

How the Crisis Helped Informality Re-enter the Temple: A New Sicilian Custom¹

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This article builds upon ethnographic material collected mostly in the Sicilian coastal city of Messina and in its provincial area over the last twenty years. Through an examination of how publishers have changed their book launches, selling behaviour and venues following the global economic crisis, I suggest that a multilevel uncertainty produced by ambiguous practices has slowly turned informal transactions into culturally accepted norms within the community, as well as penetrating locations, both sacred and profane, previously denied to them.

Keywords: Messina, Sicily, publishers, authors, distributors

Introduction

Messina is known for having suffered a political ‘cumulative inconsistency’ of choices (Moraci forthcoming), as well as sheer inability, collusion with supra-regional powers, immoral parochial choices and managerial incompetence (Mollica 2012), which has led people to what Pardo (2004) conceptualized as a generalised distrust in the institutions. In the Messina case, this is to be considered in the face of a devastating economic crisis that, just in 2015, contributed to the closure of some one thousand economic activities. In this article, I address this issue through an examination of how publishers have changed their book launches, selling behaviour and venues following the global economic crisis. I shall suggest that the uncertainty produced by new practices has slowly turned informal transactions into culturally accepted norms within the community.

Messina is the third-largest city on the Mediterranean isle of Sicily, after Palermo and Catania, and the thirteenth-largest city in Italy, with a population in September 2015 of 238,842 (Istituto nazionale di statistica 2015a) and of 641,734 in the provincial area (Istituto nazionale di statistica 2015b). Messina is located near the northeast corner of Sicily on the so-called Strait of Messina, facing the town of Villa San Giovanni and the city of Reggio Calabria in continental Italy. The distance from the mainland, at its narrowest point, is 3.1 kilometres. Such a short distance has led to a longstanding debate on the possible construction of a suspension bridge that could connect the isle with mainland Italy. The debate has strongly influenced the political agendas of all national parties as well as the recent socio-political and economic lives of the cities of Messina and Reggio Calabria, the isle of Sicily, and the Region of Calabria (Mollica 2012, Sacco and Scotti 2013).

Messina’s main resources are its seaports (commercial and military shipyards), cruise tourism, commerce and agriculture — mostly wine production and cultivation of lemons,

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented at the Commission on Urban Anthropology’s annual conference, ‘The Global Financial Crisis and the Moral Economy: Local Impacts and Opportunities’, held at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York on June 19, 2015. I am grateful to the participants in the conference, to the Editorial Board of *Urbanities* and to the Journal’s anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.

oranges, mandarin oranges, and olives (Mazza 2007). Messina hosts a Roman Catholic Archdiocese and Archimandrite seat and is home to a locally important international fair. The city boasts the University of Messina, founded in 1548 by Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the first Jesuit school opened by the Society of Jesus. I graduated from that university in the nineties. The city was completely destroyed in 1908 by the most devastating European earthquake and tsunami of the last several centuries, claiming some 80,000 victims just within the city, a city that was then the third-largest populated centre in Italy after Rome and Naples. Messina never completely recovered (Motta and Altarozzi 2008, Caminiti 2009). Large earthquakes and tsunamis usually hit the city every century.

The discussion that follows builds upon a multi-sited ethnography and in-depth interviews, focus groups (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999) and above all participant observation that I conducted mostly in the Sicilian coastal city of Messina and in its provincial area over the last twenty years. The ethnography on which I draw is to be considered ‘multi-sited’ (Coleman and Von Hellermann 2011) because although it focuses mainly on Messina it also covers the province, the isle of Sicily as a whole and other cities in mainland Italy. I have used the expression multi-sited in inverted commas in view of the several fascinating and longstanding methodological and theoretical problems posed by multi-sited fieldwork in urban settings as they have been recently and extensively discussed by Prato and Pardo (2013), and in full awareness that these problems are far from being solved.²

For the purpose of this article, the challenging conclusions reached in the analysis of informal transaction in two coastal, harboured and highly complex and dynamic Southern Mediterranean urban ethnographies are particularly relevant. I refer to the work of Manos Spyridakis (2012) in Piraeus and of Italo Pardo (2012; also, of course, 1996) in the Southern Italian city of Naples. Spyridakis’s study of former Keranis workers in the Greek city of Piraeus shows how workers struggle to cope with the extremely difficult conditions created by market forces. Pardo’s seminal work on legitimacy, governance and entrepreneurship in Naples brings out a number of economic transactions that take place at the margins of the law and are significantly connected to fully legal business practices. In conducting the fieldwork *at home* (Prato and Pardo 2013) on which this article is based, I faced the challenges posed by gathering data both in multi-sited ethnographies and in informal economic networks. My role as researcher was visible, including in sensitive situations. Perhaps most important, I am ‘known’ locally because of my past and ongoing research on local history and popular culture and because I live in the area, though not as a permanent resident.

Given these caveats, the aims of this article are threefold. First, it will attempt to show whether informal practices in the world of book production and sale serve as a way to solve new tensions, which sellers and purchasers are not capable of managing through conventional means. Second, it will examine the extent to which informal practices produced by the global economic crisis have changed the morphology of spaces that sellers and purchasers previously saw as untouchable. Third, it will consider the way in which the economic sector represented by small publishers reacted to pressure from large book distributors.

² See, for instance, Marcus’ (1995) and Falzon’s (2009) conflictual ideological positions.

In order to accomplish these aims, I will begin by recounting how I got involved with a publisher and consequently with book launches, first as a novelist and local historian and then as a university researcher. I will then outline my experience over the last twenty years with reference to locations and changing selling and buying behaviour in book launches. I will place a major emphasis on the limitations introduced by the so-called Brunetta Law in 2009 (Law 150/2009) and on the consequential informal practices adopted to flout those limitations. The chronological descriptions of personal events will intersect peculiarly local and wider dramatic changes related to the global economic crisis. Finally, I will describe the means devised by small Sicilian publishers to try to counter the effects of the economic crisis on their jobs. Given my personal involvement and the massive use of entries from my diaries as well as self-reflections, what follows will be narrated in the first person. This additional caveat is relevant as it concerns me first as a participant and then as an observer and an interpreter — and the fact that I will only speak of book launches in reference to this *parallel* activity of mine, thus not referring to any academic publication.

Redeeming a Young Novelist

In the mid-1990s, determined to put an end to the sentimentally turbulent final phase of my bachelor studies, I decided to write a book about love. After a relatively short gestation, I produced a historical novel with a tragic end. I took part in a regional literature competition, which I won. By chance, I met a publisher who decided there was a pretty good chance that that passionate love story historically framed in my native area (north eastern coastal Sicily) could sell. The novel was titled *Il Pianto delle Ciaule* (The Cry of the Daws, Mollica 1995) and was priced at 16,000 Italian lira, approximately 8 Euros. The publisher turned out to be right, as the book was reprinted three times and became part of the curricula of some gymnasia in the province of Messina.

Let me explain that from now on I will use the word ‘province’ for descriptive reasons only, because the province of Messina, like the other eight provinces in the island, was abolished by a Sicilian law on March 11, 2013 (*Gazzetta Ufficiale della Regione Siciliana* 2013, No. 13). However, it took more than two years of acrimonious debate for the Sicilian Parliament to pass a new law (July 30, 2015) to define borders and competencies of the new territorial units that were meant to replace the old provinces. They were given a new name, Liberi Consorzi (Free Associations of Local Authorities; *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Regione Siciliana* 2015, No. 32). Meanwhile, the three largest cities (Palermo, Catania, and Messina) were given the new status of ‘metropolitan cities’. According to some politicians, this change was expected to create a serious blackout in the administration with huge financial repercussions for at least 14,000 public employees. But ‘province’ was then and still is more than a hybrid administrative entity. In spite of the relatively recent creation of the first fifty-nine Italian provinces in 1861 in the then-new Kingdom of Italy, the name carries deep cultural and linguistic peculiar features which still today overlap the historically sensitive boundaries of the Sicilian Catholic archdioceses and dioceses, including that containing my native region, whose history was part and parcel of my novel.

Indeed, my novel relied on a systemic description of the territory, mostly based on ecclesiastical sources, as it was set before the abolition of feudalism.³ The local Bishop was lord of the area, thus maintaining both ecclesiastic and religious powers (Mollica 2003 and 2004). The novel contained a chapter about a tragic sexual interlude in the basement of a seaside medieval tower settled in the tempestuous early 19th century of Sicilian history. However, my romantic vein had not yet run its course, as just two years later, the novel gave birth to the lyrics of a Sicilian-language historical musical. The musical was set on the bicentenary of the reconstruction on the coast of a hilly medieval town, with all its churches and palaces. The piece, *Petra supra Petra* (Stone upon Stone) was represented in public squares and small theatres a dozen times (Mollica 1997).

We were, in the meantime, approaching the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. One winter evening in 1998, I received a call at my parents' house from the Bishop of my dioceses, whom I had met once or twice but never expected to receive a call from. He told me that he had received a call from my publisher, who was interested in publishing a book for the Great Jubilee and asked whether I wanted to write a book on the most famous sanctuary of the area; that is, the Church of the Virgin Mary of Tyndaris (Tindari). I said yes, and the following day I went to Messina and signed a contract with my publisher, who agreed to pay me one million lira (approximately 500 Euros) for the work.

Tyndaris is a well-known tourist attraction because of a nearby Greek theatre and the ruins of a Roman town that even Cicero had written about (*Action V in Verre* cit. in Mollica 2000: 50). The nearby Catholic Marian sanctuary is the second-most-visited place of pilgrimage in Sicily after the sanctuary of the Weeping Madonna of Syracuse. The place gained additional visibility when, in 2000, one of the most-read European novelists, the Sicilian, Andrea Camilleri, titled one of his bestsellers *Gita a Tindari* (Excursion to Tyndaris, 2000). The following year, this bestseller became a movie, part of the TV series *Il Commissario Montalbano* (Inspector Montalbano), based on Camilleri's books and broadcast on prime time on the main public Italian national channel, RaiUno, and later by the BBC (BBCFour).

Thus, the Bishop officially endorsed my publisher's idea because I was a young writer and, apparently, a promising local historian. However, friends told me years later that rumours in the dioceses pointed to the fact that he wanted to redeem me (and my reputation) from that erotic chapter I had included in my 1995 novel. If the rumours were correct, I had to assume that he had read my novel, including that chapter.

Unfortunately, my romantic vein did not last long and neither Camilleri's book nor the connected TV series had any dramatic impact in the coming decades on the sales of my Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 book on Tyndaris (Mollica 2000). However, that experience left a personal mark in the form of a strong attachment to local history and manuscripts held in parish and dioceses archives. This attachment was so strong that I applied to perform my Civil

³ Feudalism was maintained until 1810, when it was abolished by the Sicilian Parliament, although its abolition was sanctioned by the king two years later.

Service⁴ with the local diocesan Caritas after graduation, helping to catalogue manuscripts. Once I completed my Civil Service, I started writing books on local history for the same publisher (Mollica 2003 and 2004). I kept publishing with him in the following years and also received small municipal research grants to investigate local history. It became a sort of parallel activity to my early university career and to another (however much more rewarding and strictly informal) activity also linked to local history, as I carried out genealogical research for rich Sicilian migrants to North America.

In the meantime, I started touring Sicily with my publisher, visiting libraries, schools and public institutions in Messina and in small villages, towns and cities in the province. I soon found myself launching not my own books (which were few) but someone else's books. This process never stopped, not even when, at the end of the year 2000, I moved to Leuven, Belgium, to pursue my doctoral studies. Since then, every time I have returned to Sicily (on average, six times a year), I have continued to launch books. Sometimes, I see the book I am going to talk about just a few hours before the launch.

However, in the year 2000, when my book on the Great Jubilee was published, I participated in around fifty book launches in one year, mostly on Sundays before or after mass, and we toured almost all parish churches of my dioceses.

I should also mention a number of international book fairs across Italy. In my case, I launched my books with the same publisher at the international book fairs in Pisa, Turin, and Rome (the most important in Italy). Over the last five years, I have also started launching books in Tuscany, both because I am currently based at the University of Pisa and because my publisher, for reasons that will become clear later, opened a branch in central Italy, in the Marche Region. As I was often in central Italy, and could easily cover a number of regions, my publisher started asking me to launch books in Tuscany, where he now has some two dozen local authors.

So, I found myself in the midst of it when the global economic crisis hit and can testify as to how the habits of my publisher (as well as those of other Sicilian publishers) changed. Gradually, I saw him (and the others) starting to engage in new kinds of tours, first in Sicily, then in Italy and now apparently also outside Italy (as he has recently talked about traveling by car as far as Istanbul).

Book-launching Informality on Consecrated Soil

The chronology of the mostly personal events that I have outlined, runs parallel to formal and informal economic practices. With reference to selling and buying policies, a number of stages help define these practices and map their impact. In terms of locations, I will look at public (mostly city halls) and private (mostly churches) places. Needless to say, I will examine these stages through my own memory and files with a high degree of engagement

⁴ At that time, military service was compulsory for all male Italian citizens. However, regulations allowed people to opt, instead, for 'civil service'. The Statutory military service was abolished on December 31, 2004.

that cannot be hidden or denied, as cannot hide or deny that I did and still do enjoy launching books.

When I started book launching in 1995, and until 1999, I was mostly involved in Sicily and operated in ‘traditional’ — private and public places, both indoors (city halls, public libraries) and outdoors (squares, gardens). One of the first events was the book launch of a small pamphlet containing the lyrics that I wrote for the historical musical *Petra supra Petra* (Mollica 1997). The pamphlet was sold mostly outside the main village church following an early-spring Sunday Mass, and it was advertised during the homily, as the piece was about a religious representation and the main sponsor was the parish church. This kind of book was usually sold by young parish volunteers outside the church, in accordance with the tradition of putting the books on a stand in the *piazza* facing the main church portal, from which the congregation exit after mass. Most book launches took place in public places, such as town halls, although some took place in private premises. For example, I recall two events in a famous pub in the historical area of Messina.

I witnessed the first changes in the year 2000, while touring promoting my book on the Great Jubilee. My publisher never sold the books on consecrated soil, although we did usually speak at the end of the Mass beside or below the church pulpit or the main altar. I recall at least two book launches where my publisher sold books in the church rectory. On one occasion, the parish priest organized a party for my book and advertised it in the local papers and TV, which neither my publisher nor I expected. We later discovered that this was part of the priest’s personal ideological war against some TV shows, one of which was scheduled for that very evening (21 December 2000): Canale 5, a national private TV channel, was broadcasting live the final of the Italian *Big Brother*.

That year, as the president of the province of Messina had financially supported my book on the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, many book launches took place in public places, including half a dozen in city halls and in the province hall. The President and the Bishop had written short introductions to the book. Publishers were accustomed to adopting this strategy. Getting political or religious leaders to write an *Introduction* or a *Presentation* implied that the authorities would directly support the publication (for example, by buying a certain number of copies for public libraries or schools, or as presents that their administrations would give to people during certain festivities). Although I was living outside Italy for work, I continued to be engaged in book launching for several years, as I published more local history books.

A big change occurred in 2010, when a national law known as the Brunetta⁵ Law (law 150/2009), imposed restrictions on the locations and procedures of book launches. Indeed, this new law made it officially illegal to sell books in schools, municipalities, university buildings and even libraries located in those places. My informants in Messina and its province believed that this law was passed to forbid book launches, in the interest of the

⁵ Renato Brunetta is an Italian economist and politician. He served as Minister for Public Administration and Innovation under the third Berlusconi Cabinet from May 2008 to November 2011, coinciding with the start of the economic crisis.

largest book distributors. Needless to say, the Brunetta Law addressed much more than this issue. It included innovations considered ‘good’ by all sides — among them, the reform of public employment, the institution of annual targets for the Public Administration, introduction of mechanisms to assess merit in the Public Administration, the promotion of national and international mobility and the rationalization of disciplinary proceedings. And yet, as a consequence of the Brunetta Law it became impossible to sell books in city council buildings. Some small publishers went so far as to argue that the Brunetta Law was used by the state to help organized crime (the Mafia). Meanwhile, it became increasingly common to sell in new locations, such as functioning churches — sometimes just after the Holy Mass.

So, following the Brunetta Law, book launches had become unprofitable events. For the first year, the Brunetta Law was strictly enforced in all the places mentioned. Some key informants recall book launches banned even in areas not included in the prohibitions. The few book launches that my key informants held in municipal buildings, mostly in Messina, always started with the notice *Qui non si vendono libri* (Books are not sold here).

This state of affairs did not last long, though. After a year, book launches continued as before. However, the old practices resumed with some additions. Informal practices increased as the new law coincided with the beginning of the economic crisis. My publisher also resumed the practice of selling books, even though in most of the traditional places (such as public buildings) it had become technically illegal to do so. After all, to attend or even better to speak at a book launch is seen as something prestigious, and not just in the Sicilian tradition; especially if the event is close to or, better, coincides with local elections. Thus, just one year after the Brunetta Law came into being, mayors, council members, high-ranking public officials and police officers belonging to the Carabinieri or even to the Guardia di Finanza (Financial Police) again started attending book launches. Publishers resurrected the old practice of selling books; now, regardless of the ban, also in the presence of public officers, who were supposed to enforce the Brunetta Law but *in fact* legitimizing its transgression. Sometimes the latter even introduced the event, thus stressing further Pardo’s point on the legitimacy of not strictly legal behaviour (Pardo 2000).

Seen through the publishers’ eyes, the only ‘technical’ problem was the *locus*. Publishers are not required to issue receipts and have no limitations in terms of the number of books they sell, because early in production process everything has already been declared and therefore taxed. Only the place of sale was a problem. But what were technically ‘illegal’ places turned into places that acquired legitimacy through the active presence of those who were supposed to prevent the violation of the law.⁶

Meanwhile, book launches slowly moved also into consecrated locations, and they were eventually sold on the main altar. I was recently involved in this practice when a book of mine was presented in the main church of a village. The book was about mummified priests who were kept in the crypt of that very church (Mollica 2014). Something similar also happened in Montepulciano, a medieval town in Tuscany, where last year I was invited to speak about a

⁶ See Pardo (2000) on the key concepts of the legitimacy of behaviours that are not strictly legal and the illegitimacy of behaviours that are legal.

book on the timely issue of refugees arriving on the Sicilian island of Pantelleria, from the Maghreb or the Middle East (Rapisarda 2012). In both cases, the books were sold in front of the altar after the book launch.

So, reminiscent of the informal economic strategies of ordinary people in Naples (Pardo 2012) and the Piraeus (Spyridakis 2012), in recent years publishers have adopted new practices to improve their chances of selling books during the economic crisis and have devised ways to deal informally. At the International Book Fair of Pisa, my publisher sold for 10 euro a cookery book together with what was advertised as a Sicilian pumpkin. He brought to the International Book Fair of Turin a famous cook, who cooked in the publisher's stand and customers could buy *pasta al dente* and books. In 2000, he sold *Liquore di Fico d'India* (Prickly Pear Liqueur) with a book on Sicilian conundrums.⁷ In 2007, over two hours he sold alongside books two olive trees, ten boughs with fresh lemons and more than twenty mother-in-law's cushions (*Echinocactus grusonii*). In Calabria, *'nduia*, a traditional salami, was sold with books on traditional cooking. At the International Book Fair in Rome, my publisher sold books with pistachio, almond, walnut and hazelnut pesto, as well as salami, *cucunciagra* (capers pâté), and pistachio cakes. At the Siena City Council fair, he sold books with Brunello wine and *'nduia*. In Civitanova Marche, he sold books and *'nduia*. In the Sicilian town of Sinagra, at an international handicrafts trade fair for the day of the local patron saint, Saint Leone, he sold books with salami and *provola* cheese.

Encountering the Big Fish in Informal Waters

The economic crisis was clearly evident in terms of overall book sales. After a sharp decline that started in 2011, in 2015 book-reading statistics in Italy had become relatively stable compared to 2014. Book-reading was still much less common in the south of Italy, although in Sicily there was a small increase in 2015. However, between 2010 and 2014, household expenditure on books (as well as on newspapers and magazines) decreased by 18 per cent. This was a dramatic decrease, if compared with the 6 per cent decrease on overall expenditure on goods and services (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica 2015c).

At the same time, I saw that attendance was also decreasing at book launches. People were simply not turning up as before. As an informant explained, 'If a lady buys a book, then she cannot go to the hairdresser or buy a new dress. This (practice) is much more visible in rural areas where people are not going to book launches anymore' (informant #1). Traditionally, at book launches the public is expected to buy a book for at least two reasons. First, the member of the public usually knows the author, who expects the transaction to happen. Second, the person is expected to buy by other community members because of her/his attendance at the event. Since books are usually sold at the end of book launches, those attending the event but not willing to buy a copy of the book leave the room before the event ends, a behaviour that I have seen increase markedly in the last few years. Moreover, book prices have increased. As another informant explained, 'It is not just that the book is not seen as important anymore; people prefer other, less expensive forms of leisure, such as

⁷ In one day he sold the incredible amount of 120 books and 64 bottles of liquor.

Facebook. As a consequence, the *value* (my italics) of a book has enormously diminished' (informant #2).

As part of the wider, documented reduction in book sales (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica 2015c), also the number of books sold directly by small publishers at book launches has decreased. Paradoxically, however, publication of new books has increased in recent years. Would-be authors wanting to be published approach small publishers, who then use a different publishing house name to avoid using the name of their main publishing house on modest books while still publishing the new book for money. Rumours also point to the fact that two of the largest Italian publishing houses, Feltrinelli and Mondadori, have recently been publishing modest books charging authors between 8,000 and 10,000 Euros but have carefully avoided publicising those books. However, despite the increase in the number of books published, small publishers' overall publications have decreased. I found, for instance, that small publishers who traditionally publish academic books in their own cities, faced a huge reduction in demand as financial support for academic publications dramatically decreased following cuts in Italy's public expenditure on research and development since 2009.⁸

In general, people are buying less for other reasons too. As an informant put it, 'Recently we have also the triumph of advertised books' (informant #2), pointing to pressure to buy advertised books, while small publishers continue to face the extremely low prices imposed by the so-called 'large distribution', which, as an informant told me, '[...] is on the border of legality' (informant #1). He meant this pressure on buying 'advertised' books causes serious problems for those trying to sell non-advertised books, implicitly destroying the market. Big publishers are also affected. They pay for market imbalances, since they need to publish as well as distribute; meanwhile, small publishers can more easily reduce their distribution. The market is nevertheless damaged for three other reasons: too many authors; joint selling of books with weekly magazines or newspapers;⁹ online publishing. Online publishing, for instance, means that anyone can publish his/her own book. As a consequence, informants argue, customers select the easiest and cheapest choice. According to a key informant, for instance, even if the economic crisis were not felt in the south as it was in the north, people in the south of Italy saved more money (a point recently supported by Ferragina 2015), thus highly limiting their already weak allocation of money for books. As an informant explained:

'Let's take the case of shopping centres. Beyond a normal discount of 15 per cent, no other discount should be allowed by law, as this (the 15 per cent discount) is a

⁸ In Italy, public expenditure on research and development is considerably lower than the average for the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries (Consiglio Universitario Nazionale 2015).

⁹ See for instance *Il mio libro* (My Book) and *Il Filo* (The Thread), property of the two largest Italian publishing houses, the former belonging to the Gruppo Editoriale L'Espresso S.p.A. (<http://ilmiolibro.kataweb.it/>), the latter to the Gruppo Albatros controlled by the Arnoldo Mondadori Editore S.p.A. (<http://www.gruppoalbatros.it/>).

discount not linked to the price of the item. In addition, shopping centres often lack expert bookshop assistants and just a few books are on the shelves. They do not operate as bookshops. Bookshops are, in other words, subject to unfair competition. Licences in those cases should not be granted because those commercial establishments do not have the features of a bookshop' (informant #1).

As an immediate consequence, shopping centres, including rest stops on Italian highways, have massive quantities of unsold books. Those books are then sold for 1 or 2 Euros to stock buyers of unsold books, who then proceed to sell them at street or flea markets. However, large publishing houses can rely on their own shopping centres; for example, Mondadori has the large Mediaset S.p.A. group, and Feltrinelli has the Supermarket chain GS S.p.A. Informant #1 gave me a powerful example. He said:

'Last year, I was in one of the oldest and most famous bookshops in Messina old city which recently is run just by the owner. A lady came in and asked for an Andrea Camilleri's book. She said she had just searched for that book in a famous shopping centre in the city but could not find it. She found the book she was looking for in the bookshop, approached the desk with the book in one hand and her wallet in the other hand. Then she asked the owner, who was at the desk, for a discount, adding that at the shopping centre there was a 15 per cent discount on all books on sale. The incensed owner started screaming at her and asked her to leave. He refused to sell her the book, which was probably one of the few he would have sold that morning' (informant #1).

In addition to the aforementioned problems, publishers lament the structured disinformation on book distribution, as customers can only see the 'lowest price'. However, for the publishers whom I interviewed the 'lowest price' policy involved not just the cannibalization of small bookshops, but also large distributors' competing with the extremely important 'local history' book market niche for schools. This 'local history' market traditionally belonged to small local publishers, who possessed the proper tools and know-how. Indeed, small publishers have traditionally seen schools located in their areas as target customers for their books, since they usually publish on local history and popular culture. However, selling to schools has recently posed additional challenges. Key informants report that, alongside the 'lowest prices' problem raised by large distributors, it has recently become common for book salesmen for large publishing houses to be allowed (illegally) by heads of schools and teachers to peddle their wares in the classrooms. As an informant puts it, 'They (the book agents) also act against the law because it is not just immoral to sell their poor-quality books but it is illegal to sell them in a classroom. Even more so, considering that the potential buyers are minors' (informant #2). This informant was reporting on a well-known common phenomenon involving vendors giving gifts to teachers and heads of schools, who let them enter the classroom. These gifts can either be coupons or coffee machines, which usually include coffee capsules.

Trying to Escape the Big Fish's Mouth: The 'Book Tour'

A key informant explained the need for a two-pronged strategy adopted to face the crisis. First, small publishers need to increase the number of book launches, as this will help them reduce distribution costs. Second, increasing book launches brings higher visibility, which in turn helps to improve their chances to meet people and reach both new authors and new buyers. The latter point is extremely important, as it allows them to bypass the intermediate stage of distribution (which is totally outside their control). Indeed, distribution dynamics have recently become small publishers' main problem.

In terms of income, until a few years ago publishers and distributors shared basically equal percentages. As a product of the crisis, distributors started asking for a higher share. In the last two years alone, distributors' share apparently grew from 55 per cent to 60 per cent. However, including mailing costs and the cost of books lost or damaged during shipment, the real cost grows to 65 per cent. So, distributors have taken advantage of small publishers' increasing difficulties. Over the last five years many small publishers have gone out of business, as they could not manage in what has become an increasingly competitive market. Others have been forced to work for large publishers or invent new strategies to survive in the market. At the same time, large distributors had a strong interest in setting up a monopoly in the sector, which also includes the north of Italy. However, while small publishers would not give 60 (let alone 65) per cent to large distributors, because they could not raise the prices of their books, large publishers could raise their prices, thus increasing their profit. As we have seen, the 'book tour' was one of the strategies adopted by small publishers, as a way of countering both the economic crisis and the large distribution while pursuing informal practices that I have described.

When my publisher goes for instance to the central Italian city of Bologna, he knows that he has a chance to distribute his books all the way from Sicily and back. He can stop in towns and cities where there will be book launches. Meanwhile, he can enter into direct negotiations with libraries, suggesting his books to them while getting his share from bookshops that are already clients. This is one way to bypass the large distribution while engaging local book buyers. Of course, even when he sells directly at a book launch or fair, he still needs to pay not only for travel, accommodation and food but also for the stand and probably a hostess. He thus needs to structure the book tour, and if he is unable to do this he does not leave Messina. On one occasion, as I needed to travel south from Tuscany, I took part in many small book tours as well as in two- to three-day book tours, as I needed a lift from Florence to Sicily, with a stopover in Rome, and my academic timetable coincided with that of my publisher.

This new strategy seems to be working, as my publisher recently told me that he is setting up an association of small Sicilian publishers in order to reduce the costs of the book tour. This association will allow a small publisher *on tour* to bring with him books published by other small publishers, who would contribute to the overall trip expenditure (fuel, accommodations, etc.), while saving on personal and other expenses. He argued:

‘The big distributors are associated. Small publishers should do the same if they want to survive. We were here before the large distribution appeared and the Brunetta Law was passed and we want to be here still.’

Conclusion

In this article I have examined the impact of the global economic crisis on the modest, albeit highly symbolic, economic sector of small publishers. The research was multi-sited although mostly conducted in the Sicilian coastal town of Messina and its provincial area. I also played a direct role in the ethnography, as I have authored novels and local history books and was a privileged witness at several book launches. I have developed an analysis of the situation in line with what, drawing on his fieldwork on elite groups in the Naples, Pardo (2004) has conceptualized as a generalised institutional distrust. Pardo’s argument on the legitimacy of not strictly legal behaviour and the received illegitimacy of laws that are received as unworkable or unjust (Pardo 2000) is confirmed here by both publishers’ and consumers’ flouting of the law at book launches in the presence of those who are supposed to enforce that very law. We have seen that in this ethnography the tension between citizens and the rule of law reaches its peak when the law enforcers endorse, in fact, that very violation by speaking at book launches, presenting books there or simply sitting, often in high uniform, in the front seats. This happens both in private settings where the selling, although morally debatable (as when it takes place on a church’s main altar), is legal and in public settings (such as city halls or public libraries), where the selling is unequivocally illegal.

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