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In the congested midmorning traffic of the busy centre of Naples, a man speeds on a moped bearing stickers of the Volto Santo (Holy Face of Christ) and of the Naples football team’s mascot. Various logos adorn the expensive helmet which, instead of being worn as prescribed by law, hangs from the back of the moped. Probably in his early forties, the man wears fashionable jeans, shirt and trainers. Suddenly he brakes to shout and exuberantly gesture a respectful greeting to a dottore1 who is negotiating his way along the sidewalk among cars half-parked on the pavement, other pedestrians and street-vendors’ improvised stalls and show-rugs. Without stopping, the dottore acknowledges the greeting, waving his briefcase-free hand. Under the wisely inattentive eye of a bored, perhaps stressed vigile (pl. vigili, watchman),2 the man U-turns in the one-way street and, having quickly parked and locked the moped, approaches the dottore. The minor disturbance is speedily absorbed by the apparently chaotic but in fact virtually self-regulating stream of traffic. Speaking gently, touching the dottore’s arm, the man coaxes him towards a fashionable bar nearby. A quick coffee, a concerned chat, and the brief encounter is over; the moped-rider joins his mates standing by, and the professional enters a building.

The dottore and the moped-rider are a council bureaucrat and a council manual worker. They meet near the comune (town hall), but similar encounters can easily be observed near any public building or central place of leisure. Perhaps this has been a transaction or an image-boosting, satisfaction-giving event. The actors here are matter-of-fact, natural, but others may (though it is unusual nowadays) stress hierarchy. Depending on the political situation, the traffic may be more ordered and the vigile more self-conscious, overzealously aware of an opportunely renewed sense of duty. The obstacles to be avoided may be less obvious, less physically
demanding, but they could include uncollected rubbish, perennial street repairs or protesters demanding services, benefits or jobs. The episode, nevertheless, vividly exemplifies a kind of behaviour which is most usual in Naples, whatever the actors' social positions and employment statuses. It is also a good introduction to the challenging tangle of appearance and reality that confronts the observer. Throughout the centuries this compelling city has inspired richly imaginative forms of art and, most ambivalently, romantic rapture and contempt. Notoriously, Naples is la nobilissima, la corrotta (the noblest and most corrupt) — stereotypically paradoxical.1

It is probably true that to understand life in Naples we cannot avoid penetrating the life and culture of its ordinary citizens; particularly the popolino (populace, used as a plural) who make up the majority of the inner city's population. The Naples popolino, who nowadays use the word to describe themselves as ordinary people, have been addressed in the most diversified literature, from the comparative Victorian concern of White-Mario (1978 [1876]) and the realistically emotional pleasing of Serao (1973 [1884]) to the stigmatizing remarks of Croce (1967 [1944]), and more recent detailed journalism and studies by sociologists, political scientists, and folklorists (e.g. Luongo and Oliva 1959; Guadagno and De Masi 1969; Allum 1973; Laino 1984; CENSIS 1984; Lay 1981; Mazzacane et al. 1978). A view of them as misera plebs may be true to certain aspects of their desperate postwar condition, contentiously rendered by playwrights and novelists (e.g. De Filippo 1973 [1945]; Lewis 1978; Malaparte 1952; Burns 1948), but it certainly does not suit them today. It is nevertheless reiterated not only in certain sectors of the media but also in recent works such as that of Thomas Belmonte, published in 1979 and reprinted in 1989 with addenda which endorse the original argument.

Belmonte reports on aspects of life among the popolino, concluding that they 'inhabit a world connected and apart from the main, a dense and crowded urban world, . . . where the moral order is exposed as a fraud which conceals the historical ascendency of cunning and force. Cunning and force, the materia prima of life in the poor quarters' (p. 143).4 Thus, recalling the account of the rural South given by his predecessor Banfield (1958),3 Belmonte portrays the inhabitants of the neighbourhood of the centre where he worked as an underclass – a grasping and backward lumpenproletariat that, dragged down by its culture and beliefs, is irremediably caught into negative reciprocity and resigned to marginality and deprivation (see pp. 137–44). From such a viewpoint, these people's actions and aspirations appear strictly short-term, self-oriented and
endogenous. We are told that, socially segregated into a sort of Tönniesian *communitas*, they, when not in jail, spend their lives attempting to take advantage of each other and especially of ‘outsiders’ (see esp. ch. 2 and the addenda). Their sense of localness, Belmonte goes on to suggest, is based on a strong opposition to an ‘outside’ political and social environment on which they have no influence (see his conclusions and also, e.g., pp. 131–2) and to a state with which they have characteristically negative relations and by whose representatives they feel cheated and exploited through vertical networks of dependence.

Anthropologists are traditionally aware that narrow empiricism is as misleading as unjustified abstraction (Leach 1977:xviii). If micro-level evidence is to have theoretical value, more than simply being detailed and accurate, it must be set in the broader historical and sociological context. In a way, the multifaceted character of urban life in contemporary Europe further complicates the dilemma of tenable theoretical speculation. It seems to me, however, that understanding life in cities is made particularly difficult by a simplistic approach and conceptual superimposition which obscure a complex situation. Situating the analysis between the poles of subjectivity and objectivity is a challenging task, especially when we happen to be addressing issues that are close to us. Of course we cannot disengage ourselves from our personal experiences and, indeed, personalities. However, as a Neapolitan who has done research in Naples for more than a decade I have found that this need not sharpen the opposition between us as ethnographers (‘who know better’) and them as ‘the observed’ or inhibit our sense of the problematic in the relationship between ‘surface appearance’ and ‘underlying reality’ (Davis 1992:24–5). On the contrary, controlled use of the complications and contradictions that make up this resource may help us to fulfil a basic requirement of ‘understanding’ – achieving an empathic grasp of the situation through prolonged interactive involvement in the flow of local life (Pálsson 1992:35).

In the specific case of Naples, this requirement must be fulfilled if we are to penetrate a situation which, because it does not conform to abstract models of ‘how it ought to be’, is usually described as hopeless or, from the establishment’s viewpoint, uncontrollable. During the research it became obvious that it would be parochial, if not politically expedient, to assume that the *popolino* lacked moral, spiritual and material resources because they lived in a part of the city that, because it is central and historic, was the object of endless political debate but remained afflicted by more than its fair share of the problems that make life difficult in the urban West.
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Certainly, the objective difficulty of their lives did not mean that they could not benefit from an understanding of the importance, and the potential, of certain features of their economic and cultural life that defy standard definitions.

In this book I use ethnographic material to take a fresh look at the dilemmas of local ordinary life, beyond stereotypes and condescension. My main motivation is to see what new insights an anthropological approach to the study of this major European city can bring to a central issue of modern social theory (Giddens 1979; Abrams 1982), the relationship between individual agency and ‘the system’ in the areas of culture, organization and power. In-depth study of actors’ values in relation to their spiritual and material lives is, I believe, a fundamental condition for understanding human beings in society. In the contextual situation examined throughout the book, I investigate in detail the way in which people negotiate, over time, the terms – formally absolute but in fact ambiguous and flexible – of morality and of bureaucratic rule of the market and civil society. Moving beyond strong perspectivism about ‘rational conduct’,9 the discussion offers an empirical demonstration of the inadequacy of current concepts of purposeful action, social relations, and political organization.

The broad aim of this exercise is to see what contribution our understanding of power and social relations and of the agency/structure relationship in Naples brings to the theory of the organization of society in modern democracy. It seems to me legitimate to hope that knowledge of what is actually going on in Naples at what appears to be a critical phase for Italian democracy may stimulate a better comparative understanding of phenomena that are central to the political and economic mainstream in European society.

The methodology of research round the corner

Despite the pre-eminence of the city as a model of associated life, anthropologists have largely neglected to address urban Europe.10 John Davis is probably right when he points to professional insecurity as a possible explanation (1977: 7; see also Boissevain 1975 and Crump 1975). A rather strong possibility is that the detailed and prolonged study of the urban situation has been discouraged by a tendency towards doing research to order11 and by the argument that the participant-observer’s holistic approach is inapplicable to the study of the city.

In my case, six months of preliminary research helped me to cope with a large amount of documentary information12 and to establish the indis-
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If there are palpable contacts, then I spent fourteen months in a neighbourhood of the centre. During this period of constant and intimate immersion in ‘the field’, I employed a reasonable degree of participation in everyday life, family celebrations and situations of socialization in the area and outside it. Otherwise, I tried to share in what was possible to share, as in the case of religious rituals, ritual games, various kinds of problem-solving and events occurring in workshops, offices and institutions. I collected case-studies of significant individuals over several months, through the construction of genealogies, godparenthood maps, work histories, and maps of their universes. The combination of these strategies has been crucial to penetrating actors’ self-perceptions and world-views and to making intelligible the meanings, rules and logic of the situation, including the unsaid, the unconceptualized and their connections with broader social processes. On a different level, it has illuminated the way in which local people interact with the socio-economic, political and cultural life of the city and the country.

I originally selected three typical quartieri (sing. quartiere, quarter, as Italians call their neighbourhoods) of the centre. The three quarters are densely populated conglomerations of narrow, cobbled alleys called vicoli (sing. vicolo) and century-old buildings, weathered by time and shattered by earthquakes. Some of these buildings are hospitals or civic institutions. Street markets and other business activities, legal and illegal, are characteristically part of the bustling life of these quarters, and so is crime. Each quarter includes one or more churches and, inhabited by a pre-dominantly non-industrial population of popolino and petty-bourgeois origins, embodies a scaled-down version of the historical co-residence of people of various socio-economic positions (see, e.g., Galasso 1978: 141; De Seta 1988: 285). Later I shall argue the difficulty of looking at this contemporary urban setting from a class perspective. For now I shall only indicate that, given this difficulty, it is for the sake of simplicity that I use such terms as popolino and bourgeois and that I deliberately do so because of their generality.

I eventually settled in the quarter that seemed likely to give me the most cooperation. It is part of San Lorenzo district (see Map 2), and, although there is no break from the surrounding urban environment, its boundaries are traditionally identified with certain major streets and squares. The area is about a mile square and is inhabited by a little less than three thousand people. It is quite central; for one reason or another many Neapolitans have to cross it, some with contempt for its low status and others with interested pleasure. It is here that many of the local people’s contacts and
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activities – though definitely not all and not always the most important – form, develop and have significance.

One autumn morning, on my arrival in Naples to begin fieldwork, I met Lino, a stall-keeper in the local street market who was then in his thirties, and his wife, Luisa. Having enquired at length on the purpose of my research, the couple promised their cooperation. They shared with most locals a strong sense of belonging and an explicit concern about the improvement of ‘the quarter and of its inhabitants’ reputation. The Neapolitan popolino had been grossly misrepresented, Lino said, and he hoped that, because I appeared to be genuinely interested in learning about their lives, culture and motivations, my study ‘could help to set things right’. At first, thinking of Whyte’s (1955) experience, I felt that, with some luck, Lino might become for me a ‘Doc’ – a favourite informant who would help me to orient myself in local life. However, he became something more. I have enjoyed relations of ‘vivid human interaction’ (Firth 1984: vii) with many locals, but without such a close relationship with a person like Lino my pursuit of intimacy and depth would probably have had far less success. Lino opened up for me much of local life. What I learned from him provided a stimulating background for the information I obtained from others.

As I began to travel to the quarter every day, it was instrumental that Lino, Luisa and other early contacts began to explain my task and introduce me to their peers starting, they proposed, with those they knew would cooperate, whether they liked them or not. Of course, they also agreed, residing there would be a crucial asset but, they warned, finding accommodation would not be easy. Decay apart, shortage of accommodation available for rent in central Naples is explained by insufficient public housing and the use of housing for commercial activities. Moreover, while access to property is widely seen as an opportunity to improve personal status, a strong emphasis is put on the moral and spiritual themes that here as elsewhere make a house (and in many cases a shop or other premises) more than a commodity (Pardo 1992); accordingly, when people move they may keep their former apartments because they feel sentimentally attached to them as loci of stability and well-being. It was only four months after starting fieldwork that I acquired lodgings in a shared flat (with an old widow and a middle-aged couple) near the market. Although the previous student-tenants had moved months earlier, my popolino contacts gave me this important information and produced me as a candidate to Gino, the landlord, only when they had begun to regard me with less suspicion. Explained only in part by the fact that many here deal below the
strictly legal line, this behaviour exemplifies the way in which the *popolino* establish control over personal relations, and over access to properties. Gino, a part-time university student and semiprofessional occasional labourer now in his late thirties, had known my accommodation requirements since we met, months previously, but he offered me a contract only when I clearly enjoyed local approval and backing. Soon I learned that, in accordance with the symbolism of liminality attached to some local buildings, the place was believed to be haunted by spirits such as the Monaccello (Little Monk),\(^{19}\) the results of particularly unaccomplished lives which, in turn, engender unaccomplished deaths. Probably a factor in making the accommodation available to me, this abnormality was gradually domesticated as with time and the help of Mario, a local manual worker who claims spiritual powers, my apartment was checked and found free of evil spirits.

Taking up local residence positively affected the relationship between penetration and acceptance, giving new impetus to the fieldwork. Most people’s wish to deal with me publicly became sufficiently negotiable to allow interviews to occur in the privacy of my lodgings or of their homes.\(^{20}\) My network expanded quickly to include my neighbours and their relatives and I found it easier to participate in all sorts of events. I was invited to join conversations, meet new people\(^{21}\) and offer my opinions,\(^{22}\) finding that it was rarely wasteful not only to chat at a road-corner, outside a *basso* (pl. *bassi*, ground-floor dwelling room),\(^{23}\) or on a doorstep but also to spend time at one’s window or balcony. In warm weather, I found, a window is a vantage point from which to observe and be seen and contacted. This is an ordinary fact of a highly socialized, noisy and overcrowded life-style\(^{24}\) that, at some expense of a privacy that here has a distinctly flexible meaning, helps to reduce the price in pain and loneliness that the individual, especially the entrepreneurial individual, must pay for individuality.

However, only through the experience of trial and error could I make the best of the familiarity acquired over the years with the *popolino* and their culture and form a useful idea of how to behave, what questions to ask, and how to ask them. It was difficult to determine the unspoken but agreed-upon significance of the various forms of expression which, depending on circumstances, obviously conveyed a contrary, complementary, or much watered-down version of their surface meanings. This complexity, set in a blend of baroque theatricality and ruthless irony, finds expression in hyperbolic body language and figures of speech. Equally, self-pity is often intermingled with an ability to laugh into perspective.
normal crises, embarrassment and sometimes more serious events through a balanced use of irreverence, humour and self-mockery which also serves the purpose of ‘normalising’ others, establishing individuality and independence and reducing distance. The deceptively simple picture of local life thus conjured up provided a constant reminder that nothing should be taken for granted about the significance of events, and that actors’ motives and self-representations could indeed be easily misinterpreted. The *popolino* themselves say that one should always distinguish the truth from its representation, which is, after all, a necessary condition for our analysis of the situation if it is to avoid the mediocrity that inevitably goes with the a priori logic of determinisms.

I was given examples of and introduced to people who were ‘downtrodden and without *maniglie*’ (sing. *maniglia*, handles, useful contacts), and who ‘cope only with difficulty’. However, many entries in my notebooks have to do with the intriguing contrast between the representation many *popolino* initially provided of themselves as poor, disadvantaged and exploited and their actual ability to manage their existence relatively successfully. For instance, Lino, who in his culture and origins belongs and describes himself as belonging to the *popolino*, is like many others in having managed to obtain a steady public-sector job; he also performs other work activities, some paid and some not, has developed useful contacts and the power to help others, and is well integrated into the life of the rest of the city at various levels. I could make some early guesses about local people’s networks, but their actual breadth, diversification and value fully emerged in a systematic way only later, when the universes of a number of individuals were mapped. By then I had formed an idea of the complex economics of social exchange underlying apparently insignificant situations in the daily routine and of the results that sprang in time from such situations, including new alliances and the expansion of personal resource systems. I had also observed people’s various work activities, spanning throughout the city and outside, and had witnessed their dealings with the establishment by accompanying them on their errands in the bureaucracy, the educational system, the law, the trade unions, etc. More immediately, value judgements aside, I could not ignore the market value of the furniture and status symbols (such as television sets, hi-fi, VCRs, cars, jewellery and clothes) that adorned the homes and persons of many locals, or their investments in prestigious tasks such as family celebrations, leisure and private education and, when necessary, in contacts and favours. Equally, in agreement with a national pattern (De Mauro 1993), many *popolino* soon proved that their low level of formal instruction did not
mean that they could speak only Neapolitan or unusually poor Italian or that they were particularly restricted in their views, information and ability to express criticism.27

As local people’s trust increased, so did their interest and active cooperation.28 The improved quality and quantity of relationships and information was a key factor in coming to terms with the intricate interplay between secrecy, embarrassment and gossip. This issue of trust took on a new identity during updating field trips. While some people cold-shouldered me on my visit two years later, in 1988, the majority appreciated that I had not completely disappeared, greeting me as ‘an old friend’ and indeed behaving more informally and warmly than ever before. This response, partly explained by my renewed commitment to keeping my promise of confidentiality, has made it easier for me to return to the field.

Theory and ethnography in urban research
On a theoretical level, anthropological enquiry in urban Europe has largely been frustrated by the disposition, mentioned earlier, to think of the city as a patchwork of socially, economically and culturally separated areas. Equally frustrating has been the tendency to reject in-depth study of the micro-level in favour of ‘grand theory’. This tendency has been basically informed by a view of ordinary individuals as powerless puppets of exploitative and ineluctable powers and by the conception of social relations in terms of production and consumption, corresponding to the categories of dominance and class conflict.

Anthropologists have traditionally pointed to the political and socioeconomic changes brought about by actors’ everyday choices in their goal pursuits and enhancement of personal power. More than simply affecting an individual’s position, these choices are part of what Abrams has called the ‘problematic of structuring’ (1982: esp. xv–xviii), the power of the ordinary individual to negotiate and influence social structure over time. Believing that social theory has nothing to gain from privileging either agency or structure, I shall address the process of mutual influence of purposeful individual action (and morality) and society, focusing on the significance of different resources and domains of existence.

A sophisticated understanding of contemporary human beings in society must take very seriously the interplay between religion and civil society, thought and action, non-material and material life, belief and choice, value and transaction and people’s own sense of right and wrong, good and evil. Our interpretation ought to be fully aware that these are not simply various aspects of life which fall into different analytical pigeon-holes. They are
aspects whose meanings, relations and significance are redefined as information and experience are transmitted from generation to generation. For a real setting to be penetrated in its various levels of complexity and depth all these aspects need to be studied processually, not only in relation to self and to others but also in relation to the broader social and moral order in which individuals feel they belong. The crucial question, then, is what role this level of understanding is allowed to play in our analysis, and this emphasizes the importance of adopting a sufficiently pluralist theoretical framework.

A central part of the argument of this book is an expansion of a point which I first made in a coherent way in a shorter work (1992). There I observed that highly valued material assets are often transacted with stress on meanings – e.g., sentiment, self-representation, own moral image among significant others – beyond basic material need and strictly monetary value. I stated that of course money is important for the popolino, as it is for the bourgeoisie, and financial well-being does constitute a basic aspect of their idea of success. Nevertheless, the distinction between good and evil is not strictly blurred by money, nor is competition exclusively determined by it. Demanding careful differentiation – not opposition – of moral meaning and material interest, throughout the fieldwork people's purposive actions, their modes of exchange and entrepreneurship, have consistently indicated that non-material aspects of existence play a tangible, important and rational role in the quality of actors' lives, and this includes aspects of their culture that have been described as evidence of superstition and subalternity.

The definition of purposive action which I propose here addresses the difficulty of drawing the line between social norms and rational conduct, financially oriented or not, and between identity and interest (Lukes 1991b; Runciman 1991; Offe 1991). Recognizing the role of the moral, spiritual and emotional in these people's rationality, I suggest, does not necessarily imply indulging in a value-laden exaggeration of the 'non-tangible' at the expense of the 'tangible'. From a Weberian angle, it means recognizing culture 'as an irreducible dimension of action which elevates man above the pure necessities of the material world' (Stauth 1992: 219). But it also means recognizing the limitations of the perspectivist view, implicit in Weber's distinction between formal and substantive rationality (Brubaker 1991: 4), that what is rational from one viewpoint may be irrational from another and vice versa. I do not wish to argue for a (probably impossible) perspective neutrality. Broadly in agreement with Runciman's (1991) point, I would rather suggest that the profound implications of the