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"A matter of man to man". Moral obligations, political loyalty and clientelism in Corsica
Jean-Louis BRIQUET, CNRS, Paris

This seminar gives me the opportunity to present a research I've conducted in the late 1990s on political clientelism in Corsica – not only to present this research, but also to revisit it in the light of the topic of this seminar: that is the question of "honour" and the cultural codes linked to "honour" in Mediterranean societies.

First, I must say that "honour" was not a key notion in this research. I was quiet reluctant to use a category stressing on the "traditional" aspects of Mediterranean societies – and especially a category as "honour" related to an alleged homogeneous and conventional "Mediterranean culture". In Corsica, clientelism is deeply rooted inside modern political institutions (political parties, state agencies, local bureaucracies). So, my aim was to understand in what manner the clientelistic networks and exchanges have adapted to the political modernisation of Corsican society : to analyse the way in which the process of implementation of modern state and of representative democracy since the last decades of the 19th century has led to the establishment and consolidation of clientelistic networks and exchanges – and, at the same time, the way in which such networks and exchanges have been reshaped with the expansion of the state intervention (public policies, welfare), and the development of mass political parties. In this perspective, clientelism could be viewed as a product of political modernisation (a channel through which modern political institutions have been concretely established in Corsica), and not as a residual expression of traditional values – as, for example, "amoral familism" (to use a term forged by Edward Banfield in order to explain the indifference of Italian peasants for public affairs and politics, when these one doesn't regard their own material benefits) ; or as "parochial political culture" producing mistrust of politics, lack of civicness, and fostering political patronage (as Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba wrote in their book *The civic culture*, and as it has been recently reformulated and renovated by Robert Putnam in *Making democracy works*).

But, despite this "reluctance", I faced something related to "honour" during my fieldwork, especially when I tried to understand how people I interviewed (local politicians, political activists, or ordinary citizens) judged and evaluated the political relationships in which they were involved. Speaking about these relationships, about the role and behaviour of the main local politicians (the ruling class of the *notables*), about electoral choice and political loyalty, this people often used the language of "moral obligations", "friendship", "duty of reciprocity", "sense of gratitude", etc. From the point of view of their participants, the clientelistic links are not only based on material exchanges (political support in return for

goods and services); they are also based on what we can call a “moral economy of politics” (or a “moral politics” to be more simple) – that is moral considerations regarding how a politician has to act if he wants to have a “good reputation” among its electorate (and to receive votes and consideration); regarding the reasons why the voters have to be loyal to a politician (or, at the contrary, can remove his loyalty); regarding, in few words, what is a legitimate political relationship and political exchange. In this paper, I will describe this “moral politics” in the case of Corsica and the way in which it influences, on the one hand, the exercise and legitimization of political authority and, on the other hand, the conception of political commitment and loyalty among ordinary citizens.

[1]

The title of my paper comes from an interview with a local politician during my fieldwork. This politician was explaining to me what he considered to be the “peculiarity” of politics in Corsica, its very contrast to the “main politics” (*grande politique*) – the politics as it is performed in the “big cities” or in “France” (which means in this context the continental France in opposition to the island of Corsica). He said more precisely: “You know, here, we vote for men, not for ideas […] What counts is the man, the relationship one has with him, the relationship he has had with your family […]. Here, politics is a matter of man to man much more than of ideology”. Form him, this is a “good think”: “There is something noble [in this], a network of solidarity, trust and direct friendship with people”.

According to this interview (and many others I can’t quote), the political affiliation results from personal links (friendship, solidarity, trust). Giving its vote to someone means much more than to express a political preference; it means to express an “authentic” bond between the voter and the candidate. An anecdote related to me by a regional politician is very significant in this regard. He was candidate in a local election, and a voter comes to him saying that it was in a difficult situation: he wanted to “give votes” to the regional politician (who had helped his son to get a job in the local administration and whose “family was very close to me and to my father”); but it was impossible for him to give all the votes of his family to the regional politician, because the other competitor in the election was one of his close relatives (his cousin, who had also “helped” his family). But the voter suggests a solution: “You know full well [he said to the regional politician] that all of us [the members of the family] can’t vote for you. But I’ll give you votes anyway”. And the family divides the votes of its 6 or 7 members between the regional politician and his opponent. In this case, voting is a very similar act to the gift analysed by Marcel Mauss: it demonstrates a “spiritual bond” between the voter and the politician; it is given as a testimony of a personal feeling and gratitude; and he creates mutual engagements and obligations.

[2]

However, this “authentic” and personal bond is very equivocal. On the one hand, it is stated in terms of moral obligation and selflessness (the duty of friendship); on the other hand, it is sustained by material exchanges (the favours). Voting provides access to the resources the politician has to distribute to his supporters (jobs, public subsidies, administrative assistance, public work contracts, etc.); and receiving “favours” implies responding by political loyalty. As a voter I interviewed explained to me: “Imagine someone gives my son or my daughter a job. It bonds us […]. Well, you’re not going to spit in the face of someone who helped you; I think it’s something normal […]. When the favour is a big one, you can’t refuse the vote [for the politician who gave it], it bonds us, and I don’t want anyone saying I’m ungrateful”. Refusing to vote for someone who’s done a favour for oneself or for a member of one’s family is seen as a “betrayal”. It could be punished by a loss of reputation (“You can’t count on him”, “He is not grateful”), or by marginalisation from the solidarity networks linking people belonging to the same local “party”. At the same time, a promise not kept by a politician, a job not given, a favour refused, etc., can lead the voter to withdraw his support to the politician. A politician I’ve interviewed complained about this situation in these words: “It’s true that we have to do favours, but you are to be careful with favours, because favours are like an explosive bomb. You can gain twenty votes on one side if you find someone a job, but you can also lose forty on the other side […]. You can make some people unhappy, and they come and say to you: ‘What! We voted for you and you won’t give us anything’ […]. They feel tricked, and you lose forty votes…”

Julian Pitt-Rivers pointed out this kind of ambiguity in friendship relationships in the Spanish village he studied in the late 1950. He noted that friendship is often paradoxical because “true friendship” cannot be interested (it would become in this case “vile calculation”), but the “bond of friendship” implies mutual exchanges of services and esteems. So, “while a friend is entitled to expect a return of his feelings and favours, he is not entitled to bestow them in that expectation”. The lack of reciprocity (of favours or esteem) leads to broke the bond and to a ‘re-alignment’ of personal relations”. The same could be said of the electoral exchange in Corsica: even if it can provide access to material resources and private advantages, it should not be presented as an interested act, but as the consequence of moral relationships between people. To put it in other terms, the demonstration of political loyalty (through the vote for example) is more significant in the intentions it reveals (the sign of a personal link) than in its materials consequences (the clientelistic favours and services).

[3]

The “moral economy” of the political links I’ve just described has been noticed in other contexts by social scientists and anthropologists as a key element of clientelistic

relationships. Shmuel Eisenstadt and Luis Roniger wrote for example in their handbook on clientelism that this phenomena is first of all "characterised by a simultaneous exchange of different types of resources – above all, instrumental and economic as well as political ones (supports, loyalty, votes, protection)", but also by "a strong element of interpersonal obligation […] often couched in terms of personal loyalty and attachment". Jeremy Boissevain, and other anthropologists of the Mediterranean communities (for example John Davis) have similarly underlined the importance of friendship and affective links in social groups in which the relationships are both instrumental and highly personalized. For most of them, these cultural codes of friendship and reciprocity help to legitimate the power and authority of the traditional political élites (in France, what we call the *notables*). In order to be accepted, the domination of the *notables* has to be supported by ideological justifications, one of them being that it is rooted in an exchange of mutual benefits. In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, the language of reciprocity contribute to the transformation of economic domination in "symbolic domination" (that is a domination legitimated by moral justifications and founded on the denial of the economically-based dependencies).

In such contexts, building a political reputation (a symbolic political capital) requires adopting types of conducts adjusted to the moral economy of clientelism. The power of the *notables* does not come from the population's passive recognition of their somehow "natural" authority and socio-economic supremacy. It also followed form the active involvement of these *notables* in activities that generate and maintain the loyalty and allegiance of their voters. Among these activities, the distribution of clientelistic resources is crucial. Until the end of the nineteenth century, these resources were primarily related to land ownership. Economic management of the properties by the "big Corsican families of *notables*" was closely associated to the management of the family's political capital and reputation. In a book published in 1887, the leader of one of these families described in this way the reasons and mechanisms of its political "supremacy".

> "I give my life and, so to speak, my fortune to our clients and our clients give us their votes. That is our secret". The same *notable* explained more precisely this "secret": part of the family lands were leased to peasants (tenants) under "fairly mild conditions"; and the "rigorous payment of the rent was not always required". Free grazing of herds in the properties of the family was "tolerated", as well as wood gathering or hunting (but only for the "political friends" of the family). By this way, the family received "complete devotion" of hundreds of voters, linked to it by economic dependencies but also by "bonds of friendship, loyalty and gratitude" (P. Bourde, *En Corse*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1887).

The *notables* also granted individual assistance (monetary loans, charity) or collective assistance (small public works: fountains, roads constructions for instance). They interceded with the public authorities on behalf of their "clients" in case of trials, land or commercial

disputes. The power of the *notables* came in this case from their ability to redistribute some of their wealth in return for recognition of their dominant status – which was ratified by the political loyalty and the vote. For this, they not only need to possess resources they can distribute for clientelistic goals; but they also have to adopt conduct that bring them prestige and reputation (what Max Weber called "conducts of honour") – conducts which demonstrate their generosity and sense of duty, which established their legitimacy and made so to speak "natural" and collectively accepted their "predestination to domination" (to use again Max Weber's words).

[4]

In Corsica, this type of political organisation and "culture" has not disappeared with the political modernisation during the twentieth century. The new political élite which emerged with the republicanisation or Corsica in the late nineteenth century, coming from the local middle-class (doctors, lawyers, teachers, civil servants, etc.), adopted political practices very similar to those of the former *notables*. Access to local elected offices, to governmental institutions for the leaders of local parties, influence upon the state administrative agencies, etc., allowed them to control the new channels of public resources allocation, to manage clientelistic networks and to gain the political support of large part of the electorate through clientelistic exchanges. At the same time, with the democratisation of higher education and the opening of new channel of social mobility, these "new *notables*" accessed to prestigious social titles (university degrees, senior professional positions) allowing them to compete with the former *notables* in the domain of social esteem and individual prestige. In other words, modern forms of politics (open electoral competition, pluralism of parties and opinions, development of state intervention and public policies, etc.) were established in Corsica without producing any deep changes in the forms of political ties between voters and their elected representatives (clientelism) and with no radical transformation in the characteristic forms of exercising political power (the domination of the *notables*).

Even in the second half of the nineteenth century, the regional development policies (agricultural planning, development of the public infrastructures and services, increase of public jobs, etc.) gave politicians access to new resources, which were often distributed through the channels of clientelistic networks. As Jean-François Médard pointed out, the functioning of the local government in post-war France encouraged the "mediating functions" of the local politicians and their "notabilisation": acting as brokers between the state administrations and the community they represent, there are able to manage "informal networks" in order to provide "services to the community and to the individuals", to reinforce in this way their "symbolic identification with the local community", and to gain legitimacy by the mean of the "patronage relations" into this community. So, the clientelistic practices have adapted to political modernisation, i. e. to the establishment of the

institutions characteristic of “modern” politics: local public bureaucracies (the resources of which politicians sought to control and manage); political parties (formed largely on the basis of alliance networks powered by clientelistic exchanges); and open electoral competition (among parties and groups competing for access to clientelistic resources).

[5]

In such a context, political relationships can continue to be perceived, pricipally in the rural districts and villages, as personal relationships involving assistance and protection on the part of the politicians, gratitude and loyalty on the part of the voters. The terminology used to describe and valuate the political ties in the interviews generally refers to moral obligations and duties of friendship and gratitude, much more than of ideological and political categories. Intercession of local politician remains essential to many individuals, whether they need to find a job, to ask a “recommendation” in order to obtain administrative services, public subsidies or public contracts, etc. The act of voting or expressing political loyalty can be thus a strategic investment to obtain material benefits; but he has to be expressed as a result of solidarity bonds, duties of friendship, obligation of reciprocity. This does not appear to the individuals involved in such relationships as a contradiction: with regard to local beliefs of what constitute a legitimate political conduct, voting can both express and individual’s authentic commitment (based on friendship and loyalty) and satisfy material interests. In rural Corsica, this dimension is still deeply present: voting expresses for people their grounding in a community, their membership in groups that are at the same time “markers” of identity and networks of solidarity within which favours can be exchanged and the pragmatic transactions of everyday life can take place.

Clientelism in this case cannot be considered as a political strategy to obtain political supports and to gain votes (as it tends to be in the recent mainstream literature about “vote buying”), but as a conduct adapted to the local cultural codes that legitimate the political and social relationships. The political reputation of a *notable* depends of his capability to act in accordance with these cultural codes, distributing services and favours and respecting social conventions that, in fact, deny the material and interested aspects of clientelistic exchanges. The mechanisms of the building and maintenance of political reputation are here very close to those of the building and maintenance of honour analysed by the anthropologists of Mediterranean world.. If, as stated by Julian Pitt-Rivers, honour is not only the “the value of a person in his own eyes”, his “claim to pride”, but also “the acknowledgement of that claim by the society”, the “recognition of excellence and prestige” inside the reference group, developing clientelistic strategies will mean to legitimately express this claim and have some chance to see it recognized and accepted by the voters.

For these voters, the vote and political loyalty is one of the manifestations of the recognition of the prestige and authority of the *notables*, but also a way to access resources and, at the same time, a way to achieve their "adjustment" to modern politics. By the means of the clientelistic exchanges, people gain access to rare resources (mainly those distributed by the state agencies via the *notables*) and turn therefore to their own advantage the electoral practices. The vote give them power – even if this power is partial and limited – over their political "patrons", who are committed to "doing favours" and responding to their requests. As pointed out by Jean-François Bayart in a very different context from Corsica (the African context), "the principle of reciprocity institutionalized by the personalisation of social and political relations" is as much an instrument of power for the dominant élite as it is a means to force this élite to redistribute "the benefits of power". By the means of the clientelistic exchanges, political activities and public policies become significant for the populations, because these activities and policies are closely linked to the stakes and issues of their everyday life that really matter to them. Clientelism appears thus to be one of the mechanisms of "control of their social condition" by subaltern classes described by Claude Grignon and Jean-Claude Passeron: a mechanism of appropriation and adjustment to the modern political institutions through their own cultural values, their own motivations and social interests.

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Jean-Louis BRIQUET
Directeur de recherche CNRS

Université Paris 1 – Département de science politique
Centre européen de sociologie et de science politique (CESSP)
14, rue Cujas
75005 Paris (France)
jean-louis.briquet@univ-paris1.fr

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Abstract

While established on the exchange of material benefits (goods and services in return for political support), clientelistic relationships involve inter-individual links, often expressed in terms of friendship, personal attachment and solidarity, sense of duty, or gratitude. People are expected to act according to moral obligations (providing favours to their allies for politicians; returning these favours with political loyalty for their electorate), at risk of losing their reputation and social status. Based on a fieldwork research on local politics in Corsica, the paper analyses these moral obligations and the way in which they influence on the one hand the exercise and legitimation of political authority, on the other hand the conception of political commitment and loyalty among ordinary citizens. It is argued that clientelism doesn't manifest a "traditional" culture antagonistic to modern democratic standards, but results of the appropriation and reshaping of modern state institutions and electoral mechanisms by the local society.