

The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 13 (2016)



Review of: Anthony Molho, Ετεροδοξία, Πειθάρχηση, Απόκριση στις απαρχές των Νεοτέρων χρόνων. Αναστοχασμοί για μια ευρωπαϊκή παραδοση / Dissent, Discipline, Dissimulation in Early Modern Europe: Reflections on a European Tradition,

Viviana Tagliaferri

doi: [10.12681/hr.11563](https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.11563)

Copyright © 2017, Viviana Tagliaferri



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Tagliaferri, V. (2017). Review of: Anthony Molho, Ετεροδοξία, Πειθάρχηση, Απόκριση στις απαρχές των Νεοτέρων χρόνων. Αναστοχασμοί για μια ευρωπαϊκή παραδοση / Dissent, Discipline, Dissimulation in Early Modern Europe: Reflections on a European Tradition, *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 13, 160–162.
<https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.11563>

Anthony Molho,
*ΕΤΕΡΟΔΟΞΙΑ, ΠΕΙΘΑΡΧΗΣΗ, ΑΠΟΚΡΥΨΗ ΣΤΙΣ ΑΠΑΡΧΕΣ ΤΩΝ
ΝΕΟΤΕΡΩΝ ΧΡΟΝΩΝ. ΑΝΑΣΤΟΧΑΣΜΟΙ ΓΙΑ ΜΙΑ ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΗ
ΠΑΡΑΔΟΣΗ / DISSENT, DISCIPLINE, DISSIMULATION IN EARLY
MODERN EUROPE: REFLECTIONS ON A EUROPEAN TRADITION,*
Athens: Institute of Historical Research / NHRF, 2015, 336 pages.

The present volume is the reworked text of the 2013 Annual C. Th. Dimaras Lecture given at the National Hellenic Research Foundation by Anthony Molho on the interplay of the historiographical triptych of dissent/discipline/dissimulation. In particular, the book deals with the theme of dissimulation that the author developed in the narrative of the lecture, giving first its definition and then configuring it as a spread of European practice. He analyses its forms through the exposition of six case studies and concludes with several considerations on the ethic nature of dissimulation in a mass society in which privacy seems to have lost its value.

Defined by Michel de Montaigne as “the most noticeable quality” of his time, dissimulation is the quality of concealing individual beliefs to others while holding on to them. In other words, people who dissimulate pretend to not believe in their own ideas, often simulating an embrace of other ideas that they do not really believe in (p. 187). The author underscores that dissimulation cannot be considered as lying, as recent scholars have done (Perez Zagorin, Sissela Bok), since the

context in which it was developed did not allow people to believe in a non-conformist way and to be transparent without running serious risks to their freedom and their lives. Traced as a diachronic and transcultural problem that dates back to the persecution of the first Christians, dissimulation is however found to be expressed at its best in the Renaissance’s troubled years of rapid changes. It represented an alternative way to express dissent and to resist the disciplination of a society operated by both religious and secular powers. In this sense, dissimulation has to be read according to a historiographical perspective in which nonlinearity and contradictoriness are more relevant to the analysis, representing a way of expressing freedom while protecting dissimulators from the non-tolerant powers of the Church and/or of the State.

The author reviews the scholarship that deals with the theme of dissimulation, the work of Carlo Ginzburg on Nicodemism, the revision and deepening of some issues done by Albano Biondi, works on the theoretical explanations of the phenomenon (Perez Zagorin, Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, John Snyder) and the research

of a younger generation of scholars that pays more attention to specific groups of dissenters/dissimulators (Eric Dursteler, John Martin and Stefania Tutino, among others). The practice of dissimulation as an effective defensive strategy against the more strict control imposed by political and religious authorities, the Inquisition *in primis*, was a widespread European phenomenon. The examples cited give us the extent of the diffusion of the practice in early modern Europe: English Quakers in Livorno and Malta, Italian Evangelicals in Switzerland and Poland, Jewish New Christians and Portuguese Marranos in Amsterdam, Venice and Thessaloniki, Orthodox Christians on some Aegean islands, Lutherans in the Habsburg domains and Erasmians in Lutheran states, Christians in some Muslim lands, Moriscos in Spanish domains and more. The author calls it a minor European cultural tradition (p. 221), a common attitude to solve problems linked to official orthodoxy and dissent.

With simple, clear and elegant prose, Professor Molho offers a mosaic of narratives on dissimulation that produces a composite picture of the phenomenon from the sixteenth until the eighteenth century. The author's goal is to give an articulated perspective of the actual practice of dissimulation rather than the contribution of its theoretical formulation by major thinkers (pp. 206-207). The examples vividly illustrate the richness of the records and their uniqueness that nevertheless are thematically linked, as each of them is always referable to the conquest and defence of spaces of individual freedom in highly repressive frames, where authorities were determined to eradicate

dissent. The struggle was played out by the staging of a representation, since the dissenters were enacting different and often interchangeable religious or national self-identities.

The series of six case studies begins with an exploration of the first Jesuit mission of England in 1580, which ended with the capture and execution of one member of the mission, Edmund Campion, in 1581. Campion's process allows one to reflect on the theoretical defence of dissimulation done by the Jesuits, which supported as licit from the religious point of view the practices of equivocation and mental reservation. By the creation of an inner space with the binomial opposition heart-mouth, Jesuits theorized the possibility to say something while meaning something different without committing a sin, providing English Catholics with a valid tool for continuing to follow their conscience without the risk of being persecuted as traitors.

The second case study relates to the disclosure of the very essence of being Marrano through the stories of the two Iberian Jews, Righetto and Gaspare Ribeira, in the late sixteenth century. The two stories display a common sense of the self-proper of sharing both Jewish and Christian identities, of being a "ship with two rudders" (p. 252). The definition for exclusion of Marrano as something that is really nothing clearly labelled (not Jew, nor Christian, nor Turk) is linked with a pattern in the Marranos' behaviour that makes them easily mutable from one identity to others without any feeling of contradiction, even though there might be certain anxiety generated by the desire of Jewishness.

The third story is about a Christian renegade, Giovanni Mangiali *greco*, who returned to Christianity after a period of being Muslim. We find again the doctrine of the internal faith and external actions, accepted by the Roman Church in forgiving apostates. The open reception of this justification was common to several confessions, showing how the phenomenon of dissimulation was widespread and involved not only the weakest strata of the population but also powerful characters and famous and educated figures. This can be seen in the fourth and fifth stories, which deal respectively with the Grand Duke of Tuscany's secret decrees for attracting Jews to Livorno (1551) and Galileo Galilei's careful letter of 1613, in which he clearly avoided any reference that could be reconducted to the heliocentric system. In both cases we see how powerful people could shield themselves from an ecclesiastical attempt to keep under control their tolerance towards Jews and heterodox scientific theories, both of which questioned the authority of the Church. As for the Grand Duke, Machiavelli's advice to be both lion and fox in order to avoid papal excommunication is valid in this context (p. 278), while for Galileo dissimulation was the sole tool to protect his freedom (p. 291).

The final case study is about a Jew of Thessaloniki during a later period (second half of the eighteenth century), who

dissimulated not only his religious beliefs but also his national affiliation. The story of David Morpurgo and his dispute with Pietro Paradiso, both English and Hapsburg consuls in Thessaloniki, is revealing, since Morpurgo was not a dissenter nor was he risking persecution; instead, he was dissimulating in order to guarantee his freedom from national patronages.

Professor Molho shows once again in this agile essay his unique capacity for combining clarity and historical and philological accuracy. The freshness in the presentation of the sources, supported by his vast and deep knowledge, offers a vivid insight into the phenomenology of dissimulation. The author succeeds in making it understandable and valuable, as dissimulation is a practice very far removed from modern sensibilities, especially after the establishment by the Enlightenment of the myth of transparency. Moreover, in his afterthoughts, he considers the importance and the functionality of the ethic of dissimulating in a time when data collection and exhibition of the self seem to prevail without a proper problematization of the value of individual privacy and of the risk to our freedom that can derive from it.

Viviana Tagliaferri

*Institute for Mediterranean Studies –
FORTH, Rethymno*