6.1 Public Discourse and Mediterraneanness in Europe

Today, there is no such thing as a single culturally dominant West but many Wests and “Western souths”. There is an Atlantic Europe and a Mediterranean Europe, the latter bordering on the world of Islam, in its Arabic, Persian, Kurdish, and Turkish variants (Cassano & Zolo, 2007). Proximity violence may be defined primarily as a cultural problem, structured around ways of constructing the role of women and gender relationships within a given social context (Monckton-Smith, 2012).

The pathways of a “dominant” and an “underground” culture intersect. The former is of a late-modern type, widely acknowledged; the other, equally present and bearing with it, neo-patriarchal implications. The former officially rejects gender-based violence in all its forms; the other rejects it but, at the same time, justifies it. On the one hand, we endorsed paradigm of the free circulation of female erotic capital; on the other, the reaffirmation of oppressive family ties (Bimbi, 2015). Their frames of presentation and legitimation concern the same sphere of culturally extended influence existing between Europe and the Mediterranean countries. Their interactive game of mirrors, Atlantic culture postmodern (Sassen, 1999) – and Mediterranean culture – still strongly influenced by premodern drifts (Giordano, 2005) – have produced broad gaps of discontinuity between public discourse and discourse related to private or community customs. In the Mediterranean area the “honour-shame” paradigm (Bimbi, 2015; Giordano, 2005; Peristiany, 1965), aimed at the control of women who “belong” to a man as partner, bride, fiancée, and even as ex-partner, is still a prevalent feature of individual research projects, supported by the long sequence of femicides which occur daily in the area. Honour-related crimes as an extreme form of gender-based violence following a woman’s separation from or abandonment of a man inform the idea that recognition of the male continues to pass through affirmation of his dominion over women.
The hierarchy of masculinities is a pattern of hegemony, not a pattern of simple nomination based on force. Cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and the marginalization or delegitimation of alternatives are widely documented features of socially dominant masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Despite female emancipation, the body of a woman continues to be an instrument used to assert male dominion which, the more it is scaled down in the public sphere, the more it assumes attitudes of vehemence within the intimate and private spheres. “This body of work erected a sharp divide between the culture of northern and southern Europe by separating ‘moderns’ from those were deemed ‘non-yet-moderns’” (Greverus, Romhild, & Welz, 2001: 3). This process outsources personal identity, meaning that one sees oneself primarily through the eyes of the other (Bartholini, 2013) while also being acknowledged by the other (Honneth, 1995). The process of the outsourcing of personal identity is not new to sociological analysis and can be used to throw light on the relationship between gender violence and the exteriority/fragility of self-representations in the world of “Mediterranean” men who commit feminicides and perpetrate family violence.

From this angle, proximity violence may be defined as the effect of a dyscrasia between cultural models that have not been sufficiently harmonized and which act as a barrier to the model of “converging love, (which) is in a certain sense the opposite of projective identification” (Giddens, 1992: 72). Proximity violence has become an “in-between phenomenon”, the understanding of which permits us to intercept the inconsistencies arising between female emancipation at the public level and the cultural legacies of the Mediterranean. These legacies are fostered also by the presence of retrograde migrant cultures which are also capable of exercising indirect influence over indigenous cultural representations. The latter, while siding with modernity, find it difficult to abandon the legacies of the past, and end up by fomenting conflict between the various strands of public discourse.

The intersection between discontinuous cultural paradigms on the diachronic plane and parallel ones on the synchronic plane highlights the need to:

(a) Tackle, by means of reflective openness, divergent cultural paradigms, but also attempts made on several fronts to bring the hands of the historical-social clock back to an archaic and premodern dimension of community life.

(b) Perceive the repeated attempts made to reject pluralistic and post-materialistic values by imposing – even in a skulking manner – neo-patriarchal values boosted by drifts of a Mediterranean culture that become radical and fundamentalist in their opposition to processes of Western modernization.

Mediterranean culture even if in the minority assumes more aggressive positions and, therefore, is capable of suggesting and creating in the intimate sphere conditions incongruent with the conquests females have made in the public sphere. All this in favour of a subjective well-being of a male variety, though obtained in captivity, brings men in the spotlight of that infinitely small audience – small but absolutely necessary – where the Other than self, in the role of the closest to him – the partner – is essential.
In this chapter, we shall try to untie some of the knots of the relationship existing between proximity violence, “adaptive preferences”, and “corrosive disadvantages” within the private sphere, which are totally at odds with social conquest and are, on the contrary, the outcome of “social constructs” (Berger & Luckmann, 2000) haphazardly internalized and rooted in their universe of meaning.

6.2 A Late Unfinished Modernity Amid Postmodernist Thrusts and Mediterranean Heritage

In the contemporary West, some of the objectives prompting transition towards a political, economic, and cultural post-modernization of society seem to have been achieved (Balandier, 1994; Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1998; Giddens, 1992; Inglehart, 2018); among these, the emancipation of women and their inclusion in full in the public sphere of the professions. The so-called phenomenon of “feminization of the workforce” dates back to the 1950s, but it is only in recent years that gender segregation has given way to effective participation by women at all levels. Their visibility on the labour market represents a significant degree of discontinuity due to the effects produced not only with respect to the past, but in the corporate balances and governance structures that have arisen (Reyneri, 2011; Saraceno & Keck 2011). The entry of women into the world of the liberal professions, into employment, trade, and the services has also required a review of welfare policies and conciliation plans regarding the family system. It has also led to a deeper analysis of the balances upon which the dynamics of gender relations and identities are based, precisely by virtue of the redefinition of the no-longer hegemonic, exclusive functions of men in public life, and the renegotiation of the respective roles of a couple within a relationship.

If, on the one hand, female emancipation has constituted an authentic revolution – as well as an element of breach with the past – within the family context, we find, on the contrary, strong regressive tensions, aimed at re-establishing a “restorative balance” which in the intimate sphere, restores to the male partner those signs of power which have disappeared along with the loss of his role as male breadwinner (Bartholini, 2014). These attempts, supported by traditional practices and codes of inspired by religion, find their extreme expression in proximity violence. It deconstructs the dynamics upon which relationships of intimacy are based, which, by definition “is above all a question of emotional communication with oneself and with others in a context of equality” (Giddens, 2000: 142) by imposing asymmetry and subordination. Although gender violence (or proximity violence as it would be more appropriate to call it) has been considered so far an integral part of definitions of conflict and power, it is, nonetheless, from a culturalist perspective, a category capable of explaining interpersonal dynamics at both micro (Collins, 2008; Wright & Decker, 1997) and macro-sociological level (Balibar, 2001; Thapar-Björkert, 2007), precisely because in it old legacies and new forms of female and male capacity converge to hinder the possibility of establishing “converging relationships” (Giddens, 2000).
The reappearance and, under certain conditions, the imposition of neo-patriarchal
and neo-macho revanches within intimate relationships (Bartholini, 2015, 2019;
Walter, 2010) leads us to see how, in actual fact, “we have not gone beyond moder-
nity; on the contrary, we are in the midst of a phase of radicalisation of modernity”
(Giddens, 2000: 57), and note that Modernity is still an “unfinished project”
(Habermas, 1985) where emancipation has not taken place wholly, but in discon-
tinuous watertight compartments. Although our nation is founded on the equality of
all citizens, gender equality frequently turns the division of tasks within a couple’s
relationship into an increase in the number of tasks assigned to women as a result of
her equal rights and duties which, in reality, spell double work for her both at home
and in the workplace, poorly backed by still inadequate practices of conciliation.

In addition, her emancipation and the flexibility of her work in the public sphere
finds its counterpart in the disembedding of her interpersonal relationships. If
women and men are engaged, on the one hand, in catering for the challenges of an
increasingly flexible and whippy labour market on the other, they are exposed to a
similar kind of elasticity in their intimate relationships which clashes, however, with
other representations of the stability and continuity that relationships involving
couples present in their imaginations. If the procedural elements of public life may
be contained by rationality, the emotional inclinations on which personal balance is
based are far less manageable. This dyscrasia causes tensions that are sometimes
irreducible within the relationships of couples where legacies and representations of
the past are still vivid (Hanmer & Itzin, 2001) and capable of generating violence in
an attempt to keep the relationship standing. It is for this precise reason that proxim-
ity violence and emotional oppression (itself the product of relational oppression)
act as authentic strategies for the maintenance of relationships that weaken and/or
overwhelm the capacity for autonomy and dignity widely applied by women in the
public sphere.

The full participation of women in the world of work seems not to correspond,
therefore, to acknowledgement of their role and dignity within the intimate sphere,
but rather to greater exploitation of their emotional-affective resources by employ-
ment of a code of symbolic representation that amalgamates the lexicon of feminin-
ity with a more covert misogynous and neo-patriarchal one, however disguised and
“gilded” by values like fidelity, reciprocity, and free donation. All this – and this is
our thesis – has generated veritable “corrosive disadvantages” to the detriment of all
those women hovering in the balance, in their “amphibiotic habitus” on the brink
between emancipation and emotional subordination to traditional representations.

6.3 Public Emancipation and Private Oppression

If women, despite the difficulties that the various sectors underline, are actively
engaged in their working lives to confirm roles and functions, skills and compen-
tences denied them in the past or undervalued by a hegemonic male society; in their
private life they are often held hostage by emotions associated with archaic representations of their roles as women and partners, mothers and lovers, which turn into “corrosive disadvantages” (Nussbaum, 2016). While the working world assumes gender neutrality as a relational model and skill as the main key to acquisition of position within the labour market, the private sphere is exposed to influences of a different nature, which may be defined in the reference area of the gender violence and emotional dynamics which Collins (2008) called “forward panic”, Nussbaum hot emotion (2004) which, at the same time was rhythmic and strongly entraining emotion (Collins, 2008). The possible re-establishment of mechanisms of domination by action at psychological level takes place by bringing into play emotional energies that underlie the interpersonal dimension of Eros and affectivity, which influence the subjectivity of the victims and their mental makeup, when categorizing, perceiving, and assessing (Gracia & Lila, 2015).

The dynamic between dyads we consider oppositional, broadly speaking – public sphere–private sphere, autonomy-dependence, symmetry-subalternity, subjectivity-social organization – suggests that “we are entering an era where the consequences of modernity are (actually) made increasingly radical” (Giddens, 1992: 57); radical, therefore, double, albeit ambiguous, as dangers and risks increase precisely within that part of society which seemed to have redeemed itself from a pre-modern destiny, according to which gender was the fundamental principle of the regulation of social life, behaviour and power relationships, to the detriment of women who show acceptance and tolerance attitudes still quite widespread.

Violence within couple relationships releases a paradoxically coagulating and stabilizing kind of action, liturgically ritualized over time and ranging from preparation (threats, silences, blackmail, dis-confirmation. and disappointed responses) to the explosion of violence itself. If gender violence, in its pre-modern perspective stemmed from the fundamental and universal inequality existing between men and women, and from the subordination of the latter to the former (Bimbi, 2003), in its contemporary form, it surfaces explicitly, above all, as repeated attempts to regain positions of dominion men have lost and as the emotional blackmail to which women condemn themselves due to premodern (Kimmel, 2000) and modern (Pinker, 2011) cultural representations still present in Mediterranean culture. If proximity violence, in its classical conception, was used as a tool aimed at subordinating women to the will of males, today it has a social force charged with meaning (Corradi, 2009), endowed with the ability to structure reality by rebalancing in private the loss of status and identity men have experienced in the public sphere as a result of female emancipation (Bartholini, 2015).

Proximity violence therefore:

1. is partly the product of the merging of incompatible cultural paradigms within the same territorial area;
2. is, in part, the product of attempts made to reaffirm that “male domination” (Bourdieu, 1998) undermined by the professional emancipation of women paralleled by their personal independence;
3. is a constitutive – therefore, institutional – aspect of a relationship and, as such, increasingly involves the partner or former partner and almost never a woman who is an outsider, therefore external to the sphere of relational acknowledgement.

A few years ago, Giddens wrote that “today’s separating and divorcing society has become the consequence rather than the cause of the birth of converging love […]. Converging love is active, contingent love and does not rhyme, therefore, with ‘forever’ and ‘one and only’” (Giddens, 1992: 72). Today, we are witnessing the emergence of asymmetrical and oppressive relationships, where the unequal divergence between roles is the product of a type of oppression that Mediterranean-Western women help create for themselves.

6.4 Women’s Amphibiatic Habitat

It is not simply an attempt to impose outdated models, but rather the configuration of attitudes and behaviour that tend towards the “spontaneous” acceptance of dynamics of subordination by women and of psychological domination as the only tool used by men against their partner to recover their former status. This creates veritable communicative aphasia within the couple where the woman is silent, obfuscates her needs, limits her expectations, though fully aware of her ability to assert her reasons and needs. So, it is not a question of not “feeling able”, but of women voluntarily accepting an underlying subordinate habitus in their private lives, which facilitates the exercise of violence by men. In these cases, the goal is to have the partners converge on common denominator which maintains the relationship and keeps it in time (Bartholini, 2015). If we add the increasingly mythical aspiration by women to “completeness of identity” by means of a personal type of realization combining professional skills in the workplace and personal skills within the private marital sphere, which becomes a conditio sine qua non of effective social recognition of women. The common opinion today is that a woman who renounces or places a stable partnership in the background is socially only a woman by halves. Economic and professional autonomy becomes a sword of Damocles forcing women to demonstrate their ability to combine the skills of partner and mother with those of female breadwinner. The desire to comply with the emancipatory offices of the public and those of the traditional-conservative private spheres is transformed into a state of veritable emotional self-impoundment which obliges women to tumble cruelly; the more they waver on the wire like the tight-rope-walkers in a Chagall painting, the more likely they are to fall.

Furthermore, changes in mass values and their progressive liquefaction go hand in hand with attempts made to hybridize value and belief systems – those of the Mediterranean and of the Atlantic – due to migration. This favours a reshuffling of inter-gender habituses and attitudes which often translate into the adoption of behaviour and attitudes aimed at facilitating the compliance of women and, in some
cases, acceptance of their partners’ attempts to reaffirm their male domination within the relationship. The product of this voluntary attuning to self-subordination to male revanches provides women with that emotional gratification which derives from feeling having been capable of maintaining the relationship even at the cost of “places between parentheses” those very abilities asserted in the public sphere (Bartholini, 2016).

As far as women are concerned, it is a question of a truly amphibiatic habitus (from amphibolía, “uncertainty”, and lógos, “discourse”), double in nature and uncertain in its narration. According to Bourdieu habitus, as a “structured structure” “has a bond of dependence with the social world” (Bourdieu, 1979: 191) which cannot be modified and, as a “structuring structure”, “organises practices and perceptions of practices” (ibidem). At the same time, however, it refers to “a system of patterns of perception, thought and action acquired permanently and generated by objective conditions, which tend to persist even after these conditions have changed” (ibidem). In this sense, the female habitus, precisely because it is determined, in part, by social structures and, in part, by conflicting representations, creates communicational dystonies that re-accommodate themselves only in acceptance of the incongruent behaviour that follows and limits the primary ability to feel. The transition from the paradigm of addiction, typical of patriarchal cultures, to the paradigm of emancipation, brings in its wake the detritus of an unfinished revolution which transforms the goals achieved by women in the public sphere into a more pernicious identity unease in the private sphere compared to disappointed expectations regarding a female role congruent with the patriarchal representations still present in late-modern men and women.

What, in the public sector constitutes an indisputable reality within, that is, acquired equality of tasks and functions between genders, in the private sphere, eclipses the persistence of that asymmetry of roles justified by archaic cultural representations, often handed down unconsciously and which impacts upon the emotional sphere of women. It is often a sort of emotional self-requisition – which limits their ability to feel and will something women practice for themselves and by themselves – where internalizations of premodern representations of “how” a woman should be destined mother and companion prevail, however. In other extreme forms, these same women subject themselves to a sort of “modern sacrifice” involving intimate violence where neo-patriarchal reverberations of male domination, practices of empathic-oppressive delegitimization of ability and identity converge.

6.5 Corrosive Capacities and Disadvantages

According to a recent Declaration on Femicide in the United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (2013) “the form of the murder of a female as a result of domestic violence by an intimate partner (husbands and lovers, ex-husbands and ex-lovers)”, also because of that symbolic violence widespread in
daily representations which frequently prevents women from considering themselves bearers of rights and people of equal dignity and value.

In this sense, it is opportune to emphasize once again how gender violence is proximity violence. The possibility of its implementation is subject to the identity of the perpetrator who is hardly ever a stranger to the victim. However, if he is a proximus, companion, boyfriend or husband, the possibility of a hidden reason, therefore, a possible narration of the facts extraneous to pure and simple victim–perpetrator dichotomy, winds its way into public perception, transforming the victim into a quasi-victim and the perpetrator in a subject put to the test by the conflicting and contradictory effects of the partner’s double habitus. Furthermore, while indicating a non-random assault, which is actually repeated and continued at various levels, the violence is legitimized within an oppressive context determined by the degree of intimacy of the proximate subjects co-participating as partners in the relationship.

What justifies gender violence is its proximal character, a term that derives from proximus and refers to that absolute superlative indicating the person closest to another. This explains the type of relationship in which subjects are mutually linked by a closeness deriving from “sharing an emotional experience” (Collins, 2008). The proximus is the other participant in an emotional experience which defines his identity in relation to the other and, as a result, impacts on the identification process of the other.

The killing of a woman, as a tragic outcome of a spiral of violence perpetrated by subjects close to the victim like her husband or ex-partner, clearly illustrates how some of the skills women reveal in the public sphere, like empathy and a willingness to donate are reshaped in their intimate lives, becoming veritable “corrosive disadvantages” of an emotional-affective type. The victim trusts and activates receptive mechanisms before and endurance afterwards, by virtue of the fact that the perpetrator is (or has been) almost always her partner. And this clearly makes perception of how violence, even before it erupts, is present at symbolic level of dominant, often shared representations. As Franca Bimbi writes “in late modernity and in the regime of equal opportunities it is necessary to keep in mind that symbolic violence lies between what we permit without realizing it and what we intimately dissent from without being able to express it” (Bimbi & Basaglia, 2010: 33).

Which leaves us to hypothesize how particular emotional attitudes can favour the acceptance of gender violence. These are attitudes that do not belong to the rational domain of reflective activity, but to a more visceral dimension determined by ancestral representations that many women struggle hard, but often fail to neutralize. They belong to a veritable symbolic device capable of shaping emotions by adapting them to an invisible and unconscious image of what it means to be a woman, but evident in its effects; a perceptual system located between premodern representations and late-modernizing pressures that makes practices which the victims would consider unacceptable in public life, plausible.

This induces us to reflect on the emotional sphere of women, more empathetic and morally constrained by male instrumental rationality, because this sphere is strongly conditioned by a system of reputation and social recognition which unites
public life and the stability of private life, without reckoning with the decline of the male in the public sphere and the sometimes violent attempts of recovery of status they make in the private sphere to the detriment of their partners or ex-partners.

These are emotions of which women are bearers and which support abilities that can be neutralized or manipulated, precisely because they belong to the experience of all of us. These abilities make life truly human, but, at the same time, they are subject to everything else the other, as an acknowledged subject, plans and implements to encourage their development or, otherwise, to hinder their growth.

If on the one hand, the concept of ability is intended in its universalistic sense, on the other hand it is subordinated to specific situations that can facilitate or prevent its development.

Therefore, there are capacities, skills “that can prove useful when facilitating others” (Nussbaum, 2012: 138) as well as acting as disadvantages that may be added to others (corrosive disadvantages precisely). From this point of view, skills are a perishable and impractical asset when it comes to oppressive contexts because of being “irreducibly plural” disadvantages; all the more so, if we consider the emotional heritage available to us as one of the abilities indicated by Martha Nussbaum and, therefore, “as the intrinsic possibility for each person, to be able to establish links with people and things beyond and outside of ourselves; to be able to love those who love and care for us, to suffer because of their absence; in general, loving, suffering, feeling lacking, gratitude and justified anger” (ibidem) together with life, physical health, physical integrity, the senses, imagination and thought, practical reason, union with people and with living creatures, the ability to play and, at the same time, to take control of their environment (Nussbaum, 2004, 2007, 2010). It is something that is legitimized by a production of meaning that renders specific patterns of behaviour and attitudes recognizable within situations or “provinces of meaning” (Schütz, 1932). Such are the pre-eminent worlds of real objects and events in which we can take hold with our actions and, therefore, in the “mutual play of structures of relevance” (ibidem), through which an object or event becomes a theme or topic of our thinking. It is precisely the “provinces of meaning” which deem “adaptive preferences” sui generis because, unlike those posted by Marta Nussbaum, they do not promote “spheres of freedom” within the pluralism of different conceptions of life, but justify the sui generis workings of an oppressive–violent relationship.

Proximity violence highlights the corrosive disadvantages that arise when archaic and modern representations of the habitat impersonate overlap. It is intended as a constitutive, and therefore institutional, condition of the ego-alter relationship, capable of developing procedures aimed at recognizing the identity of each actor involved in the rituals that make a deviant situation acceptable. In an attempt to harmonize western and late-modern values with the cultural heritage of the Mediterranean that still make their influence felt in women’s self-evaluation in relation to their own actability/ability to combine values deriving from Mediterranean models and post-modern values of self-autonomy, gender violence transforms abilities and skills into corrosive disadvantages, that is, into series of constitutive limitations that reduce human existence to perennial emotional failure.
The latter therefore exercises institutional power within intimate relationships, which thus become self-sufficient (1), autoimmune (2), and exclude conflict (3) in its manifold manifestations.

1. When violence – in its different forms and modes – becomes the very cement of the relationship, it assumes the characteristics of self-sufficiency. Violence, that is “sufficient” to keep the relationship up and running; within the behavioural ritual of the partners involved, it performs a constituent function allowing the relationship to continue. This is true both in the case of a couple’s relationship and in relationships between teenagers or young people (where group-violence dynamics arise).

2. As an autoimmune phenomenon, a relationship based on violence excludes any other form of resistance to violence from within, as the latter becomes indispensable to maintaining the relationship. Thus, violence becomes the foundation upon which the domination of one over the other is based, when any other form of mutual and reciprocal attachment is lacking.

3. It replaces the conflict which – in its “domesticated” form of antagonism, competition, rivalry, and dialectic – provides for the “intentional symmetry” of the subjects involved in action aimed at obtaining a result or winning the stakes while, at the same time, it provides for “an asymmetry of objectives, expectations and resources used to find balance between the parties or a repositioning of the parts” (Bartholini, 2013: 18).

Insofar as it is self-sufficient, autoimmune and conflict-excluding, in the case of proximity violence unfavourable conditions of various kinds intersect and add and may be equated with the corrosive disadvantages identified by Nussbaum, which are, in our interpretation:

(a) *durée*, that is, a temporal continuity of the experiences regarding the interpersonal sphere of several subjects poised between pre-modern values and post-modern emancipatory drives;

(b) a state of *relational oppression* which may be considered as a possible identity-acknowledgement strategy constituting the context in which violence is reiterated and ritualized;

(c) *asymmetry of power* between a persecutor and the person persecuted which might be better defined as a form emotional blackmail based on the acknowledgement/contempt of identity proportional to how much a woman is capable of adapting to the symbolic violence of legacies of dominion in private life.¹

When describing her approach to skills and ability, Martha Nussbaum focuses, above all, on concrete forms of safeguard that may translate into options of escape from situations of violence legitimized by intimate relationships and hampered by the corrosive disadvantages that may prevent this exit. If when an Indian woman

¹For a broader and more detailed reflection on the categories of violence indicated above, see Bartholini (2019).
tells her story she describes how “during marriage Vasanti was cut off from any relationship except that strongly unequal one with her violent husband” (Nussbaum, 2012: 17), she also notes that “a woman who owns land it is less likely to be beaten because that might end the marriage and lead to the loss of a valuable asset. Other forms of safeguard against an abusive husband are work, education, movable property and savings” (ibidem).

In the case of Western women, during our appraisal of their experiences and while reflecting on the lives of Western-Mediterranean women, victims of violence, we have become increasingly aware of how the forms of safeguard that need to be activated against that very emotional abduction they themselves helped produce in a condition of relational oppression, are also and above all of an emotional-cultural type. In other words, this situation is the outcome of the clash between late-modern and neo-patriarchal cultures of which the women feel the impact and which forces them to adopt an amphibiotic habitus making them, the one hand, professional workers located adequately in the public sphere, partners emotionally subjected to male diktats in the private one.

Not only thanks to research carried out previously (Bartholini, 2013 and subsequent publications), but during participant observation conducted in recent years as a friend, colleague and fellow-researcher of many women, it was possible to note that the more women achieved their goals in the professional field, the more they allowed themselves to be ensnared by feelings of inferiority and inadequacy with respect to the habitus adopted in their partnerships. This conditioned their choices and behaviour up to the point of accepting their partners’ prevaricating diktats the effects of which were clearly reflected in the emotional sphere.

6.6 Conclusions

Therefore, if one views the violence suffered in the intimate dimension of proximity relationships as a legacy inherited from patriarchal cultures now devoid of raison d’être, one fails to enter in depth into one of the interpretative keys of the present “state of health” of intimate relationships, of public–private chiasma underlying it in a cultural area where Atlantic and Mediterranean paradigms intersect. Today, it is impossible to take the end of male hegemony for granted and consider the phenomenologies of men’s violence against women in “our” world as pre-modern. Despite the increase in cases where women, besides holding important positions in the professional sphere, are themselves a family’s sole female breadwinner, episodes and behaviour marked, indirectly, by gender violence are not infrequent. In these cases, violence is conveyed through discourse and images which, by radicalizing themselves, denote models of male domination (Bourdieu, 1998, 2015) within relations between men and women which converge only prima facie while, in reality, they are strongly asymmetrical with the female “giving” and voluntarily offering herself up to a dramaturgy of submission, in an attempt to gratify her partner and sanctioning her distance from certain premodern representations that still weigh on her imagina-
Such images, although rationally circumscribed by awareness of being and feeling master of themselves, still weigh on the perceptual dimension with which many women, to use an expression of Nussbaum’s, have “the strange feeling of having been robbed of a history, of no longer being people with a family history” (Nussbaum, 2016: 39–40), despite the fact that the cost of continuing a relational story may foresee the possibility of their own death at the hand of their partners, like the murder of “Sara”, a student burnt alive by her ex-boyfriend. In rereading the statements of friends and family, Sara showed infinite compassion and rare pity for that young man from whom she had separated, compassion and pity that led her to bear with his threats, ambushes, stalking, and blackmail (Giomi & Magarragia, 2017).

Lorena was a very young student who in a few months would have graduated in medicine with a thesis in paediatrics. She was strangled by her boyfriend, a nurse: “I killed her because she gave me Coronavirus,” he said to the investigators. Lorena had agreed to move to Furci, a small town in the provinces, for the love of her boyfriend who worked in that area after having got to know him in the corridors of the General Teaching Hospital in Messina. She worked in the wards where Covid19 patients were being treated. “Lorena was a passionate student. Her last message posted on Facebook three days earlier, spoke of the doctors who had been killed by Coronavirus. There she had launched an appeal: Now, more than ever before you need to show responsibility and love for life. Respect yourself, your families and your country” (La Repubblica 31/3/2020: 3).

Sara, a “brilliant” girl as her mother defined her (La Repubblica, 7/6/2015: 2), as well as by those who knew her, could sever the bond by expurgating from her inner life every emotion destined to translate into one “corrosive disadvantage”, separating memories from the present? And could Lorraine accept being threatened and treated like a farmer instead of turning away from a man who accused her of “infecting” her like a witch of the Middle Ages or an accabadora who brings death?

Could Sara, defined as a “brilliant” girl by her mother (La Repubblica, 7/6/2015: 2) and by those who knew her, have severed the bond by purging from her intimate life every kind of emotion destined to translate into a “corrosive disadvantage” separating memories from the present? And could Lorraine have accepted being threatened and treated as an infector instead of turning away from the man who accused her of “infecting” him like some Mediaeval witch or Accabadora bringing death?

They both might have. However, neither Sarah nor Lorraine could not sever the links with their perpetrators in time, nor could all those victims of violence for whom the “intelligence of emotions” – oriented towards acknowledgement of others – became the warp of their own deadly trap.

In the same way, we tend to underestimate the deviant though substantial contribution violence itself, acting not only at concrete level, but also on an indirect and symbolic plane, to make sure the relationship “holds” (Bartholini, 2013).

From this angle, the Mediterranean area represents an intrinsic and peculiar field of analysis, “a geopolitical and geocultural space standing at a crucial crossroads, that of being either an area of perpetual disorder and destabilization or of transforming itself into a laboratory where new social relations may be experimented” (Pepicelli, 2007: 330). In it, the reality that arises in relation to the way men and
women represent themselves and others within the context of their actions (Berger & Luckmann, 2000) and within their “provinces of meaning” (Schütz, 1932), is continually at the mercy of all those pre-modern legacies in conflict with the emancipatory process of women in the public sphere and which, acting upon their emotional sphere, makes them victims – even if only potential – of male violence, disarticulating their capability for autonomy and gender dignity.

What remain open are issues and problems referring to the social construction of violence, its incorporation into the “habitus” of men and women, the persistence of mechanisms of male domination expressed in the subjectivity of the victims or in their mental structures. These take the form, precisely, of categories of perception and emotional evaluation referring, nonetheless, to women from the European-Mediterranean area, their emancipation in the public and professional sphere. These are two gender regimes which attack “dignity as a reflective awareness of one’s own uniqueness and moral autonomy […] and the “honourable” space where European women are located” (Bimbi & Basaglia, 2010: 38–41).

Acknowledgement of the need to promote gender equality in the struggle against violence does not only mean fighting the multiple forms of disadvantage that half of the people find themselves suffering, in various forms and more or less marked ways, in different areas of the world and in ours. It means projecting oneself towards a model of society that imagines itself different precisely because of those gender skills which should not be translated into corrosive disadvantages of an emotional type for women who are bearers of an amphibiotic habitus. Such women, teetering between the western paradigm of emancipation and that of the Mediterranean tradition, are taught to become simultaneous generators of skills within the public sphere and bearers of those emotional disadvantages within the intimate-private one destined to demolish and destroy their selves in an effort to combine the intricate aspects of antithetical representations of womanhood in a Mediterranean and European area. Referring again to the “tightrope walker” painted by Chagall, we conclude by recalling that even in those paintings, things are not as they should be: the cocks are gigantic and the women walk upside down. In the emotional amphibiotics that only sleep should legitimize, fantasy overcomes the reality and the idealized memory of the past becomes more important than the present that is experienced with enormous weariness.

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