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Book Review - Debates

## Making sense of Prato: a case study in migration studies and global economic restructuring through the lens of two recent books

Elizabeth L. Krause

*Tight Knit: Global Families and the Social Life of Fast Fashion*

University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 2018, ISBN: 9780226558103

Antonella Ceccagno

*City Making and Global Labour Regimes: Chinese Immigrants and Italy's Fast Fashion Industry*

Palgrave Macmillan, Cham: 2017, ISBN: 9783319599816

### INTRODUCTION

Some places happen to become research foci, pivotal cases for international debates. Prato is one of these, with the peculiarity of being used as a reference case two times: first in the debate on industrial districts from the late 1980s; and from the late 2000s, when the analysis of migration, diasporas and global value chains paid specific attention to the blossoming of the Chinese community in Tuscany.

Ironically enough, for a quite long while these two branches of literature hardly spoke to each other. There was surely an issue related to disciplinary barriers. On the one hand, the literature on industrial districts was in sociology and economy, but the latter became predominant in the public debate. This is true especially in reference to the case of Prato due to the role played by Becattini and his school in defining Prato as the «archetype of all industrial districts» (Becattini 2002: 97; see also Bianchi 2017). On the other hand, studies on Chinese migration in Italy and Prato were kicked-off by anthropologists, sociologists and area studies scholars, with a partial, and late, catch-up by economists (Ceccagno 1997).

What is more, disciplinary barriers included contestations: the «heartily reciprocated [...] distrust and contempt» that affect social intercourse among the tribes of economists and social scientists has been the subject of early ironic accounts (Leijonhufvud 1973: 327). The transformation of the Prato industrial district boosted a “disenchantment” phase for this case study, which involved academic, personal and even political trajectories of those involved in analyzing and promoting Prato as a case of economic

excellence. On the one hand, applied research in economics had to process the grief and loss from denial to acceptance. Publications by one of the most prominent scholars in this field, Gabi Dei Ottati, are quite telling. Early reflections (Dei Ottati 2009) endorsed the idea of the Chinese economy as alien to the local district, while later works supported an idea of selective incorporation (Dei Ottati 2017).

On the other hand, if I can keep going with the ironic psychological metaphor, scholars in the social sciences and humanities had to elaborate their Cassandra syndrome. Critical accounts on the Italian industrial districts are not new and, in some cases, referenced migration-related issues (see Blim 1990; Hadjimichalis 2006; Andall 2007; Barberis 2008; Blim, Goffi 2014). As Bracci (2016) accounts thoroughly, the debate on Prato was somehow resistant to include such critical voices. Consequently, smashing mythopoeic discourses on the district and its economist standard-bearers was a pleasure to indulge greedily.

Once respective traumas are elaborated, using interdisciplinary dialogue to discuss the *longue durée* of the local socioeconomic history was helpful in finding a theoretical place for Chinese migration to Prato. Reassessing early economic studies on Prato was a way to overcome descriptive sociographies that were not able to grasp the wider context of where Chinese businesspersons, employees and their families had to be placed.

It is worth mentioning that the improvement of such a debate was the result of sincere, open-minded, interdisciplinary meetings, which, frankly, are too rare in our disciplines: most of them based on the activism of a single institutional actor – the Monash University Prato Center. As an “outsider” actor, the managing staff of the Prato Center had the farsighted idea to boost academic and policy dialogues in annual dedicated events, such as the Chinese in Prato Symposia and the Wenzhuese Diaspora Symposia. Perceived as a “neutral venue”, the Prato Center has to be credited for developing the conversation, hosting tens of scholars, and promoting Prato as an international case study for Chinese migration. Many of the interesting publications in this case study stem directly or indirectly from this worthy endeavor, including quite a number of interdisciplinary coauthored and coedited works.

Actually, we now count dozens of relevant works on intertwining social and economic changes in Prato with global value chain transformations and migration processes. Just focusing on the last decade, the three main outcomes of Monash’s debates (Johanson, Smyth, French 2009; Baldassar *et alii* 2015; Guercini *et alii* 2017) were complemented by national and international scholarship from different disciplinary backgrounds. Their research experiences, often spanning research areas outside the scholarship on migration studies and industrial districts, helped to reframe and contextualize the Prato case. Different perspectives were engaged: from cultural dimensions of economic action to intergroup tensions in a number of fields beyond economy.

In particular, Barbu, Dunford and Weidong (2014) examine intergroup socioeconomic conflicts. This theme was theoretically reframed within critical labor studies by Lan (2015), which focused on bordering practices and capitalist accumulation, following Mezzadra and Neilson (2013). Others looked at historical continuities and discontinuities in Chinese and Italian labor sustaining the district (Hamilton, Fels 2014), while Chen (2015) tried to keep together macrostructural changes in global economies and the micro local Chinese migrants’ emplacement – an effort extensively covered by Bracci (2016). In some cases, also the symbolic dimension of “Made in Italy” by Chinese has been explored (Weibel-Orlando 2012).

National literature tried to explore topics off the beaten tracks: Chinese migrants’ social mobility (Berti, Pedone, Valzania 2013), religious practices (Berti, Pedone 2018) and spatial conflicts (Bressan, Krause 2017).

This review article will discuss in-depth two recent books issued by international publishers: *Tight Knit: Global Families and the Social Life of Fast Fashion* by Elizabeth L. Krause (University of Chicago Press, 2018) and *City Making and Global Labour Regimes: Chinese Immigrants and Italy’s Fast Fashion Industry* by Antonella Ceccagno (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). These two contributions are interesting in many respects.

They aimed to place the case of Prato within thick theoretical frames. Often, Prato has been investigated as an extreme, exceptional case. First, and in some respects foremost, focusing on a case as an outlier city is a rhetorical device with a number of potentially negative consequences, including an inadequate attention to more general processes shaping the case (Beauregard 2003). On the contrary, the two books analyzed here used Prato as a case to question wider socioeconomic processes.

Second, the frameworks used by the two authors could not be more diverse. Sure, they have in common a focus on social life and migration under global capital restructuring – and even foci on other rather unexplored dimensions (e.g. gender issues). Nevertheless, they use very different framings. In short (as will be discussed later), they consider the effect of global capitalism on native and Chinese minority agencies in almost opposite ways: it is pervasive in Ceccagno's accounts and not necessarily so far-reaching for Krause.

Third, these two volumes are based on extensive, multi-sited fieldwork campaigns, thus adding strong empirical grounds to theoretical reflections: another problematic issue in studies on migration and global capital restructuring that we will mention in the conclusions.

#### FROM FIELD TO THEORY: 20 YEARS IN PRATO

*City Making and Global Labor Regimes* summarize many of the research intervals the Author experienced in some twenty years, focusing on Chinese immigration and entrepreneurship in Italy, especially in Prato. The volume is not a simple collection of published works, but it aims to reinterpret Ceccagno's own studies under new theoretical lenses and analytical foci, picking also from an extensive literature on her case study. Thus, the book does not discuss only Chinese migration in the Italian industrial districts but also changes in the Italian cluster economy before, during and after Chinese nationals arrived in Prato.

Most research data here were already published – sometimes in a merely descriptive way. Often, the data originated from commissioned research, as the Author was the director of the Center for Immigration Research and Services in Prato from 1994 to 2007. Ceccagno yearns to integrate the history of Chinese migrants in Prato into different theoretical lines.

Actually, the first explicit aim of the book is to reuse her research: «While focusing on Chinese migrants' interactions with the city of Prato, Chinese migrants are by no means the unit of analysis of this study» (Ceccagno 2017: 6). She refocuses her studies on the Chinese migrants in Prato into a study on how Prato changes because of global dynamics (that obviously also includes Chinese migration).

Two main theoretical approaches ground such a perspective. First, Nina Glick Schiller and Ayse Çağlar (2011) studied scalar reconfigurations of global economy and migration: they maintained global and local processes jointly contribute to the positionality of a locality in political and economic hierarchies. Ceccagno used three ideas derived from this approach. The concepts of *downscaling* (i.e. the loss of power in global networks) and *disempowering* are deemed fruitful to analyze Prato – its native and migrant populations, which share this subordinate condition in global competitive arenas (as better explicated by Çağlar, Glick Schiller 2018) of migrants as *scale-makers* (i.e. having a transformative role for the whole local context in which they are embedded).

Second, Ceccagno refers to Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013) on the transformations of labor in global value chains – in particular, the diversification, fragmentation and intensification of labor regimes. This argument plays a role in demolishing the discourse of a supposed culture-based, ethnic “Chinese model”. Ethnicized Chinese networks are just one of the many shapes the global transformations of labor take under global capitalism.

Keeping together these theoretical standpoints requires a complex navigation among scales and dimensions: push factors from China and PRC's new role in global markets and social, economic and regulative changes in Italy and in Prato – considering structural changes and immigrant and native agency.

To disentangle such a complexity – especially for an international readership that may not be acquainted with the Italian case – Ceccagno spends the first chapters to describe the national and local contexts in light of her theoretical approach. Chapter 2 analyses global challenges to the Italian and Prato fashion systems. These challenges are faced in regard to migrant labor: an issue explored in Chapter 3, which is dedicated to the incorporation of Chinese migrants in Prato. Chapter 4 puts the two sides together: the downscaling of the national and local production systems and the role of Chinese migration correspond to make Prato an important center for international, low-quality *fast fashion*.

Thus, the Prato industrial district becomes something else but in a path-dependent way – a conclusion shared by many other studies in this case (see Lan 2015 and Bracci 2016, among others). The most original part of the volume is in the following chapters, where Ceccagno introduces what she defines as “*mobile regime*” (Chapter 5), a labor regime based on severe (self) exploitation and functional with global *fast fashion*. This regime is based on the reorganization of production spaces via a high mobility of workers among production sites, sectors and districts. This entails a strong compression of personal time (Ceccagno 2007), demonstrated by analyzing a rich set of interviews with Chinese employees and employers and observations in Chinese firms.

Chapter 6 lays the foundations of the mobile regime: the externalization and/or expulsion of social reproduction (via precarious and transnational family arrangements) and the ethnicization of production sites. The “Chinese” ethnic labeling creates a social distance between equally disempowered native and migrant workers, to the advantage of top players in the global fashion value chains.

Finally, Chapter 7 elaborates on Prato’s hegemonic discourses on Chinese migrants and district economy: such discourses maintain that immigrant business is dangerous and legitimize the criminalization and policing of minorities.

As a whole, this book is a neat advancement in the analysis of Chinese migration in Prato and global restructuring. Starting from existing literature and fieldwork (by Ceccagno herself and by other scholars in the field) in this case study, she provides empirical evidence to internationally relevant approaches based on labor regimes, local dynamics of capital restructuring, the role of migration between agency and structural opportunity windows.

In particular, an added value is the substantial effort to keep together micro, meso and macro processes: from the internal organization of Chinese firms, to national regulation and global value chains and from structure to agency – for instance, exploring how the *mobile regime* is affected by workers’ individual preferences and choices.

The effort is titanic. Consequently, some issues are not considered enough. For example, the social structure of Chinese networks before migration (e.g. family and kinship relationships) are not considered in their influence on the mobile regime. While underlining the “invention of tradition” and the mythopoesis the Chinese minority builds about its migration endeavor, it is hard to imagine there is a relational vacuum before migration. Recent works on transnational caregiving and Chinese migration history may contribute to further advancements (Chang 2012; Gao 2018).

## ENCOUNTERS IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

This is where the work by Elisabeth L. Krause steps in. Actually, the starting point of her research is family change and economy, with a focus on child nurturing and caring practices, parenting and parents’ participation into the labor market. The Author is familiar with such fields and the local case of Prato, as she explored them with a focus on Italian family-making strategies in the more or recent past (Krause 2005; 2009). In *Tight Knit. Global Families and the Social Life of Fast Fashion*, she is interested in exploring a new field, disentangling the global *fast fashion* value chains – with a focus on Chinese families in Prato. Thus, her research starts, among the others, from these questions: «What family arrangements such an economy require, repel, or generate? How do individuals and families cope with überflexible lives?» (p. 9)

Framed in Marshall Sahlins’ works on culture and capitalism (Sahlins 1988) and in David Graeber’s reflections on value (Graeber 2001), Krause argues that agents’ motivations and *Weltanschauungen* are not dominated directly and uniformly by capitalist logics. Thus, studying migrant Chinese families and Prato, she focuses on what spills over common utilitarian and functionalist discourses. In this way, contestation and resistance to power can emerge, showing irreducible cultural elements outside capitalism and power domination.

Empirically, this concept grounds the strongest point of the book. This work is one of the few in which minority, disempowered voices are heard loud and clear and mainstream, codified points of view on transnational, intercultural encounters in Prato are inserted in brackets and challenged via the lived experience of dispossessed Chinese and Italian families.

Her method to enter the field has an eminently micro, bottom-up perspective that Krause frames as “encounter ethnography.” She focuses on sites and situations in which diversity is thematized and mediated and enters transnational, social contact. She further elaborates the concept, identifying three types of encounter: structural (the economy-framing agency and discourses), genealogical (contact between different forms of knowledge) and fieldwork (based on contingent social contacts).

The three sections of the book are dedicated to different sites of encounter, when usually all the above types of encounters are explored. Section 1 is devoted to encounters in production sites (i.e. the role Chinese migration assumed in the *Made in Italy* value chains). Section 2 discusses care arrangements in Chinese migrant families, with a focus on health and on minors’ mobility. Section 3 discusses public and institutional encounters, with a focus on discrimination.

Not all the sections are equally convincing. Some passages seem to show an inadequate grasp and framing of the context, spiced up with an annoying tendency to resort to picturesque descriptions (e.g. when describing Italian fashionistas). Additionally, there are few factual errors that one shall not expect to find in valued academic press. There are two examples. The first tells the story of Wang, one of the oldest Chinese entrepreneurs in Prato; the amnesty under the Martelli law is dated 1986 instead of 1990. If instituted processes are deemed important, this error engenders a misunderstanding on Wang’s trajectory, and one may suspect the interviewees’ words have not been contextualized with a check of actual events. Second, the argument in Chapter 2 is based on a dubious statement: the Author maintains the department store La Rinascente recalls the Italian Renaissance, which seems not to be the idea D’Annunzio, who invented the brand name, had in mind (Papadia 2005).

Actually, Chapter 2 on “value” is quite baffling. In the book’s design, this chapter had to frame the value of *Made in Italy* besides the hegemony of profit logic, later showing what kind of far-reaching effects the crisis and transformation of district economy meant for the lived experience of its inhabitants. In fact, it purports a questionable theory that gives centrality to the 1966 flood in Florence and the myth of the Renaissance. Besides postdating the success of the “Italian wave,” the argument seems to be a treatise disconnected by the general argument of the book.

Chapter 3 focuses on Chinese migrants to Prato, their motivations and the structural encounters where sentiments meet and clash with economic motives. She analyses the Wenzhou and the *Made in Italy* models of petty capitalism, and the global restructuring of *fast fashion* value chains, articulating them based on lived experiences that challenge the idea of a simple and common quest for money. Chapter 4 aims to disentangle the meaning of the crisis from the life stories of Italian workers in the district, dispossessed in the restructuring of the value chain, which nostalgically see the end of a world.

Section 2, which includes Chapters 5 and 6, is the most interesting section of the book; the Chinese minority is given a compelling voice about issues where they are voiceless, in particular concerning their parenting strategies. Structural, genealogical and fieldwork encounters, as defined above by the Author, are clearly expressed as relevant turning points in personal biographies and in their wider societal consequences. Chapter 5 shows how inequalities and discrimination are embodied in the interaction between Chinese migrants and the Italian health-care system. Based on interviews and observations, this chapter introduces the reader to the stigmatization of mobility and transnational parenting: common ethnicized discourses on culture clashes do not account for structural conditions of disadvantage and tend to reinforce them. This issue is further explored in Chapter 6, where Krause problematizes the international circulation of children, contrasting migrants’ voices and experts’ rebukes that deny the reality of (reluctant) global households, pressured by the pace of *fast fashion*.

Finally, Section 3 accounts for the local debate of minority incorporation, first delving into discriminatory political discourses (Chapter 7), while Chapter 8 illustrates projects aimed at producing counter-narratives. Chapter 9 recaps Krause’s findings by explicating the interdependence – the micro-macro link between families and institutions – between the global and the local. In particular, the Author clarifies her interest on how people, especially dispossessed and disempowered ones, try to make sense of their experiences. She maintains that such issues shall be explored, challenging dominant economic worldviews.

RESEARCHING MIGRATION AND GLOBAL CAPITAL RESTRUCTURING:  
MAKING SENSE OF MULTISCALAR APPROACHES

These two books constitute a reference point in the internationalization and theorization on Prato and its migration. This case study becomes a litmus test of how global capital transformations are performed locally. They are also an example of the direction migration research has taken in the last decade. In the wake of the abovementioned works by Nina Glick Schiller and Ayşe Çağlar, there is an effort to articulate the complex entanglement of global and local processes and of structural factors and social action from the point of view of the social actor.

Both books highlight the importance of persisting, globalized processes of disembedding capital restructuring and the need to focus research (and civic engagement) on the common processes of dispossession and displacement. Such processes are experienced by migrants and long-term residents, even though bordering practices and symbolic and material boundaries keep people apart.

They also share – again in the wake of Glick Schiller and colleagues – the need to focus on localities to understand global capital restructuring better, a complex research agenda that requires directing researchers' eyes toward multiple scales. In this, Ceccagno preserves the scalar dimensions in a structural way, but the value of Krause is in the focus on translocal micro-consequences of such processes.

Theoretically, turning away from biases related to nationalism and ethnocentrism and giving value to the neglected agency of dispossessed people beyond dominant stigmatizing discourses are much-needed efforts (Glick Schiller, Çağlar, Guldbrandsen 2006). Empirically, most questions are still open. While Glick Schiller and Çağlar maintain that locality shall be the entry point to the field, how to unravel the different dimensions involved is quite a challenge. Translating theory into actual research may be far from easy and probably requires research campaigns much more extended than the ones we are used to in migration research.

These two books are a case in point, as they either retrace 20 years of research (Ceccagno) or – starting from some sort of previous knowledge of the case study – adopt multiple research methods with a number of research collaborations (Krause). Most likely, this is not enough, as the comparative dimension (deemed as fundamental by Glick Schiller, Çağlar 2009) is still missing, and the transnational lens is curbed by limited fieldwork in the sites of translocal lives outside Prato (which is deemed equally important by authors such as Levitt, Glick Schiller 2004; Faist 2012). Personally, I have still to find a piece of research that adequately covers these dimensions: to my knowledge, the best recent pieces of international research in this field have either a comparative perspective but limited transnational fieldwork (Glick Schiller, Çağlar 2018) or a transnational analysis but no comparative perspective (Miraftab 2016). Clearly, the blanket is short, and researchers have to learn how to bend. One of the strategies “to bend” that is still missing is to produce more collaborative research.

Volumes by Krause and Ceccagno also show notable differences. As mentioned above, what seems to contrast the two authors is their understanding of global capitalism. On the one hand, *Tight Knit* focuses on «the persistence of heterogeneity within global capitalism» (p. 7), in which many noncapitalist social relations need to be acknowledged. Thus, “capitalocentrism” (i.e. the fact that capitalist discourse dominates many debates, including the academic ones) should be considered detrimental for an understanding of social dynamics. On the other hand, *City-making and Global Labor Regimes* focuses on «the way in which structural transformations of the capitalist economic system engender different spatially determined social relations» (p. 12) – an approach that avoids determinism by looking at migrants' scale-making agency.

The point here is that Krause lists a series of economic practices she is interested in examining as noncapitalist, such as «gifts, barter, self-employment, cooperatives, volunteering, informal economy» (p. 35), which are hard to consider as noncapitalist overall. Just to stay within this case, Ceccagno shows well how self-employment and informal economy are structural elements of capital restructuring, aimed at extracting value through severe (self) exploitation, and we have a number of similar studies in the same direction (e.g. in Mediterranean agriculture; see for instance Corrado, de Castro, Perrotta 2016).

While it is a worthy endeavor to explore noncapitalist cultural and social factors, it is also a point that capitalist economies are a global force that – in their varieties – selectively include, accept and promote specific cultural

traditions and inventions. In the wake of authors such as Polanyi and Schumpeter, we cannot overlook the creative destruction capitalism produces in noncapitalist economies and societies and the forms of integration between (capitalist) economy and society.

Maintaining the Prato industrial district model or Wenzhou economic model are not just “global capitalism” does not mean that social, economic and cultural factors preexisting capitalism were not assembled and funneled into a capitalist economy. In this respect, the disembedding of Prato can also be read as a transition between different capitalist models (as Ceccagno does in contextualizing economy in an institutional setting at national and local levels).

Capitalism is not just value but also the production or reuse of justifications, ideologies and social systems that support a mode of production. Acknowledging this does not mean endorsing capitalist exploitation but understanding the moral order underlying an economic regime and even its contestations, as debated in the economy of conventions (Boltanski, Chiapello 2005; Boltanski, Thévenot 2006; Borghi, Vitale 2006).

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