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## *Anthropology of Urban Inequalities: Weakened Citizenship in Italy*<sup>1</sup>

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Drawing on ethnographic evidence from Naples, Italy, this article examines the adverse combination, in everyday life, of a health system that is public in name only, of the misgovernance of a filthy, unsanitary and hazardous public domain and of the empirical consequences of central and local government's discriminative policies. I discuss the distortions brought about by these adverse dynamics and consider how they contribute to justify local people's feeling that they continue to be seen, and treated, as second-class citizens.

**Keywords:** Health care, public health, guaranteed vs non-guaranteed workers, second-class citizens.

It is beyond question that, alongside individual freedom, two non-negotiable democratic principles underlie the relationship between citizenship and governance. First, the power to govern must enjoy authority (Pardo and Prato 2011, Pardo and Prato ed. 2011). Second, the recognition of authority is directly dependent on the fair and responsible exercise of power.

An exercise of power that fulfils the demands of these principles enjoys legitimacy in society (Pardo 2000). The importance of this point for the democratic order cannot be overestimated (Stankiewicz 1980). Emphasizing a classic point in anthropology (Pardo 1996, 2000a, 2000b; Prato 2000, 2019; Gledhill 2004), in Italy (Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana 1947: Art. 32), as in other Western countries, citizens' rights are Constitutionally stated but they are unprotected in reality. In line with T. H. Marshall's (1950) the classic definition of citizenship and the rights of citizenship, this marks a significant difference between formal and substantive citizenship, between ideal and actual distribution of rights. Misgovernance and legal and illegal corruption in public life (Pardo 2018a) deeply undermine this *fundament* of associated life to the benefit of the ruling élite and their allies but at the expense of the wider society. This feeds various kinds of inequality which threaten the economic, social and political order.

Inequalities are at the forefront of today's public and policy debates on the major forces that combine to create inequalities and on how different forms of inequality are related to each other; such as inequalities in health, income, wealth, educational opportunity and family life, and gaps between rich and poor, and between different parts of a country.

In a democratic society, equality — of opportunities, of access to resources, to compete — continues to be a utopia. As a consequence of misgovernance, socio-economic inequalities are becoming stronger, more complex and ramified, and in many cases implicit, disguised or hidden. It is therefore important to understand both the impact and ramifications of bad governance and the complex ways in which individuals deal with it. Let us proceed step by step. First of all, why anthropology.

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<sup>1</sup> This article originates in a key note address that I gave at the Conference on *Inequalities and Health: Views from Anthropology*, May 2022, Accademia Peloritana dei Pericolanti, University of Messina, Italy, while serving as Visiting Professor at that University.

## Why Anthropology: Deconstructing Stigma

Very much in line with Giambattista Vico's teachings (1999 [1725]) on the significance of empirically committed thinking as a scientific *sine qua non*, Social Anthropology champions the value of in-depth empirical knowledge for theoretical development. Distrustful of both excessive empiricism and unjustified abstraction (Leach 1977: xvi ff.; Harris 1986: Chap. 1), this discipline is well equipped to clarify the processes of inclusion and exclusion that determine belonging to society and to investigate the distribution of power in the social, economic and political system.

As a classically trained social anthropologist, I have kept faith with the methodological imperative that a serious study must be based on the in-depth involvement of the researcher in local processes over a long period of time (Pardo 1996, 2017).

In Italy, I have done extensive research in the South and in Tuscany. In the South, I have done field research in Naples and Palermo. In my research among ordinary Neapolitans and local élite groups in the media, the medical and legal professions, business, banking, the trade unions and politics (Pardo 2017), I have systematically applied the methods of participant observation and the in-depth case study of people, groups, situations and events. I have been lucky enough to establish solid relationships with Neapolitans in different walks of life. I am honoured that over time many of these relationships have turned into friendship. When away from the field, such strong relationships allow me to stay abreast of local events.

As demonstrated by the recently published volume on *Urban Inequalities: Ethnographically Informed Reflections* (Pardo and Prato eds 2021), anthropological research that is unequivocally free from personal opinion and political prejudice helps us to avoid the conceptual confusion between *equality* and *levelling* and to understand the empirical difference between the ideal distribution and the actual distribution of rights — a substantial difference that is experienced on the ground in different ways and degrees. The powers-that-be may have an interest in blurring this important distinction, as in the case sadly known to southern Italians of the dominant rhetoric on the complex relationship between crime, in its various expressions, and the criminalization of people and behaviours that are not criminal but are stigmatized and represented as such because for various reasons they are not homologated to the rhetoric and interests of the dominant élite.

The southern Italian reality offers stimulating insights for analysis that have wide relevance, beyond geographic specificity.

Over the years, the results of anthropological research have shed light on the difficult relationship between morality, norm and behaviour. Interesting ways have emerged in which the ruling élite deal with the expectations and demands of citizens, and interesting strategies have come to light with which they often dodge the absolutely key task of reconciling their ideology of what is moral and legitimate and what is not with the values and life styles of ordinary people. As recognized by the most enlightened jurists, ascertaining these dynamics is as indispensable to jurisprudence as it is to political philosophy, to the theory of the state and, essentially, to good governance.

Promoted since the unification of the country (1861), a stigmatization of Southern Italians has been endorsed by generations of Italian and international writers. According to much of the literature, bogged down by lack of trust in each other and by their ‘amoral familism’, ordinary southerners are politically and socially backward individualists who lack social responsibility and cannot be trusted. They are dubbed as people who, devoid of civil sense, have transformed fundamental rights and illicit benefits into transactable goods. They, the stereotype goes, prefer illegal ways to lawful ones; subterfuge to honesty; dishonesty and violence to respect for the rules and civil behaviour.

This stigma and its contaminating ramifications (Goffman 1963: 4) have applied, in particular, to the Southern *popolino*. This word, *popolino*, is often used disparagingly by outsiders. My Naples informants are aware of this, but they use this word proudly to describe themselves. They have been collectively described as amoral and ungovernable people. They have been cast as a dangerous underclass — a deprived and oppressed *sottoproletariato* (lumpenproletariat), as they are called in Marxist parlance.<sup>2</sup> Those whom I have met over years of field research lack formal employment — and the benefits and guarantees that come with it — but they are very hard workers, profoundly animated by culture of *sapé fa* (literally, cleverness) that emphasizes pooling *all* personal resources in the pursuit of specific goals and of general betterment. They express an entrepreneurial culture strongly influenced by the belief that ‘God helps those who help themselves’. It is as a direct consequence of this cultural makeup that their social and political relations can be understood as belonging to a ‘moral climate’, a ‘way of doing things’, a rationality that has been summarily dismissed as casual *arte di arrangiarsi*. Depending on the writer’s interests, this unfortunate expression has been translated as ‘art of making do’ or as ‘art of living by one’s wits’. Spun to infamy, it betrays the mixture of contempt and apprehension with ordinary people’s approach, embodied by a progression of local rulers of various political persuasions who have systematically frustrated in words and deeds a culture and morality that, difficult to control because creatively committed to personal independence and discernment, pose considerable challenges to their power.

This long-dominant stigma is based on an implausible axiom between a numerically small part (even according to the most pessimistic estimates) of the population that makes a profession of dishonesty and crime and the rest of society. The ‘rest of society’ is the majority; people who profoundly healthy, work hard, make the most of their personal abilities and resent the approach of the ruling élite, now flexible, now rigid and dirigiste, but instrumentally finding common ground into practising various forms of clientelism.

Plainly, the stereotype of ordinary Southerners that I have outlined is unacceptable. It does not stand to logic. It crumbles under the weight of empirical evidence. And yet, it greatly contributes both to obscuring what happens in real life and to justifying punitive policies. Underscoring the critical opposition between independent analysis and analysis that is *organic*

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<sup>2</sup> For an articulated criticism of this literature, see Pardo (1996, Ch. 1; see also Stewart 2001 and Schneider 2002) and Pardo and Prato (2011).

to vested interests,<sup>3</sup> it has long been instrumental to policies that are averse to the reality, interests and development of the South. In short, this stigma has greatly contributed to determine the inequality of an entire European Region.

As an independent scholar, I am interested in an objective analysis that sheds light on the nature, genesis, exaggerations, limits and consequences of this stigma. I am interested in the ramified ways in which, over time, the game of exaggerating selected aspects of the situation and underestimating others has visibly damaged crucial areas of associated life and institutions. The last thirty years have been characterized by the appropriation of the high moral ground by certain southern élite.

In a strangely successful game of parts, from the early 1990s an almost ideal New South was advertised. This new world was dominated by rulers who, despite having long participated in the management of power at various key levels, succeeded in selling themselves as ‘moral champions’, as the ‘new’ embodiments of clean hands and higher ideals. Now, everyone was supposed to be happier. Yet, things have turned out to be quite different, as the renewed and stronger intertwining of politics, business and crime has matched powerful élites’ abuses for their own and their friends’ benefit. Interestingly, however undeserving and irresponsible in the Weberian sense (Prato 2000: 79), their approach seems to be unmovable. Paradoxically, this unconscionable approach seems to benefit from the low level of trust in democratic participation, as most citizens have ceased to exercise their democratic right to vote. This disaffection with local politics, though amply justified, is a dangerous development for democracy that helps to perpetuate the obnoxious political status quo.

This has resulted in a further extension and worsening of inequality. Notoriously, and classically, while judicial inquiries drive scandal but often fail to deliver convictions of the accused, many ‘new brooms’ have become involved in abuse of power, bribery and corruption, which not always break the law. For instance, in recent times, I have been asked to note, while in office, the Naples mayor ‘received a 15-month suspended jail sentence for abuse of office and a hefty fine for libel’ — these crimes were committed while he was a serving magistrate. He was subsequently suspended from office by the judicial authorities, appealed, and one month later was reinstated on a technicality. Equally interestingly, it was also pointed out to me that ‘his deputy received a 1-year suspended jail sentence for having assaulted a policewoman in the past. He, too, stayed in office’. But there have been other, subtler, ramifications.

Like those who have recently replaced them, these governing élite and their friends have thrived on a blurring of the dividing line between what is legal and legitimate and what is legal and not legitimate in public life, as they have aided and abetted the violent actions of local extremist groups and their ideology of the state as the enemy. Local commentators denounce Naples’ governance as deeply embroiled with these groups, who guarantee extremist support to the powers-that-be. Antonio Polito, the deputy editor of an authoritative centre-left newspaper

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<sup>3</sup> Gramsci’s ideas (1971) on the role of the ‘organic intellectual’ in establishing hegemony of his or her party (political and otherwise) in key domains of power and culture have been influential across the Italian political spectrum.

has described how these malcontents ‘have become his (the mayor’s) party’ and ‘his militant guardians’. In return, they have been allowed to settle in publicly owned buildings, like the Asilo Filangieri, named after the great 18th century Neapolitan jurist and philosopher. This building of important historical value was restored at public expense to be used as a venue for international cultural events. Like several other buildings in the city, it was illegally occupied by ‘collectives’, radical groups who were later turned into legal occupants through ad hoc Municipal Decrees (of 25 May 2012, 29 December 2015 and 01 June 2016). While the previous local rulers are under investigation for abuse of office and damage to the public purse, the recently elected rulers have awarded to these groups 30 million Euro for the upgrade of what are now legally their buildings. This share of the EU funds awarded to Italy is part of the 210 million Euro assigned by the national government to the Naples administration (Garau 2022). Part of the *Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza*, this money is supposed to inject some lifeblood into the city’s finances, which, evidently mismanaged, are on the brink of financial insolvency.

Meanwhile, as we shall see, Naples remains a dangerous and dirty place; a city marred by administrative inefficiency, wildcat strikes and street crime. A city whose public purse is perilously close to insolvency.

Ethnographic evidence highlights broader issues of high comparative value as it testifies to the tyranny, in Hanna Arendt’s sense (1951) of the structural inequality that historically undermines local society; a tyranny now dramatically evidenced by the impact of Covid-19. Anthropological reflection helps us to understand the tension between the *de jure* and the *de facto* legitimacy that qualifies ordinary Neapolitans’ access to healthcare, their right to public health and safety and growing precariousness in their lives. In a national scenario dominated by the unspoken but pervasive fraudulent idea that the tax-paying citizen is in debt with the state, they are dealt a mighty triple blow. A triple blow that effectively turns them, as they say, into ‘*figli di un Dio minore*’ (children of a lesser god), citizens whose life is *made* pervasively hazardous and precarious. They must contend with a health service that, increasingly, is public in name only. They are forced to live in a filthy and hazardous public domain. They are subjected to discriminative policies that disadvantage large, vulnerable proportions of the population. As I explain in a forthcoming essay (Pardo 2023), these three blows need attention, as they add up to a toxic socio-economic and political situation. Here, it will be useful to outline them briefly.

### Three Blows to Ordinary Italians

#### 1. A Public Health Service?

In Italy, healthcare has been gradually turned from a citizen’s right to a commodity. Since the early 1990, this progression has ridden on the back of the so-called *intra moenia* scheme, whereby medical personnel are legally allowed to exercise privately while they are publicly employed in the ‘Aziende Sanitarie Locali’; literally — indeed ominously — Local Healthcare Corporations, generally known by the acronym ASL. The ASLs are part-funded by the central government and are managed by the Regional authorities, which, as Prato has noted (2022), explains significant variations (in technical equipment, personnel, performance, cost to the patient, and so on) across

Italy's 21 Regions. Flying in the face of the Constitutional principle that healthcare is a citizen's right (one's taxes pay, of course among other things, for one's healthcare), an ever-expanding proportion of medical and pharmaceutical services is accessible only by private purchase, and access to the rest involves varying amounts of payment. As brought out by the Fondazione Gimbe (2019), in recent years, these legal yet illegitimate dynamics have been paralleled by cuts in public funding to the tune of 37 billion Euros.

The impact of the foregoing is felt more in some Regions, like Naples', where the everyday reality of the inadequate and understaffed public health system raises serious challenges to key aspects — medical, moral and ethical — of the Hippocratic Oath. As a social anthropologist doing field research there since the early 1980s, I have recorded how the actions of some in the medical profession contribute to the deterioration of public healthcare. I have observed the conflict between the dedication and professionalism of many doctors, nurses and health administrators and the corruption — moral, criminal or both — of some of their peers, some holding 'qualifications' obtained through corruption (Beneduce 2021). They generally stay within the strictly-defined boundaries of the Law but practice what their patients resent as *de facto* abuses of power, pursuit of private interest in public office and monetary and career greed. These unscrupulous — and well-networked (Beneduce 2019) — medics, trade unionists, contractors and agents of pharmaceutical companies act, often jointly, with little or no concern for the patient. They routinely refer their public health-service patients to their private practice, or to private specialists, or to private test laboratories (in each case, tax-avoiding cash payments are requested), and so on. Once these professionals sell their public office and professional ethics, their profitable contacts expand, as do their lucrative contracts with private medical establishments and their favour-credit in their networks.

Interestingly, these efforts to turn patients into customers, or clients, or supplicants do not always appear to have the intended results. Stubbornly resisting pressure to make them subaltern to some 'superior powers', the ordinary Neapolitans whom I have met over the years have developed varied and complex ways to deal with this and most other distortions of associated life. As I have explained elsewhere in detail (Pardo 1996: Ch. 6 and 2017), inspired by their will 'not to be subject to anyone',<sup>4</sup> many have built multiple contacts and generalized relations of (often delayed) exchange. When in need, they use more than one contact, usually with good *and* relatively not-too-expensive results.

## 2. A Filthy and Hazardous Public Domain

The developments that I have outlined occur in a context where uncollected rubbish continues to jeopardise local public health<sup>5</sup> in lethal combination with the injuries and deaths caused by alarming levels of street crime<sup>6</sup> and badly maintained public property: overflowing sewage; falling trees; and

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<sup>4</sup> They say: *Nun voglio sta suggestt' a niscium'*.

<sup>5</sup> This continuing problem (Corriere del Mezzogiorno 2022, Folle 2022) has become entrenched since the early 1990s. Some of those responsible are under criminal investigation (Beneduce 2020).

<sup>6</sup> As increasing street crime dominates local news (Crimaldi 2022), Naples rulers are accused to have failed to heed top policeman Alessandro Giuliano's assessment and warning (*NapoliToday* 2022).

broken or uneven pavements (*Il Mattino* 2019); large and deep potholes; pieces of public buildings that fall on pedestrians (*La Repubblica Napoli* 2019).

Amidst medieval visions of filthy roads and pavements populated by stray cats, rats, cockroaches and feral packs of dogs, these hazards now include a ‘rubbish trade’, whereby illegal immigrants peddle objects scavenged from dumpsters and displayed for sale on rugs thrown on the pavement; a practice on which the authorities appear persistently inclined to turn a blind eye. In spite of citizens’ repeated protests and widely reported appeals to the authorities (Garau 2020), this practice has expanded across the city centre (Folle 2021).<sup>7</sup>

This dangerous setup is magnified by the practice of shallow-burying household, industrial and hazardous waste in dumping sites (Beccaloni et al. 2020). Over the years, pulmonary disease, cancer and death have multiplied exponentially (Senior and Mazza 2004, Martuzzi et al. 2009, Beccaloni et al. 2020).

In short, for over 30 years, local authorities have mismanaged both public property and what takes place in public space. That such mismanagement should have continued during the pandemic has raised widespread anger among citizens.

### 3. Discriminative Policies that Disadvantage Many

As authoritatively stated by Gian Carlo Blangiardo, the President of ISTAT (*Il Tempo*, 24 May 2021), ‘in 2020 the number of people below the poverty threshold reached unprecedented levels’. Meeting Prato’s discussion (2020) of new inequalities, he points out that the increase in poverty is explained by the loss of jobs and income, especially among the self-employed and the micro and small entrepreneurs.

Earlier, I mentioned the inequality between the privileged and ‘the others’. Let us now dwell briefly on ‘the others’ in view of the inequality between the secured and the empirical impact of this inequality, especially in times of crisis.

The bias of a certain political ideology against the self-employed and micro and small entrepreneurs is known and widely discussed in the literature (Pardo 1996: Ch.2; 2017: 39-43; 2021). This bias has played a key role in discriminating the non-guaranteed; That is, the heavily stigmatised Southerners who are traditionally forced to fence for themselves. At the same time, the guaranteed, enjoy secure, trade-union-protected employment mostly in the public overstuffed and historically clientelism-ridden sector. South Italy is marked by extraordinarily high formal unemployment (Banca d’Italia 2020, Bulian 2022). According to the Eurostat dossier of 2022, while the average EU unemployment rate is 7%, in Sicilia, Campania, Calabria and Puglia it reaches an average of 60%.

In this environment, most of my Naples informants are (by choice or more often *perforce*) self-employed (Pardo 1996: Ch. 2; 2017). They have developed excellent entrepreneurial abilities that highlight the socio-economic complexity that in most societies underscores the not-strictly legal but widely regarded as legitimate (Pardo 2000, Björklund Larsen 2010). Under contextual pressures, they mostly employ these abilities informally in productive economic activities at the micro and

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<sup>7</sup> For more on this, see Pardo (2020a).

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small level that, as amply demonstrated elsewhere (Pardo 1996, 2018b), expose the unlikeliness of the ‘dual economy’ view as they interact meaningfully with the formal in the market.

Recently, ‘those in command’, as my informants contemptuously call their rulers, have used the pandemic as a convenient trojan horse to grab extraordinary powers and impose incredibly unfair policies, while continuing to exercise power Italian style; ruling, that is, without being elected and staying in power despite losing the elections.<sup>8</sup> Lockdowns (inevitably impeding business) and the exacerbation of bureaucratic and fiscal weight have brought to bear the aforementioned political bias, amplifying throughout the country the inequality between the guaranteed and the non-guaranteed, with particularly devastating effects in urban environments like that we are dealing with.

During the pandemic, none of my ‘non-guaranteed’ Neapolitan friends received help or assistance, monetary or otherwise, from the local, regional or national government. Most are *popolino*, some are middle-class. Many were driven out of business. Many others who worked for small entrepreneurs lost their jobs. As always, they could count only on themselves. The ‘luckier’ among them could rely on limited help from their kin. Local stall-keepers’ experience typifies the plight of precarious workers’ struggle to survive. Referring to Italian rulers’ rhetoric of *tutto andrà bene* (all will be fine), one remarked:

‘Market’s shut. I can’t work. No one is helping. Savings are dwindling. My children and wife are barely coping. Nerves are frayed. The neighbourhood is dirtier than ever. Yeah, we’ll be all right indeed!’.

As a small entrepreneur put it,

‘we’ve been forced to eat the few savings from a lifetime of working without a parachute. Now I and mine’re truly in the shit, as we have almost nothing left to fall upon. If, God forbid, one of us should fall seriously ill as my little daughter did a few years ago, we’d have to borrow from loan-sharks. We have no patrimonial guarantees, you know; so, banks won’t even look at us.’<sup>9</sup>

The severe impact of this third blow has egregiously complemented the punishing job done by the seriously crippled health ‘service’ and the misgovernance of the public domain.

The precarious are more precarious, or dead. The guaranteed have kept their jobs and financial security; the well-connected have thrived; the wealthy have become wealthier.

In this scenario, one’s mind is drawn to the complications brought out by the ethnography of mismanagement of power that fosters difficult relationships between an autochthonous population traditionally tolerant of diversity and generally accepting of foreigners and the ever-growing number of undocumented immigrants. This substantial urban change, my informants in central Naples say, has made their neighbourhoods dangerous and unliveable. Here, as across Italy and

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<sup>8</sup> For an anthropological analysis of this practice, see Pardo 2021.

<sup>9</sup> I have discussed local experiences during the pandemic (Pardo 2020b). The forthcoming full-length chapter cited earlier (Pardo 2023) offers ethnographic evidence on the plight of these Neapolitans.



beyond, misgovernance has bred these dark overtones, engendering critical dynamics of integration versus exclusion and of tolerance versus toleration, as they have contributed to turning the autochthonous population's natural *tolerance* into *toleration* and, gradually, into *intolerance*, as citizens' instances have remained unaddressed and problems have stayed unsolved.

These oppositions and their worrying ramifications, I note, were incisively discussed fourteen years ago by Giuliana B. Prato in her early, bravely argued, critique of 'multiculturalism as a political project'. In a fine example of what Laura Nader has called 'contrarian anthropology' that questions assumptions that inform entrenched mindsets, Prato and the contributors to her book drew on ethnographic evidence from across the world to examine this obnoxious project on the ground (Prato 2009). Their robust analyses foresaw its failure, powerfully bringing to light its contribution to furthering injustice and inequalities; a failure now of course broadly recognized in the mainstream literature and, critically if belatedly, in politics. As we have seen, local examples of such a failure abound.

These dynamics tally significantly with illegal immigrant dealers being allowed, by default, literally to monopolise pavements, gardens and squares, while the autochthonous licensed traders are heavily fined for any transgression, including exceeding the space allocated on their trading licenses. The latter are identified and must pay — 'unlike', as one of them noted, 'the illegal peddlers who operate here, run from the police just to reappear when it is safe, and if caught cannot be made to pay because officially they've no income and often no identity documents'. As residents and traders in the city centre grow concerned for their health, a highly explosive situation is brewing, one that brings to mind past riots motivated by similar reasons. A young man who was forced by the municipal police to close his stall because he could not pay the fine was, in his own words, 'sorely aware that unlicensed illegal immigrants can sell what they want where they want'. He went on to remark, 'why I can't sell my wares but they can sell my rubbish?'

The foregoing spells out a plethora of serious problems, each raising deep concerns for associated life. Combined, they very seriously endanger individuals' health, security and critical citizenship rights, and undermine many fundamentals of the democratic order. It would be difficult to contest the view held by many ordinary Neapolitans that much responsibility for this dangerous combination lies with their rulers — local, regional and national. Let us consider briefly this point looking at abuses of democracy and asking the question whether such abuses are a done deal — whether they are 'destined' to go unaddressed.

### **Abusing Democracy: A Done Deal?**

In Naples, as elsewhere in Italy, the view is dire. The democratic covenant between rulers and the ruled has dropped into the chasm between some dominant élite's running roughshod over it — a practice that is peddled to 'the masses' as a bitter but necessary pill to swallow — and the real-world incarnation of such riding, which is widely resented as a rotten deal. This rough handling of the democratic covenant is both resented and actively opposed at the grassroots level as it patently protects the interests of the powers-that-be and their networked friends, in

most cases at the expense of the rest of society. Things have recently escalated, especially because during the pandemic people have had to live with the impact of local, national and international political inefficiency and questionable policies that are now under intense scrutiny, including from the judiciary.

In her recent essay on ‘Pandemic Emergency, Solidarity and Brutus Tactics’, Giuliana B. Prato has drawn on the Italian scenario to raise an important point that has worldwide significance. She writes:

‘The Italian philosopher Agamben has recently criticized the “techno-medical despotism” of the Italian government, justified in the name of the “common good”, but in fact resulting in the suppression of political and civic freedoms, of human rights and dignity (Agamben 2020). Internationally influential in the social sciences until recently, Agamben has lost the support of the Italian “radical” intellectual establishment because of his position on Covid-19 and his criticism of the government. With punctual descriptions and denunciations, he describes the government’s action as a “gigantic operation to falsify the truth” and points out how the Covid-19 pandemic has been exploited as an opportunity to bring in authoritarianism and a new political rationality centred around biosecurity’. (Prato 2020: 10)

Critically, far before the Covid-19 pandemic, it had become only too easy for powerful élite groups to spin their repeated disregard for the democratic principles of governance as a measure mandated by some ‘critical situation’, by some ‘emergency’. The thing is, such a ‘critical situation’, such an ‘emergency’ — mostly imaginary but represented as true — have become the established state of affairs in the country. Hence, the ‘extraordinary’ — but de facto normalized — step of *‘having to recur’* to emergency governments led and staffed by unelected people, who may sometimes be prestigious figures. It is increasingly clear that citizens are not gaslighted by this dominant rhetoric, which visibly lacks legitimacy at the grassroots. Yet, this seems to make no difference to the powers-that-be, as legal but illegitimate governments have regularly encountered only minority opposition in Parliament. Untainted by ideological bias or commitment to be *organic* to a political agenda, my informants draw on their lived experience as they remark that the support given by most Parliamentarians to unelected prime ministers and governments illustrates the point that Italian political culture appears to contain deep reserves of intolerance to citizens’ will and cynical manipulation of electoral results.

There is, of course, little comfort in the growing belief across Europe that many aspects of this Italian picture extend to the workings of the European Union. Many increasingly view the commendable ideal that originally inspired the EU project as having turned into an undemocratic, ineffective, even harmful reality.

### **Closing Remarks**

In closing, I shall remind the reader that, by definition, misgovernance breaches the democratic contract with citizenship. I may well be at risk of labouring a point, here. But this is a point that I believe to be fundamental.

When it affects people where it hurts most, I would argue, the legitimacy of the ‘system’ becomes dangerously questioned. The casualties are trust and, ultimately, authority. The Naples ethnography graphically exemplifies this progression in a country that has manifestly become a test case for social and political consequences of the eroded legitimacy of the system which, until relatively recently were too dire to contemplate but are now unmistakably real.

Bluntly, these brief reflections on the crisis of legitimacy in Italian public life remind us that, by definition, democracies may well be more resilient than some expect, but they are still fragile — and imperfect — achievements. In a national context marred by a succession of governments manned until recently by unelected people, we have examined how in Naples the actions of ideologically driven rulers elected by the minority who bothered to vote pander to the interests of select groups. We have seen how, holding power but lacking authority, this style of ‘governance by double-standards’ has contributed substantially to making life difficult at the grassroots, where it is resented as illegitimate.

The Naples predicament brings out a warning for committed democrats across the world. It spells out critical dangers engendered by the gulf between ruling élite and the rest. Some specifics may change from context to context, but here, as in much of the democratic world, the situation that we have studied raises the general warning that as this gulf keeps widening there is no simple road back to authoritative, because legitimate, democratic governance — certainly not from the viewpoint of the ordinary people who have to live with the practical consequences of this gulf.

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