

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Art of Making a Living in Naples

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Italo Pardo (2012). Exercising Power without Authority: Powerful Elite Implode in Urban Italy, in Italo Pardo and Giuliana B. Prato (eds). *Anthropology in the City: Methodology and Theory*. Farnham: Ashgate: 53-78.

and

Jason Pine (2012), *The Art of Making Do in Naples*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

The volume *Anthropology in the City* has opened up a broad discussion on the methodological and theoretical status of what has become known as ‘urban anthropology’, a debate that necessarily includes a historical reflection on the development of anthropological research over the last decades. With more than half of the world’s population living in urban settings, anthropology has inevitably become in great part ‘anthropology in the city’. As the editors of this collection emphasize, ‘urban anthropology should be intended simply as (more or less classical) anthropological research carried out *in* urban areas’ (p. 8). After years marked by a too abstract and ideological debate in anthropology, we see again a clear commitment to ethnographic research. The novelty of urban anthropology rests not so much in conducting anthropological research in the city as in the relatively recent application of classical methods of social and cultural anthropology in western towns and cities.

When Italo Pardo started systematic field research in Naples in the 1980s, he had to deal with the mainstream opinion in anthropology, especially in British Social Anthropology, that the anthropological paradigm could not be applied in western urban settings. The holistic approach was simply considered inapplicable in the study of ‘complex societies’. Furthermore the hermeneutical objections to the anthropological study of western cities threatened to block any research project in this field.

Pardo had already worked on ‘belief and thought’ in Naples in the late 1970s and early 1980s before starting his long-term fieldwork among the *popolino*, which he carried out between 1984 and 1993. The results of this research have been published in numerous articles and in the monograph *Managing Existence in Naples: Morality, Action and Structure* (1996),

a study that formed the basis for further research projects, in particular Pardo's work on élite groups. Though centered on his project on the Naples élite, Pardo's contribution in the volume *Anthropology in the City* gives a good overview of his long experience of field research in the metropolitan area of Naples.

It seems natural to confront Pardo's research with a recently published ethnography by the American anthropologist Jason Pine. In *The Art of Making Do in Naples*, Pine introduces us to the Neapolitan underworld of the neo-melodica music scene, the murky ambience of wedding singers, boss-impresarios and pirate TV channels, one of the most particular social backgrounds of Naples where the so called formal, informal and illicit economic activities overlap.

Pardo and Pine both tried to understand how people in Naples manage their existence. They have investigated the grey zone between legal, semi-legal and illegal economic activities in comparable but different ways, paying attention to different aspects of the life among a heterogeneous population. Both of them have avoided separating artificially the social, cultural and economic dimensions of the city, and have tried to illustrate a complex reality with all its vagaries and contradictions. Both have contributed to overcome a simplistic characterization of the Neapolitan population as a backward society, demonstrating that the reality is much more complex; they use, however, different methods and a different terminology, not least because they belong to different anthropological traditions. Pardo is known as a British-trained scholar. Pine belongs to the young generation of American anthropologists who shun attribution to a particular scientific tradition.

Pardo and Pine describe in detail the beginning of their fieldwork and the long, systematic process of penetrating the territory. They tell us about their initial difficulties and their first successes in becoming acquainted with the residents. For both the contact with key informants was decisive. In their publications the identity of those persons is encrypted by code-names.

Pardo started his research with the conviction that in order to understand life in Naples it was imperative to study holistically the city's ordinary residents. He strongly challenged the stereotype of Naples' *popolino* as a backward lumpenproletariat, an image that had been shaped by generations of sociologists, historians, philosophers and novelists. After a first phase of preliminary study which had revealed a clear contrast between the social reality of the *popolino* and its representation in the literature, he started constructing the case-studies of significant individuals and situations and examining local people's networks in order to

come to terms with the complex economics of social exchange. Studying people's attempts to expand their personal resources and renegotiate their lives in a complex system, Pardo identified a 'strong continuous interaction' between material and non-material aspects of existence, in which the relationship between morality and (self-)interest is negotiated. Pardo valorizes alternative forms of economy, interpreting people's creative activities beyond formal employment and formal unemployment as expressions of an entrepreneurial spirit, and he refuses to classify these activities 'as colourful examples of an *arte di arrangiarsi* (art of living by one's wits)' (1996: 11).

Interestingly, Pine has chosen just this expression to title his book, but he has given it a different interpretation from that established in the literature on Naples. The word *arrangiarsi* (to make do) is sometimes used by ordinary residents of the Naples region to describe economic marginality. Sociologists have fixed and amplified this negative connotation. For this reason, Pardo regards it as inappropriate to use this expression in addressing the social reality of Naples and, moreover, considers it absolutely damaging. Pine, however, applies the expression in the broad sense in which its practitioners, whom he encountered in Naples, use it; that is, 'as affective-aesthetic sensibilities, as well as economic practices, that traverse open fields of potential where there are no essential margins' (p. 309). Thus, the 'art of making do' refers 'to the alertness, adaptability, and celerity that are awakened by a challenge' (p. 23). Basically, Pine and Pardo see the *popolino* in a similar way. They just diverge in the interpretation of the expression *arte di arrangiarsi*. Both are interested in highlighting the element of creativity in people's attempts to achieve self-determination and personal fulfillment. Pardo describes their 'strong motivation to act in ways that give them reason to feel that they are actively engaged in the negotiated achievement of [...] material *and* spiritual well-being' (1996: 11). In the difficult context of Naples, most 'manage to make a living, achieve an education and stay healthy' (2012: 60). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, Pine describes their practices as 'nomadic', unfolding in an open space that is not 'mapped through (state-)regulated circulations and flows' (p. 310).

Pine began his research on the neo-melodica music scene in 1998. For months he 'frequented recording studios and TV stations, attended festivals, weddings, and baptisms, and visited the homes of composers, songwriters, managers, singers, and their fans, but it seemed [he] learned virtually nothing' (p. 16). People invited him to these events, because they were curious to get to know 'the American with the video camera'; at the same time, they kept him at a distance and set him on the wrong track by various means. Pine changed

his tactics and addressed people indirectly in various ways. He started to produce music videos that he offered for broadcast on pirate TV channels. He partnered with a recording studio and came in contact with a boss-impresario. In order to discover the role of the Camorra, he began to transform himself into a neo-melodico singer writing his own songs and looking for an impresario. He engaged in the experience of 'becoming-neo-melodico' until dangers seemed to accumulate, thwarting the process. Participant observation in the neo-melodica music scene, it emerged, meant entanglement in a problematic contact zone.

In his research, Pardo has covered the whole spectrum of people's activities, from the legal and semi-legal to the outright illegal, always emphasizing the fact that true criminals are a small minority and that Naples being so often associated with organized crime has been enormously damaging. As Pine was particularly interested in the neo-melodica music scene and its entanglements with organized crime, it was natural that he should focus on the nature and extent of illicit activities. Nevertheless, Pine has addressed all activities that inform the art of making do, from legal forms of favor exchange and semi-legal working activities to illicit forms of exchange and both murky and explicit entanglements with organized crime. To perform neo-melodica music does not mean to be a criminal, but many of the neo-melodica music singers have found working opportunities in circles dominated by organized crime affiliates. 'Singing neo-melodica music is one of the entrepreneurial arts of making do, and affiliating with a crime clan is an act of entrepreneurial excess. Between them are multiple and varying potential relations' (p. 62).

Among all arts, music probably has the greatest potential of affective binding. Indeed, Naples owes its fascination mainly to its extraordinary musical traditions. The great variety of Neapolitan musical styles and the capacity of Neapolitan artists to absorb elements from other traditions and create new styles is alluring. In the case of the neo-melodica music, the affective-aesthetic effects of music are used to create and reinforce identity. Neo-melodica singers are not appreciated so much for their musical qualities as for their ability to create affective-aesthetic atmospheres. They stage the lives of their fans while generating configurations of Neapolitan life toward which they and their fans orient their everyday experience. Using the language of the popular classes and melodramatic melodies, they tell stories that are typical of the poorer Neapolitan urban and suburban neighborhoods; stories of love and betrayal, and sometimes of fathers in jail or on the run.

Starting from the theoretical framework of performance studies and the Deleuzian theories of affect, Pine reconstructs in his ethnography environments and atmospheres,

avoiding the formulation of definitive results: 'Instead of telling sovereign truths, these stories perform truths in the transient affective-aesthetic time and space between speculation and unknowing. They invite contact with an atmosphere saturated with the intimacies, vulnerabilities, and indeterminacies of fieldwork' (p. 18).

Pine's book is written in a fluent style that in some passages achieve literary qualities. With his video camera he has filmed many events, but in some situations it was not appropriate to film or to write observations in his notebook. He could only count on his ability to reconstruct the 'film' in his mind when he was alone. This might seem a banality, for most anthropologists work in this way, but the results are really astonishing, considering the precise depictions that he gives of certain situations which surely could not have been filmed. He offers dense descriptions of his encounters with some of his 'partners' and informants in the scene. He paid much attention to the details of the outward appearance of the persons that he met, and to the interior decor of their houses. Pines' analysis of the psychology of some key situations convinces in as much as he succeeds in elucidating the inner logic of the dynamics of his conversations. To present his investigations, Pine experimented with alternative forms of documentation, sympathizing with Kathleen Stewart's cultural poesis: 'Instead of sorting things out and summing them up, I adopted a mode of attention that does not distinguish between theory, ethnographic practice, writing ethnography, and even reading ethnography' (p. 221).

Doing fieldwork in the neo-melodica music scene, like in many other contexts in Naples as testified by Pardo's work, means to work hard to get behind the masks of self-folklorization. With subtle irony people represent themselves as poor and oppressed Neapolitans, satisfying thereby the expectations of northern Italian and Europeans who desire a pre-modern 'Italian South' (Pine 2012: 216). The only way left to come to terms with people's tactics of mimesis was to participate in their performances and to practice the art of making do. Pine shot and edited music videos and commercials for pirate television first as an independent entrepreneur and then later under the direction of a boss-impresario, always in search for new clients who could connect him with crime boss-impresari who manage some of the major singers on the neo-melodica music scene. He did not hide his real identity, but people preferred to think of him as a journalist who wanted to find a scoop, and they accepted him because he represented for them 'a link to the potentials of publicity' (p. 167).

When Pardo returned to Naples to start his field research on élite groups he had to face once again the objections of traditional social anthropology. With this project he was

suspected to invade the field of competence of other disciplines like sociology or political science and the research methods of anthropology were considered to be inapplicable in this case. Participant observation and in-depth case studies, however, proved to be fundamental for an understanding of the élite's interests, moralities and behaviours and their relationship with the rest of the society. The combination of these field methods with the extensive study of documents from public and private archives allowed Pardo to produce an ethnography that clearly distinguishes itself from other studies of the élite.

In the early 1990s throughout Italy people's trust in the political system was broken by the great corruption scandal that has become known as *Tangentopoli*. The political tempest washed away the principal political parties, with the exception of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the neo-Fascists. In 1993, Antonio Bassolino won the election for mayor in Naples as candidate of the Democratic Party of the Left, one of the two successor parties of the PCI. Under his leadership, the 'ex'-Communists succeeded in staging a 'renaissance' in Naples by means of a superficial face-lift of the city. They successfully used public space to gain popular consensus and to consolidate their power. Shots of public ceremonies and events on the central Piazza Plebiscito document their popularity, at the beginning. As the years passed, these politicians did not keep their promises and residents' trust in politics faded away once again. Pardo interviewed traders, shopkeepers and craftsmen who had contributed to the urban renewal, whose efforts, however, had been ignored by those in power. Entrepreneurs widely agree today that in that period local administrators 'practiced a sanctimonious, ideologically biased and deeply self-serving style of government at the expense of the city and of its inhabitants' (2012: 69). Once in power, the new political élite worked hard at widening their power network, practicing clientelism. The 'consultancies' that had been granted to thousands of so-called experts and intellectuals caused great controversy. Naples' leftist rulers justified the superimposition of their political project on ordinary citizens on the basis of the stereotype of southern Italians as lazy and predisposed to illegality. Moreover, they used this argument to criminalize the entrepreneurs who had cooperated with the previous administration and to avoid paying for the work they had performed under government contract. As on other occasions these illegitimate procedures were legalized by *ad hoc* legislation. Pardo's final assessment of the political élite that had been in power in Naples for twenty-five years is withering: 'administrative weakness, bureaucratic inefficiency, expedient and selective policies and moral and criminal corruption alongside manipulation of the law, expedient interference in the process of legislation and

complex illegal practices' (2012: 73). Naples' leftist rulers have used the negative image of southerners to whitewash the shortcomings of their politics, and Pardo has demonstrated the disastrous consequences of resorting to this stereotype. On the other hand, a representation that claims to reflect the city in its complexity must also take into account that not all structural problems and social distortions can be ascribed to bad politics.

Pardo and Pine started from different viewpoints and focused on different aspects of Naples' many-faceted social reality. It would not be exact to say that they have obtained the same results, but there are interesting convergences. Through their fieldworks Pardo and Pine verified that the traditional categories with which work activities are generally analyzed were insufficient to understand the art of making a living in Naples and that a broader analytical framework was needed. The practices and sensibilities that Pine has observed transcend common categories such as 'formal' and 'informal' (p. 309). Boundaries are blurred between 'the formal and the informal, the legal and the illegal and the material and the non-material' (Pardo 2012: 58). Furthermore it has become problematic to associate unambiguously the 'formal' with modernity and the 'informal' with pre-modern attitudes. 'Rather than conceptualize the informal only in terms of what it lacks, implying that it is an archaism that vanishes with modernization, I follow continuities and interpenetrations across any figuration of the economy' (Pine 2012: 309). The distinction between the 'formal' and the 'informal' is dubious when it is applied in an abstract way, when it reduces a society's complexity. Pardo has illustrated the arbitrariness of such abstract categorization, inviting us 'to look beyond the formal categories of industrialism and the observable, material aspects of the Western concept of quality of life' (1996: 20).

However the research findings of Pardo and Pine might be evaluated, their fieldwork in the metropolitan area of Naples has once again demonstrated that ethnographic research in western urban settings with the holistic orientation of classical social and cultural anthropology is not only possible, but extremely productive, and that its results open interesting new perspectives in urban studies.