in Nordic and Mediterranean countries among peasants, which can be traced back to feudalism.

Wichers compared Dutch peasants with Montegranean ones, showing that the theory of amoral familism has little historical background. To enhance his study, Banfield should have carefully examined Mediterranean culture and its roots. The arguments presented by Banfield are not solidly grounded in the history of this region, and his theory is too abstract to respond to the complex reality analysed.

Two years after Wichers' article, Pizzorno (1971) provided a decisive contribution to the debate. In fact, his approach strengthened some of the criticisms already highlighted by Marselli and Wichers and added new elements for reflection by revisiting the foundation of Banfield's theoretical model, focusing on its lack of contextualization when analysing relations with the public administration and with power, as well as on Banfield's description of Montegrano as a non-community, revealing results that Banfield omitted from his fieldwork such as the importance of friends, and stressing the need for a further historical investigation.

First, Pizzorno does not criticise the concrete case study (as Marselli did), but the theoretical model proposed by Banfield. According to him, Italian scholars have not taken into account or commented on Banfield's analysis because *The moral basis of a backward society* does not contribute any meaningful insights into the southern question. Montegranians follow their egoism, acting exactly like the British middle class in the eighteenth century. There is not much difference between southern Italian society and that described by Adam Smith (1937 [1776]) in his famous book *The wealth of nations*. The only difference from Smith is the idea of 'short-run material advantage'. Paradoxically, even in Montegrano the conditions for the accumulation of capital essential for the development of a modern economy do exist.

Second, there is another factor in Montegrano's development, one with more impact than the concept of short-run advantage, namely the absence of associations and formal social networks. According to Banfield, people are not able to join groups or to direct policy action in support of the entire community. But even this point appears biased by the author's background. In the Roman juridical tradition, administrative law does not take into account interactions with the public administration. Why should Montegrano's inhabitants do something that does not fit in with their own values? Why should they act in a way that would never generate a concrete effect? And what type of theory would have been formulated if Banfield had undertaken his study in a village where streets and hospitals had been built thanks to the action of some MP in the Parliament in Rome (Pizzorno 1971: 91)? These points, according to Pizzorno, show that amoral familism does not suffice to explain Montegranians' behaviour. The lack of infrastructure in Montegrano seems to be related to an incorrect functioning of the 'typical clientele mechanism', rather than the presence of amoral familism.

Third, analysing Montegrano's social structure is meaningless: the village cannot be seen as a community. Montegrano is a simple agglomeration of houses: each family lives for itself, and people consider any effort to improve present conditions completely useless. Fourth, Banfield omitted from his analysis the importance that Montegranians attribute to sincere friendship.

Fifth, Pizzorno re-states Wichers' criticism of the lack of historical contextualization, in order to introduce his theory about the backwardness of southern Italy. The key idea proposed at the end of the article is that the centre-periphery problem is central in explaining underdevelopment: amoral familism can only be seen as the outcome of a long historical process, not as the original cause. Only individuals can identify themselves with a new system and build new social ties: it is unlikely that an entire community will change if it remains historically marginal:

On the other hand, identification with the new system can occur solely individual by individual, in a place where a new life makes sense, that is, in seats of historical progress. To conceive of communities, of community action, of community identification in historically marginal zones, as long as they remain such, does not make sense. (Pizzorno 1971: 98)

Individuals can only emigrate to change their condition. If they are obliged to remain, they will generate 'human aggregates' and not communities, as in Montegrano's case. In conclusion, Pizzorno brings to the fore the importance of Banfield's analysis in scientifically revealing and discussing conditions in these marginal areas. Banfield nonetheless misinterpreted peculiar factors inherent in the southern Italian context: for this and the aforementioned reasons, his theory of amoral familism has to be rejected.

A fourth criticism was published eight years later by Muraskin (1974), whose position is stated clearly in the title of his article: 'The moral basis of a backward sociologist: Edward Banfield, the Italians, and the Italian-Americans'. According to him, Banfield offered a 'disturbing and oversimplified picture' (Muraskin 1974: 1495) of southern Italians.

### 3.3. *Bias and inaccuracies in Banfield's analysis: Colombis's criticism*

The debate around Banfield's theory arose in Italy only during the 1970s with the publication of the second edition of his book (Banfield 1976). The first edition did not attract great attention, probably because the title was less problematic: *Una comunità del mezzogiorno* (1961). The second edition (1976), with the original title literally translated, presented De Masi's introduction accompanied by many essays written in earlier years about the book. Most of them have already been discussed in the previous section. In this section, the focus will be on Colombis's original analysis.

Colombis meticulously verified the methodology of the research and the terminology Banfield had used and compared Banfield's results with his own fieldwork in the south of Italy. Colombis's first extensive article appeared two years before the second edition of Banfield's book in 1974: 'Organizzazione sociale e familismo amorale a Chiaromonte: critica della tesi di E.C. Banfield da parte di un familista' (Colombis 1974). The aim of the article is to examine the theory of amoral familism from the perspective of southern Italians.

The first criticism Colombis presents is terminological: Banfield uses the term 'amoral familism' as a synonym of egoism—amoral familists are fundamentally egoists. In reality, Chiaromonte's inhabitants are in a situation of extreme poverty and demonstrate a strong spiritual dimension through their devotion and attachment to the family. Colombis is surprised that a scholar coming from a social system where capitalism

has imposed a life-style based on the logic of increasing material consumption should complain about the lack of altruistic feelings in human relationships in a context where people have to struggle to survive (Colombis 1974: 447).

The second criticism is methodological: Colombis raises many questions about the reliability of Banfield's analysis (Colombis 1974: 449-67). Reviewing all the questionnaires used by Banfield, he discovered that there are no distinctions in term of gender or age, even when the questions could be heavily impacted by these variables. The questionnaire is not well constructed, and the answers are interpreted in a misleading manner. For example, 15 out 28 people interviewed preferred a man who cheats on the wife rather than one who steals. Therefore, the majority of those interviewed considered theft a more serious issue than adultery; however, theft damages the stranger, while adultery damages the nuclear family (Colombis 1974: 456). According to Colombis, these answers do not allow Banfield to define the Chiaromontesi amoral familists.

The third criticism relates to the logic of Banfield's argument. In Montegrano he catalogued 809 nuclear and 67 extended families. According to Banfield, inside extended families people learn to act collectively, while in nuclear families egoism toward other members of society is fostered. Therefore, the absence of extended families is one of the main problems in Chiaromonte. According to Colombis, this conclusion is illogical. In fact, growing up in an extended family does not amount to an ability to overcome egoism. If Chiaromontesi were amoral familists, the situation would not change with a larger number of extended families. Instead of maximizing the 'short-term advantage' of the nuclear family, they would maximize the advantage of the extended family (Colombis 1974: 457). Colombis's point is very interesting and applicable to current trends: for example, the current social evolution of southern Italy shows high rates of youth unemployment, which increases the time people spend at home with their parents and thus has a direct impact on the number of extended families. Nevertheless the larger number of extended families does not improve people's ability to act collectively.

According to Colombis (1980), Banfield did not understand southern Italian reality and applied the theory of 'democratic pluralism' in a place where cultural and moral values are distinctively different from the United States. In a context where illiteracy and poverty dominate, the best explanation for backwardness is provided by Pizzorno (1971): Chiaromonte is too isolated to be part of history. In emphasising relations, networks and psychological motivations, Banfield does not consider the structural factors that cause the Chiaromontesi to act individualistically. Following the modern development of cultural approaches to the analysis of the different institutional performances of nations, one can say that Banfield over-emphasised the importance of social capital without considering the structural problems of society.

### 3.4. *Family structure and development: the debate in the 1980s and 1990s*

*The moral basis of a backward society* remained one of the most frequently debated books among Italian scholars throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The reason for this interest is found in the fact that Banfield touched upon three central topics of southern Italian studies: the *questione meridionale*, the debate between structuralists and culturalists about the causes of southern backwardness, and the role played by the family in the process of modernization. For the purpose of this article, this section will concentrate on the debate about the family.

Francesco Benigno (1989) showed how the nuclear family model is not an exclusive prerogative of the south: it also prevailed in the north historically. The structure of the family cannot be the only reason for the economic and institutional divergence between Italian regions. The social importance of the family consists in its ability to mediate between the private and public spheres. When addressing the question of who does not have access to 'public resources', the importance of the family may produce a disregard for collective actions in society and a consideration of only private interest (Giannini and Salomone 1992). In Italy, this role of mediation assumed particular connotations. We can reasonably argue that everywhere the strength and loyalty of family ties have provided support against the specific institutional weaknesses deriving from the fragmented process of unification.

Therefore, the role of the family has been twofold. In the south, where private interests diverged from collective ones, the ability to act collectively has been reduced. In the north-east and centre, where private interests converged with collective ones, the familial model helped the development of an original productive organization during the 1960s and 1970s, namely that in industrial areas. When the family becomes the only perspective for individuals from the cradle to the grave, negative consequences for the formation of individual identity and the structure of society in general can be generated (Gribaudi 1993). The problem is not the 'familism', but the incapacity of welfare policy and the state to liberate individuals from the overwhelming support of the family (Mingione and Magatti 1997).

### 3.5. *The third Italian edition and contemporary debates*

The publication of a third Italian edition of *The moral basis of a backward society* (Banfield 2006) re-opened the debate, demonstrating the centrality of the issues discussed in the book. This section will focus on the most interesting and original contributions. The Italian review *Contemporanea* dedicated much space to Banfield, presenting four articles discussing his book from different perspectives.

Marco Santoro (2007) stresses how much Banfield's book was already out of date by 1958. The ethnographic research conducted by the Boas school, and particularly by



Ruth Benedict (1934), was already more advanced and accurate. Banfield's theory was merely an over-simplification of reality, and amoral familism rapidly became a national habitus that was also accepted outside the academic world. The creation of such a paradigm is largely due to the over-emphasis placed on Banfield's book. Instead, Italian sociologists should have given greater attention to the concept of habitus and its possible declinations in describing southern reality.

The second contribution (Kertzer 2007) draws attention to a paradox stretching beyond Banfield's success: a book written by a man who was hardly able to speak Italian, who spent only nine months in the country and perhaps never read any Italian books, became the most famous sociological study about the south of Italy. Dario Gaggio (2007) highlights how Banfield anticipated a shift from the analysis of social and economic history to cultural history. In fact, *The moral basis of a backward society* represents the basis for the modern conceptualizations of Putnam (1993) and Fukuyama (1995). The last contribution, by Pier Paolo Viazzo (2007), proposes, unlike the other scholars, a positive assessment of Banfield's book. *The moral basis of a backward society* still has much to tell us about the south of Italy. Banfield seems to have correctly forecast the reasons for the drastic reduction in fertility rates and correctly commented on the role played by the nuclear family in this regard. His only mistake was to disregard the importance of neighbourhood relations. Therefore, the ostracism of this classic book should be ended.

Another important Italian review gave space to the debate over *The moral basis of a backward society*. Antonio Blando (2007) published an interesting article in *Meridiana* entitled 'Il Ritorno di Banfield'. The Italian past, as Putnam argues (1993), did not really become past. The cultural and historical developments of recent centuries reduced the efficiency of Italian institutions. Therefore, to explain Italian reality, one needs to abandon the structuralist approach. According to this vision, Italy is becoming a battlefield to test theories successfully applied to American reality. Banfield has the merit of being the first to propose this shift: perhaps this is the strongest reason for the success and immortality of his book.

#### **4. CONCLUSION: 'Theories that won't die are those that confirm our most basic assumptions'**

*The moral basis of a backward society* described only a particular reality with a limited temporal and spatial validity. The central problem with Banfield's theory is the generalization of a small case study, undertaken in a very small and marginal area that is not representative of all southern reality. Amoral familism, therefore, cannot be treated as an anthropological theory, an ideological paradigm or a matter of choice: it is merely a historical product which has to be correctly contextualised. Banfield's framework can only partially explain the absence of collective action. An exhaustive review of all the

causes advanced to explain this phenomenon has been provided by Catanzaro (1983). Culture cannot be directly correlated, in a relationship of cause and effect, with the backwardness of institutions and the faulty development of economic and social life.

The danger with culture-centric theories is the construction of stereotypes that remain attached to some particular context. Southern Italy became the land of amoral familism, even though the historical evolution of the family institution does not diverge from that in the rest of the country. Banfield's theory seems to confirm many basic assumptions. In reality, as has been demonstrated in this article, his argument does not describe the south; rather, it provides a snapshot of Chiaromonte in 1955. Chiaromonte represented only a part of the south, and the 'familism' that connotes Italian social life can only be understood when it is embedded in a particular institutional and social context.

Nevertheless, more than fifty years after its publication, *The moral basis of a backward society* remains a book of great importance in the field of the social sciences. One can judge its impact from the number of commentaries on it and the great attention given to it by Italian scholars and worldwide. Great works are those that are able to raise debates that foster intellectual curiosity and further research. Banfield renewed the opportunity to discuss important sociological and policy issues based on provocative and insightful analyses. He re-read classical topics of social science and opened up new spaces for reflection. In this sense, the modern reader must admire the clarity and the richness of his work, even if many of his ideas are difficult to share and his methodological accuracy has been sometimes obscured by his political ideology:

Despite his attack on the orthodoxy of the time, most liberal academics conceded that Professor Banfield's scholarship was impeccable and deeply insightful. His colleague James Q. Wilson, a political scientist of great distinction, called Banfield 'the most profound student of American politics of this century'. (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 1999)

## References

- Allum, P.A. 1975. *Potere e società a Napoli nel dopoguerra*, Torino: Einaudi.
- Arlacchi, P. 1980. *Mafia contadini e latifondo nella Calabria tradizionale*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Bagnasco, A. 1977. *Le tre Italie*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
- . 2006. Ritorno a Montegrano, in E.C. Banfield, *Le basi morali di una società arretrata*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 9-31.
- Banfield, E.C. 1958. *The moral basis of a backward society*. New York: Free Press.
- . 1961. *Una comunità del Mezzogiorno*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
- . 1970. *The unheavenly city*, Little, Boston, Toronto: Brown and Company.
- . 1974. *The unheavenly city revisited*, Little, Boston, Toronto: Brown and Company.
- . 1976. *Le basi morali di una società arretrata*, ed. D. De Masi, Bologna: Il Mulino.
- . 2006. *Le basi morali di una società arretrata*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Barbagli, M. 1984. *Sotto lo stesso tetto: mutamenti della famiglia in Italia dal XV al XX secolo*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Benedict, R. 1934. *Patterns of culture*, New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Benigno, F. 1989. Famiglia mediterranea e modelli anglosassoni, *Meridiana* 6, 29-61.
- Blando, A. 2007. Il ritorno di Banfield, *Meridiana* 59-60, 307-23.
- Blok, A. 1974. *The Mafia of a Sicilian Village, 1860-1960*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Caciagli, M., et al. 1977. *Democrazia Cristiana e potere nel mezzogiorno*, Firenze: Guaraldi.
- Cancian, F. 1961. Southern Italian peasant: world view and political behaviour, *Anthropological Quarterly* 34, 1-18 [Italian version: Cancian, F. 1976. Il contadino meridionale: visione del mondo e comportamento politico, in E.C. Banfield (ed.), *Le basi morali di una società arretrata*, Bologna: Il Mulino: 207-13].
- Catanzaro, R. 1975. Potere e politica locale in Italia, *Quaderni di Sociologia*, 24/4, 273-322.
- . 1979. Le cinque Sicilie: disarticolazione sociale e struttura di classe in un'economia dipendente, *Rassegna italiana di sociologia*, 1, 7-35.
- . 1980. *Partecipazione, potere e sviluppo*, Catania: Pellicano Libri.
- . 1982. Note sulla carenza di conflittualità e di azione collettiva nel mezzogiorno, *Inchiesta*, 57, 39-48.
- . 1983. Struttura sociale, sistema politico e azione collettiva nel mezzogiorno, *Stato e Mercato* 8, 271-315.
- Collida, A. (ed.) 1978. *L'economia italiana tra sviluppo e sussistenza*, Milano: Angeli.
- Colombis, A. 1974. Organizzazione sociale e familismo amorale a Chiaromonte: critica della tesi di E.C. Banfield da parte di un familista, *Sociologia dell'organizzazione*, 4 December, 437-88.
- . 1980. Ricerca sociale coencentri ed ideologie: con particolare riferimento alle aree interne, montane, depresse, *Basilicata* 24/2-3, 62-75.
- . 1992. L'invenzione del familismo amorale, in F. P. Cerase (ed.), *Dopo il familismo cosa? Tesi a confronto sulla questione meridionale negli anni '90*, Milano: Franco Angeli, 201-12.
- Compagna, F. 1963. *La questione meridionale*, Milano: Garzanti.
- Da Molin, G. 1995. *La famiglia nel passato: strutture familiari nel regno di Napoli in età moderna*, Bari: Cacucci Editore.
- Davis, J. 1973. *Land and Family in Pisticci*, London: University of London, Athlone Press, and New York: Humanities Press.
- . 1976. Principi morali e arretratezza, in E.C. Banfield (ed.), *Le basi morali di una società arretrata*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 281-97.
- De Martino, E. 1959. *Sud e magia*, Milano: Feltrinelli.

- Donolo, C. 1972. Sviluppo ineguale e disgregazione sociale nel meridione, *Quaderni Piacentini* 47, 121-8.
- Douglas, N. 1915. *Old Calabria*, London: Secker. Freely available through the Gutenberg Project: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/7385>.
- Franchetti, L., and S. Sonnino 1974. *Inchiesta in Sicilia*, Firenze: Vallecchi.
- Friedmann, F.G. 1954a. The world of 'la miseria', *Partisan Review* 20, 218-31.
- . 1954b. The peasant: a symposium concerning the peasant way and view of life (mimeographed). Italian translation in *Comunità* 1956.
- Fukuyama, F. 1995. *Trust: the social virtues and the creation of prosperity*, New York: the Free Press.
- Gaggio, D. 2007. Come ripensare il ruolo della cultura nella storia economica?, *Contemporanea* 10/4, 709-14.
- Giannini, M., and A. Salomone 1992. Il familismo tra amoralità e sviluppo meridionale, in F.P. Cerese (ed.), *Dopo il familismo cosa? Tesi a confronto sulla questione meridionale negli anni '90*, Milano: Franco Angeli, 63-9.
- Gramsci, A. 1952. *La Questione Meridionale*, Roma: La Rinascita.
- Graziani, A., and E. Pugliese (eds.), 1979. *Investimenti e disoccupazione nel Mezzogiorno*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Graziano, L. 1974. Clientelismo e sviluppo politico: il caso del Mezzogiorno, in L. Graziano (ed.), *Clientelismo e sviluppo politico*, Milano: Angeli, 333-62.
- . (ed.) 1974. *Clientelismo e sviluppo politico*, Milano: Angeli.
- Gribaudo, G. 1993., Familismo e famiglia a Napoli e nel Mezzogiorno, *Meridiana* 17, 9-42.
- Hanifan, L. 1916. The rural school community centre, *Annals of the American Academy of Political Science* 67, 130-8.
- Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 25, Autumn 1999, p. 16.
- Kertzer, D.I. 2007. Banfield, i suoi critici e la cultura, *Contemporanea* 10/4, 701-9.
- Levi, C. 1990 [1945]. *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, con saggi introduttivi di Italo Calvino e Jean Paul Sartre, Torino: Einaudi.
- Lopreato, J. 1961. Social Classes in an Italian farm village, *Rural Sociology*, 26/3, 266-81.
- Marselli, G. A. 1963. American sociologists and Italian peasant society: with Reference to the Book of Banfield, *Sociologia Ruralis* 3, 319-38 [Italian versions: Marselli G.A. 1963. Sociologi nordamericani e società contadina italiana: a proposito del libro di Banfield. *Quaderni di Sociologia Rurale*, 2/1, 109-30; and Marselli, G.A. 1976. Sociologi nordamericani e società contadina italiana, in E.C. Banfield (ed.), *Le basi morali di una società arretrata*, Bologna: Il Mulino: 215-227].
- Mazzarone, R. 1978. Studiosi americani in Basilicata negli anni cinquanta, *Basilicata* 22/1-3, 45-8.
- Mingione, E., and M. Magatti 1997. Strategie familiari e sviluppo: una comparazione Nord-Sud, in B. Meloni (ed.), *Famiglia meridionale senza familismo*, Catanzaro: Meridiana Libri, 137-58.
- Moss, L.W., and W.H. Thomson 1959. The south Italian family: literature and observation, *Human Organization*, 18/1, 25-41.
- Moss, L., and S.C. Capannari 1960. Patterns of kinship, comparaggio and community in a southern Italian village, *Anthropological Quarterly* 33, 24-32.
- Muraskin, W. 1974. The moral basis of a backward sociologist: Edward Banfield, the Italians, and the Italian-Americans, *American Journal of Sociology* 79/6, 1484-96.
- Piselli, F. 1981. *Parentela ed emigrazione*, Einaudi: Torino.
- Pizzorno, A. 1966. Amoral familism and historical marginality, *International Review of Community Development* 15, 55-56. [Re-edited version 1971 in M. Dogan and R. Rose eds., *European*

- Politics: a reader*, Boston: Little Brown Italian version 1976: Familismo amorale e marginalità storica ovvero perchè non c'è nulla da fare a Montegrano, in E.C. Banfield (ed)., *Le basi morali di una società arretrata*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 237-252].
- Putnam, R.D., R. Leonardi and R.Y. Nanetti 1993. *Making democracy work*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Reyneri, E. 1979. *La catena migratoria*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Rossi-Doria, M. 1948. *Riforma agraria e azione meridionalista*, Bologna: Edizioni Agricole.
- . 1958. *Dieci anni di politica agraria nel Mezzogiorno*, Roma-Bari: Editori La Terza.
- . 1967. Il mezzogiorno agricolo e il suo avvenire 'l'osso e la polpa', *Nord e sud nella società e nell'economia italiana di oggi: Atti del Convegno Promosso dalla Fondazione Einaudi*, Turin, 30 March–8 April 1967, pp. 286-99.
- Salvadori, M. L. 1977. *Il mito del buongoverno: la questione meridionale da Cavour a Gramsci*, Torino: Einaudi.
- Santoro, M. 2007. Dall'ethos all'habitus ovvero perchè a Montegrano c'è sempre qualcosa da fare, *Contemporanea* 10/4, 695-701.
- Schneider, J., and P. Schneider 1976. *Culture and political economy in western Sicily*, New York: Academic Press.
- Silverman, S. 1968. Agricultural organisation, social structure and values in Italy: amoral familism reconsidered, *American Anthropologist* 70/1, 1-20 [Italian version 1976: Organizzazione agricola, struttura sociale e valori in Italia, in E.C. Banfield (ed)., *Le basi morali di una società arretrata*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 253-271].
- Smith, A. 1776 [1937]. *The wealth of nations*, New York: Cannan edn.
- Tarrow, S. 1972. *Partito comunista e contadini nel mezzogiorno*, Torino: Einaudi.
- . 1979. *Tra centro e periferia*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Thomson, I.T. 2005. The theory that won't die: from mass society to the decline of Social Capital, *Sociological Forum*, 20/3, 421-48.
- Verga, G. 1881. *I malavoglia*. Electronic edition: <http://www.imalavoglia.it/>.
- Viazzo, P.P. 2007. Revocare l'ostracismo? L'antropologia di fronte a un classico ripudiato, *Contemporanea* 10/4, 714-19.
- Villari, R. 1961. *Il sud nella storia d'Italia*, Laterza: Bari.
- Vöchting, F. 1955. *La questione meridionale*, Napoli: Iem.
- Wichers, A. J. 1964. Amoral familism reconsidered, *Sociologia Ruralis*, 4/2, 168-81.

© JASO 2009