

## *Entrepreneurialism in Naples: Formality and Informality*

Italo Pardo  
(University of Kent)  
[i.pardo@kent.ac.uk](mailto:i.pardo@kent.ac.uk)

Urban Europe is a testing ground for key dynamics of negotiation of citizenship and, by extension, of integration versus exclusion. This article draws on long term fieldwork in South Italy to offer an analysis of economic activities that take place at the margins of the law and of their relationship to the formal market. The discussion addresses key questions on the extent to which the social and economic role of the varied forms of individual and collective entrepreneurialism, and the attendant culture, is frustrated by policies inspired by a culturally determinist approach and on the impact of such frustration on the relationship between citizenship and governance.

**Keywords:** Relationships between formality and informality; autochthonous and ethnically mixed enterprises; credit; stereotypes.

What follows is a reflection on key aspects of work and entrepreneurship based on the empirical study of the relationship between the formal and the informal in Naples and its Region, where a large informal 'sector' continues to develop, also involving in recent years legal and illegal immigrants of various ethnic backgrounds (Pardo 2009). Elsewhere (Pardo 2004 and, with Prato, 2010), I have argued for an anthropological understanding of the moral and cultural complexity and social value of individual action (Bloch and Parry 1989; Pardo 1996, 2000; Graeber 2001; Humphrey and Mandel eds 2002; O. Harris 2007; Prato 2010). Here, I heed this analytical *sine qua non* in order to develop a better view of current economic processes (Dilley, R. ed. 1992; Roy and N. AlSayyad eds 2004; Galemba 2008) and, more broadly, of key dynamics of legitimacy and legality (Pardo ed. 2004) in the relationship between citizenship and governance (Holston 2009; Pardo and Prato eds 2010; Krase 2012) in the fields of social policy, legislation, integration and access to rights.<sup>1</sup>

Ethnographic evidence brings out the complex relations between immigrants (legal and illegal) and native entrepreneurs in Naples in a context marked by a substantial gap between

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<sup>1</sup> Current debate among the international community testifies to the centrality of this topic in anthropology today. I refer, for example, to two conferences, one in Gioiosa Marea, Sicily in 2010 the other in Corinth in 2011 convened by the Commission in Urban Anthropology (<http://urban.anthroweb.net/xwiki/wiki/urbananth/view/Main/Past>) and to forthcoming scholarly gatherings (see [www.anthrojournal-urbanities.com/confna2012](http://www.anthrojournal-urbanities.com/confna2012)). Edited volumes, now in preparation, will offer concerted reflections.

citizenship and governance, whereby Neapolitans have long had reason to feel that they are treated as second-class citizens. This feeling must be understood in light of the long-established view that Southerners are deeply corrupt and that Southern society is undermined by a cultural sympathy with criminality. This seriously flawed view has helped to justify lack of investment, adverse credit policies and expedient legislation that meets the interests of the ruling élite but is widely received at the grassroots as profoundly unfair, and which objectively undermines local business. Case studies and participant observation among native Neapolitans and immigrants in their dealings through the city and beyond help to illuminate their interactions with each other and with the wider system. The discussion builds towards the empirically informed opinion that it is in the context of the failed full integration of native people that the integration or failed integration of many immigrants is cast and must be understood.

### **The Background: A Summary**

Italy has repeatedly embodied complex social, political and economic processes that have had international ramifications. In South Italy, such processes have evolved in unorthodox, though potentially innovative ways but this has gone largely unrecognized and perhaps opportunities have been lost. At least since the Unification of the country (1861), the stereotype has become entrenched that, bogged down by lack of trust in each other and by their amoral familism southerners are politically and socially backward; narrow individualists who lack social responsibility and cannot be trusted.

Endorsed by generations of writers (e.g. Banfield 1958; Allum 1973; Gambetta 1988; Belmonte 1989 [1979]; Putnam 1993), such stereotyping has informed the approach of influential élite groups to important processes of inclusion and exclusion, social, economic and political,<sup>2</sup> factually undermining southerners' citizenship. It has contributed to weaken a context marked by the combined effects, now exacerbated by the general economic and financial crisis, of an enormous public debt (over 4/5 of the annual Regional Budget) and of adverse financial and economic policies.<sup>3</sup> Weak, fragmented industrialization has led to a prominence of non-industrial and post-industrial values and official unemployment is high, though it is widely accepted that

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<sup>2</sup> Among the few exceptions, see Jane Schneider (2002).

<sup>3</sup> For more throughout discussions, see Pardo 1996 and Pardo and Prato (2010).

only a small part of the officially unemployed do not work.<sup>4</sup> As elsewhere in Italy (Donati 1997), criminal powers do provide illegal employment for a proportion of the population (the size of which is highly debatable), and some business do draw on criminal backing to gain unfair advantage through money-laundering and intimidation (Pardo 1996: Ch. 2). When exposed through judicial enquiries, such cases may well be inflated and over-reported in the media, in the interest of sales. However, this by no means accounts for the general situation. Many of the officially unemployed aspire to a secure public-sector job, identifying such employment as allowing free time to pursue rewarding ‘side-activities’ — in many cases, individual or joint enterprises that are strictly illegal but are licit in the eye of the actors and of their significant others bring to a head their strongly entrepreneurial approach.

It is in such a scenario that over the past twenty-five years local rulers have responded to the argument (Gramsci 1966: 216-218) that popular culture should be taken seriously, investigated and, then, uprooted, to be replaced (ideally, with its bearers’ cooperation) by a superior, enlightened conception of the world. While rhetorically opposing assistance and clientelism, and practising both (Della Corte 2007; Demarco 2009), they have pursued selective policies (particularly regarding access to credit) and have misappropriated public funds through corruption, for which they are on trial.

### **The Formal and the Informal in the Economy: Local Entrepreneurialism**

Since economic informality was conceptualised in light of African ethnography (Hart 1973) and sociologists applied the concept to industrial society (Pahl 1984), scholars from various disciplines, from Harding & Jenkins (1989) to Gibson-Graham (2008), have produced a rich

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<sup>4</sup> The nature of the informal ‘sector’ makes a quantitative assessment extremely difficult. In 2010, roughly six million southerners in working age were estimated to be involved in the informal ‘sector’ of the economy (Svimez 2010, 8). According to the Italian Institute of Statistics, in 2008 the economic value of the informal ‘sector’ was between 255 and 275 billion euro, about 30 per cent of GDP (16.3/17.5 per cent of the GDP). A 2011 Report by Eurispes and Istituto Italiano di Studi Politici San Pio V (212) and a recent Parliamentary Inquiry (Reuters 06/06/2012 at: <http://it.finance.yahoo.com/notizie/riciclaggio-bankitalia-sommerso-criminale-vale-095243438.html>) confirmed these data, at the same time pointing out that the informal ‘sector’ is larger in the Centre-North.

literature on reciprocity, informal activities and networks of support.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to the ‘dual economy’ view, unambiguously undermined by Breman’s seminal work (1994), my empirical experience has both demanded attention to the relationships between the formal and the informal (Pardo 1996, 2004, 2009) and pointed to the naivety of the distinction between work and employment (Pahl 1984), to the weakness of viewing informal work activities as a separate mode of production, as argued by Pahl (1980), or as belonging to a ‘casual economy’ (Pinnarò and Pugliese 1985) and, most important, to the misleading implications of the economic maximization view.

While concurring with Parry and Bloch (1989) on the interaction between the moral and the monetary in individuals’ action in the economic sphere<sup>6</sup> and with Wallman (1984) on the importance of resources such as contacts, information, time and identity, I felt that further steps needed to be taken in order to account for ordinary Neapolitans’ entrepreneurialism. Encapsulated by a culture of *sapé fa* (literally, cleverness) that emphasizes pooling *all* personal resources in the pursuit of goals and of betterment, their approach is firmly rooted in the morality and ramifications of a *strong continuous interaction* between tangible and non-tangible aspects; that is, between different kinds of resources and domains — material (money, possessions, the body itself) and non-material (encompassing the moral and the spiritual, the mundane and the supra-mundane) — that mark the social, cultural and political makeup of local life (Pardo 1996: Chapter 1).

Taking on such an empirical challenge has demanded steering clear of — unhelpful (Wilk 1996: 36 ff.) — categorical assumptions. It has emphasized that a reasonably accurate analysis must address actors’ formal position in terms of production and consumption and its role in the rationality of their choices, but must do so taking into account the key facts that, here, morality and interest are not dichotomous; that the boundaries between the categories of the modern organization of labour and between the formal and the informal are blurred. Such a view of individual action in the economic sphere, and beyond, helps us to understand that, contrary to

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<sup>5</sup> See the overviews offered by Smith (1989), Losby et al. (2002), F. Schneider (2005) and Hart (2006); but compare with Pardo ed. (2004), O. Harris (2007), Prato (2010) and Bardhoshi (2010).

<sup>6</sup> There is a growing literature on this issue (see, for example, Portes et al. eds 1989; H. Buechler and J. M. Buechler 1992; Gudeman 1992; Seligmann ed. 2001; AlSayyad 2004; Prato 2010; Bardhoshi 2010; Spyridakis 2010; Hann and Hart 2011).

pessimist claims, controlled forms of trust (Pardo 2001) mark the lives and careers of my informants through enterprising modes of exchange — often unspecified and long-term oriented.

Informed by a normative understanding of ‘work’ and entrepreneurship (Firth, 1979; Harrel 1985; Parry and Bloch 1989; Wilk 1996; Humphrey and Mandel eds 2002; Seligmann ed. 2001; Pardo 1996, 2004; Williams and Round 2007), the study of informal economic activities and of the ‘moral economy’ of work (Murphy 1993) remain in sharp focus in current anthropology. The ethnography that I have collected over long term field research in Naples and in South Italy has brought out gradations of entrepreneurialism that draw on access to community resources beyond official definition and allocation in defiance of attempts of the state to regulate and extract revenue from the production, circulation and consumption of goods. Thus, many manage to make a living, achieve an education and stay healthy. In economic terms, their *sapé fa* translates into establishing or expanding *independent* small-and micro-scale businesses in the context of a clear distinction between *lavoro* (work; that is, work activities that are rewarding and promising for the future) and *fatica* (toil; intended as unrewarding and unpromising work). Although such enterprises are mostly rooted in the informal ‘sector’, they generally address the market as a whole. A variety of legal businesses rely on workshops that produce goods illegally, evading tax on the purchase of raw materials and on the sale of finished products, as well as employment tax and other welfare state contributions (Guano 2010). A proportion of such products finds its way into the legal market.

Such ‘informal’ activities may not always be strictly legal and they may not always agree with the ‘laws’ of market capitalism, but they should not on this account be misread as evidence of marginality — cultural, economic, political and moral. On the contrary, far from being caught in a culture of short-term moves and immediate goals, even informants with a disadvantaged background are actively engaged in the pursuit of betterment with, of course, various degrees of success. Informants from all walks of life recognize that many *and* varied contacts are important in the pursuit of goals. While saying, *Chi ten’ sant’ va’ mparavis’* (Contacts with saints get you to heaven), they significantly negotiate their life and career strategies according to the principles *Ajutat’ ca Dio t’ajut’* (God helps those who help themselves), *Nun voglio sta’ suggett’ a nisciun’* (I don’t want to be subject to anyone) and *Chi pecora s’ fa’ o lupo s’ a magna* (If you behave like a sheep, you’ll become a wolf’s meal). The complex interaction, in the context of *sapé fa*, among

these important aspects of their culture is central in the link they establish between (self-)interest and moral behaviour, which informs their management of existence.

If we agree that our understanding of human beings in society must take very seriously the interplay between value and action, and that this requires an empirically informed awareness of the ways in which people merge social morality and personal choice into practices that recognize more than the self, then we need to ask whether ‘individual-oriented’ necessarily means individualistic. Anthropological debate (for example, Parry and Bloch 1989; R. Harris 1986; Pardo 1996) indicates that an astute answer must eschew confusion between individuality and individualism; it must steer away from a conceptual opposition between being *in* community (i.e., belonging to) and being *cum* community (i.e., being together with).

Recognizing that in today’s world individual action takes place in a context marked by imperfect competition, constraints and inequality, does not justify maintaining that these conditions are pre-determined and self-perpetuating. Distinctly transcending a sterile opposition between a market and an anti-market culture,<sup>7</sup> informants’ choices and controlled forms of trust develop in a situation in which small and micro entrepreneurs’ access to credit, an important right of citizenship (Barbalet 1988; Bulmer and Rees eds 1996), is made exceedingly difficult by overpriced banking services, property-based guarantees demanded by credit institutions,<sup>8</sup> high interest rates on banking loans<sup>9</sup> and dubious dealings.<sup>10</sup> These restrictions combine with more ordinary difficulties in starting, running or expanding a business. When people cannot buy money officially, they borrow at low or no interest from friends and family. Only in desperation will they consider borrowing from loan sharks, for here the considerable risks implicit in usury, i.e. credit transactions that carry excessive charges, are recognized across the social spectrum (Pardo 2000, 2004).

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<sup>7</sup> See Pardo (1996, 2004). Jane Schneider (2002) has convincingly challenged such a dichotomy.

<sup>8</sup> In order secure a bank loan, entrepreneurs must prove ownership of private property, the value of which is set against the loan.

<sup>9</sup> In the South, interest rates that are between 2.5 and 5 per cent higher than in the Centre-North.

<sup>10</sup> Some bank officials refer unsuccessful applicants to private credit agencies that grant credit easily and at high interest (Pardo 2000). Entrepreneurs describe the various schemes aimed at addressing this situation as weakly drafted and badly implemented (*Il Denaro* 16/02/2008, p. 9).

### **Between the Formal and the Informal: Interactions**

Over the years, I have kept in touch with my socially diversified informants and their networks, in many cases reaching outside Naples. A collective reading of the field-notes from my last fieldwork<sup>11</sup> brings out a classical theme in economic anthropology (Smith 1989: 309 ff.), as entrepreneurs increasingly find it convenient to attempt to operate ‘in the sunlight’ because, they reckon, operating informally (therefore, ‘semi-legally’ or illegally) is too costly, monetarily (the necessity of engaging in bribery was recurrently cited as a considerable drawback), morally and in time and worry (Pardo 2004). In some cases, the informal aspect is limited to fiscal matters; in others, it extends to a proportion of employees, some of whom are foreign immigrants.<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere, I have discussed the interactions between native people and immigrants and their relationship to the law and to social legitimacy (Pardo 2009). Case-study material brings out important dynamics in this evolving situation, which is now the object of an extended field research.

Pietro’s firm exemplifies important aspects of this situation. Now in his early thirties, he belongs to a family rooted into the Neapolitan sartorial tradition. His grand-father ran a bespoke gentlemen’s tailor workshop in central Naples with his sons, who later also opened a shop selling good-quality clothes. As big fashion designers began sub-contracting to smaller businesses, Pietro’s father saw an opportunity to branch out. He sold his share in the family business and used the capital and a small bank loan to establish a workshop working for high fashion firms. As his business expanded, so did the work force, only a proportion of whom operated in the workshop itself. There, skilled employees made the cut and assembled the suits. Others did this job informally in their own homes, avoiding tax on their cash earnings.<sup>13</sup>

While still a young boy, Pietro learned the ropes and, on graduation, became fully involved in the business. He put into practice his *sapé fa* planning a strategy that has helped him to expand the business and almost entirely phase out the informal element. Through three contacts —a local politician, an accountant and a business lawyer — he pooled the necessary

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<sup>11</sup> I conducted this fieldwork between 2005 and 2007 and have updated the empirical material through several fieldtrips.

<sup>12</sup> Relatively recently, Italy, traditionally a country of emigration, has experienced considerable, ever-growing immigration.

<sup>13</sup> They, though, did not enjoy the benefits of formal employment or trade-union protection.

support and information to buy large premises auctioned by a local authority at the periphery of Naples. Having failed to obtain a bank loan for lack of sufficient property-based guarantees and having ruled out loan sharks, Pietro used his savings and loans from family members. Later, the politician helped him to obtain EU funding aimed at encouraging local development and to secure grants from the Regional authority to employ immigrants and train local young people. Recently, Pietro has taken additional commissions, which, he says, ‘has involved further expansion and some risk-taking but so far it has paid off’.

Most of Pietro’s workers, including legal immigrants, are formally employed full-time. A minority works part-time. Pietro is particularly happy with two long-term Indian employees.<sup>14</sup> ‘They’, he says, ‘are highly skilled, loyal and, like all my employees, never miss a day work and get on very well with the rest of the work-force.’ Aniello, a Neapolitan part-time employee of Pietro, runs a workshop in his home, where he works in the evenings and through the weekends. He has trained family members and friends to operate the machines that he has purchased using savings and money borrowed from his social network. Aniello also employs part-time four immigrants: the three Indians (see above and n. 14), who work there in the evenings and over the week-ends, and a young Ukrainian, who also delivers to Pietro’s clients. When the latter, who has married an Italian woman, started delivering for Aniello’s workshop, he used Pietro’s lorry; however, bringing to mind similar entrepreneurial strategies employed by Neapolitan informants, he soon purchased a van and hired the help of a fellow Ukrainian.

Aniello produces clothes for the informal market roughly copying the original designs given to Pietro by the fashion designers. This new entrepreneur stresses that he is not interested in the low-end of the market. A Neapolitan seamstress in her forties who works for him typically remarked, ‘the market for cheap, low-quality clothes has been completely taken over by Chinese products. Moreover, I am proud of my craftsmanship and of the quality of what I make’. The first part of her remarks tallies with what I have been repeatedly told: regardless of the kind of merchandise that they produce or distribute, most informants say with obvious, if grudging, admiration that Chinese entrepreneurs have brought about radical changes in the dynamics and

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<sup>14</sup> One married an Indian woman who has joined him in Italy and has become a full-time seamstress in Pietro’s workshop. The other lives with an Italian woman who works as a secretary for a local accountant.



nature of the local economy. Neapolitan-produced cheap, low-quality goods have almost completely disappeared from the market because, as Chinese entrepreneurs have increasingly moved in, similar products have become available at considerably lower prices. Local entrepreneurs with the necessary funds, skills and contacts have specialized in better-quality products, benefiting from a tradition of skilled work, fashionable design and good-quality materials. As in the case of Aniello's production, these goods sell in Naples and throughout Italy at a fraction of the price charged by the high-street brands.

The activities of Lello, a local trader in his late fifties whose career I have followed ever since we met in the 1980s, will help to clarify key dynamics at the distribution and sales end of this grey area between the formal and the informal. Lello was thirteen when he left school and started contributing to the meagre family income by working (illegally, of course) as an all-round assistant in a local clothes shop. Later, he found regular employment in one of a chain of large shops and was soon noted by the management for his sales skills and good relationships with suppliers. In his free time, Lello used the contacts he had made through his job to start a small business selling ever larger quantities of informally produced, good-quality clothes to shop- and stall-keepers across Naples and the Region. He dealt in cash and avoided paying tax on transactions, which suited him and his suppliers and clients. Within five years, he opened a small shop in Naples. There, he sold formally produced clothes, keeping the informal part of his business sufficiently small to escape the attention of the law. About twenty years ago, Lello invested his savings in larger premises and involved his wife in the expanded business. All along, he continued to travel throughout Italy. As he raised sufficient capital, he opened a second shop in a tourist resort, which he entrusted to his children, who speak several languages. Lello has recently employed assistants in the Naples shop (a Pole and a Ukrainian), thus becoming free to invest time and money in starting a third shop in a wealthy area, specializing in luxury clothes. It took him three years to raise the necessary capital, for he could not borrow from banks (he and his wife do not own property) and refused borrowing from loan sharks. The increasing presence of foreign immigrants and some of the changes in the market that I have outlined have played a key role in his new venture. Chinese products have played a similarly important role.

Lello's *sapé fa*, contacts and knowledge of the market made him quickly aware of key changes. He saw an opportunity to raise money through the expansion of his informal activity. Having met what he describes as 'reliable and hard-working immigrants', Lello bought several

vans and employed (informally) two Ukrainians and a Pole to deliver to his expanding custom of shops and stalls. Having diversified his suppliers, Lello now meets the demand of two different sections of the market. He sells good-quality clothes in his Naples shops but, having found that stall-keepers especially struggle with keeping up with the demand for cheap clothes, he has established profitable relationships with a number of Chinese entrepreneurs who run workshops at the periphery of Naples.<sup>15</sup> Modified versions of the better quality Chinese-produced merchandise find their way in his shop outside Naples and to traders throughout Italy.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Lello managed to accumulate the sufficient funds to start his new up-market shop.

### **Conclusion**

Anthropologists have long argued that, with its legitimacy at stake, governance must effectively address the kind of working relationship with citizenship that is critical to the democratic contract. We have seen how a governance openly committed to misreading grassroots entrepreneurialism has seriously undermined the citizenship of a large proportion of Neapolitans, justifying the assertion of many locals that they have de facto become second-class Italians, caught in an entrenched context of exclusion both from the formal 'sector' of the economy and from basic rights of citizenship, increasingly leading to suicide (widely reported in the local and national media). With reference to specific immigrant groups, we have also seen how grassroots modes of action inform substantial, if informal, processes of integration.

In brief, raising important issues in disciplinary and interdisciplinary debate on the sociological ramifications of grassroots moralities and actions that affect in recognizable ways the relationship between agency and the system, the anthropological insights offered here point to the need for governance to devise credible ways to address action that develops outside the

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<sup>15</sup> Official statistics apart, the huge presence of Chinese enterprises is obvious. According to the Association of Chinese Commerce in Naples, around 15.000 Chinese people are active, of which 3000 operate in the centre and a similar number trade wholesale at the immediate periphery. Resonating with central themes in the literature (Harrel 1985), the rest operate in workshops located mainly in San Giuseppe Vesuviano, a small town in the province which has been almost completely taken over by Chinese immigrants.

<sup>16</sup> Like other entrepreneurs, Lello has part of this merchandise opportunely modified in a local workshop in order to meet customers' tastes.

existing law. Comparative case material (Breman 1994) suggests that in the current competitive global economic climate, policy and legislation must meet the sophistication and diversity of what happens on the ground with a view to encouraging ‘shadow’ activities into legality, including the growing number of ethnic and ‘cross-cultural’ enterprises. This is crucial to democracy because rulers’ recognition — in policy and legislation — of the structural value of grassroots culture and actions qualifies both participation and representation; two fundamentals in the relationship between the individual and the system.

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