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PALIO DI SIENA OR VICTORY JUSTIFIES
THE MEANS. A FEW REMARKS ON CONTRADE
FORMING THE IDENTITY OF SIENA'S INHABITANTS
FROM THE AXIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Summary. The subject of the article is the analysis of a specific case: the importance of the contrade and tradition of Palio di Siena to shape the identity of the citizens of this city. One of the elements of the human identity is morality and this aspect has been analyzed. The article shows the conventional character of moral norms, which originate from small communities in which a man is socialized. Scientific research on the influence of various communities on the shaping of the identity of an individual is a current topic, because more and more clearly in the development of societies, the coexistence of two tendencies: globalization and locality.

Keywords: Palio; contrada; Siena; morality; local identity.

Palio di Siena lub zwycięstwo uzasadnia środki. Kilka uwag na temat contrade tworzącej tożsamość mieszkańców Sieny z perspektywy aksjologicznej. Przedmiotem artykułu jest analiza konkretnego przypadku, mianowicie znaczenia tradycji odbywających się Palio di Siena, organizowanych przez contrade, dla kształtowania się tożsamości obywateli tego miasta. Jednym z elementów tożsamości człowieka jest moralność

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i właśnie ten aspekt został poddany analizie. Artykuł pokazuje na konwencjonalny charakter norm moralnych, których źródłem są małe wspólnoty, w których wychowuje się człowiek. Badania naukowe nad wpływem różnego rodzaju wspólnot na kształtowanie się tożsamości jednostki jest tematem aktualnym, bo coraz wyraźniej w rozwoju społeczeństw uwidacznia się współwystępowanie dwóch tendencji: globalizacji i lokalności.

Słowa kluczowe: Palio; contrada; Siena, moralność; tożsamość lokalna.

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of the identity of a person and the sense of belonging to the community is the object of many sciences, including the history of political doctrines, sociology and philosophical anthropology². The influence of different communities on the shaping of the individual's identity is a timely topic because the coexistence of two trends, globalization and localization, is becoming more and more apparent in the development of contemporary societies. The research topic presented in the article is the analysis of a particular case, namely the meaning of *contrade* and the *Palio di Siena* tradition for the identity of the citizens of the city of Siena. I will pay special attention to morality, as one of the crucial elements of human identity, by analyzing the principles determining the life of this community.

2. MEDIEVAL ITALY AS A CONGLOMERATE OF VARIOUS POLITICAL UNITS AND CULTURAL COMMUNITIES AND THE CALL TO CREATE ONE COUNTRY WITH A COMMON LANGUAGE

According to the well-known saying of Prince Klemens Wenzel Lothar von Metternich (1773-1859), Italy, just like Germany, had for a long time been only a geographical term (*un expression géographique*). It wasn't until the time of unification and the creation of the kingdom of Italy with King Victor Emmanuel II in 1861, that the situation changed. All studies on the history, culture and sense of identity of Italy's inhabitants considering the period before that time must take into account their diversity.

The small political units of Italy lacked stability, and the political systems, borders and zones of influence of the kingdoms often changed. Constant conflict

² The article was elaborated on the basis of research materials acquired during my scientific stay in Rome in 2018 which had been possible thanks to the Lanckoroński Foundation scholarship.

and wars between cities led to a situation in which the only homeland for their inhabitants was their own city. The concept defining this local patriotism is *campanilismo* which originated from the word *campanile*, meaning the belfry. In the Italian cities, the belfry was the centre of social life and the hearing range of the tower bell determined the boundaries of the community³.

Benedykt Zientara in *Świt narodów europejskich [The dawn of European nations]* wrote that although in the Middle Ages the Italian bourgeoisie referred to the heritage of the Roman Empire, this fact did not contribute to forming a common national identity. The common Christian religion was not a unifying factor either, on the contrary, it served to emphasize the distinctiveness of local communities, each having its own patron saint and the celebration of holidays associated with the patron was the basis for building different traditions (Zientara, 1985).

The Italians did not have a common language either. Of course, educated people in the Middle Ages used Latin, considering it as the language of the ancient Romans' descendants, but the majority used local dialects, very different from Latin.

“Languages spoken in various corners of the peninsula, having centuries earlier evolved from Latin in the normal process of language divergence i.a. under the influence of invasions, foreign governments and contact with different cultures, have been described for the first time by Dante Alighieri in his work *De vulgari eloquentia*. In this work the author describes with special perceptiveness the linguistic diversity of Italy defining fourteen major idioms (called ‘*vulgari*’ - Latin *vulgus*). At that time, the Tuscan dialect of the Florentine type (the language of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio) was leading amongst all ‘*vulgari*’. In the fourteenth century, its position was confirmed by the splendour of Florence which was not only the cradle of the most talented personalities of the art world but also the economic, social and cultural centre of the whole Europe (Medici family, bankers). In the sixteenth century, ‘*vulgare*’ has also overtaken Latin in the field of literature” (Grochowska, 2011, p. 35-36).

From the mid-13th century, “*vulgare*” gradually became the language of writers. Dante’s Alighieri (1265-1321) contribution to the formation of the Italian language, by introducing the Tuscan dialect into literature, cannot be overestimated. He wrote about Italy as a whole, as later, in the sixteenth century did Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), whose dream was to unite the Italian states

³ More about *campanilismo* see Mielke, 2012.

under the leadership of Florence and to create one powerful state⁴. The author of *The Prince* also considered the need to establish a common Italian language.

In the text of *Dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua*, he proposed to make the Tuscan dialect a common language of all residents of future united Italy, because the dialect originating from Florence was the source of the language of the great poets which he valued the most⁵. As Gaetano Berruto concluded, „language is a dialect which made a career” (Berruto, 1995, p. 225), and the Tuscan dialect, due to the power of Florence, had the best opportunity for it. “Tuscan had several advantages in its quest to become the Italian language: apart from its literary beauty, the spoken and written languages were similar, and its sounds as well as its grammatical rules made it closer to Latin than other dialects – the Latin *sanc-tus* and *bello* becoming Tuscan *santo* and *bello* but Sicilian *sando* and *beddu*” (Gilmour, 2012, p. 32). In his book devoted to the history of Italy and its inhabitants, Gilmour (2012) pointed out that to this day Florence is perceived as the best place to learn Italian, although according to many opinions it is the inhabitants of Siena that have much better pronunciation.

3. CONTRADE – NEIGHBOURHOOD COMMUNITIES CREATING THE URBAN LIFE OF SIENA

⁴ More about political view's of Machiavelli see Baranowska, 2018. Felix Gilbert pointed out, that: “There is certainly nothing new in the fundamental presupposition in the idea of Italy as a unit distinguished from the surrounding world, in the demand for the expulsion of the foreigners. Machiavelli himself concludes the chapter with a quotation from Petrarch's *Italia Mia* which had already expressed these ideas; and in the fourteenth century the sentiment of Petrarch's *Canzone* had been re-echoed in the works of other poets, by Fazio Degli Uberti, Francesco di Vanoazo, and the poets of the Visconti court. It was natural to fall back on this tradition when a situation similar to that from which Petrarch's song originated had arisen. [...] It is a recurrent theme in humanist literature that Italy has a special position in the world because her frontiers were drawn by nature herself. The view that Italy was a separate geographical unit on whose soil foreign Barbarians have no right to be, is a fundamental assumption of humanist political reflections. [...] there is enough evidence to show that the renewal of an era of foreign invasions which opened with the expedition of Charles VIII resulted in the awakening of a national feeling in wider groups. We have popular songs directed against the foreigners; we know that in 1509, before the battle of Agnadello, the soldiers shouted «Italy, Italy» into the face of their foreign opponents” (Gilbert, 1954, p. 41)

⁵ „Concludesi, pertanto, che non c'è lingua che si possa chiamare o comune d'Italia o curiale, perché tutte quelle che si potessino chiamare così, hanno il fondamento loro dagli scrittori fiorentini e dalla lingua fiorentina; alla quale in ogni difetto, come a vero fonte e fondamento loro, è necessario che ricorrono; e non volendo esser veri pertinaci, hanno a confessar la fiorentina esser questo fondamento e fonte” (Machiavelli, 1997, p. 204–205).

The importance of local identity for forming politics and human attitudes is clearly visible in Siena to this day. In the period from the 12th to the mid-14th century, it was one of the richest cities in Europe due to its convenient location along the trade routes, the development of the textile industry and banking. It is in Siena that we find the seat of the oldest bank in Europe *Monte Pashì di Siena*. The bankers' families were the most influential in the city from the beginning. Siena began to lose its importance when in the mid-14th century the city suffered a plague, which killed more than half of the population, and as a result of conflicts with Florence which ultimately subjugated it (Drechsler 2009).

The case of Siena is extremely interesting considering the analysis of the local identity because the inhabitants' life is organized in traditional territorial neighbourhood communities operating within the boundaries of the old city, called *contrade*, whose cooperation and competition gives the city its unique character⁶. Scientists, including anthropologists, historians and sociologists, have devoted much attention to this phenomenon (Parsons, 2004).

Contrade originated from medieval neighbourhood military units or neighbourhood communities engaged in organizing various holidays. Initially, the inhabitants of the district creating the *contrade* also performed the same profession, and thus it was an organization supporting the interests of a given social group (Silverman, 1979). The well-known and often cited rule formulated by Sydel Silverman (1979) provides that the strength of organizations such as *contrade* was always in inverse proportion to the strength of the city as a whole. Considering this pattern, Drechsler formulated the conclusion that although *contrade* had been formed earlier, they, in fact, gained significance after 1555 when Siena lost her independence to Florence⁷. It was the Medici who supported the *contrade* to disrupt the unity of Siena's people.

Within the old city limits only the *Piazza del Campo*, the cathedral and several streets are not assigned to any of the *contrade*. Initially, there could have been about 40 *contrade*, but in 1729 when the governor of Siena and Grand Princess of Tuscany (as the wife of Grand Prince Ferdinando of Tuscany) Violante Beatrice of Bavaria (1673-1731) sanctioned the division of the city, 17 *contrade* have been formed and exist to this day⁸. Each of them has its own flag, a patron

⁶ „Le *contrade* si identificano in porzioni di territorio comunali iscritti all'interno della cinta muraria. Chi vi nasce è *contradaio* e, per logica conseguenza, ha il dovere e il diritto di partecipare alla vita della propria *Contrada*. Il territorio è il primo e fondamentale elemento costitutivo delle *Contrade*” (<http://www.comune.siena.it/La-Citta/Palio/Siena-e-il-Palio/La-Contrada>).

⁷ Drechsler (2006) compared this policy to the practices of the European Union supporting the regionalist tendencies in the member states.

⁸ 17 *contrade*: *Aquila, Bruco, Chiocciola, Civetta, Drago, Giraffa, Istrice, Leocorno, Lupa,*

saint, motto, *fazzoletto* i.e. silk handkerchiefs as well as a special place of meetings and celebrations of holidays which is treated as the home of the “second family” (Liebscher, 2001). All *contrade* are also very similarly managed and their main goals are preparation for *Palio* races, the organization of common holidays as well as activating the community within various types of smaller groups of interests or sports groups, meetings and games for children and youth.

„Its internal organization of officials, assemblies, committees, and honorific positions is analogous to that of the commune, the local political-administrative unit. This organization is formalized in a constitution, which in some ways follows the model of civic participation of the historic Italian communes. In addition to the civic organization, a separate “wartime” apparatus is provided for, and in the period leading up to the *palio* an appointed captain and his two lieutenants (*mangini*) are given full powers for the purpose of Winding the *palio*. [...] The *contrada* is a basic reference point for social interaction within the city. [...] The *contrada* is internally stratified, its high-status members being designated as “protectors” or as members of an honorary body of *contrada* dignitaries. However, within the *contrada* there is an ideology of equality; members of different classes use the familiar form of address with each other, and there are sanctions against potentially divisive behavior” (Silverman, 1979, p. 416).

Another important role of *contrade* is helping its members in various life situations (Dundes, Falassi, 2005). It is worth noting that *contrade* are not part of the city administration and are financed only by membership fees and donations. They are a bit like NGOs (non-governmental organisations) (Drechsler, 2006). Currently, *contrade* also have their official websites where we can find all the important information about their structure, history and activities⁹.

Undoubtedly, *contrade* create the social fabric of Siena. Researchers indicate their positive influence on shaping the identity of citizens who have been taught the community life and responsibility for the community since childhood. This also has had an impact on the very low crime rate in this city (Drechsler, 2006).

Nicchio, Oca, Onda, Pantera, Selva, Tartuca, Torre, Valdimontone (<http://www.comune.siena.it/La-Citta/Palio/Siena-e-il-Palio/Le-17-Contrade> ; <https://www.ilpalio.siena.it/5/Contrade>)

⁹ Por. <http://www.contradadellalupa.it>; <http://www.contradalefonti.it>; <http://www.contradadellatorre.it>; <http://www.contradadeldrago.it>; <https://www.contradadellapantera.it>; <https://www.contradadellaselva.it>. Analysis of websites of *contrade* (Boos, 2017).

4. *PALIO DELLE CONTRADE*

Undeniably, *contrade* have many advantages. They undertake many activities strengthening the small communities. The best known by far is the organization and participation in the *Palio* races, which take place on 2 July and 16 August each year. Additional races may also be organized on the occasion of celebrating special events such as the end of the war or anniversaries associated with it¹⁰. The race is preceded by the traditional parade *il corteo storico*. Only 10 *contrade* participate in the race at the *Piazza*. Seven of them are those that did not take part in the previous *Palio* and three more are being drawn by lots. The *contrade* enter their horses in the race, but for which of them the horses will run, and which jockey will ride them is also to be decided by lottery. This effects in even greater emotions and uncertainty of results. Silverman (1979, p. 415) quoted words of one of Siena's mayors: „in the *palio* it's not the best man who wins... The man who wins is the one who comes in first". There are several scientific studies about *Palio* (Bindi, 2002; Dundes, Falassi, 2005; Parsons, 2004; Silverman, 1979) and it is worth referring to them to learn more about the tradition of this unique race.

In this article, I would like to point out a particular aspect of *Palio*. The race is carried out according to complicated rules which allow also violent behaviour. In contrast to most types of sports competition, the rule nowadays referred to as *fair play* does not apply. There is only one rule in *Palio* – to win at any price (*Conta solo vincere. E se non vinci, perdi*) (Drechsler, 2006). Captains of *contrade* can give bribes to the jockeys of the opponents or to help the allied *contrade*. Apart from bribing the jockeys, there are also instances of doping the drawn horses and attempts to poison the other horses before the race. During the race, the jockey is allowed to hit other participants of the race. The ingenuity of *contrade* members is certainly quite impressive when it comes to ways of influencing the outcome. Thus, you can do anything, you just can not lose.

All these elements such as drawing of lots, games behind-the-scenes, bribes, make *Palio* so exciting and the winner so hard to predict.

It is worth noting that although *Palio*'s tradition seems unchanged, the organizers had to start adapting to the requirements of our time. Under the pressure from animal rights organizations, the treatment of horses taking part in the races

¹⁰ In 2018 *Palio Straordinario* was held on October 20. „Con deliberazione del Consiglio Comunale n. 152 del 14/9/2018 è stata approvata l'effettuazione del *Palio Straordinario* dedicato al Centenario della fine della Prima Guerra Mondiale che si terrà il giorno 20 ottobre 2018". Por. <http://www.comune.siena.it/La-Citta/Palio/Palio-Straordinario-2018>

has definitely improved. Particularly, some anti-doping controls were introduced and sharp bends were secured with boards to prevent, at least to some extent, injuries to both jockeys and horses.

„This year, with a little help from the motor-racing industry, the organisers are hoping to limit the damage. Special barriers made of PVC, similar to those used in Formula One racing, are being placed around the most dangerous parts of the track. Also, in a nod to the phobia over doping in sport and repeated accusations that the steeds are drugged, the horses will be blood tested before the event. Toxicologists and city officials have drawn up a list of prohibited substances. But in keeping with the spirit of the contest, the specimens will only be examined if there is an inquiry or accident during the race. If not, the winner could be stuffed full of EPO or anabolic steroids and no one would be any the wiser - because in the *Palio* anything is admissible, betrayal, backstabbing, skulduggery or just plain cheating. The only thing forbidden is losing” (Kennedy, 1999).

Apart from the race ruled by the brutal rule: victory at any cost, there is also the tradition of *cazotti* or fist brawls between the *contrade* members. About 200 men between the age of 18 and 40 stand up to fight against each other in the *Piazza del Campo* and the brawl lasts for half an hour (Warner, 2004). The rules of the fight are agreed beforehand and *contrade* are jointly opposed to police interference, which has taken place several times in the recent years. Sometimes fights spread outside the *Piazza del Campo* and take on a more severe form¹¹. There are also occasional beatings of tourists who, on the *Palio* day, with *fazzoletto* of one of the *contrade* bought as a souvenir, stroll in the districts of other hostile *contrada*.

5. VICTORY JUSTIFIES THE MEANS – *CONTRADE* AS THE SOURCE OF MORAL NORMS FOR ITS MEMBERS

Violent behaviour and all kinds of scams appearing during *Palio* are considered to be normal and desirable among the members of the *contrade* and thus the community does not condemn people for such actions. Of course, one can say that *Palio* is a unique situation, a kind of *catharsis*, and the behaviours present there do not represent the moral rules of the community in general. Park

¹¹ It seems that the *cazotti* tradition resembles the arranged fights between football hooligans and *fazzolette* could be compared to club scarves.

(1992, p. 82) stated: „There is something *cathartic* about all this. The industrious citizens of Siena are allowed to indulge all the meanest, lowest human behaviour twice a year, in July and August, and then return to their normal lives in a town that was last year voted to have the best quality of life in Italy”. However, in my opinion, Alan Dundes and Alessandro Falassi (2005, p. 49) are right that these events are a manifestation of emotions and activities that accompany *contrade* members every day. They stated: „It is not enough to say that the *Palio* represents a dramatic enactment of *contrada* life. Rather, the *Palio* provides an emotional outlet for all the love and hate relationships bound up in the *contrada* system”. So at *Palio* we can observe the rules, also moral ones, that are actually recognized by this community.

Morality is a system of assessments, norms of a social group, which defines the behaviour and views of people as appropriate, that is -good -or improper, that is - bad. In this case, it is evident that the social group consisting of the members of the seventeen *contrade* in Siena considers as proper and good all activities which aim at realizing their own interest, in this case - victory in *Palio*. The actual origin of moral norms is thereby clearly demonstrated. They are of conventional character and are created by small communities. Morality is a part of the human identity, and the latter is shaped by a particular community in which the individual is socialized.

Values promoted by larger communities have less influence on the actual human activities. It should be emphasized that the *contrade* members have always been Christians, and the Christian universal catalogue of religious values clearly defines deceit or lies as bad. Of course, some exceptions can be found in the thought of Christian philosophers (Kucharski, 2014), but they do not apply to such cases as winning horse races. Even if the *contrade* members recognize universal Christian values, the small community to which they belong is at the forefront and it is the community’s interest that determines how its member should behave. For this reason, in the study of morality, it is the empirical observation of human behaviour and customs, not the metaphysical reflection that constitutes the best source of knowledge about the values adopted by a particular social group.

It is worth adding that in the sixteenth century Machiavelli wrote about the conventional character of morality in which the good of the political community is the highest value. This position is recognized in scientific literature as overcoming the tendencies present in medieval philosophy. This text indicates that he did not formulate his views in a social “vacuum”.

In contemporary scientific research it is worth pointing to the concept of „amoral familism” by Edward C. Banfield (1958). His research concerned

a small and very poor village in Italy, Montegrano. The concept of the „amoral familism” is that principles of morality only applied to the own family. Individuals outside the family are fair game to be exploited to forward the position of the family. „In a society of amoral familists, the law will be disregarded when there is no reason to fear punishment. Therefore individuals will not enter into agreements which depend upon legal processes for their enforcement unless it is likely that the law will be enforced” (Banfield, 1958, p. 93). According to Banfield strong family ties are associated with low civic virtues¹². Referring this concept to the case of Siena, it can be said that principles of morality only applied to the own *contrada*. Other *contrade* can be exploited, especially to win *Palio*. In my opinion each of families and *contrade* have their own morality, so I differ with Banfield in this issue and it seems to me, that in this case the expression of „amoral familism” is not adequate. Banfield (1958, p. 99) also wrote: „In the society of amoral familists there will be no connection between abstract political principle (i. e., ideology) and concrete behavior in the ordinary relationships of everyday life”. I agree with the author of *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* to a certain extent: there will be no connection between abstract political or religious principles and concrete behavior in everyday life, but there is a morality in *contrade* and families. The basic morality is the one formed in a small community and its principles determine the directions not only everyday activities, but in fact every activities (as described by Machiavelli in their treaties).

It should also be emphasized that the sense of identity with *contrade* is still very strong today.

„What seems clear is that today the *Palio* is the central point of urban Sienese identity, and all scholarship has shown that it has become more so during the last decades. It has undergone a `revitalization and retraditionalization`; while it had never disappeared, since the 1970s it has been particularly strong, and has gained importance at the end of the 20th century” (Drechsler, 2006, p. 111).

Reflections on various aspects of local identity are currently extremely important, as the global mass society is a factor conducive to the revival of regionalism. Also today, the policy of Italy depends on these sentiments.

¹² In contrast to Banfield, there are other scientific concepts. For example Martin Ljunge (2013) argues for a strong family ties promoting high civic virtues and presents systematic evidence on these hypotheses.

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