
MIGRANT PRODUCTIVITIES: STREET VENDORS AND THE INFORMAL KNOWLEDGE WORK IN NAPLES

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Abstract

This paper examines the knowledge work of organizing migrant economic activity – informal, underground and formal – in Naples, Italy. The two dominant approaches to migrant entrepreneurship will be critiqued for their over-determined focus on the individual maximizing his or her needs. That is, both the research that concentrates on the putative cultural resources and co-ethnic social networks available to migrants, or that which emphasizes the individual neo-classical entrepreneurial perspective, with a focus usually on one business or entrepreneur fail to address the sociality I observed in extensive fieldwork in Naples, Italy. This paper examines the migrant search for livelihood by considering the key role knowledge and power play in the capacity of migrants to make a living, to find work and to imagine different futures. That is, this paper examines how migrants not only negotiate their everyday livelihood in the city's economy but also how they imagine new forms of work organization. Naples is well known for its extensive informal economic activity and, recently, migrants have become a key component of this already established underground economy. Recent changes in the legal requirements for permits of stay have added more onerous formal conditions for the renewal of permits, but informal activity continues alongside or within conditions, with knowledge and imagination the key skills migrants employ to organize under these conditions. This paper will attempt to identify and value that informal knowledge.

Introduction

While discussing Europe's economic difficulties at an European Union Council of Ministers' meeting in June of 2005, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi chastised Italians for their preoccupation with unemployment by suggesting that Italy was better off than its EU partners because 40 per cent of the country's economy was in the *economia sommersa* – the underground economy – and, thus unaccounted for by statistics generated by Brussels, ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale Statistico) and official sources of economic measurement. Despite the peculiarity of such an impolitic remark from the head of state, Berlusconi's offhand comment reflected a reality even if the proportion he cited exceeded the estimates of the size of the underground economy by Italy's own ISTAT (15%) and the IMF (27%). This underground economy combines forms of irregular, illegal, and informal work with significant under-reporting of earnings and uncollected revenue. The day after Berlusconi's revealing comment, one Pakistani street vendor in Naples, Italy with whom I often talked about Italian politics rolled his eyes in disbelief over this recent outburst and contrasted the Prime Minister's valorization of the off-the-books economy with the recent, more onerous requirements placed on a migrant to renew a permit of stay (*permesso di soggiorno*) in Italy. He lamented that as a licensed street vendor he now found it necessary to pay an Italian to organize his papers to renew his *permesso di soggiorno*. He figured it was a necessary extra expense to avoid interminable delays, or worse, rejection. The 2002 'Bossi-Fini' law (no.189) demanded evidence of employment for the renewal or proof of self-employment, such as tax invoices with the 19% value-added tax paid (IVA) for the purchase of products for street vending. A Neapolitan street vendor next to us, overhearing our conversation, joked that under this law migrants were

required to produce evidence of two things a Neapolitan probably couldn't – a work contract and a housing contract.

In this paper I draw on fieldwork in Naples, Italy among migrant street vendors to examine the knowledge work of these entrepreneurial migrants as they strive to innovate their work organization and imagine better futures (1). I am particularly interested in migrant workers engaged as street vendors, *commerciante ambulante*, and to a degree their wholesale suppliers, as I will explain later, because of their visibility in the Neapolitan streetscape. As such, they represent in the popular imagination and the conjectures in the media an immediate and intimate example of those involved in the underground economy. At best, Neapolitans, and Italians in general, describe them as performing undeclared economic activity. At worst, they are presumed to be illegal, undocumented, or permit over-stayers and perceived to engage in transnational criminal activity – either the end product of the 'trafficking' of co-ethnic subservient labour or the end of the supply chain for the importation of counterfeit or inconceivably low-cost goods. Yet, if those are the received meta-narratives held, they are undermined or challenged as soon as they are constituted by the everyday practices of many of the same Neapolitans, who defy easy categorization, prefer to undercut authority and may act in quite generous and warm-hearted ways to those migrants they get to know, who live and work in their neighbourhoods – an alternative Neapolitan stereotype. Certainly, almost all migrants I interviewed noted that an appeal of Naples was the greater openness of Neapolitans towards them as compared to work experiences in northern Italy. Whether generous, hostile or indifferent Neapolitans serve as key sources of knowledge for migrants to interpret.

In the last few decades, Italy has been transformed from an emigration society to immigration one, what some

researchers have termed ‘the Mediterranean model’, which considers the social and economic significance of these coexistent, crosscutting migrant trajectories. This model also suggests that these Mediterranean countries with this dual migration flow have significant informal economies and when immigrants do find positions in the margins of the formal economy, those are very precarious (Pugliese, 2000). As a result the nascent research on the recent population changes in Italy has considered the informal or underground economy as part of any research program (Pugliese, 2002; Grillo and Pratt, 2002; Riccio, 2001, Ambrosini, 2001, Bonafazi, 1998, Colombo, 1998; Zinn, 1994; Calvanese and Pugliese, 1991).

Carrying their goods in jury-rigged baby strollers or shopping carts, neatly packed and wound with rope, street vendors in Naples set up their crude but effective cardboard or cloth display tables on sidewalk space along the city’s main shopping streets – Via Toledo and Corso Umberto – to display jewelry, fabrics, bags, baseball caps, inexpensive battery-operated toys, cellular phone accessories or sunglasses, etc. If only briefly to stem the negative discourse that pervades official and popular discussions of these street vendors as blights on the urban landscape – despite the licensing they can receive from city hall that permits their ‘mobile’ selling – it is tempting to argue that these migrants represent innovative entrepreneurs – individualistic, mobile, and capable of creating wealth out of limited resources. Certainly, the individual energy, perseverance and creativity evidenced in the life histories I recorded of street vendors from Bangladesh and Pakistan working in Naples in 2005, leave much to be admired about their fearlessness in the face of state security measures aimed to limit their movement across and within borders and the precariousness of their small business enterprises in Italy’s currently faltering, and oddly both over-regulated and under-regulated, economy

(Mangatti and Quassoli, 2003). The navigation of these uncertain conditions and the stark sight of dozens set-up on the streets, most hawking quite similar goods, seem to require an individualistic migrant entrepreneur heroically striving to overcome structural constraints and the immediate competition. It is further tempting to consider their individual entrepreneurial activity as a Hobbesian war of all against all with each migrant struggling against the other migrant competition. Given the time-consuming, monotonous, and uncertain work each street vendor puts in everyday to sell inexpensive items for scant profit in the heat of summer and the cold/rainy winter, the long circuits of travel by buses and trains to beaches and festivals to maximize sales in an intensive two or three days of work, an observer would presume that 'the social' among the street traders might be fraught with misinformation, speculation, and distrust. Ostensibly, such an entrepreneur would have little time to share knowledge, consider alternative forms of work organization and sociality other than the maximization of his (sic) personal and familial needs (2). In effect, to survive both these macro and micro realities of everyday life, the transnational migrant entrepreneurs would function as the perfect formalist, rationalist economic actors (Narotzky, 1998; LeClair et al 1968).

At work here too in the social world of street vendors amid the scattered, brief, disrupted, polyglot conversations and encounters between migrants and Neapolitans is the importance of knowledge about doing business: wholesale prices, mark-ups, products, consumer tastes, profitable locations to sell from, ways of navigating Italian commercial laws, avoiding fines from municipal police or the *Guardia di Finanza* (Finance/Customs Police), avoiding the Camorra 'pizzo' (extortion payment) and renewing one's permit of stay. Moreover, knowledge and the power attendant on having, valuing and dispensing that knowledge about a

myriad of necessary things to make one's life bearable and sustainable offer ample space for relationships of exploitation and asymmetrical relationships of power, including with co-ethnics, over where to find apartments, food products from home, discount airline tickets, etc. In the uncertain everyday experiences for migrants in Naples, what I term an *intimate knowledge economy* emerges because the consequences for lacking that knowledge or having partial knowledge can be catastrophic for a migrant's livelihood, safety, and migration trajectory. There is ample evidence that ethnicity can help engender trust in economic relationships. The process of chain migration is a key example of the usefulness of imagining and enacting trust through co-ethnics. However, ethnicity, understood here as an aspect of a social relationship, may work in the opposite way too and place migrants in positions of exploitative subordination with their co-ethnics (Knights and King, 1998; Kwong, 1997; Werbner, 1990). Certainly, many Neapolitans I interviewed at a general level considered migrants as parts of these ethnic chains and, of course, the tragic stories of people smuggling in the pages of the Italian dailies and on the newscasts with little analytical complexity, contributed to these views. The remarkable heterogeneity of migrant origins in Italy and Naples in particular, and the lack of dense social networks make any simple analytical recourse to ethnic mobilization of networks as a sufficient analytical perspective highly provisional, suspect and partial. In the examples discussed below non-ethnic ties are also crucial to knowledge, work organization and imagination. The embeddness literature in its various forms has done much to unsettle a narrow neo-classical view of economic behaviour by the reintroduction of the social. The adaptation of the concept into migrant and ethnic studies through the concept of 'mix-embeddness' offers a way of making comparisons across and within migrant receiving societies and the opportunity structures available for migrant business and entrepreneurship.

However this literature does not entirely escape the privileging of maximizing economic behaviour for the individual embedded in the network. In the end, the deployment of embeddedness concept normalizes a reduced conception of 'society' and accepts and naturalizes the separation of 'society' from 'economics' as putatively objective categories for analysis rather calling that separation into question (Dobbin, 2004; Kloosterman and Rath, 2003). My ethnographic work however raises questions about the wisdom of working with such a reduced conception of the social. Migrant entrepreneurs appear to elaborate the social through new practices of work organization that cannot be contained by the notion of embeddedness.

Whether one focuses on the collective aspects of a co-ethnic migrant chain and subsequent work relationships, which may suggest a hierarchical and exploitative system of making profits for a few migrants off the work of other co-ethnic or on the individual, entrepreneur, in both instances the intimate knowledge economy might look much like the Moroccan bazaar economy that Clifford Geertz (1978, p.29) observed in which "information is scarce, maldistributed, inefficiently communicated, and intensely valued". Moreover, the uncertainties of knowledge described in the Geertzian bazaar, or what he referred to as differential knowledge are further exacerbated by the knowledge inequalities that are attendant in transnational migration, of which language, legal status and processes of racialisation and racial hierarchies are only a few. However, in my fieldwork, even if the basic premise that knowledge was valuable and highly sought after among migrants in Naples because of the numerous ways their status might be precarious, a sociality that favoured competition, individualism, restricted the distribution of knowledge, and encouraged deception, seemed remarkably unfamiliar to the group of street traders I worked with for nine months. In my

experience with mostly Bangladeshi and Pakistani street traders as principle informants, such a representation flattens the productive knowledge work central to their sociality and glosses over alternative regimes of value which introduce either non-monetized or monetized exchange that may not strictly adhere to market models (Williams, 2002). Instead, a more innovative social reality, full of alternative possibilities and forms of sociality might be viewed through the everyday practices of migrant street traders in Naples, Italy.

The underground economy, migrants and Naples

One of the problems with research into the informal sector and immigrants is the too readily available assumption that migrants are the archetypal figures for such work. The extent of the underground economy in Italy both reinforces that but also undermines that imaginary given the significance of the underground economy for Italy as a whole. Nevertheless, the underground economy does offer a flexibility that serves the immediate needs of new migrants, legal or illegal, in Italy. Even with the measures in the 2002 law to seek greater control of migrants (developing restrictions in law 40 from 1998) in Italy through bureaucratic means, the extent of the underground economy as part of the over all Italian economy provides ample space for documented and undocumented migrants to find work. Moreover, coupling the informal and illegal possibilities for work with the massive regularization component (*sanatoria*), or immigration amnesty, introduced in the 2002 law for illegal migrants, incidentally, the fifth such amnesty since 1986, makes Italy an attractive site for migrants taking their chances on a better future entering the EU (3). The *economia sommersa* blends a variety of forms of informal activity and

exhibits different features and dynamics throughout the peninsula. I am concerned here with its manifestation in Naples, Italy, the largest southern Italian city and one well known for its informal sector. Briefly, for my purposes, the underground economy, for example, encompasses practices such as the evasion of tax and pension contribution, non-compliance with regulations for work contracts, and workplace health and safety rules. This informal economy includes those activities that are either unregulated or unprotected by the state, and do not follow institutional norms and rules (Portes, 1994; Williams and Windebank, 1998; Quassoli, 1999; Reyneri, 2004).

Naples, accentuates many of the characteristics associated with the underground or informal economy, or the *economia non osservata*. It has a very large pool of underemployed and officially unemployed, hovering at around 25 per cent. In the crucial age bracket between 15-29, over 50 per cent are unemployed (Istat, 2002; Salmieri, 2003). The city has a reputation as an urban space of transit, useful as the major metropolis in the region of Campania and the south, a transportation hub, with an international seaport and a main junction for the Italian railway. It offers ample opportunities for informal, unregulated work to those willing to take it in agriculture, domestic service, small craft manufacturing, street trading, services and construction. It has tended to draw migrants because of the flexibility and opportunities available in its unofficial labour market and its nearness to the vast southern Mediterranean coastline, which offers many access points for covert entry. In interviews, migrants and local officials in government and non-profits consistently emphasized the inefficiencies of or absence of the state as reasons for both the city's attraction and its limitations for migrants. The policing authorities do not enforce the immigration laws with the same consistency or energy as those in northern Italy or elsewhere in Europe. In part this

may be the case because the police may be preoccupied with a persistent problem of organized crime, the dozens of Camorra clans who periodically fight each other, and all of whom are involved in the underground economy (Allum, 2003; 1973).

While the numbers of foreigners officially in Naples is much less than those present in Italy's economically powerful north and northeastern regions of Veneto, Emilia Romagna and Lombardy working in factories, as labourers, domestics or services or the administrative capital Rome in Lazio, the significance of Naples as an under-regulated transit point should not be undervalued. Further, as of 2003 there has been a dramatic increase in officially resident foreigners in the region, topping 111,000, a doubling of the previous year's total, over half of whom live in Naples – and not including those not there legally (Caritas, 2004: p. 423). A recent comprehensive report by sociologists working with the regional government suggests the number may be as high as 159,000 (Orientale, 2005). Interestingly, contrary to what is typical in other immigrant receiving countries, for example France or the UK, which tend to receive large percentages of migrants from specific former colonies or from source nations for particular historical reasons, Italy, long a peninsula of emigration and a bridge to the wealth of northern Europe has a remarkably heterogeneous migrant population. No one group is dominant, although particular occupational niches do exhibit ethnic clustering. For example, Ukrainian and Polish women compete with Sri Lankan and Philippine men and women for positions as domestics. West and North African male migrants are heavily involved in demanding physical labour such as construction. In the streets off Piazza Garibaldi, where one finds the main train station, Chinese small stores sell clothes wholesale to Neapolitan shop-owners and West African, mostly Senegalese street traders. Although one typically sees

Senegalese, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Chinese street traders throughout the city and surrounding towns, there tends to be a sharp, ethnically marked division that matches product to ethnic group (see Amato, 1997; Dines, 2002). That is, Senegalese tend to sell African object tourist art, clothes, baseball caps, designer bags, or pirated DVDs and CDs (although these latter products are also mostly sold by other West Africans working illegally to survive awaiting their refugee determination), migrants from Bangladesh sell jewelry, buttons, cotton 'tribal' scarves, Pakistani migrants sunglasses and cellular phone accessories, Chinese offer electronic toys, games, magnifying glasses etc. and imported Chinese everyday wear clothing. This migrant street selling economy inserts itself into a long tradition of street selling by Neapolitans of contraband cigarettes, pirated CDs and DVDs, sports (football) clothing, books and often one or two of anything you could desire. This paper concerns itself mostly with street traders from Bangladesh and Pakistan, two of the most visible – in terms of how they are identified and racialised as minorities by Neapolitans and in terms of numbers involved in street selling on the main commercial streets in the historic centre – in Naples. The Bangladeshi (470, people) and Pakistani (860) statistical presence in Naples is not that significant even taking into account that official estimates based on either registered residents cards or renewals of permits of stay may need to be increased by at least 30 per cent to take into account the presence of others who may be permit over-stayers or illegal (Orientale, 2005). In general, both groups buy from the over two dozen wholesale distributors, mostly of Bangladeshi origin, who have set up near Piazza Mercato and Piazza Garibaldi. Elsewhere I have addressed some of the characteristics of this Bangladeshi presence (see Harney, in press). The Bangladeshi and Pakistani migrants I interviewed tended to be part of on-ward migration strategies and trajectories, many had some university, college or diploma experience. As a

result simple 'push/pull' migratory models do little to explain the desires for worldly experience and entrepreneurial ambitions of these migrants even with the well-documented political instability and economic troubles in both countries (World Bank, 2005).

Knowledge distribution and imagination on the street

In this section I want to turn to two of the key ethnographic sites for the street vendors to think about knowledge distribution, imagining futures and the sociality of their labour (Hannerz, 1992; Appadurai, 1996). First, I will discuss their sociality on the street as they sell. Second, I want to consider the sociality of vendors and wholesalers and knowledge distribution I observed at several wholesale stores run by Bangladeshis. Knowledge takes many forms, from the explicitly articulated to the subtler, informal, tacit, corporeal or embodied knowledge observed, enacted and naturalized through the sociality of everyday life. The pedagogical aspects of everyday life for recently arrived migrants faced with material inequalities, enhanced by racialized stereotyping and discrimination, are legion. The practical knowledges of survival, developing competency in a language, negotiating the bureaucratic demands of a foreign state, even if challenging and repressive may well be the most straightforward to negotiate. The knowledge of local practice, local social courtesies, bodily movements, postures, the unspoken ways of getting along with, in this case, your Neapolitan neighbours, and getting on in life are more difficult to master, created and reproduced locally, the intimate knowledge economy may help define those migrants who have a measure of subjective satisfaction with their migratory trajectory from those that do not; yet,

the splitting of these two knowledges, the division between explicit and tacit just as the distinction between formal and informal sets up an artificial divide which misreads the processes of learning and thinking and how knowledge is constituted through very localized social processes of becoming, embodiment and naturalizing.

Street vendors start setting up their makeshift stands between 9:30 and 10am on the edges of Piazza del Gesu and along Via B. Croce and Via S. Biagio ai Librai. Their daily routine started at 8am replenishing their inventories by visiting one or several of the two dozen or so wholesale stores in neighbourhoods near the Piazza Garibaldi and the train station, Napoli Centrale. Selecting items from wholesalers to sell was based on both experiential knowledge and speculation about consumers. By 10am after a quick Italian coffee and setting up, finding a spot to along the volcanic stone-paved street, the selling and haggling with Neapolitan teenagers, students and German tourists over prices would begin, if they could avoid a periodic municipal police sweep, they would stay in the same spot the whole day, contravening the stipulations of their licenses as mobile traders. A mixed, fluid group of street vendors mostly from Bangladesh and Pakistan but occasionally including a North African, a Ukrainian and a Neapolitan, tended to gather in the same small stretch of the city's historical center to sell jewelry, watches, scarves and cloth bags from South Asia, occasionally sunglasses and inexpensive posters for the university students who passed through each day on their way to classes. This area was preferable to the main commercial streets that may have more potential buyers, but also more vendors, less sympathetic Neapolitan store-keepers in front of whose stores one had to set up shop and greater harassment by the municipal police checking permits and ensuring these licensed *commerciantе ambulante* were really mobile and not setting up in one spot the whole day. I use the

term group but it should be stressed that these were loosely associated individual entrepreneurs whose social relationships with each other developed in this small stretch of space in the old city. Each worked for himself, bought his own goods and none shared living quarters. All but one of the migrants, a Pakistani who had been in Italy 14 years – and financed his children's university careers in Karachi with street vending – had arrived in Italy since 2000. All the vendors with whom I spoke had purchased the goods wholesale. None had goods on credit. They tried to sell each item with at least 50 per cent mark up but often for less. Each sale of a pair of earrings, a hair clasp or button generated between 50 cents to 2 € profit. While self-employment for the street vendors I interviewed was attractive because of the little capital investment required and the degree of autonomy it enabled, its attractiveness was at least in part, a response to the limitations in the opportunity structure. No secure jobs with a pension in Neapolitan factories were easily found for Neapolitans, let alone foreigners with or without legal status. If a good, legal, factory job or a restaurant job arose in Naples or up north, street vending was just one short-term strategy to earn cash before moving onto something less physically demanding and precarious.

The narrow streets of the historic centre, no wider than to allow the passage of one car and maybe a pedestrian or two, offered a useful space to set up four or five small, independent stands, abutting storefronts, in the nooks of the adjoining buildings or making use of scaffolding set up for refurbishing a 17th century palazzo, but whose lower rungs may as well be used as under-girding for a display table selling goods. Passing the nine to ten hours on the street hoping to earn enough to cover basic costs and not eat into any extra income accumulated from the seasonal festivals throughout southern Italy that could generate as much as 800€ in two or three days of selling, permitted plenty of

conversation. Topics ranged from possible futures in work – opening up a international call center, a fast food generic ‘eastern kebab’ restaurant in northern Italy, or buying an old car to make the circuit of all the key festivals – ways of tracking the renewal of documents, or exchanging views on the most profitable upcoming festivals, the most inexpensive way of getting there and which local Neapolitan store-keeper might help you fill out the necessary forms to get a temporary selling permit in the local municipality. Other street vendors would pass, of mixed origins – Senegalese, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese – since this was one main route between Piazza Garibaldi, the wholesale stores and migrant housing areas near the train station and the main commercial street of Via Toledo that many street vendors chanced to take advantage of the passing consumers. Street vendors would typically exchange pleasantries, order an Italian coffee (espresso) but often drink on the street together to watch their stands in case of a sale, apples or more rarely, but more prized, South Asian sweets would be passed around from a care package sent by a wife or mother at home. They would exchange views on how to avoid the municipal police, and critique the Italian economy, or speculate about the problems street vendors faced on a particular stretch of street from the Camorra, the police or Neapolitan teenagers. While this kind of knowledge exchange, communication and sociality about everyday issues was crucial for survival, it was part of a less remarked upon but equally important, if not more so, informal and embodied knowledge that smoothed one’s business and entrepreneurial activities. Developing the rapport, knowledge and familiarity with a local owner of *salumeria* (delicatessen) to offer discount pizzas or sandwiches or the Caffé owner to charge only 50 cents for an Italian coffee as opposed to 70 or 80 cents in exchange, the store-owner would not ring it up and run the risk that you as the customer might be charged by the *Guardia Finanza* in that peculiar Italian law that charges the customer leaving the

store lacking a receipt with tax evasion. These kinds of tacit knowledge, embodied, learned through observing, interacting and the social processes that constitute them through practice and familiarity, marginally improve one's situation in the everyday precarious survival of migrant entrepreneurs. Bodily posture, gestures and movement between the street, frequent personal, convivial conversations with local store-owners and assistants indicated these migrant street vendors were not 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1966) on the streets but constituted part of its local distinctiveness. This belonging to the neighbourhood, a knowledge of the place and the sociality of it was most evident to me when I noticed how the municipal police engaged with them on their frequent, but predictably periodic sweeps of the streets to clear unlicensed vendors and force those with licenses to keep on the move as stipulated. Most of the time those migrants most comfortable in the local street as evident by their social relations and comportment with each other and local store-owners were ignored by the police as they passed, even if others just a few stores down, whose bodily presentation or posture seemed to expect censor, were assessed, warned and asked to move along. I would not want to over-determine or romanticise this belonging. Some sweeps required almost everyone to move, especially after a series of robberies of tourists by Neapolitan youths spurred a public demonstration of police vigilance against illegality for a few weeks in the spring of 2005. Further, the street vendors did have to control for pilfering by passing local adolescents. All migrant street vendors had to move for the Christmas season for Neapolitan street vendors who wanted these prized spots for the holiday shoppers intent on visiting the famous Neapolitan Christmas artisans of ceramic and wood figurines on Via San Gregorio Armeno, but willing to buy many other handicrafts, winter hats and gloves etc.

The differential knowledge here was starkly evident

in who was asked to leave by the police but the sociality displayed did not evidence the guarding or secreting of knowledge by these street vendors – even with those asked to move along by authorities information was exchanged in a polyglot and of joking-style mix of Italian, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali and English. It did not manifest itself in competition but instead in a cooperative way that belied the putative individualist, neo-classical entrepreneur. Aside from the exchange of local knowledge and speculations about future work, these street vendors also displayed a remarkably cooperative work organization. The stands were spread over a 10-15 metre area on both sides of the cramped street. In the nine hours to ten hours of selling on the street, these migrants shared the responsibilities of the ‘showroom’ floor in a remarkably fluid way even if at the end of day profits and sales were clearly distinguished and distributed accordingly. By no means would a street vendor necessarily have to attend his own stand for a customer. That is, as they talked, gossiped, drank coffee, and stood around during the day between the passing traffic of customers and the hazards of police, and Neapolitan adolescents, they shared sales duties at each other’s stands, left their goods under each others’ care while they went to lunch, made a long-distance call to family, retrieved documents from the Ufficio Immigrazione or went for a quick trip to replenish their stock around Piazza Garibaldi, or simply lazily relaxed against a stone wall by the stands. This shared, unpaid labour was integral to the sociality of the work.

The imagination of work futures and entrepreneurial desires that were discussed shuffling on those long days in the historic center scripted the emergence of entrepreneurial chains of mostly South Asians into the wholesale distribution of the goods they started out selling on the streets, purchased originally from Neapolitan wholesale stores but now predominantly Bangladeshi-owned. In the spring of 2005, to

localize the global anxiety about the Chinese and the country's burgeoning economy that confronted the EU, the United States and other countries, Bangladeshi wholesale distributors in Naples were beginning to express some concern about Chinese distributors moving beyond the sale of imported cheap clothing to under-cutting and competing with them in the wholesale distribution of inexpensive jewelry and buttons not just to street vendors but mainly to small Italian store-owners all over southern Italy who came to Naples to find stock. At about the same time, a street vendor I had been conversing with since I arrived in September of 2005 decided to invest his savings from street vending to open a distribution store of jewelry, belts, hair clips and South Asian fabric bags with a Chinese partner. He had tired of street vending and wanted to move on. His business was unusual because of its partnership and hence social networks with Chinese migrants and his Bangladeshi friends chided him, in a good-natured way, for trusting the quality of Chinese products as compared to the known-quality of products from Indian, Bangladeshi or Thai supply-chains they generally used. He was admired for the risk he had taken to establish a shop and for his access to China, which offered plenty of speculation in imaginative pathways for the future for his former fellow street vendors. He benefited from multiple ethnic networks to establish his store, Neapolitans who helped him negotiate the licensing, renting and bureaucracy of setting up a shop, Bangladeshi knowledge of the wholesale business, and Chinese familial networks which would guide him in the supply chains from Shanghai, using his partner's cousins on the ground and long-distance cellular phone calls, with imaging, to communicate and find help with translation on his trip to Shanghai while his Chinese partner stayed back in Naples. He was also part of a nascent micro-credit group of migrants, mostly from Bangladesh from friendships developed in Naples – some hoping to legalise their status, some with

documents and street selling and some storeowners – who helped him with credit, advice and considerable informal knowledge and unpaid labour in organizing the new store, selecting mark-up prices, and finding a suitable Italian business accountant. As they joked the famous Grameen bank in Bangladesh got its ideas from them but was better at marketing. Frequently during the day I would hang out at his store, asking questions about business plans, supply chains, and his migration trajectory, street vendors I knew from other parts of the city would drop in to gossip, exchange views, help serve customers who entered the shop, or unload trucks when goods arrived from China. His store was a focal point for the exchange of knowledge about entrepreneurial possibilities in the city.

This paper has sought to value the informal knowledge work of migrants in Naples, Italy. The anthropologist of hunters and gatherers in southern Africa Richard Lee (1998) has asked us to consider how work might be done differently, organized in a way that transcends or is not limited by the current political economy of the time. The ethnographic evidence in this paper suggests that even though migrant street vendors face considerable constraints, they create space to construct a sociality based on an innovative practice of entrepreneurship. It is precisely through their production and distribution of informal knowledge and their social practices of work, not completely bound by their marginal insertion into the Naples, that these migrants create alternative ways to imagine possible entrepreneurial futures. After months of patiently responding to my naïve, perhaps arcane questioning, my Bangladeshi friend who had moved from street vending to his own wholesale store with a Chinese partner turned to me and seemed to speak to this new sociality when he talked not just about his new venture but the circle of friends who either owned similar stores or were street vendors, ‘Nick, we are

not following any business model out their, and because of that failure is not a possibility.’

Notes

1. This grant-funded research is based on anthropological methods of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, etc. I want to acknowledge the financial support of a University of Western Australia Small Grant and Study-leave Award that made this research possible. Further my stay in Naples from September 2004 to July 2005 was courtesy of a Visiting Researcher position in the Dipartimento di Sociologia at the Università degli Studi di Napoli, Federico II. Thank you to Professors Gabriella Gribaudo and Amalia Signorelli for their generous and thoughtful support. Also thanks to Stefano Harney and Lalita Sood for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.

2. The gendered asymmetry of migrant street traders in Naples is stark. The occupational niche is overwhelmingly male. The selling of two specific kinds of goods marked the exception: children’s inexpensive electronic toys, cheap electronic items (calculators) and clothing manufactured in China. Chinese women dominated this niche, sometimes selling with male partners but not always. They had a little competition with some Bangladeshi men who chose those goods to sell rather than jewelry, scarves and buttons as was common among their co-ethnics.

3. The previous immigration amnesties occurred in 1986, 1990, 1995, and 1998.

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