City Making and Global Labour Regimes by Antonella Ceccagno (Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

City Making and Global Labour Regimes

A Conversation with Antonella Ceccagno

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Chinese immigrants in European societies have often been perceived as a threat, especially in those contexts affected by economic decline and industrial retrenchment. Prato is no exception to this. Once a flourishing textile hub in which local entrepreneurs dominated the industry, a couple of decades ago the Italian city entered a phase of decline. It was only thanks to Chinese immigrants that it managed to survive, eventually thriving once again as the centre of a new value chain stretching from suppliers in China and Turkey all the way to buyers in Europe. Still, in spite of this contribution to the local economy, Chinese workers and entrepreneurs were repeatedly vilified and criminalised. In her new book, *City Making and Global Labour Regimes: Chinese Immigrants and Italy's Fast Fashion Industry* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017), Antonella Ceccagno draws on 15 years of fieldwork in the city to shed light on the entangled processes of city making and the restructuring linked to capital accumulation—tackling issues of governance, territory, migration, division of labour, labour mobility, housing, and human rights.

Ivan Franceschini: Your book takes a close look at the situation of Prato, with particular attention to its Chinese business community. Can you tell us more about your reasons for choosing this case study?

Antonella Ceccagno: The topic has been at the centre of scholarly debate for several years now, both in Italy and internationally. Chinese immigration in the Prato area has brought important questions to the fore, such as the characteristics of Chinese migration, transnationalism, and migrant entrepreneurship. The book discusses the city of Prato and the Chinese entrepreneurs who have transformed a declining textile district into the pulsing heart of a vibrant global fast fashion industry. However, neither the city itself nor the migrants are the unit of analysis of the book. They are the entry points from which I observe the migrants' role in the Italian fashion industry, which is shaped by local and national institutions and broader fields of power.

A lively debate has been going on, mainly among urban sociologists, about the uneven and unstable historical spatialities of capitalism. Prato is an exemplary case in that capitalist investment and disinvestment can be observed as taking place within a single locality but involving different industries, roughly over the same time span. My study unveils these related processes, showing that disinvestment in the textile industry by native industrialists has literally made room for investment in the clothing industry. Chinese migrants, active in the rising clothing industry, have come to physically replace native industrialists in the use of old textile factories and warehouses, which were abandoned because of the economic crisis. This process of replacement offers a concrete glimpse into the role of migrants as agents of neoliberal restructuring.

Besides, Prato—once famous as the 'exemplary' Italian industrial district—is now a disempowered city, one that has fallen behind in the global competitive processes of city repositioning. But its trajectory is a peculiar one, as instead of building on the new opportunities emerging with the arrival of the Chinese migrants, Prato has instead blamed the crisis on them, thus failing to make a comeback.

I was able to capture these dynamics because of my long-term engagement (1994–2007) as the research director and director of services at the Centre for Immigration Research and Services in Prato—an institution linked to the local government. In this capacity, I have had countless unstructured conversations with migrants, and later I complemented this with more recent fieldwork aimed at understanding variations over time. These sources disclosed a range of relationships that develop between migrant employers and workers, husbands and wives, parents and children, natives and migrants, and migrants and local institutions.

IF: In the book, you mention how the situation in Prato over the last few years has become tense and describe the city as 'exhausted and characterised by a state of crisis that it is unable to address'. What are the root causes of this crisis and how are these dynamics emblematic of broader social and economic tensions?

AC: Some crucial alterations in the global fashion industry—the rise of cheaper competitors, including China, and the restructuring of distribution chains that concentrated the power in the hands of global retailers—gave rise to an unprecedented crisis in the Italian fashion industry. These global shifts brought most of the small and medium manufacturing firms to their knees. This is a situation whose effects have been particularly visible from the turn of the century—well ahead of the 2008 crisis—but whose roots can be traced back to the 1980s. And, significantly, the late 1980s were the years when the Chinese migrants were attracted as subcontractors and workers into the Italian fashion industry.

As a result, Prato—just like other Italian fashion districts—transformed from a wealthy manufacturing centre contributing to the international success of Italian design to a disempowered city. At the same time, the economic downturn following the 2008 crisis had a huge impact on local society: the population experienced new forms of dispossession, including unemployment and early retirement, mortgage foreclosure, and the loss of social status. Even wealthy industrialists were deprived of their previously glamorous lifestyles. A gloomy atmosphere prevailed.

In the book, I show how anger became the prevalent mood among the populace throughout the country since the mid-2000s. This translated into different forms of distrust and hostility towards China, which by then was clearly the main winner in the globalisation race. Italian economists publicly declared that China was adopting dumping practices and tried to convince European institutions to fight against imports from China; also Italian cultural productions depicted China as the bad guy. For instance, the 2011 movie *The Arrival of Mister Wang* by the Manetti Brothers depicted China as an octopus-like alien invading the earth, and the award-winning 2012 book *Story of My People* by Edoardo Nesi, a writer and politician from Prato, held China responsible for a situation where 'everything that had always run smoothly suddenly started to go wrong'.

IF: In the book, you delve into the fundamental role of the Chinese community in shaping Prato as a city. Has the relationship between local inhabitants been smooth or has it been marred by underlying tensions?

AC: Well, tension was so high there that Prato was the only place in Europe where Chinese entrepreneurship was criminalised. Selective police controls on Chinese businesses came into being which included strong symbolic actions such as soldiers patrolling the streets, policemen assisted by police dogs, and police helicopters repeatedly flying over the areas where checks were conducted. In the book, I connect this all with the city's harsh experience of the crisis.

But let's start from the beginning. While most other migrant groups in Italy are mainly employed in low-paid jobs with modest prospects for career upgrading, Chinese migrants have made inroads into the Italian fashion industry mainly as small entrepreneurs in subcontracting and as workers employed in Chinese-run workshops. In the book, I argue that by offering high flexibility and low costs, at the national scale the network of Chinese subcontractors has helped prevent a more drastic reduction in Italy's role as a global exporter of fashion items. Thus, they represent one crucial way in which local-run manufacturing firms were able to respond to the globalisation of the fashion market.

Prato, however, is the much discussed exception in the Italian fashion scene. In fact, it is the only place in Italy where Chinese migrants have been able to break the unwritten rule that only locals are allowed to be manufacturers reaping the most substantial benefits, while migrants are only allowed to be subcontractors. In stark contrast with the rest of the country, in Prato Chinese migrants have upscaled and become manufacturers themselves, retaining profits that elsewhere are retained by the locals. Prato has become a renowned low-end fast fashion centre, sourcing textiles from China and Turkey, and selling fashionable low-cost garments in Europe and beyond.

What has blurred the picture, though, is that the rise of the Chinese-run fast fashion centre coincided with the crisis of the textile industry run by local entrepreneurs. Discontent was thus channelled in such a way that Chinese migrants were blamed for the loss of Prato's international relevance. Moreover, while the nationally-felt anger at the crisis was directed towards the inability of the elites to guarantee general wellbeing, in Prato the hegemonic discourse linked the ability of Chinese businesses to succeed at a time of crisis to their connections with, and economic rise of, China. This narrative posited a dual challenge that hung over the city—both from China the country and from Chinese migrants themselves—and provided an opportunity to use Chinese firms in the territory as scapegoats. My research explores and dismantles this conceptual conflation of China (as

a powerhouse of manufacturing and export) and the Chinese migrants in Italy (as successful entrepreneurs) into a single, dangerous challenge to Prato's society and economy.

IF: In December 2013, a fire in a Chinese-owned clothing factory in Prato killed seven Chinese migrants prompting widespread condemnation of the supposed 'Chinese productive regime'. In the book, you take issue with this interpretation of the event. Can you tell us more about your take on this?

AC: My argument is that the Chinese-run low-end fast fashion is not a 'deterritorialised' working regime. On the contrary, Chinese firms are firmly embedded in the territory and in the fashion industry. In the book, I show that in many respects the production regime of the Chinese migrants follows the pathway and the unwritten rules prevailing in the Italian fashion industry. Besides, I single out the 'mobile regime'—whereby workers sleep at work and move to other workshops to complete urgent tasks—and the outsourcing of family life—with children sent back to China or living in the houses of Chinese babysitters in Italy—as extreme forms of flexibility linked to the contemporary processes of the multiplication of labour and not to a specifically Chinese model. Furthermore, I show that this reorganisation of the space of production and of family life introduced by Chinese migrants is to the advantage of the entire Italian fashion industry. The so-called 'Chinese productive regime' is in actual fact emblematic—I argue—of the imperatives of fast-fashion.

My book also distances itself from essentialist interpretations that adopt the 'ethnic businesses' approach to get to grips with the peculiarity of Chinese-run fast fashion in Prato. Taking the opposite approach, I show that the process of 'ethnicisation' of the workforce smooths production operations and is therefore beneficial to the manufacturers, not only to the Chinese. Rather than taking the ethnic factor as a starting point for exploring and explaining the behaviours of a single group that is assumed to share common cultural traits and exhibit bonds of trust, in the book I carefully investigate the ways in which the ethnicisation of the workforce emerges from within and is shaped by more general transformations of the productive space which do not only involve or only benefit Chinese businesses. As the ethnicisation of the workforce emerged in a particular historical conjuncture, it can easily be abandoned when the conditions change, as is increasingly happening these days. ■