

## Setting an Ethnography of Material Culture in Madrid in its Historical Context

**Date :** November 2, 2007

*Marjorie Murray, Anthropology, UCL*

In his critical analysis of the Castilian character at the end of the nineteenth century Miguel de Unamuno described them as people who see things as clear-cut as their climate and landscape; 'an extreme climate without sweet warmth, with a landscape that is uniform in its contrasts' (1895: 182). He suggested that people there observe the world in discreet terms. He suggested this could be easily appreciated in the pictures of the old school of Castilian painters, which realism lacks gradations or the soft transition of nimbus. He makes a similar point when describing the Golden Century Theatre in Spain, particularly that of Calderón, whose characters don't lack internal contradiction when compared with Shakespearean ones and whose stories he describes as slow, sensual and full of didactic clues for the audience.

During the nineteenth century -that in which the position of Spain in the world was definitely

questioned- Castilian literature and theatre drifted from romanticism to realism in the search for a detailed description and representation of their 'traditional', stereotyped local characters; their work, psychological attitudes, social class and customs. These characters performed regularly in new shorter and cheaper plays (the *género chico* or small plays of one act) and the zarzuelas to which a wider range of the population had both access and interest. These genres of antiheroes ranged from the young maid coming to town, the ironing lady and the *sereno* (night guard in the streets) to the young MP or the beggar. This was the time when the now mythical '*chulapos*' and '*chulapas*' came to existence both in stage and the street, hanging carnations and Manila shawls. As part of my ethnography of material culture genres in Madrid I spent long hours studying people's clothing through the analysis of wardrobes, with detailed discussions and comments on others' outfits such as those of people in the media and shopping. One of the obvious conclusions is that clothing is the best tool for a detailed and sophisticated identification of stereotypes -as well as individuality in the small touches or the capacity for combination. They tend to characterise not serenos or '*cursis*' (a nineteenth century character of the new rich and bad taste to which several books were devoted at that time) but give detailed descriptions of the '*pijos*' (upper middle class and upper class that show off with certain labels, etc.), the '*modernos*' (moderns as against to classic) or the '*horteras*' (cheap and with bad taste) just to name a few. Most of my informants identified a range of such characters and are quick in incorporating new ones as they appear in the city. More surprisingly, they frequently describe themselves as belonging to one or other category and they have a profound knowledge of the aesthetic option that they have thereby chosen. .

Stereotyping and clothing reveal some of the most profound characteristics in Madrilenian society. I will use here Inditex –the giant retailer best known for its brand Zara- as an example of how affluent and cosmopolitan Madrid has redefined but not eliminated strict clear-cut divisions, in this case in the stages in women's life course. Inditex is the master of the Spanish high street, with several brands and shops. If we concentrate only on those for women, we find that there are five different brands that follow the retailers' successful strategy of making fashion and style affordable and democratic. The names of the brands are Bershka, Stradivarius, Pull and Bear, Zara and Massimo Dutti. Very briefly, my observation of them in the context of Madrid's high street suggests that they embody something that is more complex than brilliant market categorizing and identification of taste; they also show how inevitable it is for women to end up buying in what they call 'mothers shops' (*tiendas de madre*). In a nutshell the story goes as follows. After a childhood of laces and pink, early teenagers can express their new stage in life through clothes such as that of Bershka, the most colourful and up to date fashion that resemble the looks of young national and international celebrities. Teenagers can also start buying at Stradivarius and Pull and Bear. The first one is urban and sophisticated, and much wilder than 'mainstream' Zara. Pull and Bear is a more sporty version of youth, with less black and more light coloured cotton in what many informants associate with 'affordable surfer clothing'. Zara welcomes the students and workers in its formal, work and casual clothes sections as well as a section that is more expensive and quality that is certainly targeting middle aged and perhaps mothers, as the range of sizes evidently show. Massimo Dutti is a higher end version of Zara in which the extra euros paid, the more 'classical' cuts and colours -as informants put it-, give a sense of elegance that is absent in the other brands.

What I find interesting is how informants themselves associate each of these shops with groups of women in society, that are not only defined by taste (or even class) but very much by life stages. The irreverent young girl in shiny shoes and mini skirt will inevitably end up in something like the middle- age section of Zara or Massimo Dutti depending on their work and income. This takes place before they are 'sent out' to the proper 'mothers' shops' (*tiendas de madre*) as they call them, that range from department store El Corte Inglés to local 'mothers' shops' and the recently arrived cheaper Chinese clothes shops. Put another way, people in Madrid suggest that 'styles' through clothing tend to 'disappear' after a certain age; there is a time to play the corresponding character, which is reinforced through the right characterisation of the role. As a youngster you can select among different characters (from Goths to *pijas*); as a mother the options are reduced and you should focus on learning your part very well. This must be considered when thinking of the 'Peter Pan' phenomena or the avoidance of making the big step to adulthood and maternity in today's Spain. If the peasant girl made the biggest step in life passing from virginal long hair to short hair and pearl necklace the day after the wedding, contemporary women in Madrid go through a more sophisticated and longer route but to a similar goal. Many will all end up in the *tiendas de madres* and will play this very hard role; eventually 'the performance of their lives'. I wanted to use this example to share some of the current questions regarding my own ethnographic material in Madrid. After months of analysing my work on different genres of material culture –including clothing, home interior and mobile phones- I am currently going through essayists' historical, and travellers' writings. I believe this is an unavoidable step in order to understand some of my findings on their normative sense of propriety and aesthetics, just to mention one of many issues.

Most of this historical and literary material is far from being ethnographic or anthropological but I hope it will help me build little by little what again Unamuno -a sharp observer of his people and times- described as the intra-historical in Spain, which is moulded but always crucial for the observation of events and historical circumstances. He believed in the *longue durée* before Braudel and I am currently asking (you!) whether this is a right path to understand and explain my ethnography. At the moment it feels like I am trying to grasp something that is too ethereal and elusive, and it might not lead me anywhere, but it has certainly been one of the most exciting times in the process of writing up the thesis. It would be great to hear your opinions or experience as I guess many of you have gone through similar questions and decision- making when working on your ethnographic material and trying to link it with very different styles of historical and literary material that make up the background past to the ethnographic present Or maybe not? Am I going Quixotesque?