Encountering Entrepreneurs

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An Ethnography of the Construction Business in the North of Italy

By

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INTRODUCTION

"She is our assistant, not assistant, anthropologist. She looks at you and understands everything, just looking at you!" I start my narration with the imaginative and ironic introduction that one of my informants made of me: 'the anthropologist', the one who can read people's mind and understand them at first look. If only this were the case!

From September 2013 to September 2014, I worked, learned and shared many of my days with a group of entrepreneurs of the construction business in Lombardy, North of Italy. My experience took place in small-medium businesses, mainly based in the province of Bergamo; though, I often refer to the broader region of Lombardy, because my fieldwork was not confined to a specific place, village, or town. I often moved from one village to another, from one town to another, to meetings or for visiting construction sites with my informants. I was often an apprentice, their shadow, trying to absorb as much as possible about the business, and about the entrepreneur's working life. Typically, I would meet with informants in town or in a village nearby, at the offices of a company or in a parking place, and then move by car to other places.

I studied those businesses in which, due to their size, the businessman, usually the company's owner, has complete or almost complete control over the decision making. In such businesses, it is usually the case that the person of the entrepreneur himself is so essential or seems to be so essential that it is difficult to divide the person from the business and from the enterprise. My informants' role is multitasking and most of the time they know more information than anybody else in the company. It is they who carry out and nourish relationships outside the company; most of the main problems, the drafting of contracts, sometimes even the simple administrative tasks, are done personally by the entrepreneurs who own the business.

Imprenditore

My use of the word "entrepreneur" is a direct translation from the Italian word and concept *imprenditore.*

Looking at the definition of "entrepreneur" in the English dictionary, we see that the first meaning of the word is: "a person who sets up a business or businesses, taking on financial risks in the hope of profit"[1]. This does not seem to be too distant from the meaning of the word *imprenditore*. Despite this, I feel obliged to more clearly define the word because most of the people to whom I have spoken outside Italy seem confused when I speak about "entrepreneur" and not "businessman" for instance. In fact, I often use the two terms as synonyms.

When I talk about *imprenditore* in the Italian context, I have a very specific kind of person in mind: *the owner of a company*. I do not speak about a manager; nor do I speak about some personal characteristic. In English the term is often used as an adjective, a characterization more than a character, and therefore can be employed for different kinds of people. Some other times, it is employed when thinking about start-ups and new fields of investment and strategies. This is not my use and this is not what an Italian reader would usually understand. If I speak to people in Italy about *Imprenditori Lombardi,* they will usually have a very specific category of people in their mind, and they will have clear images of businessmen.

Location

Lombardy, with its population of nearly 10 million residents is the most densely populated region of Italy and the most economically prosperous, contributing about one quarter of Italy's gross domestic product. The region, is located in the North and is divided into 1530 municipalities distributed in 12 provinces (Varese, Como, Lecco, Sondrio, Monza e della Brianza, Milano, Lodi, Pavia, Bergamo, Brescia, Crema, Mantova). The capital of the region is Milan.

In this region the period of strong economic development has ended, and after a period of stability, it is now suffering the consequences of the global financial crisis. The region has been very "anthropized"[2] and the construction industry is very developed. The construction sector which has, in the past, enjoyed a tremendous boom due to the enormous economic growth and urbanization of the area is now also in crisis. Between 2008 and 2014 (year when my field research was conducted)

[1] 2010. *Oxford dictionary of English*. 3rd Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[2] Anthropize: to transform or adapt the environment either to meet the needs of humans, or by human activity.

construction companies in Lombardy have decreased from 118,867 to 98,843 (ANCE 2017) (Fig. 2).

Fig 1. Map of Lombardy with its provinces (Inset: Location of Lombardy in Italy).

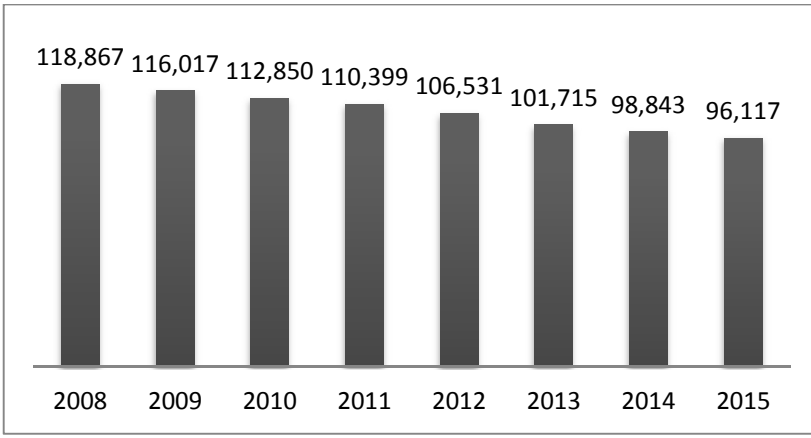


Fig. 2. Number of construction companies in Lombardy (Source: ANCE 2017).

Home yet not home

My position in the fieldwork was that of an insider and of a stranger at the same time. It is true that my field was in my native region and city so that I was somehow "in my place", communicating in my mother tongue, sharing a lot of common understandings with my informants; but at the same time I was venturing into a completely distinct world from my own. I was not a stranger, I was very much local, but I had never had any experience in the field of construction before. I was somehow very distant from this world, with no basic knowledge of anything related to it. This could be an advantage in order to see it with an innocent curiosity. However, it was also a challenge. I needed to enter into it, and acquire some understanding of this new space in order to perceive certain aspects and to penetrate deeper into the world of the people working in it. Not only was I a complete outsider to this world in terms of previous knowledge, but also in terms of social connections.

Almost a parallel world, and yet I discovered it to be very much connected to mine. It was simply that I had not seen these relations because I was not interested in paying attention to them. These relations might have come into my world but I was looking at them in a completely different way; in a way influenced by my life, by my experience, and by what was important for me in that moment. For example, previous to my fieldwork research, if there had been some building work going on in a street near my house, I would have never paid attention to it, or I would have seen the works but with a different view, related to my purpose of arriving home.

It is not only a question of paying attention or not; the kind of attention you are paying is also influenced by your own life experience, and purposes, and desires. It is not simply a matter of having seen certain things around you since childhood, but also how these things were effectively influencing your life. What we see is often what we expect to see or what we are interested in seeing (Rapport 1993, 151-4).

The more experiences a person collected, even in his own home town, the more this person would potentially see the world around in an increasingly complex way, and the more this person would discover other worlds which were already there, but he or she never previously needed to see and explore. These new worlds then influence one's life, and make one understand something new, and start to construct new connections. Reality start to take on a new meaning. This is a process without end. The things

someone can see, and the different way someone can see these things, never end but can only increase with life and experience.

Learning is an historical process: “a comparative anthropology of mind requires the recognition that ontogeny is a genuinely historical process” (Toren 1993, 461). Epistemology and ontology are faces of the same coin. While I was making sense of a new world, this world was suddenly appearing to me. This world was not there for me before, because it was not formed in me. It started to exist when I experienced and learned it. Vice versa, I experienced and learned it when it appeared in my life and I started to see it. This process of learning does not end in adulthood. There might be a resistance, or non-recognition of this process, but not an end. There is a continuous creation of being and of meaning.

Into the field

How can a field be approached when you are not part of it even if you are at “home”? How could I engage in this world when I was not an entrepreneur myself, or an engineer, or even a simple worker? I wanted to follow the entrepreneurs of the construction business throughout their day: my goal was to stay in the construction field and with the entrepreneurs as much as possible, observing their jobs, and immersing myself in their lives. I wanted to be able to follow them also outside the office, where in fact the majority of their time is spent. I knew from the very beginning that the idea of this kind of fieldwork was considered by many to be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Many suggested being employed in one of these companies. Assuming that this was possible, my fieldwork experience would have been very limited, and of a completely different type. I could try to understand the life, worries, enthusiasms, and fears, only by sharing the day with my informants.

As my research is focused on businessmen, and not their employees, I could not position myself inside the offices of a single company. I did so in particular cases, and only for limited periods, where it was not always possible to follow the entrepreneur. In such cases, I did this only because that position gave me an advantage, both in term of a better understanding of the business, and of acquiring trust. This trust could give me future opportunities to have a more direct contact with the entrepreneur or to follow some of the meetings inside the office.

I know that the way a field is accessed can profoundly affect the way people welcome you, the way they classify you and see you, and can

consequently influence all your experience and research. I did not feel that randomly contacting entrepreneurs would be a useful entry point. What did I have to offer? Why was I interested in them and in their lives? How could I convince them to collaborate with me? I did not want to give them the suspicion that I was selling something. I thought the only reasonable way was approaching the entrepreneurs through some common acquaintance. Yes, it was the only possible way for me: a person that could mediate. My presence was already brutally external, I needed to enter smoothly. The first step was to find a contact and with that, an opportunity to talk.

At first this contact appeared to be difficult to find, but with time possibilities started to open up. Every time I went out in Bergamo with old and new friends, people asked me about my life, my job, and consequently about my research. When speaking about my research, I asked each one of my friends the same question: "Do you happen to know an entrepreneur in the construction business?" One night, I was chatting with a friend of a friend about my future months in town and, as usual, about my research expectations. This person told me that he knew one entrepreneur, Luca, and that this one could be the right person for my research. We agreed that he would contact his friend on my behalf, and that he would only very briefly explain to his friend about my research. I assured him that I would myself explain the research in detail to the entrepreneur. In this way, I could directly answer any question he might have. After a few days I had Luca's number, talked to him on the phone for the first time, and gained the first of my meetings.

The social relations in which every person in society is embedded can be viewed as a network, with lines virtually radiating from the individual to his friends, and then on to their friends, and so on, consequently connecting the entire society (Boissevain 1974). I successfully used my extended personal networks and penetrated the field through friends of friends in this way; and later, through other entrepreneurs. Sometimes I met new informants through old ones. For instance, travelling with Luca to some other office and company, I exchanged my contact details with other entrepreneurs. Afterwards, when I contacted them by phone, it was easier to establish a meeting because they knew that I was already carrying out the research with somebody else. Other meetings happened through the facilitation of the local association of building constructors. In this case, I was invited to the meetings at the association, and it was only after a very first contact in person, and an exchange of phone numbers, that I could hope for further meetings at the entrepreneurs' companies. Being presented by friends, by colleagues, or by the director of the local

association of building constructors, was more reassuring. Meeting me in person, and exchanging a few words, also facilitated trust.

Interviewing my informants would have been much easier than the participant observation I wanted to achieve, but I would never have discovered the complexity, and contrariety, that only a longer period of time with the people studied could offer. Interviews were most of the time what my informants expected, and were prepared for. They expected me to have precise questions, and a specific allocation of time that they could dedicate to my questions during their busy days. Not fulfilling such expectations often meant for me a lot of time and effort spent convincing them of the scientific nature of my methods. I was often finding myself explaining anthropology, and about the authenticity, and effectiveness of its methods. Not all of them probably completely understood my explanations, but most of them kindly allowed me into some of their days.

Most of my informants were generously helping me without any form of reciprocation from my side. They were in most cases freely helping me. It felt like a sort of hospitality. I was guided and initiated step by step into and inside a new world. In some cases, I offered my knowledge of foreign languages to translate or to interpret for them; other times, my opinion on facts, or maybe just my company during the movements between one place and another, was all that was asked for in return.

My position

My fieldwork, as any fieldwork, was surely shaped by the way I positioned myself in it, but also by my social position. My place of birth and my language, my gender and my social status, have certainly influenced my research and the establishment of trust with my informants.

I am a local, born and raised in the town in which, or around which, I carried out the research. The fact of being from Bergamo might have given my informants a positive impression of me for a variety of reasons. There is more trust in a person who comes from your home town, and knows your customs and language. Italian is my native tongue, and I also understand the local dialect[3]. My accent is not recognised as foreign. This can not only favour communication, but can also give a feeling of

[3] Dialects in the case of Italy are languages with a different vocabulary, structure and grammar; not only a different accent. Therefore, when I refer to accent, I mean a local intonation and pronunciation of the Italian language.

closeness that only an understanding of the language and of the place can establish.

I am a student. I am studying in a university abroad, and at a Ph.D. level. Education is very much valued in one sense but then it is also regarded with a bit of suspicion, especially in the eyes of people who left school and entered paid employment early. I always tried to put myself in the position of a person eager to learn, and demonstrate that I was ready to work and engage with things. Sometimes experience and common sense are much more valued.

I am a woman. On various occasions I felt that this, instead of being a disadvantage, was helping me to penetrate the field. I think that the fact that I was a woman gave less feeling of competition and more sympathy, although this is just my supposition. Furthermore, as some of my informants jokingly underlined in front of some colleagues, "it is preferable to stay in the company of a woman, when you are otherwise constantly surrounded by men."

I am a person external to the construction field, with no family members or previous work experience in it. Colleagues told me that the study of a kind of elite could only be done by somebody whose personal experience, or family connections, allowed them to be accepted in such a close environment. However, I do not find useful to define my informants as "elite". Furthermore, I do not think that they would define themselves as such. Most importantly, I want to argue that my position as an external person without strong connections to the field was in fact an advantage. I clearly felt that the fact that I did not have personal interests or family members inside the field reassured my informants. If on the one hand, it was more difficult to penetrate such a world, on the other, I clearly felt that my informants were feeling much freer in speaking in front of me—able to trust me because, although I was a local, I was also foreign to their business interests. One of my informants explicitly asked me if someone in my family was in the business, and most of the entrepreneurs I worked with were eager to know if my curiosity for the business was disinterested or was influenced by personal connections. The field seems to be very large and diversified but, in fact, it is not so large. In most cases my informants knew each other in some way or another, and it was very easy to go and step on somebody else's business. I didn't want to be affiliated with anybody; I wanted to be, and to be seen in their eyes as, independent, and free from factional connections.

Actors involved and issues of confidentiality

I worked mainly with entrepreneurs of small to medium businesses, mostly males. However, I also met other actors, both when I was in the company of my informants, and by myself. Such meetings were also very important for the results of my research. During my visits to the offices of the companies, I sometimes spent time, and had conversations, with secretaries, accountants, and quantity surveyors who gave me their views about the business, and about their experiences. Travelling with my informants from offices to construction sites, I met workers, bank employees and managers, municipal employees, lawyers, architects, artisans, and private clients, with whom my informants were used to interacting in their job.

I spent some of my time in fieldwork with the managers and engineers of a design company, with whom I exchanged opinions, worked, and learnt. I also found it necessary to go, and investigate, the work that is done inside the local government offices of a municipality, when preparing a tender. I went and talked with the managers of the various offices in charge of this work. I met an old retired mayor with whom I shared thoughts about the relationship between entrepreneurs and the local government. Through these experiences, I learnt some of the laws and procedures of the business. Finally, I regularly visited the local association of building constructors, and went to some of their meetings. I talked to the director and to some of the employees of the Association in order to understand their work, the relationships they entertained with the entrepreneurs, and the critical issues of the construction business.

During fieldwork, I did not speak to any of my informants about my other meetings with other entrepreneurs. Even if, in some cases, they knew about other friends or competitors that I had met, I never commented on such meetings, and on the information or situations encountered. I paid attention not to inadvertently give away information heard, so that my informants could always count on my discretion. I was never asked to divulge information about competitors. The basis of my neutrality was set at the very beginning of my research by my explanations. This silent agreement of confidentiality was accepted with their acceptance of my research.

Furthermore, I used different notepads for different informants. In fact, I often wrote down notes during my days with them. People sometimes expected me to write down their explanations. I ensured that the notepads

were always with me, and that my informants could not read them, but as a precaution, I used distinct notepads for each of them.

In order to protect and respect my informants, names of people, places and companies have been changed to avoid identification as much as possible. It is for the same reasons that I did not want to give very specific information about the size of their business, employees, earning… I limited this information, which would have given to the reader more contexts to reflect upon, because I feel an obligation of justice towards my informants. Such particulars in such a small field would allow easy identification. I tried to balance the information given prioritising their right of privacy and their protection.

Different levels of narration

I now invite the reader to see the different levels of narration in the book, where my authorial voice undertakes forms of mediation in different ways.

The first authorial voice is contained in text boxes. This text is a direct narration from my fieldnotes. Here, I endeavour to bring readers inside the days spent with my informants, and let them follow me in the movements, conversations, and spaces of my fieldwork. I want to give the reader the opportunity to immerse himself, or herself, in the lives of my informants, as I did. Furthermore, I would like the reader to understand my place inside the business, and the relationships I entertained with my informants. I am aware of the fact that this narration is nevertheless mediated, and that the reader is not free to look at spaces and people with his own experience, but only through my very personal experience and lenses. However, in this type of narration, I try to leave out authorial comments or explanations as much as possible. I give only a few essential comments in order to allow the narration to flow, and to give the reader the opportunity to have a close taste of the field. In other words, my purpose is not to give some objective and detached narration, but simply to bring the reader closer to the field and to my experience.

I will give here an example of such an “unmediated” or barely mediated narration. This is a first day with one of my informants. This example represents some of the possible situations, movements, places, and people that we will then find inside the various chapters. I use the present tense and the first person in this kind of authorial voice because I want the reader to see the place, hear the conversations, and have an immediate taste of my experience:

It is almost 9. I cannot find the company. I am driving around the village where the company headquarters are supposed to be, and where I am supposed to have a first meeting with one of my informants, but I cannot find the place. I use my phone and try to contact him, but his phone is switched off.

I stop for a coffee at the bar at the centre of the village and ask the bartender for directions. She tells me it is impossible not to notice it: I have to go back, a bit outside the village, and then turn, and I will see the quarry. I follow the directions and get lost in the fields another couple of times until I finally reach the place.

Mr. P. is at a meeting somewhere else. I sit and wait there for him to finish with it and join me. After a few minutes, a man comes in and speaks with the receptionist. He is looking for a job and he is given a form to fill in. He sits right next to me. I look at him in a friendly way, and he takes the opportunity to ask me for some orthographic help with his Italian. He is Albanian, and he has been working in Italy for many years now. He tells me that he likes to construct and realise things, and then, he says, "In the construction business compared to other sectors you are not just a number." I write down his observations, and I tell him that in fact I am waiting for the boss. Therefore, he waits with me so that he can give him the form directly.

Mr. P. arrives, and without dedicating much time to my new friend, he leads me to the offices upstairs. I only have the time to turn, look at the worker, and hope that he will have some luck. Mr. P. shows me around, and he presents me to some of the employees of the office before we go out. We will meet with one of them and eat together later.

While we are out driving, Mr. P. explains to me that the company started years ago with the production of cereals. The old company is still there on one side of the road we are passing through, and it is still productive. Apart from cereal production, he owns two companies in the construction business, one dedicated to road construction with 67 employees, and another company with 40 employees dedicated

to quarries, the concrete and the asphalt plant, and a modular building company in the nearby town. For an overall number of 180 employees.

We arrive at the quarry, and I can see the long queue of trucks. There are at least 20 waiting to be loaded. Big excavators are incessantly working next to them. The area is huge. Much bigger than I had expected! The water is far down below. Before it, in front of me, wide mountains of stones and shingles of different dimensions. Two crawler cranes are working down on the bank. The grey sky almost fades into the mass of stones and mud to become one. Only the yellow excavators and some red trucks colour the landscape.

Mr. P. explains to me that there are 130 trucks at the moment that go back and forth. “Big works need material. Here a lake will remain. An artificial lake. We excavated for two years for X highway. And now we will excavate one more year in the same area.” At the moment they are selling material for the construction of some parts of the highway, and of the high speed new train line connecting two big cities of the North of Italy. He phones somebody because he is worried about the condition of the road with so many trucks lined up outside the quarry.

After some logistics are explained, he turns to me and starts to recount: “I am one of those entrepreneurs who still love to go and visit the construction sites, I like the human contact, I grew up there (in the construction sites). If I am not on the construction site, I go around anyway to some other office, or there is some local mayor who seeks me out because here the villages are small…” In fact, he had just received a phone call from a mayor who wanted to recommend a friend to him, in case he had some free position in his company. Mr P. takes advantage of the phone call to ask the mayor about some work being undertaken on an underpass.

We visit an architect in the nearby village. After some minutes of funny jokes and everyday conversation, and him staring at me trying to understand my role, Mr. P., introducing me as a researcher, tells him: “I met her in

ANCE[4] and she told me, 'I am studying the entrepreneurs!' and, 'can I come to your firm?', then I forgot it…and this morning I arrived late…" The architect discusses my being an anthropologist, about the beauty of Scotland, and finally also about some works they are doing, using for that a huge map, which he opens up on the big table and points towards with his finger.

It is already lunch time and, together, we go to a nice little restaurant to eat something. When we are back at the office, the company's lawyer comes in. He is a young attractive man. He looks energetic and willing to talk. He already knows what I do and he jokes with me: "You should write that Mr. E[5] last year had a full head of hair."[6] He tells me while waiting for Mr. P. who is in the other office, "the real problem for the entrepreneurs is the slow rate of justice, because if there wasn't this problem, we would not be here in discussion… Sometimes, it is more convenient to immediately get some money, than to wait for the time to get justice to recuperate all the money you are owed." Then, he goes on discussing some issues with the secretary.

The day continues with me and Mr. P. going back and forth various times from the office to some other place or office around the area. We go back and forth more than ten times during the day. This is the active life of a small entrepreneur, it seems.

I go back home satisfied with the welcome, and for the many things that I learn, and that I see during my days, and for the positive ties that are established.

Outside the above text boxes, the reader will find the second and third authorial voices.

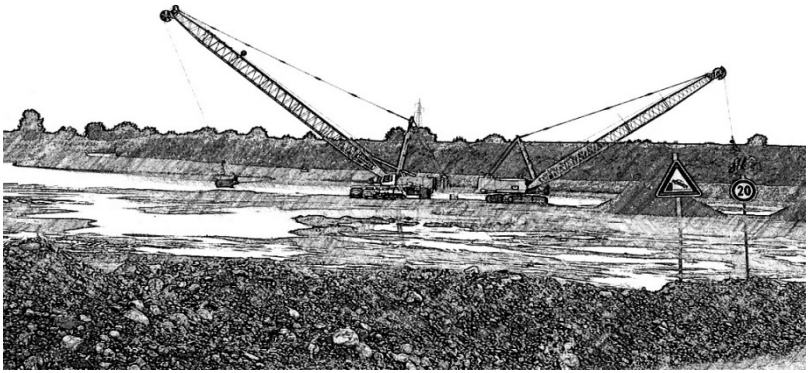
The second authorial voice consists of my commentaries on, and explanations of, the narrative in the boxes. I give additional information to help the reader to understand, and to set the narratives inside a wider

[4] *Associazione Nazionale Costruttori Edili*. The local Association of Building Constructors.
[5] He calls him by his given name instead of his surname as everyone else does.
[6] He is implying here that Mr. E recently lost all of his hair because of the stress.

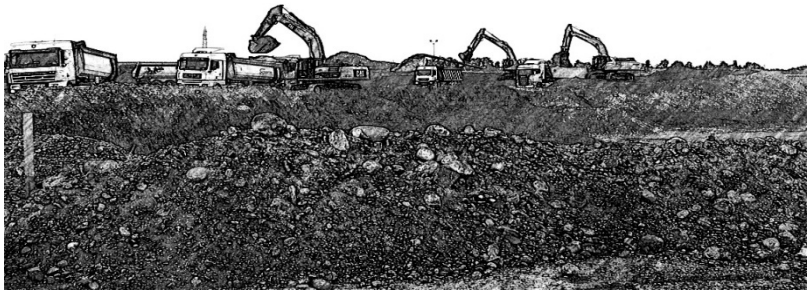
context: I connect to other experiences and knowledge that I have about Italy, about the construction business, or about the lives of my informants outside that single small vignette. I also build connection to other episodes in my fieldwork that can shed light on what has been said in the narrative. The single narratives in the boxes are important to allow the reader inside the lives of my entrepreneurs, but should not be taken as pure evidence. For the reader lacks the whole experience necessary to fully understand the episodes, discussions, and places I am describing in the vignettes.

With the third authorial voice, I try to connect the material of my fieldwork to other wider discourses about the same themes I discuss, but external to my fieldwork. I draw examples from other anthropologists and social scientists whose work I find useful to connect to mine.

The register is much less formal when I use the first authorial voice, as I have wanted to stay close to the original register of my conversations in the field. Sometimes, I report direct speech and conversations; some other times, the flow of my thoughts. Therefore, phrases are in general shorter in the text boxes, or fragmented, and they are more grounded in the senses.



Pic 1: Quarry: the material is collected.



Pic 2: Quarry: the material is loaded into the trucks.

Themes

When writing my ethnography, I did not always consciously define the themes to write about. The small narrations included in the boxes, written with the help both of my fieldnotes and my memory, are about very normal days in the life of my informants, or about particular events, and conversations, that I found relevant to report. In each of these accounts different themes emerge: the accounts can be divided and categorised in many varied ways, and they can all potentially connect to different themes. I decided to discuss the subjects that seem most relevant to my ethnographic experience, and to distinguish the chapters according to these key themes. This division is functional in that the linearity, in which the themes and experiences are presented, allows for the reader's easier comprehension. However, real life is in fact much more complex, and less ordered. Life has no linear form.

Furthermore, a different sensibility to my own would probably connect the same experiences to other discussions, and to other subjects. I am influenced by my life and education, by the way I experienced fieldwork, by my personal relationships with the people I met, and therefore everything is mediated, and seen through my lenses. Not only the way I see and experience things is mediated, but also the structure, content, and

style of this book are the result of my personal understanding and sensibility. I return to the serendipitous and personal nature of anthropological ethnography and analysis in the Conclusion to this book.

Reality through perceptions - conceptual ideas about a post-cultural anthropology

In the book, I engage with the concept of knowledge in two ways: by questioning the partiality and ephemerality of our ways of knowing and of our production of anthropological knowledge, and by reflecting on the similar ways of knowing that anthropologists and businessmen share. I show how these two concepts are in fact connected by the idea of a universal modality of knowing and of expressing this knowledge: a modality which goes beyond our culture, personal history and roles.

The problem of claiming objectively to know and transmit knowledge becomes evident in anthropology especially with the Writing Culture Debate, and with the idea of the partiality and subjectivity of the knowledge acquired in fieldwork (Strathern 2005). There, the position of the author both in fieldwork, and in the ethnographic texts produced, became a major focus (Clifford 1986). Nevertheless, ethnographic writing has been, and remains, the main means through which anthropologists have communicated the results of their fieldwork research. Starting from their experience and their knowledge, from their participant observation and their fieldnotes, anthropologists try to produce an effective text in order to communicate and translate their findings to an intended audience. However, "writing ethnography is not merely about describing what we encounter in the field, but about abstracting, interpreting, analysing" (Gay y Blasco & Wardle 2007, 26). What is included in the text? How is the data presented? Ethnography is a powerful form of representation that has changed and is constantly changing through time in the discipline.

Every representation is a mediated product in which objectivity might be an aiming point, but it can never be reached. For, "all communication is translation" (George Steiner in Rapport 2001, 96). Berger affirms that by writing about others we always risk writing fiction (John Berger in Rapport 2001, 96). In fact, our understanding of others is always influenced by our own perceptions (Ed Wilmsen in Rapport 2001, 96). Wilmsen explains that we, the observers, are the measure of other people and their lives, and we cannot listen or understand them outside our own

experience; therefore, through our description, we inevitably distort them and their reality.

Bourdieu (1977, 2) also underlines the limits of objectivism, and the insufficiency of claiming to gain access to the native experience and representation of facts, and urges that the anthropologist should: "break and question the presuppositions inherent in the position of an outside observer, who, in his preoccupation with interpreting practices, is inclined to introduce into the object the principles of his relation to the object." Knowledge does not only depend on the point of observation in time and space the ethnographer takes, but by the same relation the observer takes up with the object by his/her same act of withdrawing from it.

If it is possible to find a solution to the distortion we practice with our knowing and representing the other, it is in a "post-cultural" anthropology which recognizes a human commonality behind differences of thoughts, lives and cultures. "Human experience is a universal modality existing over and above the diversity of avenues of its formal expression" (Rapport 2001, 100). Rapport (2001, 97) insists in asserting "commonalities of individual bodily experience over and against the formal specificities of cultural difference." This possibility of similarly experiencing beyond culture, he argues, both gives back to people their humanity and allows us to step outside the objectification of the other and the cultural determinism that a cultural anthropology often falls into. Neither objective determination nor subjective agency are here affirmed in isolation or opposition, but a space in between the two.

That is, when elaborating about human experience, and how it is possible for the individual to experience the world beyond culture, Rapport goes back to the role of the body and in particular to the "role that embodiment plays in knowledge and its expression" (Rapport 2001, 98). For him, in fact, there is a universality of the individually embodied understandings of the world. Not in terms of the substance of this knowing, "but in terms of capacity and disposition: the capacity for knowledge, the disposition to know" (Rapport 2001, 99). Such shared human embodiment becomes important not only in the ethnographic experience but also in the consequent ethnographic expression. I argue that "the anthropologist in the field comes to know tacitly, by the way of the body being in certain practical circumstances" (Rapport 2010a, 1) just as the entrepreneurs of the construction business know through their practical experience: by moving, by taking decisions, by working in field, by meeting people and exchanging information. Knowledge comes through experiencing and

doing (Coy 1989). Similarly, Stoller (2007) describes a process of "embodying knowledge through experience." He proclaims the need for a sensual engagement in ethnographic fieldwork; and also the need for anthropologists to make the reader have a taste of the ethnographer's bodily experiences. This is because it is only "through embodied self-knowledge" that "one can aspire to a commensurable knowing of others" (Rapport 2001, 100). It is only through recognising and making explicit one's own individuality and individual experience that one can aspire to appreciate others in their individuality and try to understand them. It is through a personal relation made of empathy and embodied knowledge that one can approach a different environment: through recognising his or her personal experiences, and the personal way of experiencing a "new" world, the ethnographer can bring a much more valid experience to the reader. And while this does not give us the certainty of achieving valid knowledge, it relocates the problem. One moves beyond an anthropology of "culture" and beyond notions of cultural determinism—beyond the issue of how one discrete culture may gain objective insight into another—to a question of how one human being comes to know alongside other human beings who share the same universal bodily capacities (Rapport 2001, 101). As will become apparent, I feel I come to know my informants through the common methods of knowing that they as businessmen and I as anthropologist shared.

Individual and culture

One of the other key themes I insist upon in this book is identity. Here, too, I try to step outside a simple cultural determinism while never denying the strong influence given by the individuals' membership to cultural traditions and social groups. Cultural determinism and a universal human identity as individual are sometimes seen as positioned at two distant and opposite ends of theorization. But this is not my position. In fact, these two ends, for me, perfectly coexist in the same reality.

The individual is influenced and formed by his environment and history, by the set of rules and instructions he or she learned in the many groups they are part of. However, his or her actions and thoughts are not only determined by this cultural affiliation. At the same time, his or her actions should be seen as the result of their simply being a human being, being "Anyone". Nigel Rapport (2010b, 85) defines "Anyone" as "that human-individual actor whose intrinsic nature may be described separately from a description of the details of his or her current cultural milieu, social

standing, structural emplacement, or symbolic categorization." I agree with him in wanting to leave people their simple human quality beyond their multiple and intersected group identities. The concept of "Anyone" should posit "existential capacities of human being beyond the particularities of social, cultural and historical contexts." (Rapport 2014, 48) Any reader should be able to see a bit of themselves in my informants' choices, thoughts, and decisions.

In the cases analysed, the readers can recognise the specific contextual peculiarities: the size, the history, the location of the businesses, the Italian law, but at the same time they should not deceive themselves by thinking that such actions or thoughts only grow because of such specificities. Actions and thoughts, which adapt, develop and are influenced by the different external contextual conditions of a world in constant movement, always go beyond these conditions and the specific identities of my informants. These take on their different roles (entrepreneurs, Italians, Lombards, and so on) but they are at the same time cosmopolitan subjects with individual desires and they take choices with the same intrinsic capacity of any other human being. In other words, the desires of my informants, their fears and their intellectual abilities might be common to any human being, although the practical solutions they adopt in their working lives could be different from the ones adopted in other places.

Cultural descriptions should not close our vision by producing objectified and stereotyped images of people. We can avoid this closure only by always placing the common human identity above any cultural agency.

Outline of the book

The book is divided into five chapters. **Chapter 1** focuses upon the themes of knowledge and apprenticeship. It starts with a discussion concerning how anthropologists search for, and construct, opportunities of knowing, and how they can learn and collect knowledge that will be useful for their field. My own penetration in the field and my uncertainties are used to discuss this theme as well as to situate myself inside the field. My position and learning is discussed in parallel with my informants' idea of learning and knowing. How do they experience knowledge? How do they find the type of information that will be useful for their job? While apprenticeship and learning are discussed—mine and theirs—both parties move inside their own work fields. These movements lead onto a further discussion about the unpredictability of the process of knowing and the role of relationships, common sense, and creativity in such a process. Finally, the

chapter analyses the role of practical experience as well as the importance of a rounded non-specific knowledge.

Chapter 2 explores the theme of trust. Connecting to the first chapter, I discuss the role of personal relationships and trust in the construction business. I begin with the very personal experience of some of my first encounters with my informants, and I analyse how this trust develops and how it evolves through time and space. In this chapter, as in the previous one about knowledge, I also discuss risk and unpredictability. In doing so, I analyse the situations in which a person can be trusted, and how the trust towards me, towards the employees, and towards the competitors is generated and developed. Many contradictions are underlined and discussed while evidencing the characteristics of the construction and negotiation of trust through time and space. The role that informal relationships and contacts play in the construction of trust is also discussed.

Chapter 3 is titled "Personality" above all because every one of my informants seemed to have a quite striking and strong character. The chapter starts introducing the vision that my informants have of a "good entrepreneur", and what qualities they should possess, or how they should act. While doing so I explore the concept of private and public interest and how business and life, and business and family, are closely related in my informants' view and sometimes their borders are blurred. The chapter continues by questioning personal identities and personality development, and the struggle between individual uniqueness and social roles, between freedom and socio-cultural constraints. Through my fieldwork experiences I discuss the following characteristics which for my informants a good entrepreneur should possess: responsibility, decision-making capacity, practical experience, financial expertise, economic independence, daring, good social skills, and negotiation skills. Some of these characteristics, such as decision-making capacity or economic independence, are directly connected with issues of risk and discourses about the future.

Chapter 4 is connected to and contrasts with chapter 3 because here I explore the fragility of my informants, the fragility of power and also the fragility of our categorisations. If in the previous chapter I was discussing strong traits of personality, I am now disclosing the feeling of fragility that, especially in a period of economic crisis, is often the subject of my informants' discourses. Corruption, political interests, an uncertain legal system, the economic crisis and financial measures, are discussed in correlation with the emotional experiences of my informants. How do they

speak about their fragilities and about the causes of their fragility? Discourses and narratives will be analysed to understand how fragility arises, where it is encountered, and how it is expressed. Emotions such as closeness, senses of powerlessness and fear are also analysed and connected with discourses of risk and future. I also describe how the business is experienced as something personal, and how this influences views of the present and the future.

Chapter 5 studies the process of winning tenders as well as issues related to corruption. The chapter starts with words from a well-known television show, and with a discussion about the media and public discourse about corruption in Italy and in particular inside the construction business. Ideas about corruption and its perceptions are analysed in order then to enter more deeply into the field of construction and explore these phenomena from the inside. I analyse how my informants prepare for a tender competition and how a tender is prepared by the public administration. How do tenders come to be won and how may they be manipulated? In the chapter, the reader will travel from one office to another and listen to the opinions of my informants. He/she will also learn the different tender procedures. In doing so, types of pre- and post-tender manipulation are also explained. I furthermore explore the blurred borders between what is considered to be illegal or not, and what is accepted or not. Answers are often contradictory and they show a complexity hardly explored in the media. Tender procedures seem to be very systematic—as too are the breakages of such procedures. However, the results of awarding tenders as well as the result of their manipulations are not always clear. Ideas about the future and on how reality is faced everyday are explored.

The **Conclusion** brings together the main points analysed in the chapters. It explains what is important to remember from this study about the entrepreneurs of the construction business in Lombardy. It shows what we have learnt from their ways of finding knowledge and information, from their relationships and the way they trust, from the way their personality is constructed, from how they feel fragile and from how they face uncertainty and risk in their job. However, I try to leave an open-ended argument in order to overcome a reduction of the rich, multiple and contradictory aspects of my informants' business lives analysed in the book, and in order not to limit my informants' voices to my single line of reasoning and voice.

CHAPTER ONE

KNOWLEDGE: SIMILARITIES BETWEEN BUSINESS AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropological knowledge versus business knowledge

When I first thought about my fieldwork, how to approach people, what to explain to them about my research, I was doubtful. My questions to myself were: What kind of knowledge am I searching for? What would be interesting and useful for my research and for my future writing? What do I really want to understand from these people that would be interesting for anthropology or for more general knowledge?

If I had to answer all of these questions precisely before moving on with my research, I would have surely paralysed it. The answer from more experienced colleagues was: "Just go and be open to everything, and go where the field leads you. You do not have to look for something specific, you should remain open because, at the end, maybe you will find something much more interesting and surprising." "Furthermore, if you focus too much on something you would probably find it; but would it really be the most interesting or important thing to talk about? Maybe you can find that something that you did not imagine beforehand is in fact more important or interesting."

I tried to keep faithful and remain open to knowledge and contacts. And what I discovered is that this, too, is exactly what my informants do every day in their job. They do not really know at any one time if the things that they listen to will be interesting for their job, but many times they need to go and listen anyway.

My job and my search for knowledge are, in fact, very similar to the job and the search of my informants. For both of us, information means opportunity; opportunity to keep our job and to be successful. Anthropology is about knowledge, and about how to know, as it is for my informants.

Humans might have different understandings of the world but they know through similar processes (Toren 1999), and my informants seem to know and move in their social realms in the same way that I try to know and move in my social realm. Herzfeld (2007, 107) argues that there is a similarity between university students and artisanal apprenticeship. I argue that there is a similarity between anthropologists and entrepreneurs because we both have corresponding ways of searching for knowledge.

What sort of knowledge do they need in order to make money, and what sort of knowledge do I need to feel I know about them and about the business? "You should know a bit of everything", one of my informants told me.

Often people were trying to understand my knowledge, and how to use anthropology and me in their job, just as I was trying to understand their knowledge and the world they lived in. My informants are used to speaking with different people, and they are used to trying to ascertain how a person or some information could help their job. That is what they were doing with me all the time. Here is a small account in which, Luca, one of my informants takes advantage of some free time to discuss anthropology with me and tries to find links and uses for his business:

> The street is full of cars double parked and all over the sidewalk. The bar-restaurant must be crowded. Luca is nervously turning his head left and right to find a small spot to place his big car. A few minutes and lot of manoeuvring and he resolves on parking in a double row. There is no time to wait for a more convenient parking space and no desire to change place. Luca decided that the restaurant he already knew was the most convenient for the location and for the good quality of the lunch deals. He glances at the waiter, and we go straight to a free table. We sit and open the menu without hesitation. We will first order, then, we can relax and chat. The waiter arrives and asks for drinks: "Wine?" Luca rapidly asks me. I am unprepared, but after few seconds of hesitation, I refuse the offer. Luca explains that, when he can, he likes to treat himself. A good meal goes with a glass of good wine. I go to the toilet and when I come back Luca is at his computer checking the emails. Then, the food arrives, he closes his laptop, his face relaxes, and I see that he is ready to enjoy the food and my company.

> In the car, Luca usually complains about the crisis, about the small entrepreneurs and their big difficulties, about banks or politics. Now, he seems more relaxed and willing to listen to me, to my questions, but not only that: he is interested in my work. What can anthropology do in general? And what can my work do? How can a dialogue between the construction business and anthropology bring some advantage to his field?
>
> The more I speak, the more I can see that ideas build in his mind. He is always trying to relate the most general concepts to very practical applications. I can see that he is reflecting on my explanations, and through his subsequent questions I see that he is already pushing forward the concepts. However, he waits for my agreement to see if his understanding is correct, and if his ideas could be applicable.
>
> We reflect on the possible developments of cities through the study of territorial needs and of the persons living in an area; this could bring a better design of the cities, but also a good business prospect. Then, we discuss my project, and how it could help bring the entrepreneurs a better understanding of the actual situation, and possible ways out of this difficult period. Luca is now satisfied: he foresees something very interesting and positive in the work I am proposing.

Luca, as well as many other informants, often asks for my opinion about things, about meetings, about people. Most of the time, he already has an idea about them, but he is genuinely curious about my perspective on things. I learn through my informants and they learn through me.

Sometimes, there is curiosity about what my research can bring to the field, and about how anthropology can somehow be used for a better understanding of the work. There is a hope in many of my informants that I will make a good use of the information I collect, and help improve their field. But most of all, there is an attempt to capture some of my knowledge in order to find a very practical and immediate help in an understanding of daily problems and activities: