

**Ethnography of a Crisis: See the world through the lens of a economic downturn -Valenza, Italy 2008-2010.**

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**Abstract:** In this paper, it is presented the case of the economic crisis of Valenza (Italy) and its jewellery industry. This 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 an economic downturn had strong cultural effects on local population (goldsmiths and non-goldsmiths). Following Kant theory, the crisis itself had become a category of reason for local population that uses it to make decision and plan their future.

**Keywords:** crisis, jewellery, artisan, Italy, Kant.

In this paper, I am going to analyse how an economic crisis may be objectify in a community and become a category through which people analyze their world and its changing. In so doing, I want to focus my attention on the case of Valenza, Italy, a well-known city for its jewellery production. This work is based on the data I gathered between 2008 and 2010 in this city during my fieldwork. In this period, it experienced a profound economic downturn due to an international plunge in jewellery market. Scholars, such as Gary Gereffi (Gereffi & 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. 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 etic 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*” [It. crisis] occurred in the public debate of Valenza, with this meaning (e.g. Fontefrancesco, 2009a; Fontefrancesco, Laddago, & Rossi, 2009). 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 urban

environment of their city and its economy. In doing so, “*crisi*” assumed a new and peculiar connotation that diverges from the meaning given to “crisis” by economic theory.

In this paper, 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 from 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 make clear this, I want to present a small tale of the field that well portrays the atmosphere and subjects of this discourse

## **Giovanni**

I had come to the workshop to interview its owner, Giovanni, and to ask him for information concerning his experience as a goldsmith in Valenza and 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 colour 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 in the room. 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.

The large white-neon lamp hung in the centre of the room, directly over the desk. It was the only source of illumination in the room, since the blinds of the only window, which looked onto the street, were shut, and no light filtrated through them: the world, the colours and even the sounds of

a warm late September afternoon were closed outside the glass of the window and the plastic blinds. It was the 28th of September 2010.

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 different 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.

Almost three hours had passed since we started the interview. My last question was about the last ten years of history in Valenza. "After 2001, Valenza has not been the same anymore. It is the crisis... it is the difficulty in finding new clients, and making them pay on time. But, it's not just that. It is the city; it is Valenza that is done for. It's this crisis; it's the crisis Valenza is living. The crisis is in Valenza. It 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. I remember one of them. He worked here for years. He was a good goldsmith, and the firm needs workers like that. When the crisis<sup>1</sup> started, years ago, he decided not to continue his business. He resigned. He found a job in another industry elsewhere, maybe in Milan... I don't remember... After a while, he came to visit me. "There is the crisis, you know, and at least this is a secure job," he told me. What did I have to tell him? That it was not true? It would have been a lie, but our firm is solid and he would not have lost his job... 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

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<sup>1</sup>In the interview, Giovanni used only the word "crisi" to refer to the economic downturn that was affecting the jewellery trade. I translated it as "crisis", following the standard translation.

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 evolution. It became a rhetorical object, a metonymy to describe the cultural change of the city.

In recent years, Micheal Carrithers (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-patiency 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.”( pp. 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 (Oliven, 2009)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> In this respect, it is worth noting the case of the study of money which, since the work of Simmel (Simmel & Frisby, 2004 [1900]) and Mauss (Mauss, 1967 [1925]), has been at the centre of anthropological thought (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 (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 second volume of *the Capital* (Marx, 2010 [1885]). 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<sup>3</sup>, laying this idea on the conceptualization of the market as the complex set of exchanges that substantiates the economic life of a society<sup>4</sup>. Hence, the term 'crisis' refers to

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Oliven, approaching the public rhetoric of money in the USA is able to highlight the deep connections that link this object to all the phases of the life of the individual, from the cradle to the grave, and demonstrate the social and cultural functions that the object fulfils, that go well beyond the limits of the economic sphere of goods exchange, in the USA as well as in other Western countries (Hart, 2001, 2009; Maurer, 2006). In fact, it is associated with all the aspects of an individual's social life, from love to death, from individual affectivity to collective expectations. In fact, "in capitalist societies, money has come to define an indefinite field of possibilities and, within that field, has acted to create groups of relationships between abstract entities, as well as to increase practical control over innumerable social activities. Modern money only connects with concrete magnitudes after it has created this relational network." (Hart, 2009, p. 155). Thus, money has become a paradigmatic symbol of the individual's life in modern societies, almost the very foundation of its social order (Hart, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> "Thus the production of surplus-value, and with it the individual consumption of the capitalist, may increase, the entire process of reproduction may be in a flourishing condition, and yet a large part of the commodities may have entered into consumption only apparently, while in reality they may still remain unsold in the hands of dealers, may in fact still be lying in the market. Now one stream of commodities follows another, and finally it is discovered that the previous streams had been absorbed only apparently by consumption. The commodity-capitals compete with one another for a place in the market. Late-comers, to sell at all, sell at lower prices. The former streams have not yet been disposed of when payment for them falls due. Their owners must declare their insolvency or sell at any price to meet their obligations. This sale has nothing whatever to do with the actual state of the demand. It only concerns the demand for payment, the pressing necessity of transforming commodities into money. Then a crisis breaks out. It becomes visible not in the direct decrease of consumer demand, the demand for individual consumption, but in the decrease of exchanges of capital for capital, of the reproductive process of capital." (Marx, 2010 [1885], p. 43)

<sup>4</sup> Market is the key concept of modern economics, since "the history of economic thought [...] is nothing but the history of our efforts to understand the workings of an economy base on market transactions" (Blaug, 1985, p. 6). This concept was introduced for the first time in economic theory by Adam Smith (Smith, 1776) as the place of goods exchange. However, in the work of the Scottish scholar, a precise definition is not produced for this concept, which remains equivocal to some extent, as was previously noticed in the 19th century (Cairnes, 1888, p. 100); neither did later thinkers produce a precise definition for it. Thus, in classical economic thought, 'market' has an unspoken double nature: it is the social context, the place, where individuals, companies, and states actuate the exchange of goods, labour and capital, and it is the analytical abstraction used by researchers to indicate the flow of goods, labour and monetary exchanges. Two centuries after Adam Smith, the concept of market is still debated within the field of Economics and, more broadly, Social Sciences (i.e. Abolafia, 1996; Abolafia, 2005; Callon, Millo, & Muniesa, 2007; Hann & Hart, 2009; Lie, 1997; MacKenzie, 2009). Although, since the publication of the works by Karl Polanyi (K. Polanyi,

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, an economic crisis has been seen as an interruption in the normal running of the market, which is the acceptance 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, as happens for a declaration of war or the 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. That is, 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 the singularization of a historical event, an analytical judgement 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.

Besides such theorization, in the past two centuries, the term ‘crisis’ entered into the vocabulary of Social Sciences where it is commonly used as an analytic 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 acceptance was used to define the downturn initiated on the 4th September 1929 as well the most recent Credit Crunch (Allen, Babus, & Carletti, 2009).

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Arensberg, & Pearson, 1957; K. Polanyi & Block, 2001 [1944]; K. Polanyi & Dalton, 1971; M. Polanyi, 1959) and Fernand Braudel (Braudel, 1973, 1981), ‘market’ has been recognized in a historical context whose existence is strictly connected with other social institutions (Gudeman, 2001, pp. 1-25; Narotzky, 1997, pp. 89-98), through the interconnection that binds the exchange of goods, capital and labour within a society to the role played by the cultural, political and religious institutions of a social group; in Anthropology as well as in the other Social Sciences, ‘market’ is still currently used in its “original” duplex, ambiguous meaning, unless individual scholars employ personal definitions of this term (ie. Gudeman, 2001, 2008).

In the past two decades, growing attention has been given to economic crises. First of all, crises have been the spatial-temporal contexts of anthropological analysis, despite not being the primary subject of research<sup>5</sup>. 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 & Ortiz, 2008) brought to foreground the subject of the crisis and proposed it as a subject of anthropological enquiry: a combination of circumstances<sup>6</sup> made this analysis particularly urgent.

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<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, Tara Schwegler (Schwegler, 2009) read 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, p. 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 behaviour 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:

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<sup>5</sup> Economic crises were directly connected to the exploration of the social change of urban contexts (i.e. Ferguson, 1999), the conceptualization of local human space (i. e. Stewart, 1996), the analysis of working conditions (i. e. Mollona, 2009) and unemployment (i. e. Perelman, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> “On the one hand, for the first time significant numbers of anthropologists have studied capitalism in its central workings; on the other, the majority have become more insular and introverted, offering fragmented narratives within a narrow framework of time and space, while leaving to others questions of where the world is heading and why.”(Hart & Ortiz, 2008, p. 1 the brackets are omitted).

<sup>7</sup> “The current crisis reminds us that such information is produced and shared not by people everywhere, but by the employees of a few highly bureaucratic institutions. As a result, credit is channelled with very unequal consequences, while the financial profession reserves a major share of the revenues to itself.”(Hart & Ortiz, 2008, p. 2)

the speed and number of transactions multiply in the upper spheres of finance and meta-finance.” (Gudeman, 2010, p. 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, p. 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<sup>8</sup>. 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 paper 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**

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<sup>8</sup> In this regard, the study of the crisis represents a further contribution to the ethnographic and anthropological studies on finance stated in the ‘80s, “when speculative stock markets and the financialisation of the world economy occupied headlines and imaginations” (Maurer, 2005, p. 176). Particularly important in this respect were the works by Mitchel Abolafia (Abolafia, 1996) and Ellen Hertz (Hertz, 1998), which represent the early examples of ethnographic monographs concerning such markets. Both these works studied the market through the action of its players, paying great attention to the behaviour and social interaction of traders, culminating in the discovery of the centrality of the social network in market evolution, since “despite the rhetoric of the free market and competition, traders at the heart of contemporary capitalism find themselves suspended in webs of relationships that exercise control and restraint over the most aggressive players even as it allows them to ‘win’.” (Abolafia, 1996, p. 79). Moreover, in the last decade, by studying the social life and work of economic practices, such as credit and debt (Peebles, 2010), financial products, such as derivatives (Callon et al., 2007; MacKenzie, Muniesa, & Siu, 2007; Maurer, 2002) and tools, such as options-pricing formulas (MacKenzie et al., 2007) scholars interrogated the relationship that links market practices with economic theories (Callon, 1998). This process resulted in the reconsideration of the concept of embeddedness (Beckert, 2009), emerging from the substantivist-formalist debate (MacKenzie, 2009, pp. 8-36) and entering into the current thesaurus of social science in the ‘80s after its reconceptualization proposed by Mark Granovetter (Granovetter, 1985), and the development of new methodological and theoretical tools to understand this economic context and find “ever-new ways to make knowledge by managing our intellectual debts to our subjects and our academic forebears, while extending credit into the future to the new knowledge that will (hopefully) proceed from our own.” (Maurer, 2005, p. 190).

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 word 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 acceptance 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 <sup>9</sup>. 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

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<sup>9</sup> Moreover, establishing a strong nexus between the word crisis and a number of signs in the world, thus postulating a connection between the two, “crisis” from the analytical concept of economic theory is transformed into the symbol of precise status of the city and its population, including material and intangible, emotional elements: using Pierce’s terminology, ‘crisis’ is imposed as the index of the present of Valenza. In fact, as Jay Zeman explains: “An index, on the other hand, need bear no resemblance to its object. The key thing about an index is that it has a direct existential connection with its object. [...] When tumor, dolor, rubor and calor are present, inflammation is indicated to the physician; swelling, pain, redness, and heat are indexes of inflammation. [(Zeman, 1977, pp. 37-38 brackets omitted). The example of the case of the illness that Zeman proposes discloses an implicit consequence of the rhetorical strategy used by my informant. Where the “crisis” is presented as an index of the present condition of Valenza, the enumeration of elements that characterize this crisis resembles a list of symptoms of a disease. Where the symptoms are indexes of the disease, it follows that the characterizing elements of the crisis appear as indices of the crisis. Thus, if, as Pierce wrote (Hartshorne & Wiess, 1933, p. 531), “indices . . . furnish positive assurance of the reality and the nearness of their objects. But with the assurance there goes no insight into the nature of those Objects”, we can conclude that, at least in the eyes of Giovanni, the crisis existed, and was, at least emotionally, close to him.

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<sup>10</sup>. In this respect, “*crisi*” was often substituted by goldsmiths in their spoken language with the dialectal word “*molla*”, which means slackening (Gaggio, 2007)<sup>11</sup>. 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.

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, during the 20th century, it was characterized by a sinusoidal trend in demand that alternated expansion with restraint.

<sup>11</sup> An example of the use of this word was given by a retired goldsmith, born in the 1930s in Valenza, where he began working as goldsmith after WWII as apprentice and then as artisan, whom I interviewed on the 9th of January 2010. During our meeting he offered me a brief résumé of the history of the jewellery trade in the city, and its crises: “We lived through many, many crises in Valenza. One of the most tragic I remember was in the ‘70s. It seemed we were all doomed after the Yom Kippur war, but still... it was part of the game... there was a ‘*molla*’, and for months, finding work was difficult, then you had a *bonna*, a revival of the market, and you returned to normality...”

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<sup>12</sup>: “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 resemantization 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, p. 529). Since the mid-2000s, the Valenza City Council together with other partners<sup>13</sup> began to promote specific initiatives to support the jewellery industry and the local production milieu<sup>14</sup>. 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

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<sup>12</sup> He has worked as goldsmith in one of the largest firms of the city since the 1980s, where he was hired after having completed a degree at the Istituto d’Arte Benvenuto Cellini. During the crisis he did not lose his job and continued working without experiencing any change in his working conditions. The interview occurred in July 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Such as the Università del Piemonte Orientale, AOV, CNA and other business associations.

<sup>14</sup> The most important of these was the institution of the Osservatorio del Distretto Orafo di Valenza. This research centre was created by the City Council and the Università del Piemonte Orientale to provide a constant monitoring of the economy of Valenza and promote events aimed to help and inform local entrepreneurs about the evolution of the international jewellery market (Raselli & Mensi, 2007).

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 (Zemide, 2008), the then-mayor of Valenza, Gianni Raselli, defined the difficult economic period for the jewellery sector “a moment of crisis for this business”. Thus, in its public occurrence, where the crisis was finally recognized publicly, 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 cash desk. The first, Giovanna, was in her late forties; she was the wife<sup>15</sup> of one of my informants, the owner of a small workshop located in the historic centre of the town. The other was

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<sup>15</sup> Born in Alessandria, she moved to Valenza at the end of the ‘80s, when she married her husband.

Patrizia<sup>16</sup>, 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 key-word 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, 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, Radiogold. In the first week of January 2009, the radio began a new

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<sup>16</sup> Born and bred in Valenza. Neither she nor the other members of her family have ever been in the jewellery business - her grandparents were farmers in the Valenzano countryside; her father worked in the shoe making industry until the 1960s whilst her mother was a housewife. Neither she nor her siblings were employed in the jewellery business.

editorial project concerning Valenza and its socioeconomic situation<sup>17</sup>. 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 instalments. The objective was, in the words of Renato Lopena, the director of the radio, “to speak about the crisis and how 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*” [it. 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, 2009c).

The acceptation 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<sup>18</sup>, 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

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<sup>17</sup> I was asked to participate in the editorial board of the program and contribute weekly with an article about some of the social and economic aspects of the crisis (Fontefrancesco et al., 2009).

<sup>18</sup> In only the first semester, about one third of the people employed there lost their jobs or saw a reduction of their salaries (Redazione, 2009).

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 (Comitato Anti-Crisi 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 AOV 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 not 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<sup>19</sup>. 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

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<sup>19</sup> In this regard, the case of Valenza per se offers an ethnographic example of the thesis proposed by Owen Lynch (Lynch, 1994) about the normality in an urban environment of a multiplicity of interpretations of the city by the different social groups of population.

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* [lat. 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, 2009b).

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 rational choice, we see how this decision is underpinned by a pessimistic perception of the jewellery trade, and Valenza. In fact, he continued: “You know... 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 acts 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 & Weigelt, 2007), 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 space and time. These are innate and universal, common to all humankind (Kant & Weigelt, 2007 cap. 1 § 2, 6)<sup>20</sup>. Through these categories, the individual perceives the world. Through them, they are 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 following centuries. 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 & Horkheimer, 1979 (1944)) and Michel Foucault, and recently (Hart, 2010) the essays "To the perpetual peace" (Kant, 2003 [1795]) and "Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view" (Kant & Loudon, 2006). 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.

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<sup>20</sup> It must be noted that, in his treatise, Kant only demonstrated the existence of such categories, without giving a proper analytical description of their characteristics.

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.

It is the result of a continuous creative game of combination of meanings, symbols and events through which the individual defines the crisis. In an implicitly deductive process: they 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 her choices. In fact, through this image, the individual does 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 prevision 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 paper 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.

In this paper, this description 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 (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 Weltanschauung of the natives, and to offer us a better discernment of an individual's actions within a community.

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