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Some reflections on the relevance of *mammismo* in the Italian diaspora in Wellington (New Zealand)

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In his 1952 essay «Il mammismo», Corrado Alvaro blamed Italian mothers for being unable to rise above animal instinct and for bringing up immature sons lacking in moral fibre and civic sense (Alvaro 1952, pp. 187, 189). Marina D'Amelia recently contended that Alvaro's essay was part of a reconceptualisation of the maternal figure that took place during the 1950s and the 1960s, when novelists, anthropologists, and psychologists grafted a primitive mother, whose animal instinct protects as well as oppresses and devours the (male) child, onto the spiritual mother of Catholicism (D'Amelia 2005, pp. 21-29). D'Amelia situates the inception of the exclusive mother-son bond in the Risorgimento and traces its development through the two World Wars ~~into the nefarious stereotype of the Italian mother beckoned by Alvaro and seemingly still operative today~~ and its transformation in ~~to~~ the pernicious stereotype of the Italian mother suggested by Alvaro and arguably still in evidence today.

D'Amelia's ~~draws on the correspondence~~ ~~many the letters~~ between prominent upper- and middle-class exiles and soldiers and their strong, publicly engaged mothers. While her findings may not fully apply to soldiers and mothers from other classes, for whom sources are scarce, loss seems to be key to the mothers' overriding concern for sons, ~~a concern that~~ ~~which~~ ~~as other~~ scholars had previously ~~demonstrated using other sources~~ and methodologies ~~documented by different routes~~ (Bravo 1997; Accati 1998; Giorgio 2002). Daughters lost through marriage did not equate ~~to~~ sons lost through exile or death at war.

In the context of migration, it should be noted that it was mainly sons that Italian mothers lost through poverty-driven migration. Alvaro ~~has~~ clearly ~~had~~ sons in mind, when he criticised ~~s~~ society for simultaneously exalting mothers and depriving them of sons sent «sprovveduti e impreparati sulle vie del mondo in cerca di pane, e nei lavori piú duri, o in guerre disperate e temerarie». For men of the «popolo», imbued with a popular culture which ~~had~~s turned the word *madre* into a magic wand to «spremere le lacrime», the mother represents ~~origin~~roots, homeland, religion, and all women (Alvaro, 1952, p. 186).

In light of these reflections, should we expect to find *mammismo* among contemporary Italian diasporic communities? Did post-World War II migrants carry with them a sentimentalized memory of the mother? Did they transmit the Italian cult of the mother to successive generations, aided perhaps by Italian brides who might have already

Commented [a1]: AG: I have altered this clause thus: 'its development through the two World War and its transformation into the pernicious stereotype of the Italian...'. I was not sure about 'to' here (instead of 'into'): 'to' could be seen as being ruled by/linked to 'traces' rather than 'development'. What do you think of my solutions? If you accept it, I am not sure 'its' before 'transformation' is needed.

Commented [a2]: AG: I have replaced 'many letters' with 'correspondence': 'draws on the correspondence between...'. Is this OK with you? 'many letters' sounded a bit strange to my (Italian) ear.

Commented [P3]: Is this what you mean?

Commented [a4]: AG: I have revised the sentence thus: '... overriding concerns for sons, a concern that other scholars had previously demonstrated using other sources and methodologies'. Sorry about not accepting your revision, but replacing 'which' with 'as' makes it sound as if other scholars have identified loss as key to the exclusive mother-daughter bond, which is not the case. Loss is the novelty I find in D'Amelia book (she does not see that, I say it). Linked to this, when I said 'by other routes', I meant that other scholars have theorised the mother's overriding concern for sons not only by using different sources but also different approaches or methodologies, for example sociological investigation (Bravo) or psychological/ anthropological (Accati). The reference to my self is about literature, and thus it refers to sources in a stricter sense. What do you think of my revision?

Commented [a5]: AG: I have deleted the comma here, between Alvaro and the year, as you didn't insert a comma in my first two references in the first paragraph.

been socialised in the role of selfless mothers devoted to the male child? In what follows, I shall offer some provisional answers in relation to the Italian community of Island Bay in Wellington, New Zealand.

My sample comprises 50 interviews conducted in Wellington during March-April 2013. Eight interviewees had arrived in New Zealand between the early 1950s and early 1960s, eleven had one or both parents who had migrated between the late 1940s and mid-1960s. My questionnaire included no questions on the mother, yet useful data emerged from questions on what things they associated with Italy, on gender roles, and whether they believed to have raised their children or to have been raised according to an Italian style of parenting. Irrespective of age, migration generation, and area of origin, most interviewees named «family» as one of the things they associated with Italy. First-generation interviewees placed themselves in a generational continuum that went backwards to the family left in Italy and forwards to the family they had generated in New Zealand. One male interviewee in his late seventies stated: «l'Italia sono i genitori, la Nuova Zelanda i figli». None of them attributed more value and authority to one parent over the other. Second and third generations expressed awe for their grandmothers, who embodied Italian traditions connected with food and other life rituals. First-generation women were admired for braving an unknown world so remote from home, for enduring harsh living conditions, and for their contribution through work and care of family and home. Many hinted at the constraining potential of the family. Among the younger males, there was an understanding that Italian mothers were pushier yet more helpful than mothers of other ethnicities, but that the boundaries were clear. A 23-year-old talked of his protective 52-year old first-generation mother who was helping his sister bring up her child. He predicted that she would try to help with his children, but «whether I let her is another story».

A corollary of the importance of family is that children have tended not to leave the parental home. This practice seems to have gone through different phases and to have entailed considerable negotiation. Parents of all generations deplored the New Zealand custom of children moving out at 16, but acknowledged that, since their children were exposed to the wider society, change was inevitable. One 73-year-old first-generation woman stated that compromise in other areas was necessary in order to stop children moving out. Only one case of a teenager moving out was reported: in his late forties at the time of the interview, he spoke frankly of his desire-wish-and-need to get out of the protected Italian family, to think for himself, and to distance himself from a community he saw as stuck in a

time warp. He did not mention conflict or refer to his mother as a source of oppression or power. Only one second-generation interviewee in his late fifties referred to conflict, when he observed that the older generations found it «hard [...] to discipline children. They only knew one way, violent, because they had nothing else to go by». In his study of the Italians in Wellington, Paul Elenio makes a similar point about women, for whom «learning to manage a family and a household budget, enforcing discipline and order came largely from instinct and the experiences of their own upbringing rather than the advice and direction provided by older people» (Elenio 2012, pp. 84-85). It is difficult to ascertain whether the silence about conflict was due to a deep-seated taboo (not to speak ill of family) or reflected more balanced mother-son relationships than contemporary ones in Italy. Data on the younger generations indicate that the latter may be the case today.

One interviewee in her seventies mentioned *mammismo* in connection with the potential of the Italian family to oppress, especially sons: «The relationships between mama and son appears much closer in Italy than in New Zealand families... young men of Italian descent in New Zealand have more independence than in Italy». Today living with the parents seems to be a choice. Two third-generation professional siblings in their mid-to-late twenties had a lot to say in favour of living at home. The sister stated: «Our family life is quite Italian. Coming home to your parents' house which my friends think is the worst thing in the world, I like it. I have a friendship with my parents». Once again, no specific parent was singled out. The material comfort and emotional support offered by enlightened, professional parents should not be underestimated when considering the choice of young people to live at home today, in comparison with the personal and economic circumstances and societal status of first-generation migrants in the 1960s and 1970s which would have been the familial context of the teenager who had moved out.

In conclusion, this initial exploration shows that, while the Italian family structure still informs the values and practices of this Italian community, mother-son relationships do not override other family bonds, as an examination of the upbringing of daughters also indicates (Giorgio, forthcoming). This may be the result of combined factors: the need for first-generation women to contribute to the family income (most women in my sample did paid work), which may have stopped them investing their lives solely in children; the ever-increasing exposure of the younger generations to the influence of the dominant culture; and the possibility that this particular diasporic community was not exposed to the consolidation of the maternal stereotype which, if we espouse D'Amelia's thesis, took place in Italy after

Commented [a6]: AG: I have added Elenio here (you have added Alvaro and D'Amelia in my references in the first paragraph).

they migrated. Finally, the importance of the latter factor grows when we consider the community's enormous distance from the homeland, which until recently would have slowed down significantly communication and the transfer of cultural changes from the peninsula to the New Zealand isles.

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