CHAPTER 2

Making Second-Class Italians: A Progressive Fabrication and Entrenchment of Inequality

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INTRODUCTION

Much inequality is generated through ideology, corruption and privilege, compounding difference in nature and culture (Arendt 1998). As F. A. Hayek acutely indicated (2011: 149–150), a society and its laws that do not take all this adequately into account are harmful, liable to chastise the unaligned, frustrate personal determination, talent and ingenuity and disenfranchise merit—a tyranny equal to that of harming the majority for the benefit of the few. Both these specular tyrannies mark South Italian society and its history (Pardo 1996, 2019). In this chapter, the ethnography graphically indicates that if it is true that social privileges can be fabricated, strengthened and entrenched—as all too often they are, it is also true that, being products of society and not nature they can be overcome. Vico’s (1725) empirically committed thinking invites us to consider that while nature is not created by humans and is governed by
its own laws, society and its institutions are created by humans who make their own history. In a democracy, citizens elect politicians and elected politicians make laws which regulate citizens’ lives. The implications of how governments—local and national—exercise this power and how citizens respond are notoriously many and all but straightforward.

The present discussion is undergirded by my long-standing concern with the disconnection of the ruling élite from ordinary citizens and the attendant structuration and entrenchment of inequalities, belatedly recognized as a major problem in the European Union (EU) and across the democratic world. As ordinary people’s resentment of this disconnection grows, the questions arise, who (what part of the human society) is responsible for this, how they proceed to do so and who benefits?

Anthropologists classically investigate the causes of inequality and injustice contextually up, down and sideways. As a social anthropologist, I stand today as I did 30-odd years ago by the empathic grasp of human beings in society that can be achieved through prolonged interactive involvement in the flow of local life. What follows is based on the ethnographic material that I have gathered during several long-term fieldworks and updating visits in Naples and urban South Italy since the mid-1980s. In each case, fieldwork was preceded by the acquisition of background knowledge drawn from documents (judicial, historical, political, financial, etc.), media reports and other official sources. Each fieldwork relied on participant observation, case-studies of people, groups and events, focused but unstructured interviews with key informants and the construction of their life and work histories and personal networks. Lately, amid the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, my local long-term friends and informants from diverse walks of life have kindly kept me abreast on local developments through daily Skype meetings and telephone conversations (Pardo 2020b), and have gone to great lengths in gathering evidence from their surroundings and documenting local developments, also visually. I am deeply grateful to them.

Over time, I have come to recognize the profound significance of a sine qua non: as the Enlightenment-era British social philosopher John Locke pointed out, it is the explicit and implicit consent of the governed that confers political legitimacy (Ashcraft 1991). In other words, a government is not legitimate unless it earns and operates with the consent of the
governed (Pardo 2019). With specific reference to the Naples situation, I examine the deficit of legitimacy in Italian public life that both exposes the vanity of the monist approach to a culture that, we shall see, could be beneficially addressed in politics and legislation and raises the question, What change? Alerted by Hanna Arendt’s thoughts (1951: 380) on the perverse strategy that ‘started with elite formations and organized the masses accordingly’, I examine the kind of ‘revolutionary’ change promised by élite groups historically adept at riding roughshod over ordinary people’s instances and bent on teaching the ‘populace’ what to think, do, even feel. A separate essay will study the kind of change brought about by an increasingly Orwellian-looking ‘smart governance’ agenda—in many cases, now slyly exploiting the cover ‘offered’ by the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is broadly recognized that, critical to democratic society, a balanced relationship between citizenship and governance is directly dependent upon the recognized structuration of legitimacy and the attendant exercise of rights, obligations and responsibility on both sides of the spectrum (Pardo 2019). Worldwide ethnographic evidence (Pardo and Prato eds 2019) meets the recent Report produced by the Centre for the Future of Democracy (2020) in pointing to a serious crisis of legitimacy (Weber 1978: 213) caused by rulers’ mismanagement of responsibility and trust that has extensively jeopardized the credibility of democratic governance in public culture—not ‘just’ the credibility of the governance embodied by some dominant élite, that is, but that of the principle of governance. This bears important lessons that much of established politics keeps skirt ing but need to be learned, urgently.

It is beyond question that alongside the fundamentals of liberty and individual freedom, two democratic principles are non-negotiable. First, the power to rule needs authority for the relationship between citizenship and governance to work (Prato 2009; Pardo 2019). Second, the establishment of authority depends on the achievement and recognition of legitimacy across society (Pardo 2019). This links inevitably to the reflection that authority—specifically, the authority to rule—must be based, and be seen to be based, on the fair, responsible and accountable exercise of power. In line with T. H. Marshall’s (1950) classic definition of citizenship and the attendant rights, the authority of the power to rule in a parliamentary democracy is directly dependent on guaranteeing ordinary people’s right to choose their government. Recent Italian events exemplify a repeated failure to do precisely this, which, emphasizing a classic
point in anthropology (Pardo 1996, 2019, 2020; Prato 2000, 2019; Gledhill 2004), works to the advantage of the élite in power and their allies at the expense of the broader society.

In March 2018, a general election returned a hung parliament. The turnout was 73%. Italians voted overwhelmingly (50% nationally, up to 75% in the South) for protest parties of the left and the right—respectively, the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the League—whose rhetoric addressed key popular instances. In May 2018, these parties formed a coalition government led by an unelected lawyer, Giuseppe Conte. In August 2019, that government fell. In September 2019, a new government was formed and at the time of writing is still in power. Headed, again, by Giuseppe Conte, it includes two ex-archenemies, the M5S party and the Democratic Party (henceforth, PD); the latter had been voted out of power in 2018 (la Repubblica, 4 March 2018).

The double volte-face that defines this marriage of convenience at the country’s top level has surprised few Italians, given the M5S’s political inconsistency, the PD’s track record and the unequivocal attachment to power of both. The PD is the current incarnation of the old PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano, Italian Communist Party), which for many decades was the largest Communist party in the West. The PD is the last instalment of a saga that has made the Italian public see the Communists as modern leopards (Prato 1995), embodiments of the Italian penchant for changing all without actually changing anything; a penchant so masterfully fictionalized by Tomasi di Lampedusa (1958) as to become a world-famous by-word for instrumental political turn-coating. In 1991, the PCI became PDS (Partito Democratico della Sinistra, Democratic Party of the Left) but kept its hammer and sickle symbol on a red background. Later, having its leaders declared that Marxism was obsolete and Communism belonged to the past, the Party’s name was changed again; this time, into DS (Democratici di Sinistra, Democrats of the Left). Still later, the DS were joined by some ex-Christian Democrats and became PD.

Like most political punters, the ordinary citizens to whom I have spoken denounce this marriage of convenience as a ‘sleight of hand’ that, in breach of a key principle of democracy (Stankiewicz 1980), is openly intended to procrastinate what promises to be an adverse electoral judgement day. My Naples informant Lello, a local shop-keeper in his sixties, echoes a nation-wide sentiment when he says, ‘These people just want to stay comfortably seated in Parliament, holding on to their huge
pays, privileges and power. Not one of them cares about people like me’. As shown by Prato’s fine account of ribaltone (turnaround) in the Southern city of Brindisi (2019), this ‘sleight of hand’ has dangerous precedents in Italy, where the illegitimate—though legal—attachment to power no matter what appears to have become entrenched.

National events are worth summarizing. For seven years, from 2011—when medley pressures forced the elected government from office—to 2018, Italians were ruled by unelected governments led by unelected people appointed by the President of the Republic\(^2\) and supported by a slight majority of MPs belonging to various parties. Technically, constitutional law was not broken. Like later sleights of hands, these actions were nonetheless resented across Italy as profoundly illegitimate, not least because they ramified into highly disruptive consequences, seriously harming ordinary people’s livelihood (Dolcino 2013; Friedman 2014). My informants across the social spectrum saw those events as larval versions of those insightfully identified by Arendt in her work on totalitarianism (1951). They felt that they were treated as second-class citizens throughout this prolonged distortion of the democratic covenant between governance and citizens. They felt deprived of the right to choose, through the electoral process, who should rule them, and how. In 2018, Italians were, finally, allowed to vote. They robustly expressed this regained right of citizenship voting the governing parties out of power. The described ‘sleight of hand’ followed, making a mockery of the basics of democracy.

**The ‘Field’ in Context**

In Naples, where leftist rulers have long been in power,\(^3\) the fabrication of second-class citizenship has a much longer history. I have exposed the empirically indefensible, cleverly manufactured view promoted by

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\(^2\) This man is a long-standing (ex)Communist who held high-ranking positions both in the Party and in the Chamber of Deputies.

\(^3\) See Pardo (1996: Ch. 7 and 2018). Between 1975 and 1983, Naples was ruled (with a brief interruption) by PCI-led coalitions. In 1984, three Christian-Democrat majors ruled for a total of six months; then Socialist majors took over. In 1993, a Communist major was elected (in 2000, he moved on and governed Campania, the Naples Region, until 2010). His allies ruled the city until 2011, when they were replaced by a new breed of radical leftists. For a complete list of Naples majors since 1944, see www.comune.napoli.it.
powerful groups in politics, the media and the academia that has portrayed Neapolitans and Southern Italians generally as people crippled by a mixture of superstition, lack of civic sense and amoral individualism that directly impacts the economy (Pardo 1996, 2019). This view is no mere assemblage of clever words. It is imbued with a noxious history of corruption and discrimination (Pardo and Prato 2011). I shall return to this after a necessarily brief note.

As Prato has explained in detail (2018; see also 2020), up to the early 1990s, the South of Italy was the object of central government ‘extraordinary intervention’, primarily through the Cassa del Mezzogiorno (Fund for the South). Established in 1950, the Cassa was supposed to address the economic underdevelopment of the South: the so-called ‘Southern Question’. It was intended to stimulate economic growth through the development of the infrastructure, credit subsidies and tax advantages. However, only part of what was paid for was done and much work that was done was botched and soon fell into disrepair. Large companies (many based in the North) benefited from the contracts, almost exclusively. The Cassa was discontinued in 1984. In 1992, all extraordinary intervention ceased with a view to curbing the perverse use of public resources; an aim which has not been achieved—corruption in public life continues in the South as across the country (Pardo 2018).

Ethnographically informed analyses (Pardo 1996, 2019) have helped to deconstruct in detail the aforementioned view of Southerners and its pernicious implications, including that of some deserved inequality. Here, I note that the claim of amoral individualism encapsulates the notorious weakness of the opposition, society vs individual, whereby the Hegelian concept of plurality—to be human is to be part of the human community, alone one is inexistent—is forced into an ideological opposition between being in community (belonging to) and being cum community (being together with). Impervious to reason and observation, this conceptual confusion stokes the claim that formally organized collective action is evidence of good citizenship and sense of civic order, whereas individual goal-pursuit and collective performances that escape ‘proper’ organization (and motivations) are morally reprehensible and anti-society. It pre-eminently explains both the politics of handouts in the South and the systematic attempts of clientelism-oriented potentates to make instrumental use of people’s uneasiness with impersonal, over-bureaucratized relations and with superimposition of organization. It tallies with the strong perspectivism about morality and rational choice that informs the
dominant definition of membership of society and, classically (Barbalet
1988), of undeserving membership. It is a circular argument based on a
begged question; in fact, a succession of begged questions. Of course,
we are dealing with imperfect competition, constraints and inequality.
However, it would be difficult to argue that these conditions are pre-
determined, through culture or formal location in terms of production
and consumption. Nor could they be reasonably described as fixed and
self-perpetuating, maybe with people’s unwitting complicity.

This simple proposition has evidently eluded the dominant intellectual
élite. Benefiting from a politically established monopoly on the ‘right’
credentials, generations of writers (many of them Southerners) have more
or less explicitly legitimated the convenient description of ordinary South-
erners as incurable ‘clients’ caught into long-term relations of dependence
and unbalanced exchange with ‘the powerful’—including politicians,
bureaucrats, professionals and the clergy.4 They have been famously
framed as ‘populace’, ‘underclass’, ‘mob’, and so derogatively on. This
Lombrosian-inspired view (Pardo and Prato 2011: 4–6) maintains that,
ogged down by their amoral familism, Southerners are culturally and
socially backward individualists who lack civism and have no sense of the
state; ‘therefore’, they cannot be trusted.5

We shall see in the course of this essay that, despite its ugly clas-
sist and racist undertones having been amply exposed for what they
are, this unconscionable view should persist today, alongside the con-
sequent undermining of factual citizenship. Interestingly, while grounded
contrarian studies—in Laura Nader’s astute sense (2018)—have been
systematically ostracized or ‘simply’ ignored and marginalized, this expe-
dient misrepresentation has long informed local governance. Betraying a

4 For detailed critical analyses, see Pardo (1996: Ch. 1), Stewart (2001: 193–194) and
Pardo and Prato (2011).

5 Pretexts are regularly found to reiterate it. For a recent instance, see the typical
remarks made by the research institute CENSIS (Centro Studi Investimenti Sociali) and
widely reported in the media; see, for example Adnkronos (13 June 2017; available at:
http://www.adnkronos.com/fatti/cronaca/2017/06/13/napoli-mancano-legalita-senso-
civico-analisi-del-censis_tUFTH3kvRNOOQ7gc1UKajP.html) Il Roma (13 June 2017;
available at: http://www.ilroma.net/news/cronaca/%C2%AB-napoli-mancano-legaliti%C3%A0-e-senso-civico%C2%BB-lanalisi-del-censis-de-magistris-non-affatto) la Repubblica
Napoli (13 June 2017; available at: http://napoli.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/06/13/
news/il_censis_e_il_mercato_del_falso_a_napoli_deficit_di_senso_civico_e_cultura_della_}

legalita_-167999086/?refresh_ce).
mixture of contempt and apprehension with ordinary people’s approach, local rulers of various political persuasions 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 élite groups that, however undeserving and irresponsible in the Weberian sense (Prato 2000: 79), are apparently unmovable.

Adverse policies and political bribery have fuelled the structuration of a social, economic and political set-up in which the line-toeing few are privileged and allowed to rule at the expense of the many, fuelling economic exclusion and distrust between rulers and the ruled. In short, distrusted by a succession of politicians and decision-makers whom they, in turn, have progressively learned not to trust, ordinary Neapolitans have long had reason to feel deliberately left behind. With graded sophistication, informants from all walks of life reckon that this dominant approach has made them marginal—morally, socially and politically—de facto, second-class citizens. Consequently, as elsewhere across the democratic world, the gap between them and their rulers has widened to what would appear to be a point of no return.

Marshall (1950) incisively stated that citizenship is a contradiction between the formal political equality of the franchise and the persistence of extensive social and economic inequality. In the Italian case, the fabrication of second-class citizens has been driven not only by infringements of formal political citizenship (including, we have seen, the right to vote) but by infringements of civil and social citizenship marked by a politically driven misrepresentation and marginalization of ordinary people’s morality and way of life. Values, we know, are crucial to purposive action, individual and collective. I have argued the importance of recognizing, in our analysis, that people’s values interact strongly and continuously with their material interest but not for this are necessarily functional to utility maximization (1996: 10–12). Nor, I have insisted (1996: Ch. 2 and Ch. 5), does purposive action merely (or basically) obey the ‘clean’ laws of economic behaviour. In managing their existence, the Neapolitans with whom I have become familiar over the years quietly bring together personal resources of very different kinds with a commitment to action that gives satisfaction as well as producing tangible results that respond to their idea of a good life. Their attitude to society is correspondingly complex, motivating them to act in accord with a future-oriented plan of well-being that fully takes into account both the
demands of self-image and the moral expectations of their significant others—living and dead, through a relation of reciprocal influence (Pardo 1996: Ch. 5). This importance of others deeply informs the individual’s entitlement to feeling fulfilled, materially and non-materially. Because feeling fulfilled also depends on performing moral choices and practical actions that justify hope in the memory and care of the living after death (a condition for redemption and Grace), this importance of others also points to the recognition of the ontological limitations of both the individual and society in a culture that makes sense of finitude through incorporation of personal identity into a broader order extending beyond the (acknowledged) confines, and messiness, of social and biological life.

An informed understanding of the significance of strong continuous interaction between the material and the non-material aspects of life in the way ordinary citizens negotiate their lives in the system to which they feel they belong points, I have argued (1996), to much more than subjugation to clientelism, cronyism, corruption and abuse of power. Ordinary people’s juggling between legality and illegality may not conform to some Western bourgeois ideal and may well run counter to the vested interests of ‘superior powers’. Their actions do, however, indicate values and styles of citizenship that raise important issues on the impact of ideological bias in policy and legislation (Pardo 2019).

An important question to ask is why ordinary Neapolitans pay great attention to the non-material in their lives. While I do not wish to labour the point, I must insist that to attempt an answer we need to take very seriously the interplay between value and interest, and real people’s sense of right and wrong; and we must avoid confusing individual-oriented values and actions with individualistic values and actions. Let me address this point ethnographically.

**Coping with ‘the System’**

The categories of domination, equality and objectification are notoriously problematic and ambiguous, as are the relationship between democracy and the rationality of formality and impersonality and the levelling-based view of equality (Weber 1978: 983–986; Beetham 1987; Pardo 1996: 173–177). As discussed in Chapter 1 (Pardo and Prato 2020), the latter is a perverse feature of democracy (Tocqueville 1945; Stankiewicz 1980;
Hayek 2011) that remains eminently susceptible to self-contradiction. Levelling in the guise of an egalitarian promise of an ideal impersonal apparatus in which the office is thoroughly objective may give a more democratic appearance to systems in which the individual dimension has little or no influence on the organization and structure of society. In today’s Italy, the all-pervasive bureaucracy, a key element of the relationship between state and society, has two faces, one formal and one informal. Officially, it is modern (Weber 1978: 956–958; Beetham 1987): authority, spheres of competence, responsibility and career prospects are well defined, technical and hierarchical; personal interest in the office and favouritism are banned; written orders are the rule; and many procedures are digitalized. In fact, formal procedures are labyrinthine and tinkering and ‘informal’ speeding are endemic, as are the pursuit of private interest in public office, illegitimate political interests and legal and illegal corruption (Pardo 2018).

Of course, the idea that contacts are crucial in coping with bureaucratic complications has significantly influenced the rationalization of civil society (Weber 1978, esp. Ch. 16). It traditionally informs ordinary Italians’ dealings with the system. My Neapolitan informants deal with this problem by bringing together personal resources of very different kinds. Their action intimately links values such as cleverness (sape’ fa’; Italian, saper fare) to the maxims, ‘God helps those who help themselves’ and ‘Contacts with saints get you to heaven’. It follows that, here, gift-giving is an everyday practice, a blend of tolerance and disenchantment that, as Marcel Mauss (1966) would say, highlights the morality of important transactions. From experience, they describe the public sector as ‘over-complicated — by neglect or by design’, and polluted by the logic of favours and of private gain in public office. Aware of what Gupta sees as structural violence (2012: 76), they effortlessly tell of attempts by politicians and bureaucrats at all levels to impose themselves as indispensable resources in a context where services and benefits that should be citizens’ by legal right have been turned into illegitimate privileges (Pardo 1996: Ch. 6). As a man in his forties put it, ‘one has to struggle to get the inadequate benefits one’s entitled to’, which, he, like many fellow Neapolitans, clearly identifies as a major distortion of the constituents of citizenship.

6A similar argument is made, from different perspectives, by Habermas and the Frankfurt School (Ingram 1987) and Lukes (1991). For a fuller discussion of this point, see Pardo (1996: 173–177).
that engenders a large proportion of corruption in his country. As things stand, disillusioned with the formal routes to citizenship rights and benefits, most informants eschew *subjugation* in their exchanges with powerful living people saying, *Chi pecora s’ fa ‘o lupo s’o magna* (If you behave like a sheep, you’ll become a wolf’s meal).

The corrupt but not always illegal use that politicians, trade-unionists and public officials across the spectrum make of their offices (Pardo 2018) may feed on people’s commitment to personal relations and individual entrepreneurship. However, meeting Rosemary Harris’ influential anthropological analysis (1986), the empirical evidence suggests that ‘those below’, accustomed with but not reconciled to this situation, cannot be said to be powerless subjects. Supine expectancy of help from superior powers is alien to them. As control over resources and benefits—licit and illicit—has ceased to be strictly the prerogative of specific groups, ‘those below’ have become active agencies capable of making choices that help redefine the system. They exert various forms of power with which ‘the powerful’ struggle to grapple (Pardo 1996, 2019). Aware of the ‘social character of self-interest’ (Herzfeld 1987: 154), they act in accord with the moral expectations of significant others in the domains of family, work (especially independent work)7 and neighbourhood. Linking stimulatingly to other Western and non-Western ethnographies (Pardo and Prato eds 2018), they do so in keeping with their self-image as ‘good people’. The framework of personal identity that here informs one’s entitlement to feeling fulfilled, materially *and* non–materially, brings powerfully to a head the Aristotelian view of the social significance of personal virtue, for it links the construction of personal well-being to others’ recognition of own worthiness.

The interplay between mundane and supramundane activities is crucial to ordinary Neapolitans’ approach, and to their *representation* of such an approach. I have argued (Pardo 1996) that this interplay must not be mistaken, mechanistically, for a mutual relationship. The dealings of the living with the dead are profoundly different in form, norm and value from those among the living. When people act in these two spheres of their universes, they behave differently and aim at different goals. No informant of mine believes that one obtains one’s goals *because* of

7 As I have explained elsewhere at length (Pardo 1996: Ch. 2; 2012), the highly developed local entrepreneurialism finds expression in a variety of work activities that draw on a complex relationship between the formal and the informal.
supramundane intervention more than they believe in the benefaction or protection of ‘the powerful’. All believe, however, in supramundane influence in earthly matters, as a general value and feel motivated to show devotion and gratitude to the entities they consider closer to them for having fulfilled their pleas, inspiring them to take the right course of action in dealing with evil and adversity.

Supramundane benevolence must be spiritually deserved. It can be symbolically negotiated, not transacted. Although this always involves individual commitment, it often is expressed collectively, through well-known rituals, like that linked to the cult dedicated to the Mamm’è l’Arc (Mother of the Arch). These rituals involve a very large number of people and take place only in part under the supervision of religious authorities, exemplifying ordinary people’s generally shunning participation in liturgical activities and effectively circumventing a clergy who tolerate crucial aspects of popular culture which they explicitly dislike and struggle to control and to whom my informants generally recognize no moral superiority or spiritual power—only the power to control important sacred places, legitimize part of popular practices and reach into useful networks. Throughout the year, people also perform their religious activities in the privacy of their homes. Many make private visits to their preferred sanctuaries, to ‘feel closer to the sacred’ to fulfil promises made to the saint during serious physical, psychological or emotional crises. Monetary offerings are often made to the saint and accepted by the clergy, but people never ask saints to help them monetarily. To stress a key point in anthropology, the morality of money (Parry and Bloch 1989) in this market-oriented culture (Pardo 1996: Ch. 2) forbids the pursuit of monetary interest in the religious experience. The materiality of such motivation would pollute the spirituality of the event.

Informants across society keep in their home small shrines with images of their dead and of the saints to whom they are devoted. Shrines dedicated to saints are found in many streets. I have written on the care and attention Neapolitans give to their dead (Pardo 1996: Ch. 5). Most whom I have met carry on their persons images of their dead and of their favoured saints. Some maintain street shrines in their neighbourhood. Many adorn their cars, shops and workshops with sacred icons and images of their dead relatives. Reaping the rewards of long-term participant observation (2019: 59), I have recorded discrete versions of this behaviour among professionals, who keep sacred images in their wallets
and wear jewellery engraved with these images hidden beneath their clothes.

Critically, ‘having reason to feel at peace with [their] own conscience and with God’ is intimately linked to the awareness that failure to respond to the demands of one’s moral environment exposes both to social ostracism and to an inner feeling of inadequacy; ultimately, of unworthiness. This rationale bears on the social significance of personal virtue, linking the construction of personal well-being to others’ recognition of own worthiness. It directs the construction of personal betterment towards society, not away from it, making at once short work of the opposition between individual action (and motivation to personal betterment) and antisocial individualism and exemplifying—empirically—the fundamental distinction between the two. Here, I stress, pursuit of (self-)interest in the terms of fulfilment is consistently crucial to socially oriented actions that, taking into account what is recognized as an acceptable degree of risk in the relations involved, run counter to supine expectancy of help from superior powers, mundane or supramundane.

In Defiance of Objectification

Individuals’ defiance of objectification is greatly significant to the different kinds of action that I have outlined. Gross (1999) points out that modern democracies need to maintain the right balance between individual and collective spheres. The majority of the local men and women with whose lives and moralities I have become familiar over the years, reject formalization and bureaucratization of their spiritual and religious lives with the same determination they show in rejecting the formalization and bureaucratization of their economic and social lives. Relevant to mainstream social theory, in certain cases they may act together with others, not because they share the ideology and agenda of some political group but because such collective action is deemed to lend strength to individual goals.

Today, as in the past, powerful élite publicly say, ‘Il popolo senza medi- azioni è una brutta bestia’ (The people without mediation are an ugly beast), adding ‘dobbiamo iniziare a educare la gente’ (we must start
And they cite Gramsci, having traditionally heeded his intimation (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 which will liberate people from their superstition, subalternity, distrust and even neurotic tendencies—legitimation as fully deserving citizens will be their reward. We need to ask how this may help us to understand the Naples situation.

Clearly, it would be inexcusably naïve—or expedient—to let actors’ negotiation-oriented approach mislead us into believing that their actions are inevitably manipulated by those who hold economic and political power. Subscribing to this belief would demand the oxymoronic treatment of command over resources and command over people and actions as a single category. Yet, we see that, however weak and questionable these misconceptions may appear to the unbiased observer, in South Italy they have consistently underpinned dominant élites’ approach. What are the observable results?

Ordinary Italians have learned to dislike and distrust politicians. So, they tend to steer clear of party politics and defy politicians’ rhetoric of organized action. Effective collective action depends, among other things, on the efficacy of systematized behaviour, the binding role of mediation among the participants, and the dilution of individual agency into transactions entrusted to movement representatives (Eder 1993). As these conditions run counter to grassroots wisdom, it is not surprising that my informants should have an uneasy relationship with politically driven collective action. Bringing to a head my earlier point on the opposition between individuality and individualism, they resist the organization of their actions and thoughts and remain suspicious of organization imposed from outside, which they call *intruppamento* (forcing into ranks). They tend to act individually in the pursuit of goals such as jobs and benefits using enterprisingly information and contacts, and sometimes money.

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8 This was widely reported and debated in the national media. See: [https://www.la7.it/in-onda/video/achille-occhetto-molto-spaventato-dalla-sottocultura-05-09-2019-281002](https://www.la7.it/in-onda/video/achille-occhetto-molto-spaventato-dalla-sottocultura-05-09-2019-281002). See also Prato (2020). For Gramsci (1971), we know, those he called ‘organic intellectuals’ (party activists, trade unionists, school teachers, etc.) were supposed to be the ‘mediators’ indispensable in the ‘Prince’s’ (the Party’s) strategy to hegemony and power.

9 Gaining long-lasting influence in powerful intellectual circles, the folklorist Ernesto De Martino (1961) and his students explained certain popular behaviours as neuroses.
Nonetheless, at critical times, they do make their collective voice heard. Examples abound. Past prominent examples include the ‘Movement of Mothers Against Drugs’; the unprecedented and revolutionary ‘Movement of Organized Unemployed’, which highlighted the failure of trade unions to look after the unemployed (Pardo 1996: Ch. 7); and the ‘Committee of Creditors of Local Authorities in Financial Distress’, which brought together over ten thousand small and medium entrepreneurs who had not been paid for the work done for local authorities. Current examples range from people’s succeeding in keeping the supply of water under public control (Marotta 2014) to parents’ joining together to hold inefficient administration to account on behalf of schoolchildren (Frattasi 2018); from residents of a very large and incredibly dilapidated council estate at Naples periphery taking the Council to court for dereliction of duty (Bottone 2019) to residents of rubbish-clogged central neighbourhoods translating their concern about their health into significant protest against the Council (Folle 2019b), which is responsible for rubbish collection. Their anger, I found, increases as illegal immigrants’ peddling items scavenged from rubbish bins and the consequent spread of vermin spreads across central Naples (Pardo 2020a). Shopkeepers and their associations have lodged damning complains concerning the sale of scavenged rubbish. One of them said, ‘since these people started doing this, sales have dropped by 50% because the street is always dirty and unhealthy’. As this situation worsens, other forms of action develop alongside street protest and legal proceedings. For instance, groups of ordinary people have joined ‘cleaning squads’ in their neighbourhoods, sweeping rubbish off the roads and removing graffiti.

10 In addition to the comparatively very high council tax, residents must pay heavy tax for rubbish collection. In 2018, they were charged 422 Euros, one of the highest in Italy. For more detailed information, see https://www.idealista.it/news/finanza/economia/2018/11/29/129084-quanto-costa-la-tari-la-mappa-delle-tariffe-per-regione.

11 As informants have reported to me, rubbish peddling has taken place in central Naples during the Covid-19 pandemic, too. This has attracted the attention of the local press (De Simone 2020). In a forthcoming essay I examine the large body of evidence—empirical and statistical—on how this kind of inequality kills people, including high increase in cancer-, cardiac- and pulmonary-related deaths.

12 See, for instance, the investigative report of 3 December 2019 produced by Daniela De Crescenzo and Gennaro Di Biase and their telling photographs: https://www.ilmattino.it/napoli/cronaca/emergenza_rifiuti_napoli-4901491.html.

13 For meaningful examples of such action, see Folle (2019a).
On the other hand, reminiscent of Prato’s description of Communist residential idylls reserved to the nomenklatura (Prato 2017: 23–27), upmarket residential areas continue to be orderly, clean and functioning. There live most local élite. They explicitly dislike the engaged participation in public affairs that I have briefly described because it is a practice of liberty that defies their control; so, they label it as destructive, populist, mob rule, anarchic and so on.

That ordinary Neapolitans’ modes of action largely escape the control of politicians may or may not be seen as a positive thing. It certainly gives us no reason to jump to simplistic conclusions. They are neither evidence of a predatory mentality nor necessarily functional to ‘the powerful’. Aware of the expediency of the politicians of *sottogoverno* (subgovernment)\(^{14}\) across the political spectrum, people have understood in their own way that the system is not an impersonal entity, that it is made up of people who do not hold unchallengeable powers and with whom they can rewardingly transact on personal bases. They may well use such wisdom to achieve their goals more quickly and efficiently, but taking the cynical view would misleadingly simplify our task. This urban situation is not made of strong and weak caught in polarized relations of dominance and submission. It is made of negotiated choices, many of which are socially oriented in their nature, also extending to civic participation. From ‘below’ such choices are identified as voluntary expressions of self, not as enforced behaviour. Of course, such a view may not always be justified. Nonetheless, its practise does seem to affect significantly the uneven process of redefinition of the agency/system relationship, as ordinary Neapolitans continue to defy in important ways the interests of some élite in reproducing clientelist relations of dominance and superimposing various forms of *intruppamento*.

In this moral and socio–political context marked by the inadequacy of the élite in power to establish authority and trust we are reminded of Martin’s warning (1977; also Lukes 1987) not to overstate the power—in Gramsci’s terms (1971), the hegemony—of any particular group. We are also warned that it would be more naïve than straightforward to

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\(^{14}\)The expression *sottogoverno* refers to backstage interpersonal bargaining between politicians and other notables whose allegiances may lie with different parties. Prato (2000) has produced a throughout ethnographically informed examination of these dynamics, which are still rampant today.
argue that actors manipulate instrumentally the relationship between individual goal-pursuit and collective action. We would have to treat in a similarly mechanistic way their interest in constructing and maintaining a successful approach that is morally consistent, not just a prettification of their entrepreneurialism. We would have to ignore that while they reject the superimposition of organized mass action on their individuality they do willingly act together for the common good. The response ‘from above’? ‘Political bribery Italian style’, as pointedly summarized Lello. Let us look at the evidence.

**Political Bribery Italian Style**

Powerful Italian élite groups are redefining their strategies and alliances alongside well-trod routes (Burton et al. 1992), which raises what Marcus (1983) would see as central issues in élite studies. The Naples dynamics are emblematic.

In Naples, the turnout at the last local government elections (June 2016) was 50.37% against a traditional turnout of over 70% (for context, see Footnote 3). A self-styled orange revolutionary (Facci 2019; Macri 2016) and unsuccessful former public prosecutor (Chiocci and Di Meo 2013) was elected mayor by 33% of the total electorate, as 65% of those who turned out at the polls voted for him. This man ran an anti-establishment campaign that, I was repeatedly asked to note, was strong on wordy tirades but weak on policy. Initially, his group’s pledge to break the stronghold of profiteering potentates over civil society did touch a chord among ordinary citizens, including those who did not vote for him and those who did not vote at all. An unlikely mix of shallow reference to past South-American revolutionaries and local folklore (Facci 2019) have since coloured an administrative reality mired in what, echoing my informants’ views, is criticised as political inconsistency (Polito 2016; Brandolini 2020).

Over the past 30-odd years (see Footnote 3) local rulers have verbally opposed assistance and clientelism and have practised both (Pardo 2019), pandering to the interests of their supporters at the expense of the rest of the population. The current case of the Asilo Filangieri, an impressive historical building located in the historical Centre, is exemplary. Once the Asilo was restored at public expense to be used as a venue for international cultural events, it was illegally occupied by radical groups who staunchly campaigned for the present administration. The building has
subsequently deteriorated to a visibly sorry state (Il Mattino, 12 March 2016) to which the authorities have turned a blind eye despite the protests and formal complaints lodged by concerned citizens and heritage associations. A Municipal decree turned the illegal occupants of the Asilo into legal occupants (Corriere del Mezzogiorno, 4 January 2016). At the same time, rulers are seen to practise double standards; for example, letting illegal immigrant traders be while legal entrepreneurs who do not strictly abide by the local regulations are harshly dealt with.15

The feeling of betrayal among Naples’ citizens runs deep as rulers change but they continue to experience variations on ‘bread and circuses’ tactics. Broadly in line with the aforementioned Gramscian intimation, today’s rulers promote citizens’ participation in ‘educative’ street-entertainment and events aimed at ‘bringing people out of their homes’, ‘out of their private spheres and interests’, ‘out in the open, in society’. These initiatives, local critics argue, are blatant political bribery aimed at ‘managing the people’. This driving aspiration of bringing individual motivations and actions under a given agenda is probably explained less by ordinary people’s presumed shortcomings than by these élites’ intolerance of the individual’s (relative) moral autonomy and difficulty in linking their motivational requirements to real people’s. In short, while capitalizing on the difficulty of undoing the damage done by years of political greed, today’s powers-that-be would appear to trust that, blinded by cosmetic changes and fun en masse, citizens will fail to recognize political instrumentalism and forget that structural change is not happening. This is not working. Few, I have found, seem willing to turn a blind eye to the contrast between rulers’ ‘moral’ claims and their double standards, administrative inconsistency, electioneering and political bribery.

In Naples, disillusionment with local administrators has developed across society following a long succession of local rulers’ raising hopes and breaking promises, de facto stymying participation. Most citizens have come to feel that, as a young stall-keeper put it, ‘Voting just seems a waste of time. Seems just to serve the purposes of some powerful guy and his

15 For more on this, see Pardo (2020). The Italian Chief of Police, Franco Gabrielli recently noted that in 2016, out of 893 thousand people reported and arrested, 29.2% were foreigners. In 2017, this percentage rose to 29.8%; it further increased to 32% in 2018 and 2019. Illegal immigrants are obviously difficult to count. However, from experience, Gabrielli estimates that there are 1,993,466 such people in Italy; that is, 3.3% of the population (Palazzini 2019).
friends. It angers me, but this is the reality’. On the other hand, when they have reason to feel that exercising their democratic rights really matters and are given a chance to vote, my local friends, like most Italians, do so, demonstrating that, to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, in a democracy you cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{Concluding Considerations}

The Naples case exemplifies the power of the challenging questions raised by Vico’s thinking in today’s urban world. With specific but not exclusive reference to governance, we have studied, who does what, here, for what purpose and to whose benefit. The resulting picture is bleak.

We have seen that the established élite may well strive to impose political clientelism on ‘those below’ but theirs is not an easy ride because here, as elsewhere, society is not made of polarized relations of dominance and submission. Rulers’ historical and contemporary failure—or self-interested refusal—to engage constructively with ordinary Neapolitans’ morality and choices is the litmus test of their inadequacy. It raises wide-ranging intellectual problems marring much of the democratic world and with which most of the political élite is dangerously failing to grapple. It sheds light on ordinary people’s morality and actions profoundly informed by a discriminating attitude and sense of independence. In Naples, as across Italy and the EU, it points to the folly of attempting to rule by some superior ideology (and morality), and interests. Political bribery is evidently failing to compensate this fundamental omission in moral and political responsibility. The consequences are vast and incredibly worrying.

National rulers’ contempt for the democratic process and their intolerance for its fundamentals compounds this local scenario, the implicit message being that as electors Italians have no weight or value. Amply received, this message could have further demotivated people from going to the polls. The evidence suggests, instead, that people are not easily fooled or discouraged. When Italians saw a true opportunity to state that they do care about democracy and resent superimpositions from above, they resoundingly voted the ruling parties out of power. An optimist might therefore say that in Italy there is hope for democracy. Sadly, the current combination of unelected rulers, political chaos, incompetence

\textsuperscript{16}In Lincoln Archives Inc.: https://lincolnarchives.com/.
and parties that are voted out of power but work, nonetheless, their way into government does not bide well for the future.

Wary of the damage done by rulers’ persistent hubris to citizens’ trust in the institutions of democracy, I have frequently warned—of course in vain—to mind the growing gap between citizenship and governance (Pardo 1996, 2019). I was not concerned about the fate of this or that politician or political party. It was that, wary of Arendt’s and Weber’s warnings, I saw serious trouble ahead for democracy as a form of associated life, now all too obviously reeling from the repeated shocks delivered by an increasingly disaffected and angry electorate, which from some ostrich-like quarters continues to be unrealistically cast as gullible and prey to ‘populist’ pressures. All along, my argument has been that in a democracy power does not equal authority. While authority and trust must be earned through responsible and accountable action, power may be won through hollow promises or sleights of hand. Once won, power may be kept—for a while—by trampling over an expediently misrepresented citizenry or, relatively more subtly, by opting for the patronizing strategy of appeasing ‘the people’ while trying to ‘educate’ them to some dominant vision and recruit them to the attendant agenda. Power, though, is not lost because citizens fail to bend to the will of some ruler. Power is lost because, caught in their self-referential world, the dominant élites fail to meet citizens’ down-to-earth needs and demands. Whether rulers choose to be coercive or persuasive, in a democracy, sooner or later they lose power because they fail authority and trust.

Those of us who live on either side of the Atlantic are acutely familiar with the kind of political bullying that marks Italian politics. It emphasizes a crisis of legitimacy, now further exacerbated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, that defines our dismal prospects—as democrats, perhaps as free and free-thinking human beings. Translated into a Naples story long marred by convenient ideological fabrications, political bullying has proved very expensive for the survival of a workable democratic contract between citizenship and governance. Tainted by arrogance, the dominant élite have grown progressively distant from the grassroots. At this late stage, as they have lost credibility and their opponents are seen on the ground as weak alternatives, this critical situation seems unlikely to be defanged.
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