

Michele F. Fontefrancesco

*Department of Anthropology, Durham University
Great Britain
m.f.fontefrancesco@durham.ac.uk*

The Spectacles of the Crisis: Local Perception of Economic and Social Change in Valenza

Abstract: In this article, the case of the economic crisis of Valenza (Italy) and its jewellery industry is presented. The crisis has occurred since 2008 as an effect of the plunge of international jewellery market. Drawing from ethnographic materials collected during my fieldwork in the city (2008-2010), I intend to point out that in the most recent economic downturn had strong cultural effects on local population (goldsmiths and others). Following Kant's concept of category of reason, I will show that the crisis itself had become a category of reason for local population that uses it to make decisions and plan their future.

Keywords: crisis, jewellery, artisan, Italy, Kant

Introduction

Scholars, such as Gary Gereffi (Gereffi and De Marchi 2010), and experts (e.g. Servizio Studi e Ricerche 2010) have already shown the main economic features of the crisis of the jewellery industry in Valenza and highlighted the subtle but consistent threads that connect this downturn to the global change in the jewellery market (Gereffi & De Marchi 2010, Servizio Studi e Ricerche 2010). In that context, the word "crisis" was used to qualify the change of the local production milieu of Valenza. Thus, it was mainly used as an ethnic category which was borrowed from the economic jargon to exemplify and recognize a transformation that was undermining the economic trends of a local production milieu. The word '*crisi*' [crisis] occurred in the public debate of Valenza, with this meaning (e.g. Fontefrancesco 2009a). However, Valenzano people used other meanings of the word as well as it emerges from this episode of my fieldwork. In fact, the word "crisis" was often used by my informants to define the mutation of their world, which is to say the changing of Valenza's urban environment and economy. In doing so, '*crisi*' assumed a new and peculiar connotation that diverges from the meaning given to "crisis" by economic theory.

In this article, drawing upon the ethnographic data gathered during my fieldwork in the city (2008-2010), I intend to present the emic conceptualization of crisis among Valenzano people and the evolution of its use in the city's public debates. In doing so, and highlighting the discrepancy of significances given to this word by my informants, I show the differences in the conceptualization of the city that characterize different social groups within Valenza's community. Furthermore, moving beyond my ethnographic materials, I demonstrate that the crisis does not only represent a description of the status of the city and its economy, but is mainly a subset of the reasoning used by individuals to deal with the world, make their decisions and plan their future. In order to create the local context, I want to present a small tale of the field that well portrays the atmosphere and subjects of this discourse.

Giovanni

I had come on 28th of September 2010 to the workshop to interview its owner, Giovanni, and to ask him for information concerning his experience as a goldsmith in Valenza as well as about the history of his workshop.

Having a yearly turnover of more than two million euros, the firm was well known and established. However, the office of its director and owner was small and unadorned. A little over ten square meters, the room had a black linoleum floor whose color sharply contrasted against the plain white of the walls. Near the entrance, there were a couple of grey, metal lockers. Together with the plain metal writing desk and three chairs probably bought from Ikea, they were the only pieces of furniture in the room: no photos, no pictures on the wall. There was no computer either. Giovanni was in his seventies and never familiarized himself with what he called "*diavolerie moderne*", modern diabolical gadgetry. The computers were in another office and were used by a secretary and the CAD designer.

Behind the desk, Giovanni was seated in one of the chairs. While he answering my questions, he was reading some of the bills and receipts that crowded the desk. Small, anonymous packages wrapped up in white tissue paper emerged from among the papers. The only clue to understanding the precious contents of those small parcels were the few figures hastily written on each envelope. The numbers indicated the price of the pieces of jewellery that were enclosed, and the carats of the mounted stones. He was answering my questions to permit me to reconstruct the history of his life and activity.

Giovanni opened his firm in the '70s, after twenty years spent working "*sotto padrone*", literally under a master, employed in various small and large Valenzano jewellery workshops. With the recovery of the international jewellery market, in the second half of the decade, he and his brother

opened their own independent firm. In the '90s, Giovanni's brother left the firm.

After three hours of interviewing, my last question was about the past years of history in Valenza, and this is how Giovanni replied:

"It is the crisis... it is the difficulty in finding new clients, and making them pay on time. The crisis is in Valenza. It is rooted in the souls of Valenzano people. You see it in the eyes of the people, in the eyes of the other goldsmiths. It lies in the growing lack of trust for the future of jewellery making, our trade. I saw the crisis in the eyes of many of our apprentices and workers. [...] This is the crisis of the jewellery trade: the young go away and the old remain... I will continue to work so long as I have the strength to work. Then, I will sell the workshop. However, this is the crisis of our economy. It's not just the economy... it's not just the market... it is in the city: it's the too many firms that have had to close, it's the too many empty workshops that are now on sale... but it's also in our heads: it is the fear, the insecurity, the sense of resignation and lack of future that Valenzano people feel."

Anthropology, Rhetoric and Crisis

In this episode, the crisis entered into the Giovanni's discourse and became the key to interpreting Valenza and its recent developments. It became a rhetorical object, a metonymy to describe the cultural change of the city.

In recent years, Micheal Carrithers (2005) has drawn attention to the possibilities that the study of rhetoric can offer to anthropology. In particular, he wrote that this type of research:

"Shows, first, that the schemas of culture are not in themselves determining, but are tools used by people to determine themselves and others. Then it places agency-and-patency to the fore; the tools of culture are used by people on one another, to persuade and convince, and so to move the social situation from one state to another. Finally, the rhetorical perspective shows us the timing, the flow of events in a narrative, such that just this set of schemas, informing a solemn diplomatic ceremony, when combined with that set of schemas, informing ceremonies of remorse, repentance, and reconciliation, took on a particular weight and rhetorical force when expressed at that particular time." (Carrithers 2005, 581-582).

In the last few years, the study of rhetoric has grown in importance in anthropology, since it has proved to be a fertile ground of research for understanding the cultural dynamics that are at the root of how individuals and society deal with the world and the vicissitudes of life (Carrithers 2009, e.g. Gudeman 2009, Muir 2008). In this respect, the contributors in (Gudeman 2009) demonstrated the possibilities that the study of public rhetoric open up towards the understanding and verification of the penetration in the culture of

complex societies of economic theories and objects, adding a further layer to anthropologic analyses on these subjects, such as money (e.g. Hart 2001, Oliven 2009, Maurer 2006).

Like money, the concept of economic crisis, which is here referred to simply as "crisis", is *per se* a subject of economic theory, a particular feature of global and local economies, and the object of a global and local discourse (cf. Foucault 1971) that can be chosen as the subject of anthropological enquiry. To do so, however, it is necessary to consider all of the dimensions that underpin this concept and this process in order to clarify what crisis means in economics.

The word "crisis" only entered into the vocabulary of economic theory in the second half of the 19th century, as a word drawn from political jargon where it was already being used to define the slowdown of the exchange of goods. It was theorized for the first time by Karl Marx in *the Capital* (Marx 2010 [1867], 87-88; Marx 2010 [1885], 43-44). There, he framed the notion of crisis as the interruption of the process of accumulation of capital in the hands of the capitalists for the block of goods consumption in the market, laying this idea on the conceptualization of the market as the complex set of exchanges that substantiates the economic life of a society. Hence, the term 'crisis' refers to a particular dynamic of the market; a precise configuration of its characteristics that brings to a halt the accumulation of the capital, and, thus, the normal flow of the exchanges.

Since Marx, the economic crisis has been seen as an interruption in the normal running of the market, which is the meaning that was used to define the "crisis" of 1929 and the most recent crisis initiated by the bust of the mortgages bubble in 2007.

From the definition, however, we can derive that a crisis is a process rather than a punctual, historical event. In fact, using the categories introduced by Fernand Braudel, we can say that a crisis *per se* is a phenomenon that transcends the spatial and temporal limits of the "*événement*", the event, and expands in time and space developing itself in the "*durée*", the duration (Braudel 1972). In other words, a crisis, since it refers to the ongoing result of a dysfunction in the exchanges of a market, does not happen in a precise time and space, like a declaration of war or a death of a man, but expands in time. Thus, to understand a crisis, its causes and effects, a researcher must define the boundaries of the market. This means, one needs to identify the stocks and capital exchanged, the place where they are traded, and, then, consider the evolution of such exchanges over a period that is determined by the researcher. Therefore, it appears that every definition of crisis is *per se*, rather than by becoming a singularized historical event, an analytical judgment of the market status that is underpinned by the selection of the space-temporal dimension where the market is "situated" and from which the crisis develops.

In the past two centuries, the term 'crisis' entered into the vocabulary of Social Sciences where it is commonly used as an analytical definition of a plunge in the exchange rate of a market and, more broadly, to define an interruption of the normal work of a national or international market. This conceptualization was used to define the downturn initiated on the 4th September 1929 as well the most recent Credit Crunch (Allen et al., 2009).

In the past two decades, growing attention has been given to economic crises. First of all, the crises have been the spatial-temporal contexts of anthropological analysis, despite not being the primary subject of research (e.g. Ferguson 1999, Stewart 1996, Mollona 2009). In the last months of 2008, with the world one step away from economic collapse and in a climate of general insecurity, Keith Hart and Horacio Ortiz (Hart and Ortiz 2008) brought to foreground the subject of the crisis and proposed it as a subject of anthropological enquiry: a combination of circumstances made this analysis particularly urgent (Hart and Ortiz 2008, 1).

In the account given by the two scholars, however, the analysis of the global crisis emerges as an analysis of the global market and its internal functioning more than the study of the cultural repercussions on the local level that a global downturn might have (Hart and Ortiz 2008, 2). Similarly, Tara Schwegler (Schwegler 2009) reads the crisis as an opportunity for anthropologists to "add a critical theoretical dimension to the diagnosis and ongoing analysis of the global economic order" (Schwegler 2009, 9), where this dimension concerns the internal work of the market. More recently, Stephen Gudeman (Gudeman 2010) has proposed his reading of the global market moving from a flattened idea of the market to a multilayered one. In fact:

"(...) economists may see economies as flat or smooth plains consisting of markets and market-like behavior that lead to equilibrium situations, but I think they consist of overlapping and conflicting spheres of value and practices that include markets. I label these fuzzy-edged spaces House, Community, Commerce, Finance, and Finance of Finance or Meta-Finance. The domains are separate but mingle; individuals and cultures emphasize them differently; their relative prominence changes over time; and they represent competing interests and perspectives. These five domains, in order, enjoy increasing reach in physical and social space and in inclusiveness of material activities, services and institutions. They are increasingly abstracted from the material economy of everyday life, and increasingly liquid: the speed and number of transactions multiply in the upper spheres of finance and meta-finance." (Gudeman 2010, 4).

In this theoretical frame, Gudeman hints that "high-market capitalism may have a tendency to debase itself through creative destruction in the search for profit" (Gudeman 2010, 7), or, in other words, a thoughtful impoverishment of the "base", the social local community (Gudeman 2005), that is the fundament of each local economy.

Besides their originality, these recent works tend to focus on the market as a dimension of enquiry, making the study of the crisis a further step in the study of modern markets and finance (Robbins 2009, Schwittay 2009). It results that the crisis, in this research, remains strictly conceptualized as a feature of the market, rather than an independent object reaching the public discourse and the life of individuals in a local community as it emerged in the interview with Giovanni.

Therefore, this article follows this neglected research strand, considering the economic crisis of Valenza as an object of the local discourse of Valenza, and to define its characteristics, I base myself on the words of Giovanni.

Crisis as an Object of the Discourse

In the interview, Giovanni gave a precise definition of what an economic crisis was in his eyes:

"This is the crisis of the jewellery trade [...]. This is the crisis of our economy. It's not just the economy... it's not just the market... it is in the city: it's the too many firms that had to close, it's the too many empty workshops that are now on sale... but it's also in our heads: it is the fear, the insecurity, the sense of resignation Valenzano people feel."

This is a powerful rhetorical construction. In few sentences, it is able to operate an utter refunctionalization of the concept of "crisis" and mark a semantic expansion of this concept from the boundaries fixed in economic theory.

We see how the word crisis is thrown into the discourse with it strictly referring to the local economic situation and its economic meaning ("This is the crisis of the jewellery trade [...]. This is the crisis of our economy"). However, once it is introduced, the term is immediately disembedded from economic theory and its original meaning is put in brackets ("It's not just economy... it's not just the market..."). Hence, the meaning of this construction of the discourse is expanded through a dense series of juxtapositions ("it is in the city [...]"). Hence, Giovanni did not formulate a new analytical definition of "crisis" that is utterly alternative to the previous one: he expands on the original understanding through a web of examples, producing a deductive definition of economic crisis that encompasses economic change as well as the transformation of the human and urban environment of the locale. Hence, my informant offered a view of the crisis and economic change embedded into the social reality of the community that integrates the impalpability of the economic process into the material and emotional world that surrounded him. Thus, the crisis was contextualized in Valenza and transformed into an emic category that refers to the present status of the city and its population.

Archaeology of the Crisis

The passage from the interview with Giovanni is emblematic of the most extended semantic process that went on rapidly in the public discourse of Valenza. Over the span of two years, a word that was initially only utilized to describe the economic difficulty of a particular economic sector became a synonym for the decline of the entire city. This process moved through a two-fold transformation: whilst *'crisi'* moved from referring to the emergency situation in only a part of the city – the jewellery industry – to denoting a crucial stage in the life of the entire city. The nature of the problem to which the crisis referred also shifted from economy to society.

Before presenting such a change, it is necessary to shed light on the history of the use of *'crisi'* in the city. This word, in fact, is far from being new in the Valenzano dictionary. By examining historical accounts and local newspapers, it appears that, in the past century, the word *'crisi'* was often used to describe moments of extreme weakness in specific sectors of the local economy. In this sense, the word *'crisi'* was used, for example, to refer to the downturn in the footwear industry in the 1960s (Penna Ivaldi, 2008). Considering the economic history of the jewellery trade, this word often recurred to denote the periodical downturn of the national and international market that was part of the cycle of the jewellery business. In this respect, *'crisi'* was often substituted by goldsmiths in their spoken language with the dialectal word *'molla'*, which means slackening (Gaggio 2007). By the mid-2000s, however, these words were linked by a perfect synonymy. Hence, they had the same semantic extension and were used as analytical terms to describe the market trends and the consequent worsening of the working conditions of the craftspeople.

During the months of fieldwork, I witnessed the progressive rupture of the semantic reciprocity of these two terms. With the worsening of the economic situation and the stagnation of the market, my informants tended to differentiate between *'molla'* and the *'crisi'*: whilst the former was still used to refer to a general downturn of the market, the latter bore an emotional, tragic connotation, missing in the use of *'molla'*. With this meaning, it was generally associated with a dramatic moment that the jewellery market was experiencing at the time. This differentiation clearly emerged in some interviews, for example, in this passage taken from an interview with a goldsmith in his mid-forties: "I mean, yes, *'molla'* translates *crisi*...but, well... a *'molla'* is a bad moment... it can be to not sell for some months. What we experience is not just that... I would not call it just a *'molla'* ... this is a crisis... this is the *'crisi'* of our trade and this city."

The rupture of the historical synonymy between *'molla'* and *'crisi'* is the first evidence of a process of resemanticization of the latter that occurred over a few months, between 2008 and 2009, in the public debates of Valenza.

Despite its use being known and attested in the city's past, the word '*crisi*' reappears in the public debates of the city only late in 2008, even though the 2000s saw a progressive shrinking of Valenza's jewellery industry and a gradual reduction of the number of firms open and people employed in the trade (Maggiore 2010, 529). Since the mid-2000s, the Valenza City Council together with other partners began to promote specific initiatives to support the jewellery industry and the local production milieu. Although these events and projects highlighted the difficulties that the jewellery sector was experiencing, in the newspapers and public speeches, local politicians and entrepreneurs minimized the significance of this economic change until late 2008. Even in the private discussion, besides a few comments concerning the difficulties of the market, the downturn of the market was a topic that people generally avoided. As a fifty-year-old gem setter, whom I interviewed in April 2009, explained:

"The crisis of the trade was the big elephant in the room that nobody wants to talk about. We suffered but we did not talk. Why? We did not want to publicly admit the problem. We did not want to talk because we did not want to lose our face in front of the other goldsmiths. It was surreal. In those months, none of us were selling, but we continued to produce just for our face. It was a sort of taboo... When the first firms started closing and the situation of the market was not improving, we timidly began speaking..."

Only after the onset of the Credit Crunch, in October 2008, when Valenzano jewellery producers had returned from the international fairs of Valenza and Vicenza after having witnessed the almost complete disappearance of national and international demand, the words '*crisi*' and '*molla*' started circulating among the goldsmith community to define the market situation, the difficulties of selling in Italy as well as abroad and being paid on time. However, these words were mainly limited to informal discussions and the authorities did not publicly employ them.

The "taboo" was infringed in December for the first time. In a four-column interview in the *il Piccolo* newspaper from the 19th December (Zemide 2008), the then-mayor of Valenza, Gianni Raselli, defined the difficult economic period for the jewellery sector as "a moment of crisis for this business". Thus, in its public occurrence, where the crisis was finally recognized openly, it was also circumscribed only to a single part of Valenzano society, the jewellery trade. Moreover, it was not recognized either as a social problem or as a source of social problems for the community.

While the media acknowledged that the economy of Valenza, or at least part of it, was in a critical situation, from listening to conversations among Valenzano people it clearly appeared that there was growing awareness among the community that the crisis of the jewellery sector was far more than just an economic problem limited to one section of the population. The '*crisi*'

of the jewellery industry was increasingly equated to the '*crisi*' of Valenza in conversations taking place in the cafés, in the streets, or at the supermarket. An example of such parallelism took place on the 24th of December 2008, in the Esselunga supermarket. There, two women were chatting while queuing in front of the cashier's desk. The first, Giovanna, was in her late forties; she was the wife of one of my informants, the owner of a small workshop located in the historic centre of the town. The other was Patrizia, a woman in her fifties who was a teacher in one of local high-schools. Giovanna was talking about her husband's business and the problems he was facing. She justified the situation, saying: "...you see this is the '*crisi*'..." Patrizia added: "I know, I know quite well... Also I can see the '*crisi*'... it is in the streets; it is in the many parking lots left free; it is in people who throng the coffee shops without having a coffee... it is in the half-empty shelves of this supermarket..." In the description Patrizia gave, the crisis permeated the city. Small, superficial changes in aspects of everyday life in the city, the same ones that deeply struck me when I arrived on the field, were chosen by her to describe the essence of the '*crisi*' and to make sense of the transformation that Valenza and its community were undergoing.

In a few months, '*crisi*' turned from an unspeakable word into the keyword of the debates in the city. The rapidity of this change as well the direction of the semantic transformation of the word can be found in the combination of the relevance of the jewellery trade in Valenza and the period of the year in which the global market crisis started. Indeed, the jewellery industry represented, and still represents, the largest economy in the city, employing about half of the entire working population. Moreover, the last trimester of the year is always the busiest and most profit-bearing period, since the majority of the year's orders are generally made during or shortly before the Christmas period. Consequentially, it was usually a particularly intense period of production for Valenzano jewellery firms. From November to January, firms were used to closing only on Christmas to finish the ordered goods and dispatch them to customers scattered all across the world. In 2008, due to the drastic reduction of orders, the city's production noticeably slowed down from November. In December 2008, Giovanni remembered, "we [the Valenzano community] counted the first victims: dozens of small workshop closed, and a hundred goldsmiths lost their jobs." The presence and the number of these "victims" underpinned the semantic shift of '*crisi*' from a mere economic to a social emergency in Valenza's public discourse.

Despite that in its first occurrence, '*crisi*' did not mirror this shift, the local mass media became aware of, and became interested in this change. The first attempt at portraying this change was made by the local news radio, Radio-gold. In the first week of January 2009, the radio began a new editorial project concerning Valenza and its socioeconomic situation. It made plans to launch

an online and on-air weekly programme dedicated to the city from March to May, over a total of 9 episodes. The objective was, in the words of the director of the local news radio,

"To speak about the crisis and how it is changing the city. In the past year, we have listened to scholars talking about the downturn of the jewellery market, and the problems of Valenza's district. However, none has said what Valenzano people know quite well: this crisis is not just an economic problem. It is transforming the city and the perception that Valenzano people have of their city."

To underline the nexus between the social and economic repercussions of the crisis, the broadcast was entitled "*Valenza: le persone, l'oro e la crisi*" [Valenza: people, gold and crisis]. The programme was launched on the 12th March. During the series, the journalists highlighted the effects that the crisis of the Valenzano jewellery industry was having on other economic sectors of the city, such as commerce (e.g. Rossi 2009b) or education (e.g. Fontefrancesco 2009b), and on the perception of the city by Valenzano people (e.g. Rossi 2009a, Rossi 2009c).

The meaning given to '*crisi*' in the programme was just the first public occurrence of a way of describing the economic crisis and Valenza, which, in 2010, at the end of my fieldwork, was still employed. Since March 2009, in political debates and in other media, such as the newspapers (e.g. Zemide 2009), the crisis of the jewellery sector began to be portrayed as a problem that was going far beyond mere economics. Hence in the official discourses as well, the worsening of the condition of local industry and work in the town, which was caused by the lack of revival of the international jewellery market throughout, brought '*crisi*' to become an analytical-deductive concept publicly used to portray the situation of the entire city and which was explained on the basis of the factual changes in the city.

Shades of Meaning

Thus, the semantic sliding of '*crisi*' that occurred in Valenza's public discourse corresponded to a general recognition of the downturn of the local jewellery industry as a collective problem that involved the entire city to various extents. During the interviews, this general acknowledgment was distinguished by the emergence of two different main rhetorical trajectories deeply connected with the conceptualization of the possible future of the city.

Those among my informants who were directly involved in the jewellery trade and in particular the craftspeople who actually produced the jewellery, described the downturn as a catastrophe for the present and future of the city that was overthrowing Valenza. In fact, as we have already dwelled upon

(Fontefrancesco 2011), generally, the goldsmiths tended to associate the city exclusively with the jewellery sector. In this perspective, the downturn of the jewellery industry was not just a specific problem that the individuals felt to be particularly dramatic, nor an adverse economic conjuncture. It was described as the possible end of the entire city. This was particularly evident in the political arena, where, several times, formal and informal goldsmiths' associations, together with exponents of the Valenzano administration, requested aid from the government and its local bodies for Valenzano firms (Comune di Valenza 2010). Such appeals were underpinned and strengthened by an assumption that corresponded to the correlation that the one of the senior officers of one of the largest Valenza goldsmiths associations overtly formulated during the inauguration of the "Valenza Gioielli 2009" fair: "The jewellery industry is the heart of Valenza. Now, it is in crisis, and, when it is in crisis, the entire city is in crisis. If the jewellery industry dies, the entire city will die." The correlation makes the jewellery industry coincide with the entire city. It follows that Valenza is seen as almost subordinate to the jewellery trade and that the future of the city is bound to the destiny of this industry. Thus, it does not recognize the relevance or even the presence of other economies in the city, such as the tertiary sector that in the 2000s grew in importance mainly thanks to the creation of shopping malls and large supermarkets. Hence, it does not recognize any alternative for Valenza but the jewellery industry. In this scheme of thought, the crisis of the trade undermining the production milieu of Valenza is "condemning" the city to an "inevitable" decline that was being actualized and denoted by signs, such as vacant workshops, empty parking lots, and the reduction in consumption.

People who were not employed in the jewellery industry mentioned the same signs by which to describe the change in the city. Indeed, as with Patrizia, they were aware that the crisis that the jewellery sector was experiencing did reverberate through the entire city. However, although they generally recognized the importance of the jewellery trade in the city, they did not share the idea of the coincidence of Valenza with the jewellery business. "Valenza is not only jewellery," explained the bartender of one of the coffee shops in the historic city centre, in January 2010. "There are shops. There are offices. There are other firms that produce stuff such as bricks and roof tiles. We must not forget it. The crisis touches all of us, but it does not mean there are no other alternatives. History teaches us that this city experienced another terrible crisis some decades ago, that of the shoe industry. However, the city found an alternative. It was the jewellery business. We thrived on it. Now it is in crisis. The State must help the goldsmiths. Yes, sure! Even though I am sure it won't disappear, and, as well, I am sure this city will find an alternative to stem the effects of this downturn."

Analyzing the conceptualization, the meaning given to the economic crisis in Valenza, different paradigms of the city emerge. Whilst in both of them the present importance of the jewellery sector is recognized, they diverge on the projection of a future for the city. It is the theme of the "alternatives", which often occurred in my interviews: whilst to many goldsmiths they appeared difficult to find, to those not employed in the sector, such alternatives were not unreachable since their job and lives represented the alternative to the jewellery industry that the goldsmiths did not recognize. This ability to imagine a future for Valenza is not a mere exercise of the imagination, but is fundamental for individuals to plan and make decisions for their future, as we will see in the next paragraph.

Before that, however, I want to linger on these first results that come from a study of an economic crisis as the subject of anthropological analysis. The analysis of the different interpretations given to the crisis by a community, in the case of Valenza, allowed making explicit the diverse perspectives and interpretations of the city of the distinct social groups who live there. In particular, it proved to be a substantial method for understanding the role played by particular features of the city in the conceptualizations made by individuals. In fact, the divergence of interpretation originates from the discrepancy of perspectives that characterize the conception of Valenza in different groups within the city's community. At the same time, they offer further details concerning such interpretations. In fact, the analysis of the crisis does not only involve the correlation of the past, present and future of the city into a coherent narrative. It also acts as an open critique to some characteristics of the city which work as foundational axioms for the interpretation of the locale in the eye of an informant or a group of informants. For example, the crisis of the jewellery sector works as a critique of the role played by the jewellery industry within the rhetoric of the "City of Goldsmiths" that distinguishes Valenza in the eyes of the Valenzano people, who share it, whatever their actual occupation (Fontefrancesco 2011).

Applying the "crisis" critique, the imagination of a future for the locale passes through the postulation of the cancellation of this foundational parameter. Hence, the individual is obliged to rethink the place, subtracting that parameter from its actual conceptualization and presenting the analytical result of this operation. This is exactly what my Valenzano informants did when they spoke of Valenza after the jewellery industry.

Thus, where the direct question of a positive description of a place from the informant demonstrated the occurrence of certain rhetorical or structural archetypes, which I called parameters, the reflection on the crisis proved to be a *demonstratio ad subtrahendum* [proof demonstration by subtraction] of the rooting of the same in the imaginary of the informant.

Crisis: A Category of Reason

The analysis of the local perception of a crisis, however, is not just a mere question of exploration of the individual and collective imaginary. In fact, it plays a key role in the plan for the future of the individual and the community.

Decisions, such as the choice of abandoning a job for another outside the city, as in the case of Giovanni's former worker, or enrolling one's own child in one school or another, rely on the idea of future in a city and a trade. Thus, the idea, the individuals' conceptualization of the crisis become a fundamental element in making such choices, as strikingly appeared in the analysis of the case of the enrolments in the largest high-school in the goldsmith's arts, the Istituto d'Arte Benvenuto Cellini. This school, which offers students a five-year course of education in the practice and theory of the goldsmith's arts, saw a plunge in enrolment in the last ten years, passing from more than 600 students in 2001, to about 120 in 2010.

"Come on! Yes, ten years ago my sister got a degree from Cellini, but why would I go to Cellini when the jewellery trade sucks? Although I was not a genius, my parents preferred to enrol me at the Liceo Scientifico."

Mario was an 18-year-old Valenzano teenager. His family ran a workshop where his parents and sister worked together with six others. I met him in April 2009 when I was conducting a survey in the high schools of Valenza to understand the motivations behind the massive enrolment of young Valenzano people in the local Liceo Scientifico Leon Battisti Alberti to the detriment of the Istituto Cellini, and the role played by the crisis in this change (Fontefrancesco 2009a).

The answers to the questionnaire denoted the incisiveness of the crisis, which became the principal factor of the choice. Whereas until the late 1990s the Istituto Cellini was the primary choice for the teenagers of Valenza and the neighbouring cities, because it offered a course of studies perceived as guaranteeing a remunerative job at the end of the five years, with the increasing difficulties of the jewellery market, the same families preferred to send their children to a "non-goldsmith school". This is the case of Mario who was enrolled at Liceo Alberti, because, as his father explained, "It was a rational choice. You see the crisis. I do not know if it will worsen. We are working a lot and even though there is the crisis we do not lack orders. However, who knows what is going to happen in five years?"

To send Mario to Liceo Alberti was presented as a "rational choice", adducing the factual argument of the plunge of the jewellery market. However, this decision relies on a prevision of the future that goes far beyond the limit of the 2-3 year timeframe that most of the goldsmiths of Valenza currently use to plan their economic activities. Thus, beyond the self-representation of the rati-

onal choice, we see how this decision is underpinned by a pessimistic perception of the jewellery trade, and Valenza. In fact, he continued:

"Today is a very difficult moment for all the goldsmiths of this city. If it continues in this way... I do not know where we are going to end up! It will be the end of Valenza."

The crisis, and the imaginary which is linked to it, were the principal factors that pushed Mario's family and the families of many other Valenzano students to opt for one school rather than the other. In this respect, the crisis is not just an acknowledgement of the present situation of Valenza but assumes a precise instrumental function for the individuals, becoming an interpretative dimension of the reality that is used to plan the future even beyond the limits that the economic data and reasoning impose.

Thus, the definition of crisis that Valenzano people create is not just a passive interpretation of the world, but functions as an active interpretative category used to make decisions, to formulate judgments of the present and future times of Valenza and the jewellery trade. Therefore, the idea of crisis appears as an *a posteriori* analytical category of reason, and I am going to explain what is intended by this possibly opaque expression.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 2007 [1781]), Immanuel Kant proposed a phenomenological model of human understanding. To Kant, the individual interprets any sign of the world outside him through two categories: the categories of the space and the time. These are innate and universal, common to all humankind (Kant 2007 [1781] cap. 1 § 2, 6). Through these categories, the individual perceives the world. Through them, she is able to make sense of the phenomena of the world, decipher and rearrange them into a logical narration and formulate a critical judgement on them. Thus, these categories enable the individual to make rational choices.

As Witold Gombrowicz once noted (Gombrowicz 1995), despite being considered a masterpiece of philosophy, Kant's three *Critiques* and their contents had scant following within and outside philosophy in the centuries that followed. In the case of anthropology, the works of the German scholar had been almost ignored. Noteworthy exceptions are the letter, "*Was ist Aufklärung?*" (Kant 2009 [1784]), whose contents have been debated in anthropology ever since the critiques by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979 (1944)) and Michel Foucault (Foucault 1984), and, more recently (Hart 2010), the essays *To the perpetual peace* (Kant 2003 [1795]) and *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view* (Kant 2006 [1798]). Nevertheless, the contents of the critiques seemed almost ignored, with some exceptions, mainly concerning the anthropology of time (e.g. Munn 1992). However, Kant's model of perception and analysis of the world appears to be significant in understanding the role played by the concept of crisis in Valenza.

It is self-evident that the concept of crisis is not innate or universal. It is a category that is assembled by the individual on the basis of their experience, and the information they select from the social world in which they live. It is the result of a creative, individual act of construction, which may be involuntary. Hence, in other words, the idea of crisis is *per se* an *a posteriori* category. Crisis is the result of a continuous creative game of combination of meanings, symbols and events through which the individual defines it. In an implicitly deductive process: the individuals assemble this category drawing from their experience of life and elements of the discourse that surrounds them. In doing so, they answer the stimuli they receive from the environment and the social context in which they live, by selecting particular elements for their creation. Establishing correlations among this selected information, they create an image of the reality where they live through a process that is substantially personal and subjective even though not altogether freed from the dynamics that characterize the sociality in which they are immersed. In this respect, we can understand the discrepancies and the similarities that an individual's description of the crisis has in respect to the ones offered by other members of the community.

Using the metaphor proposed by Bertrand Russell (Russell 1992 [1911]), the image of the crisis appears as perhaps black, rather than blue, spectacles through which the individual sees the world, interprets it, defining its status and change. Therefore, the crisis emerges as an *a posteriori* category of reason that is fundamental to the decision-making process of the individual and which influences his/her choices. In fact, through this image, the individuals do not only qualify the social reality in which they live, but, on the basis of the interpretation of the world that it conveys, they also base their prediction of the future and determine their actions and strategies. In this respect, the crisis appears as an emic interpretive category used by natives to decipher the community in which they live and the changes of the vast, inscrutable world outside the city.

Conclusion

This article opened with an ethnographic vignette in which Giovanni described what the crisis in Valenza was, and the effects it was having on the city. While he talked about an economic downturn, in his words, the crisis did not only pertain to the economic sphere of business and production. It was an idea rooted into Valenza's imaginary on the basis of which people were making choices, and planning their future. The crisis, thus, appeared as a category of reason through which Valenzano people were planning their lives.

This case study has been the starting point for shedding light on how a global and local economic downturn has been conceptualized, transformed and

integrated into the public discourse of the city. The archaeology (cf. Foucault, 2002 [1969]) of this discourse allowed the different conceptualizations that different groups of Valenzano people elaborated and associated with the crisis of the jewellery market to emerge. Such interpretations are at the root of the individual's understanding of the city's economy and its future. Thus, they directly influence the individual's everyday decisions and plans for the future. In this respect, we can see how the crisis appears as a category of the reason of Valenzano people, through which they understand and deal with the world.

Thus, the analysis of the local understanding of an economic crisis emerges as a fundamental means through which to comprehend the point of view and the understanding of the world of the natives, and to offer us a better discernment of an individual's actions within a community.

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Mikele F. Fontefrančesko

Odeljenje za antropologiju, Daram Univerzitet,
Velika Britanija

Kroz naočare krize: lokalna percepcija
ekonomskih i društvenih promena u Valenci

U ovom članku razmotrena je ekonomska kriza u juvelirskoj industriji u - Valenci (Italija). Kriza je počela 2008. godine kao posledica naglog pada na međunarodnom juvelirskom tržištu. Na osnovu etnografskog materijala koji je sakupljen tokom terenskog rada u gradu (2008-2010), nameravam da ukažem na to kako je najnoviji ekonomski pad imao snažne kulturne efekte na lokalnu populaciju (zlatare i druge). Prateći Kantov koncept kategorije razuma, pokažću kako je sama ta kriza postala kategorija razuma za lokalno stanovništvo koju su upotreбили da bi doneli odluke i planove za budućnost.

Ključne reči: kriza, nakit, juvelirsko zanatstvo, Italija, Kant

Les Spectacles de la Crise : perception locale
du changement économique et social à Valenza

Le cas de la crise économique de Valenza (Italie) et de son industrie de joaillerie est ici présenté. La crise est survenue depuis 2008 comme un effet de la chute libre du marché international de joaillerie. En exploitant les matériaux ethnographiques collectés au cours de mon travail de terrain dans la ville (2008-2010), j'entends attirer l'attention sur le fait que la toute récente baisse économique a eu des effets culturels puissants sur la population locale (orfèvrerie et les autres). Suivant le concept kantien de la catégorie de la raison, j'entends montrer que la crise elle-même est devenue une catégorie de la raison pour la population locale qui s'en sert pour faire des décisions et projeter son avenir.

Mots clés: crise, joaillerie, artisan, Italie, Kant

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