

“Instant status” during the slaughter: Social positioning and power in a Sardinian shepherd family

FREEK JANSSENS

ABSTRACT

This article uses food as a means to critically explore the existing theoretical debate on social change and power structures. Through a detailed ethnographic analysis of two events—the milking of sheep and the slaughtering of a steer in rural Sardinia, Italy—the article introduces the concept of “instant status” to make sense of a particular dynamic of social positioning that is rapid, unexpected and real, but at the same time short-lived and does not lead to a breakdown of the higher level power structures. By introducing this concept, the article aims to contribute to the long-running debate on structure and agency in anthropological theory by offering a way out that acknowledges both.

Introduction: Food as a lens to understanding society

Sometimes we find on our plates things that we feel don’t belong there—it is not yet cooked, already overripe or simply not a food item at all. What we eat in our daily lives and regard as quite ordinary might be exclusive to others, or astonishing, or even a bit scary. Few Englishmen will joyfully tuck into a dish of tripe, while it is a delicacy to many Italians. And within Italy, not everyone would be as enthusiastic about *casu marzu*, or rotten cheese full of larvae, as Sardinians are, who attribute a variety of special qualities to it.

Most Europeans do not think about the water they consume, and waste, on a daily basis, while some people in Europe do, because they may have difficult access to it. And in many parts of the world, getting access to clean water is a daily struggle for survival. Eating enough, and eating too much, are two sides of the same coin—one that calls for our attention, as it is becoming one of the world’s most urgent problems in the near future (see, e.g., Ki-Moon and Zapatero, 2009; Steel, 2009; Stuart, 2009).

Food speaks to our imagination in extreme and contrasting ways. It can occupy these two extremes of being at the same time profoundly ordinary and common as well as highly significant and personal, because it relates simultaneously to the

absolute physical and biological—the bodily needs to eat and drink regularly—and the social and cultural—the complex set of shared values and beliefs that we attribute to the things we take into our bodies. One and the same food item can be ordinary to one and special to another, or even ordinary at one moment and extraordinary in another. And before too long, the food is gone: eaten and digested, or spoiled in the back of our kitchen cabinet, the supermarket shelf, or still in the field because no one wanted to harvest it.

The volatility of food and the complex ways in which humans constantly have to deal with it makes it a unique domain for social and cultural analysis. Through food and the foodways of everyday life, people communicate ideas about themselves, the other and society.

When I did my fieldwork in Sardinia, Italy, I gathered a group of informants around me who would in turn introduce me to other relevant people to whom I would speak. While in this snowball process of being constantly introduced to new people, I was also continually confronted with one Sardinian habit, namely the offering of typical Sardinian sweets like *amaretti*, *sospiri* or *pardulas*. You cannot say “no,” whether you like the sweet or not, and whether you already had one or not. It is through the offering of food that Sardinians construct and claim their own identity versus mainland Italians as being genuinely hospitable (Ayora Diaz, 2000). Never has a Sardinian spoken to me about Sardinian hospitality—I experienced it myself day in and day out through food.

So, food and foodways need not only be studied as ends in themselves. Rather, they have to be understood as conceptual (and practical) tools for a wide spectrum of social and cultural research agendas. Food and foodways are a means in social research, a lens through which to understand the social realities as they are continually constructed and contested. By examining very closely the role of food in specific events in which it seems to play only a marginal part, we obtain an understanding of a variety of social processes quite different from, but surprisingly related to, food and foodways.

In the present paper, I use food as a means to understand the social situation within a Sardinian shepherd family. Through a detailed ethnographic analysis of two events that I experienced very closely during my stay at the Poddas, I start to critically explore the existing theoretical framework on social hierarchies and power structures. Whereas Pierre Bourdieu (1989) argues that people, through their fine taste, gain symbolic capital and consequently rise in social position, others have demonstrated that this theory is ultimately a description of how the status quo never really changes. Theorists like Jacques Rancière (1989, 2004) have consequently argued that those who seem to lack any agency to change the structure in which powers are distributed, do have ways to protest the situation. In reaction to this debate, I introduce my own concept of “instant status” to make sense of a particular dynamic of social positioning which is rapid, unexpected and real, but at the same time is short-lived and does not lead to a breakdown of higher level power structures. By introducing this concept, I aim to contribute to the long-running debate on structure and agency in anthropological theory by offering a way out that

acknowledges both. To understand these processes, I invite the reader to follow me on two specific events that happened one particular day in a remote Sardinian mountain village.

At the beginning of the day: Tradition and modernity at the Podda family

We have two donkeys, Giacomo and the other one. However, there are in fact also two kinds of donkeys: *murriccu* and *molenti*. The *molenti* donkeys have always been used to let the mills work. This was typically something for the women, they went there with the donkeys and started, inside the mill so nobody could hear or see them, to chat and gossip about anything.

Guido is the helper of the Podda family. He lives in his own small house next to that of Mario, who is the head of the Podda family, Mario's wife and their 30-year-old son, Roberto. Guido is pleased to show me around on the farm and introduces me to the different kinds of animals that they have, including these two donkeys. Compared to other shepherds in the region, the Poddas are relatively rich. On the ninety hectares of land that Mario bought forty years ago in the southeastern mountains of Sardinia, they keep about 400 sheep and 100 goats, some twenty cattle, ten pigs, five horses, two donkeys, dogs, geese, chicken and cats. Due to Mario's economic situation, his two other sons and two daughters can afford to live in the city with their children, leaving only the nuclear family on the farm.

Roberto, Mario's only son still living with him in the mountains, will later take over his father's farm. He proudly points out the location where he wants to build his own house. And while he talks about the beauty of the green mountains and the freedom that it gives him, he also thinks about the limitations of life in rural Sardinia. Indeed, Roberto's situation is an example of the few opportunities for youth in southeastern rural Sardinia (Tiragallo, 2001:132). Like other youth in Sardinia, Roberto likes to go out to bars with friends, to the cinema and to shop for new gadgets and the latest fashion, but all that is hard when you live on a remote farm. He is not sure if he really wants to become a shepherd like his father. Growing up in a shepherd family and having had no other education than the herding of sheep makes him feel like he is forced to take over his father's farm, like he is caught in a structure from which he cannot escape.

While there are few opportunities for young men in Sardinia to move beyond the life as a shepherd, there are also very little opportunities to compete for respect and acquire status outside of the shepherd community. Individual shepherds might get personal prestige from their work skill and their ability to assert themselves and claim respect, they also “attempt to get for themselves those material attributes which are associated with the world outside the pastoral milieu, and with the highly esteemed urban life style” (Schweizer, 1988:77).¹

These tokens of modernity function as a display window for various kinds of capital, both economic and symbolic (Appadurai, 1996; Bourdieu, 1989). The longing for all that is associated with modernity, most notably personal freedom, is apparent when Roberto's mother, in conformity with Sardinian hospitality, offers me a cup of coffee in one of her expensive and posh Illy coffee cups. On the table in the kitchen are several of the newest mobile phones and in the corner is a big television screen. For her son, who just wakes up, Roberto's mother prepares a large bowl of sweetened warm milk. Tradition and modernity are mixed up in a unique and personalized way, the coffee cups and telephones telling me the position of the Podda family within the social network of the region, while also showing me their attempts to reach out to the rest of the world. Unusual for a Sardinian shepherd family, the Poddas even go on vacation sometimes.

A central element within the tension between notions of being modern and of being traditional is the way in which social positions are formed, contested and defended. In her study of the production and consumption of bread in the northwestern Sardinian town of Bosa, Carole Counihan (1984) shows how the making of flour provides an event for communally communicating and reaffirming social positions. With bread as the single most important element in any Sardinian meal, and for which families or villages, in each stage of the production, have to cooperate, bread creates a system of communal norm setting (Da Re, 1995). Indeed, Guido's narrative about the two donkeys demonstrates that it is through gossiping and through criticizing others that the women uphold the norms and standards through which social control is enforced. When Bosa's society transforms into a more modern, industrialized, provincial town, the women in Counihan's account stop baking their own bread and start buying it in supermarkets, where there is less social control and more opportunities for individuals to communicate their own standards of good living. Whereas breadmaking guarded the status quo of power structures in Bosa's community, buying bread gives women agency to change the social positions in town.

Notwithstanding their claim to be part of a modern, mobile network of telephone and Internet users, the Poddas consider themselves to be traditional in many senses. Like other shepherds in the region, they produce milk and sell this to the cooperatives. While some shepherds illegally sell cheese around Sardinia's tourist beaches, the Poddas make cheese for their own consumption only and occasionally slaughter an animal to celebrate a special occasion. According to the Poddas, recent European rules force them to milk the sheep mechanically instead of by hand. Initially, they were not at all in favor of this new rule. They tried to resist it and kept on milking the sheep by hand—in the summer twice a day, and in the winter as often as four times a day. After a while, however, they had to admit that it was faster mechanically and that it was worth it to invest in the machines.

Milking mechanically is most certainly a token of modernity to the Poddas, and while they first opposed it, they finally embraced the new method. However, even with the new milking machines, the process of milking the sheep and goats is still an activity that reveals and affirms the social relations that exist within the Podda

family. Like the making of flour for bread, milking is an activity that produces an xray of the family (Counihan, 1984:51).

In the morning: Social hierarchy revealed during milking

The Poddas milk their sheep and goats in a separate milking parlor situated out of sight behind their house and attached to a half roofed stable through which first the sheep enter the parlor in shifts and then the goats. Twenty four sheep can be milked at a time by a machine with just five extractor tubes. The men therefore quickly attach the milking equipment to the sheep's teats, who meanwhile enjoy some food, and then change it to the next sheep. As there are always some sheep left without being milked, a few lambs are allowed to drink in between the hustle and bustle of the milking activities.

After two hours of milking, the milk of both the sheep and the goats is collected in a large stainless barrel and, although it gets mixed, will later be sold as sheep's milk to make various kinds of pecorino. The whole operation goes smoothly, even though there are some extra spectators present.

During the milking of the sheep and goats, five people work on the machines: Roberto, Guido the helper, one of Roberto's brothers, a brother-in-law named Nicola and one nephew approximately twelve years old—the last three are at the Poddas because it is Sunday. Mario himself is also present, but he is not working. Rather, he stands at the end of the machine overseeing everything, commenting on everyone, explaining things to me and making jokes about the others. Mario acts exactly as he does in other situations: he just stands there and makes himself the center of attention. He carefully watches the others and yells at them as soon as he sees reason to do so. He never actually performs any work himself any more. He passed the work in the farm over to the next generation, his son Roberto. But it is still clear that he is in charge. He is the authority on the spot, and as such he is the only one who is allowed to yell and to beat the animals when they, for example, walk too slowly.²

Next to Mario in order of the social hierarchy is Roberto, the son who is to take over the farm. Although younger than both his brother and his brother-in-law Nicola, Roberto directs the work at the milking machine and chooses when it is time to let the goats or sheep go and bring in another group. After Roberto is his brother. He is here just to help and therefore has no authority when milking is concerned. Nicola and Guido come next; although not family in the strict sense, Guido works on the farm every day and gets his position from this—making him responsible for the flow of the animals—while Nicola is Roberto's brother-in-law and, as such, almost family. Roberto's little nephew is a generation younger and therefore not obliged to work. He just likes to hang around the farm and Mario likes to play with him, to let him ride horses, to catch geese and to help milk, but without any responsibility.

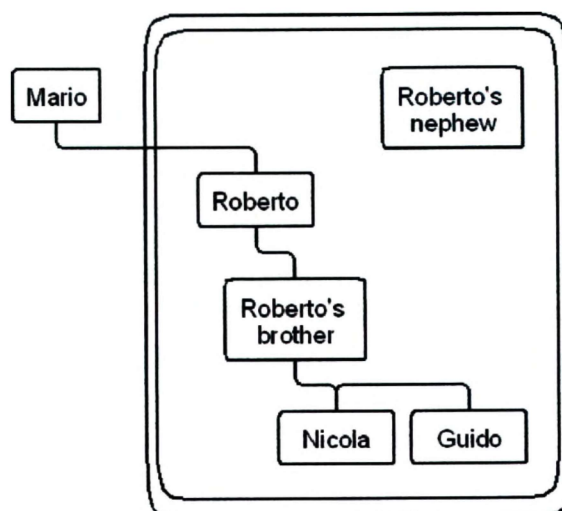


Figure 1: Schematic representation of the social hierarchy of the Poddas during the milking of the sheep and goats.

Everything on the farm has to do with sheep, and everywhere Mario is at the top of the social hierarchy. He is the “boss” on the farm as well as in the family. This family structure and Mario’s position in it as a man of status is repeated again during the coffee break after the milking, when the sheep and the goats are sent back into the mountains. The family enters the parental home, where Roberto’s mother has made everyone a cup of coffee. Since it is the family’s table at which we have our coffee, Guido does not come inside. However, my informants Bastiana, Maria, Corrado and myself are invited at the table to drink coffee. We are not family, and hence for this special occasion, Mario allows Guido to join as well. He has to sit on a stool at the outer corner of the table and, as he can make his own coffee in his “own” house, he is not offered anything to drink.

During the break: Dynamic social positions

Like many other shepherds in Sardinia, the Poddas find themselves between a whole set of traditions, on the one hand, and an alternative set of signs and tools of modernity, on the other hand. Tradition is associated with social control, with the collective structuring of social relations and hierarchies through practices in which the “normal” is defined. Modernity is associated with individuality and a more atomized life, where each person individually creates his or her own personality. In the first situation, people are often considered to be more limited in their possibilities to change their social position, since the structure in which they live is fully determined. In the latter situation, people have the feeling that they can alter the structure, or at least change their position in it. One way to do this is through the gathering and display of symbolic capital.

A well known example of symbolic capital is the ability to make delicate distinctions (Bourdieu, 1989). While bread, as Counihan (1984) has shown, is made less often at home than it was before, it is still a battlefield over which people can compete in skills. This can be seen in a lunchtime conversation that took place a few weeks before I visited the Poddas, when I was introduced to Maria by my friend and informant, Meny, who said:

Well, Maria, you should try this piece of *pane carasàu*. It's from the Nuoro province. The best *pane carasàu* comes from there. You see how thin it is? Tasty, isn't it? This comes from one particular village and I know a woman who sells it here in Cagliari. I buy my *pane carasàu* from nobody but her; it's the thinnest of the island.

On this occasion, Meny demonstrated to Maria her knowledge of good bread and her sources to get it. In ways that Tracey Heatherington (2001:336) discusses in relation to the consumption of bread in the central Sardinian village of Orgosolo, Meny proudly verified to her guest the origin of the *pane carasàu*, and affirmed the cultural status she enjoys vis-à-vis Maria.

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière has argued against the idea that people, through the collection and display of capital, can have real control over their situation. The dominant power structures and discourses shape their world and all the possibilities therein to such an extent that it completely envelops them, leaving no room for personal agency. It is only the dream of rising in social status, Rancière argues, a false expectation, that keeps the lowly ranked quiet for a while:

[T]he symbolic game is reserved for the rich and is merely the euphemizing of domination. As for the poor, they do not play. Indeed, their habitus discloses to them only the semblance of a game where the anticipated future is not what is possible but simply the impossible (Rancière, 2004:183).

Living in what Rancière refers to as the illusion of “cultural communism” is expressed also by Roberto, when he dreams about becoming something other than what he almost certainly will become: a shepherd. “The formidable perversity of this illusion,” Rancière continues, “is obviously that it does everything as if it were not an illusion. It works” (2004:185). Never will the lowly ranked, through their fruitless collection of symbolic capital, be able to really alter social hierarchies, for those in power will always define or redefine the rules as they see fit, leaving behind them the “hopeless candidates condemned to the mere appearances of distinction” (Rancière, 2004:194).

Bourdieu himself points out that every particular instance of symbolic capital has to be accepted as such by those who own more. According to him, “it must never be forgotten that the working-class ‘aesthetic’ is a dominated ‘aesthetic’ which is constantly obliged to define itself in terms of the dominant aesthetics” (1989:41).

Instead of accepting the sole powerlessness that he identifies in Bourdieu's theories, Rancière proposes to look at the moments in which people occupy multiple fields of symbolic capital, or cross the boundaries between them. Even though it is true, according to Rancière, that people will always stay behind those in power in the gathering of symbolic capital in one field, they can simultaneously deal in symbolic capital in another field (Rancière 1989, 1998). The display of this capital, of the unexpected skills and the surprise of being able to do something that nobody would have considered possible by that person, allows one to knock a breach in the static structure of the social hierarchy and power.

Let us turn now to the second event and see how the social hierarchy that seemed to be defined so rigidly, and demonstrated so positively during the milking, might be challenged after all.

In the afternoon: "Instant status" during the slaughter

This Sunday, the whole family is staying for dinner, so after the coffee break that followed the milking of the sheep and goats, a steer has to be slaughtered. It is during this slaughter that prestige is gained and social positions change for a very brief moment. Nicola, has been just one among the others during the milking. Everyone worked as hard as everyone else, with the exception of Mario, who did not work at all, and Roberto, who worked harder because he is the son and has more authority, and Roberto's nephew, who is just a child. Nicola's position was just below the "real" family, but just above the non-family.

As the slaughter of the steer is a very masculine activity, the women stay inside the house after the coffee break, for they say they "cannot watch a calf die." It is also a highly dangerous activity, as the steer is strong and tries to kick anyone who comes close. There is social status and prestige to be gained by those who are able to catch it, slaughter it and present it to the family table. Conversely, social status is lost if one is not able to catch or slaughter it.

Roberto keeps referring to the steer as a "calf," pretending it is something that can easily be put under control, and he confidently walks into the field behind the house to catch it. After his father, Roberto appears to be the "natural" authority. It is clear to all that it is his task to catch the steer. More stronger even: it is his *privilege* to catch it, to show off. At first, the steer runs away when Roberto approaches it. It fiercely resists being caught, running from one end of the field to another, leaving Roberto behind, exhausted. Roberto keeps running towards the steer, trying to throw a rope around its head, but he never succeeds, although at some point he is dangerously close to the steer's sharp horns.

After ten minutes or so of trying to catch the steer by himself, Roberto has to give up and ask for help from his brother, Guido and Nicola. Clearly, Roberto does not like to call in help from the other three. The catching of the steer is a prestigious act which he likes to do himself. He is afraid that his status might be in danger, especially since he appears to be considered an unquestioned authority in this case.



Figure 2: The four men are able to catch the steer by lassoing its horns.

Collectively, the four men are finally able to catch the steer by lassoing its horns and pulling it off the field into the half roofed stall (see Figure 2), where he is tied to one pillar of the rood. Now the animal has to be killed by a shot to the head. Roberto's inability to catch the steer on his own has had no real influence on his position as the leader of the slaughter. He is therefore still the first to try to shoot the steer. This is also an activity for which close cooperation is required. One person has to hold the steer with just a rope firmly against the pillar of the stall. Another has to walk closely to the already aggressive animal and hit it with a piece of wood so that it will turn its head toward the direction in which it is hit, where Roberto, the third one, waits with the gun. He, finally, has to shoot the steer by placing the gun right between its eyes and pulling the trigger. Only by cooperation—the physical acting out of social positions—can this activity succeed, and therefore the person who leads the process reflects his position in the social hierarchy.

After two shots—the first one for some reason did not immediately work—Roberto manages to kill the steer and Guido starts removing some skin from its forehead. Blood is dripping from the steer's head onto the ground, while Guido explains to me that it is important to remove some skin, but the place of the skin to be removed is arbitrary, since Roberto always removes skin from some other place. The most dangerous part of the slaughter is now finished and the men allow themselves a break. To show their heroic acts, the two children—Roberto's nephew and niece—are called to see the steer. They are told to call the women, but the women do not want to come. Roberto proudly shows the dead, but still moving, steer to the children. They are supposed to look very closely and to touch it in order to learn, according to Roberto, not to be afraid of dead animals.

The group experiences relief and loosens the stress that was built up during the catching of the steer. Roberto relaxes and removes his shirt, asking the children to bring him a beer. The group talks and laughs, as they managed to kill the animal

worth €3000 in meat. Guido gets a tractor to lift the steer from the ground and Mario, now that his son is smoking a cigarette as a break, starts digging a ditch in the ground to let the blood escape. So far, social relations have not altered; Mario is still symbolically in charge and Roberto is still actually leading the slaughter. It is only when the real skinning and removing of the entrails start that the social hierarchy starts to crack.

Guido and Nicola lift the steer with the tractor and Roberto, after finishing his cigarette, starts skinning the steer. With a sharp knife—a widely recognized symbol of masculinity in Sardinia—Roberto has to separate the skin from the flesh without damaging either one. However, it turns out that he is not very good at it. Every time Roberto either cuts the skin, making it less valuable for the production of leather, or he cuts the flesh. Roberto looks around him, seemingly aware of the others' expectations of his skills as a shepherd, and consequently uncomfortable by the others watching how he messes up. After yet another cut in the skin, Roberto has to admit that he is not able to do the job, and he hands over the knife to Guido, the family's helper on the farm.

Guido now tries to skin the steer, but he is even worse than Roberto, leaving the men in despair about how to ever skin the steer. It is now Nicola's turn. Carefully and with a firm hand, Nicola skins the dead animal from head to tail. He does not make even one mistake, leaving the others astounded by his sudden revelation of unexpected skills. As if this is completely ordinary, Nicola now starts to speak louder as his position in the group is rising. He starts to make jokes and, contrary to what everyone had expected, he even yells at the children in a macho way that only Roberto did before. His status can now temporarily be compared to Roberto's.

After the skinning and the removal of the head—which Mario proudly hangs in the stall—the steer's entrails have to be removed. To do this, his ribs have to be cut to provide an opening for the intestines to come out. Roberto starts with it. As with the skinning, however, as much as Roberto tries, he cannot cut the ribs. As if there is now common understanding about the situation, Guido is passed over when Nicola takes over the task for which Roberto lacks skills. Nicola cuts the ribs and removes the entrails, commanding Guido, the children and finally also Roberto to assist him in various ways. Roberto helps him in the dirty job of catching the full intestines of the steer before they fall out and splash onto the ground.



Figure 3: Nicola smokes a cigarette after Roberto shot the steer and Guido removed some skin.

In this new situation, as a consequence of Nicola being the only one able to skin and clean the animal, Nicola seems to be at the top of the social hierarchy. He is now able to make rude jokes to others and to show the children what kind of things can be done with the steer's testicles or intestines. Everyone laughs as Nicola commands the children to drink beer, and Nicola gets so comfortable as to remove his shirt, just as Roberto has done before him, and to grab a beer and a cigarette. Beer, as Tracey Heatherington (1999) also notes, is considered a symbol of masculinity and authority in Sardinia. Those who feel like they have the power will also drink a beer.³ In his appearance and in his actions, Nicola now symbolically, as well as actually, leads the slaughter.

At the end of the day: Restoring the hierarchy

After the slaughter, the meat is cut into four parts and driven to the house by Guido, where Roberto's sisters and mother place three pieces on the table and one in the wood oven. Here, Mario falls back into his role as the symbolic leader of the slaughter, carrying with him the impressive knife that Nicola had just used to skin the steer (see Figure 4). Guido now quietly disappears and Nicola puts his shirt back on. Roberto, again, is the one who speaks loudest and who walks around without a shirt and with a can of beer. Very rapidly, all actors fall back into their original roles and it seems as if nothing of Nicola's temporal rise in social position has remained.

It was his action by which he distinguished himself from the others that gave him very rapid, but volatile status, or instant status. As a city boy, he demonstrated his symbolic capital in the field of animal slaughter and profited by claiming a higher position. However, the prestige this capital provides him lasted only for as long as the slaughter lasted—afterwards he was back in his position as an “almost family member.”



Figure 4: Mario inspects the steer after it has been skinned and cleaned.

The theoretical concept of instant status that I introduce here refers to those moments in which someone, in a situation that is very much determined by factors outside his or her influence, is able to suspend the power structures that govern the particular event and claim an alternative position vis-à-vis others. This alternative position is temporal and volatile, leaving the power structures ultimately unaltered. I propose to define the concept further by the following characteristics:

1. Moments of instant status occur during critical moments, events in time and space in which someone demonstrates entirely unexpected skills. These skills can be understood as symbolic capital introduced into the scene in a way that was unpredictable and, hence, unanticipated. Nobody at the Poddas that Sunday afternoon could ever have expected that Nicola, who lives in the city and visits the countryside only for recreation, would be able to skin and clean a large dead steer. His action left everyone astonished.

2. The exposure of these unexpected skills during critical moments contradicts the ordinary power structures in a way that all agents involved realize that

something new, but unknown, needs to happen (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999; Cobb, 2006). When it was not Roberto, as the generally accepted and only anticipated authority after his father, but rather Nicola, who managed to perform the prestigious act of skinning the steer, the social hierarchy that everyone assumed to be the case needed to be revised. In those cases, there are no rules or rituals that can be followed.

3. Instant status is finally characterized by the fact that the skills that are demonstrated by someone, and that force this redefinition of social positions in reaction to that particular moment, are exclusively useful in this particular situation. In other words, it entails the demonstration of symbolic capital within one specific and narrow field, not transferable to another field. Thus, while enabling someone to assert an alternative social status during the critical moment, this status is temporal, as the skills are not valued outside this event. As such, Nicola joins the family after the slaughter with his shirt back on, not even thinking for a second about making rude jokes to the children.

The defining characteristics of instant status therefore distinguish it from the widely known concept of the rite of passage. Whereas rites of passage are, in general, rule-bound public events that facilitate the change of social status of a person or a group of persons (Gennep, 1960), moments of instant status do not entail such an irreversible change in social relations and positions, and are not governed by a script or set of rules recognized in society as such. Positions that are acquired during moments of instant status are, by and large, undone after the particular event, and little, if anything, remains. After the drama that unfolds in a stall in this particular Sardinian farm is over, everyone finds themselves back in their original positions.

Moments of instant status differ furthermore from liminal moments as defined by the anthropologist Victor Turner (1969), as they are not part of a functional process to recreate society, nor do they function as “leveling” mechanisms in which statuses are destroyed or denied. In liminal phases, someone is neither one nor the other. During the slaughter, Nicola clearly and positively takes on a role and position for himself as the leader of the group.

More closely related to Turner’s (1982) concept of the liminoid in terms of the critical and fragmentary nature of the moment, instant status should be distinguished from the former as, while it does not have a lasting legacy, it is taken dead seriously during the event. Whereas liminoid processes, like sports, are characterized by optionality and individuality, moments of instant status build on, and temporally do affect, social relations and positions that exist outside the specific event, much like how encounters in a game can sometimes find their way into the “serious” world (Goffman, 1961:68).

Conclusion: Usages of the concept of instant status

Moments of instant status happen all the time. Very often they go by unnoticed, both by the people involved and by social scientists studying these situations. In order to become more aware of these specific kinds of temporal shifts in social statuses, I have proposed the theoretical concept of instant status. By looking at complex interactions on a very small scale, the concept of instant status can be of relevance to understanding the society under study. The domain of food, as this paper has shown, is especially useful in this case, as it provides a ground for actors to shift from the personal and insignificant to the general and extraordinary in one move. Just like the food itself, social statuses can be enjoyed to the full, but they can, and will, also go off quickly.

What I have furthermore tried to show in this paper is that, even though it does make perfect sense to think about societies as entities or collections of people that are governed by rather firm power structures—quite often expressed by the force of traditions—there is always the possibility for the individual actor to temporarily escape this structure. By focusing on the opportunities that people may or may not have to alter power structures, social scientists have often missed out on the subtle and temporal power shifts that people do play out on a local scale. It is without breaking the existing set of power relations, and without a socially recognized set of rules and rituals, that people are able to problematize the existing hierarchy and position themselves differentl

NOTES

¹ Schweizer states that out of 120 shepherd enterprises in 1980, “26% had less than 100 animals, 30% 100–[150], 27% 150–200 and 17% 200–400,” while 79% had less than 65 hectares (1988:88,93).

² The middle-sized animals (sheep and goats) are treated just as a means, almost not as animals (except for the lambs). The smaller animals (geese and chicken) are ignored, but the larger animals (donkeys, horses and oxen) are treated with great care. For example, when someone gives candy to a horse, Mario asks, “Do you like it?” And when his granddaughter gives the horse a sugar cube, Mario asks her, “Have you seen how he laughs?” The larger animals, who are not used for their milk or their meat, have names, like the donkey Giacomo. They are treated almost like humans. The *molenti* donkeys from Guido’s story are the only animals that were, in the past, allowed to enter the house (Angioni, 1983:270). The young cattle, as an exception, are slaughtered for consumption and are treated in the same way as the sheep and goats. The dogs occupy a special position, as they help the shepherds guide the sheep in the mountains.

³ “[Beer] is a catalyst for embodied memories of sociality in Central Sardinia, and these memories are laden with meanings and feelings rooted in gendered, local experience. ... Beer drinking makes possible a specific genre of social interaction and cultural collaboration, symbolic of a diffuse male social agency. The very taste of beer stands in metonymic relation to an imagined source of cultural authority, so that a sharing swig from a bottle of Ichnusa beer makes an inhabitable space for men in the systematically disorganized margins of cultural representation. [Beer drinking] constitutes a participatory ritual performance in its own right, a ‘phenomenological arena in which cultural memory is fashioned and refashioned to produce and reproduce power’” (Stoler, cited in Heatherington, 1999:331–332).

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