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**The Politics of Pity and the Ethos of Compassion:
Morals, Prices and Emotions in the Art of Selling a Street Paper**

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Setting the stage¹

A brief history of *La Bussola*

The street paper *La Bussola* was born in Borgo – a city from North-Centre Italy of around 800.000 inhabitants- in 1994 after the success of another street paper in a neighbouring city. Massimiliano, at the time a young social worker at a council-sponsored shelter for homeless people, suggested to the social workers, volunteers and homeless people in the shelter that they carry out a similar project. Recalling the beginnings of the paper, Massimiliano, the paper's director from then on, says that 'it looked like every single homeless person in Borgo wanted to be part of *La Bussola*.'

There were 9 non-homeless volunteers and around 20 homeless people forming the association *Radici* when it was founded in 1994. This civic association serves as the legal platform from which the street paper *La Bussola* was launched in July 1994.² The association counted on an initial allowance of half a million lire granted by the trade union CGIL in order to initiate the project.

The editorial and administrative office of *La Bussola* is also the head office of the *Italian Federation of Street Papers* to which the street papers of four Italian cities belong. These papers have some distinctive elements in comparison with other street papers: First of all, the non-homeless volunteers and the homeless vendors themselves write the paper. Secondly, their contents focus almost exclusively on social and economic exclusion. They contrast in both aspects with another type of street paper, for instance, the one from Milan, where professional journalists write about a variety of topics in addition to social exclusion.³

The newsroom of *La Bussola* is located in a two-storey building made of concrete, where the association rents a room from the town council. Other associations occupy the rest of the building. As of June 2000, the paper had 10 vendors. Eight out of these ten vendors distribute the paper on the streets in order to gain their living. The other two, Michaela and Edoardo, sell it exclusively to family and friends. Both of them, though not homeless themselves, live in conditions of severe poverty and suffer from serious psychiatric problems.

The routine organization relies on weekly meetings with all the people working on the paper in order to decide what to publish, discuss how the selling is going, etc. The number of vendors actually going to the meetings is extremely low (around four on average). According to the old-timers, the degree of participation has fallen considerably in comparison with the beginnings. For the most part the leading voice has been left to the

non-homeless volunteers: Massimiliano and Isabella, a retired nurse now devoted full time to the paper as its coordinator.

Together with this low attendance to regular meetings, the turnover of the vendors is very high. Those who stay are few. Francesco is one of them. He is a Southern Italian in his fifties who lost his job at a pharmaceutical warehouse seven years ago. Without much savings, he could not keep paying the monthly rent on his apartment, and decided to try his luck in Borgo. After several months sleeping in the streets, he started selling the paper and finally found a place to rent with other colleagues. His full commitment to the paper has made him its informal secretary. Talking about the high turnover of vendors, Francesco explained to me that many people subvert the objective of the paper (which is, he told me, 'to be a point of departure' for reconstructing one's life out of the street, as he himself has done), and use it merely as an instrument for making some fast money. The number of volunteers has equally decreased greatly in comparison with the beginnings: From nine to three: Massimiliano, Isabella and the recent incorporation of Sonia, a trainee social worker. Of them only Isabella has a daily involvement in the routines of the organization. Massimiliano writes most of the editorials, but barely sets foot in the office.⁴

As to the selling, the association operates as follows. The would-be vendor has a meeting with Isabella. She explains what the paper is about, the demarcation of selling areas in the city, and the main lines guiding the selling – chiefly, not bothering the passers-by and selling the paper with an open offering formula, starting from the 1000 lire the vendors pay to the association for each paper. As the vendor presumably has no money at all, the association advances them 15 copies.

Finally, apart from the production and selling of the paper, the association can take the necessary steps to obtain residence ID cards for those homeless people asking for one at the paper's head office. Together with other voluntary associations, *La Bussola* acts as a mediator between the applicant and the town council and offers the address of the association as the 'recapito' (whereabouts) for these people. However, at the beginning of year 2000 the town council suspended this prerogative to all altruistic associations as a reaction to concerns over immigration in the city, as we will explain in the section on status.

Section I: The politics of pity

Introduction: Why a politics of pity for *La Bussola*?

In this section I will incorporate some of the arguments that French sociologist Luc Boltanski presents in his book *Distant Suffering* (1999) in order to understand the contents of *La Bussola*. Drawing on Hannah Arendt (1990), Boltanski starts out his reflection on reactions to the images and knowledge of distant suffering of others by setting a series of conditions for a politics of pity to exist. Firstly, there has to be a net difference between those who suffer and those who do not. Secondly, because they are physically distant, seeing and looking are stressed over action.⁵ That is why we can talk of a ‘spectacle of suffering.’ Thirdly, politics generalizes; it does not stop on an individual case. At the same time, however, a politics of pity cannot lose sight of specific cases or it becomes deprived of emotions.

In relation to Boltanski’s schema, *La Bussola* has some special characteristics. Firstly, the paper concerns a spectacle quite close to the reader: the economically and socially excluded of his or her own city. Besides, and more importantly, this spectacle is partially presented by the unfortunates themselves, who write most of its contents together with the non-homeless volunteers Massimiliano and Isabella.

In spite of the paper’s special characteristics, I still argue that the *La Bussola* deals with distant suffering for the following reasons: Firstly, the paper is a medium that objectifies the unfortunate’s reflection on him or herself. Thus, he or she becomes a spectator of his or her own misfortunes. Secondly, for the fortunate reader that does not suffer the hardships of homelessness, the suffering conveyed in the paper’s contents is a ‘spectacle’ in Boltanski’s sense. Thirdly, when there is no distance at all between the fortunate and the unfortunate, then these situations consist of the selling of the paper. Therefore, they are not within the frame of politics, but within the frame of what I call the ‘ethos of compassion.’

Following Boltanski’s usage of the (partially replaceable) terms ‘pity’ and ‘compassion,’ in my presentation pity will be confined to the realm of politics and generalization. As to the concreteness of local action and immediate suffering, I will use the term ‘compassion.’ In linking ‘politics’ with ‘pity,’ Arendt was building on the connection that there is between pity and justice. In fact, contrary to its present-day pejorative connotations,⁶ in its philosophical treatment ‘pity has been associated with the undeserved character of a misfortune’ (Nussbaum, 2001: 301). Instead, Nussbaum continues, compassion is blind to the undeserving or deserving nature of the suffering: it suffices that there is suffering. As we will see throughout my presentation, a politics of pity prompts thinking and acting that are based on ideas of rights and justice, whereas the ethos of

compassion is prompted by the (more or less denied) recognition of inferiority (either economic, social, moral or all of them simultaneously) and by notions of care (and possible condescension).⁷

The position of *La Bussola* within the social field of altruistic organizations

La Bussola is a form of organized civic action in the world of the socially and economically most excluded population of Borgo.⁸ To a large extent, the local administration leaves the management of social marginality to the initiative of private civic associations (as we will see in the third section of this article, not having legal residence precludes the homeless person, among other things, from having access to a social worker). Apart from *La Bussola*, these civic associations are mainly religious or of religious inspiration. Essentially, their action consists in the sharing out of food and clothing among the most needy in the streets of the city.⁹

The birth of *La Bussola* in 1994 created a new division within the social field of altruistic civic associations in Borgo. As a matter of fact, the paper was founded with the explicit intention of breaking away from the pre-existing assistentialist line of action. The means of the departure were twofold: Firstly, there was a discursive departure enacted in its pages by using the topic of denunciation against the town council and these other associations. Secondly, *La Bussola* set up a different kind of relationship between the benefactor and the unfortunate, creating a ‘self-management’ role for the needy person. This role opposes the passive stance imposed on the homeless by more immediate forms of help, such as the abovementioned sharing out of food and clothing.¹⁰

Snapshot I: *La Bussola* foundation against welfarist aid-culture (‘assistenzialismo’).

What follows is an excerpt from the brochure of the Italian Federation of Street Papers, with its head office at the administrative office of *La Bussola*.

We have moved away from welfarism to build another sort of existence, a place we run ourselves, another sort of movement and meeting, a voice coming from below, something living to build yourself a future, a way to claim your rights: a home, a job, health, participation = citizenship rights.

This excerpt gives us an introduction to the connection that the topic of denunciation, one of the ways in which to express the ‘politics of pity’ in discursive form, establishes with what Boltanski calls ‘the metaphysics of justice’: It is a discourse based on intrinsic rights and the opposition between justice on the one hand, and charity on the other.

A brief note on contents: Examples from the issue of April/May 2000¹¹

Each issue of the paper has 12 pages, with the following regular sections: work related articles (for the most part concerned with the lack of safety in the work place and unemployment), jail,¹² the city (with articles usually

dealing with the city's high and abusive rentals, and with the town council's failure to make use of unoccupied buildings), personal stories of homeless people, poetry and letters to the director.

La Bussola's construction of a politics of pity

La Bussola produces a generalizing discourse on suffering that simultaneously resorts to specific but 'exemplary' instances of misfortune. Without the latter, the politics of pity would be 'emotionally ineffective' in the transmission of moral sentiments – which are mostly sympathy for the unfortunate and the benefactor, and indignation against the evildoer. These sentiments, Boltanski argues, are indispensable for pity. The contents of *La Bussola* manage the tension between generalization and the singling out of specific cases in three ways (that follow to the letter Boltanski's presentation, to my initial surprise. See Boltanski, 1999: 12):¹³

a) Accumulating examples: *La Bussola* does so routinely in every issue. The issue of April/May 2000 offers an example of this narrative in the section *Inside the Cage*. In this issue of *La Bussola* its contents are for the most part dedicated to the death penalty. It includes the story of a US prisoner executed in 1999, and a letter by another US prisoner currently on the death row. Then there is a whole page illustrating the Italian situation. A section of the page starts by remembering that the death penalty no longer exists in Italy. However, below this article there is a list of six recent deaths in Italian prisons, and 'the list can continue, and now... are we sure that in Italy there is no death penalty?' (emphasis added).

b) Providing 'exemplary' cases. In the section *Storie*, Pietro, an old-time homeless vendor and writer of the paper from Naples in his fifties, writes two articles. He starts out the first one by stating that his story is singular, but it is 'none the less *exemplary* ... It is he, but it could be someone else' (Boltanski, 1999: 12. His emphasis). Pietro makes this point as follows: 'finding yourself on the street takes nothing at all. It was all because of losing a job...' (emphasis added).

c) Avoiding 'the communitarian pitfall.' That is, clarifying that there is no pre-existing communitarian tie or interest in the benefactor's concern for the unfortunate. The front-page editorial entitled 'It's nobody's fault' reads succinctly: 'the names of the main characters can be Mohamed, Salim, Dragana, but also Mario, Gino or Anna. Italians, immigrants with and without visa , people without a job from every possible background and nationality' (emphasis added).

The topic of denunciation

My argument is that the contents of *La Bussola* form a discourse organized around what Boltanski calls the topic of denunciation and accusation. Denunciation implies the description of someone's ill treatment of the unfortunate; accusation reveals the guilty party's dissimulated actions and intentions. Moreover, as above-mentioned, both denunciation and accusation are spelled out within the overall framework of a 'metaphysics of justice.' This metaphysics works by unravelling objective proofs for the identification of moral responsibility in the guilty party. 'Moral responsibility,' says Boltanski, 'belongs first and foremost to the person who caused the suffering [*active responsibility*], [*but*] it can also be imputed to the person who knew about it but did nothing to prevent it [*passive responsibility, omission*]' (Boltanski, 1999: 13-14).

'J'Accuse': The semantics of moral responsibility in *La Bussola*

a) Indifference as passive responsibility: Society at large

In *La Bussola*, denunciations are generally directed towards society at large and macro-historical events such as globalization or modernization. The vagueness of these subjects makes accusations rather difficult and fragile.¹⁴ The title of the front-page editorial of the April/May 2000 issue embeds a denunciation in these lines: 'It's nobody's fault.' Then the editorial starts out by pointing to recurrent fire-related accidents in which homeless people die during the winter. The victims are

unemployed, from every background ... products of globalization, and in Borgo like elsewhere, all they [*the establishment*] do is 'clear them out' (gets votes, so they say) ... It's nobody's fault. It's things that happen, 'accidents' ... If it's not the 'accident,' then it's little groups of fascist kids ... or that boss in Northern Italy who burned the immigrant worker who asked for a rise (under the counter). (Emphasis added).

b) Hidden economic goals vs. the common good: The town council

The previous excerpt let us see also how a form of 'weak' accusation is launched against the town council: While the town council's overt purpose is to serve the common good (it is supposed to be 'the Mayor of all' as Massimiliano points out ironically further on in another article of the same issue,¹⁵ it really acts on the basis of interested actions and intentions proper to the political game ('... gets votes, so they say').

Later on, in the 'City' section of the paper, the statements against the town council take on a more specific form as accusations. They deepen the idea according to which there are economic interests behind the supposed commitment of the government to the public good:

... the strategy [*of the town council's housing policy*] is to help offer the speculative market ever-growing ranks of people without the right to a dwelling ... Self-recovery, offered as a practical, serious, responsible offer by the homeless to the administration, stays in the dreams of so many people, and in the bottom drawers of the town officials: it's too logical, and gives too little profit, so for the supporters of 'modernization' it won't do (emphasis added).

Another article in the same page concludes by saying that 'the wish to bring back abandoned places so the citizens can use them ... is challenged ambiguously by the power lobbies that run the city of Borgo.' (my emphasis)

This accusatory discourse brings passive responsibility (a real alternative for the sake of the common good 'stays ... in the bottom drawers of the town officials') together with active responsibility (the alternative 'is challenged ... by the power lobbies that run the city of Borgo').

c) The Wrong in the Good: welfarist civic associations

The discourse on welfarist civic associations highlights the wrongdoings stemming from apparent good intentions that are, ultimately, pernicious. The following excerpt belongs to an editorial titled 'we're not asking for handouts' published on the front page of the first issue of *La Bussola* published in 1994:

... who are we? we're the people you offer a bun or a coffee to at the street corner! we're druggies, drunks, mad, even thieves. No, maybe not thieves. It's society that's stealing our lives! How's it stealing our lives? Very easy: giving us a bun and offering us coffee! That's the reason for this paper: we don't want handouts, just understanding and human warmth.

Yet, it must be said that the topic of denunciation against other associations, unlike that against local government or society at large, is almost exclusively confined to the birth of the paper, that is, to its placement in the social field of voluntary organizations. In fact, other associations are both 'opponents' and 'colleagues' with whom constant confrontation must give ground to more diplomatic relations. On the other hand, as it will be argued below, the degree of harshness of the discourse on other associations depends largely on the actual and practical relationship one has with them (as we shall see on the section 'Who's talking?'). Therefore, it is largely qualified by those members of *La Bussola* – for the most part the homeless members- who have to resort to their aid.

d) The world as deceiving theatre: Town council, associations and the limits of charity

Finally, in his second article in the section of the paper entitled *Storie*, Pietro denounces and accuses moral actors (chiefly other voluntary associations) for speculating about the situation of the homeless population. His narrative trope is that of the social world as deceiving theatre:¹⁶ ‘So it’s as if we’re on a stage, and the one that acts best will be the actor the institutions favour; those who don’t act well, unconsciously, will have the right to live officially denied.’

In the same article, Pietro comments on the sometimes rather brutal limits that there are to practical action as conveyed by welfarist voluntary associations that share out food and clothes in the train station: ‘Homes for bums? whatever for? They, they’ve already got a house, quite de-luxe too, there it is over there’ [*referring to the train station*] smiles the voluntary worker bitterly, handing over a sleeping bag for each of us adding: ‘we’ve done the possible, miracles have to wait.’¹⁷

Who’s talking: Qualifying the topic of denunciation

In order to understand fairly this interplay of voices, we must address the issue of who is talking. In fact, it has to be said that the topic of denunciation is particularly promoted by the more politicized persons in the office. Most of the editorials are written by Massimiliano, the director, who somehow plays the role of ‘advanced consciousness.’ Accusations are significantly toned down by a good number of the homeless, who, by virtue of their practical relationship with other voluntary groups, moderate the topic of denunciation (and the corresponding indignation) against welfarist voluntary associations and combine it with recognition and gratitude.¹⁸ For example, during one meeting at the paper office, Michaela, a 40 year old woman who sells the paper to acquaintances and to the psychiatric personnel who is taking care of her, silenced Massimiliano’s and Isabella’s overt criticism against one welfarist association by saying that ‘*Solidarietà e Carità* does a lot of good.’ This positive evaluation of *Solidarietà e Carità* (the main association sharing out food and clothing in the city) was further confirmed to me by other vendors.

Section II: The ethos of compassion

The ‘politics of pity’ of *La Bussola* finds its limits in the moment a paper is sold. This is a social occasion whereby the distance between unfortunate and fortunate (in this case the occasional passer-by) is annulled by their facing each other. Consequently the selling places us in the realm of local action, as opposed to the generalization of the realm of politics.

Open offering: The framing of the buying

The first thing to know about the selling of the paper is that *La Bussola* is a special type of product due to its price-formation process. Unlike most products in modern commercial society (including all other papers), *La Bussola* is sold with the ‘open offering’ formula. ‘A copy of the paper costs to he who writes and sells it 1,000 lire ... the offering is open’ reads the paper at the bottom of its front page. It is in this detail that the exchange of the paper requires a special kind of framing. First of all, the buyer is asked to do something rather uncommon in most everyday exchanges: to estimate for her or himself the price of the product. This fact, on the one hand, separates the selling of the paper from the most common class of occasions in which we give money in exchange for a product: the class of commercial exchanges. On the other hand, the fact of receiving a paper from a homeless person also differentiates this exchange for the most common class of occasions in which we give money to such persons: begging, a extremely hierarchical version of gift-giving.¹⁹ In short, the social occasion whereby the paper is sold and bought is a special type of exchange. It is neither a commercial exchange nor a gift exchange, but it lies somehow in-between.²⁰

Furthermore, faced with the open offering, the buyer is required to avoid ‘misreading’ the buying of the paper as a pure commercial exchange or as a pure gift exchange. Isabella, the paper’s coordinator, explains this point as follows:

The open offering was chosen because it was a way to give the citizens a responsibility, in a way, and involve them more. That is, not to impose it, no? There had to be the, the person buying the paper that had to feel a commitment, according to their possibilities of helping the person or not, no? Not a set price. ‘I make this product, and I’m offering it to you. Obviously I have to earn something from it, but it’s up to you to decide how much it’s worth’ [*she said imitating a hypothetical and informative vendor of La Bussola*], no? That’s practically what we counted on at the start.

Snapshot II: Selling the paper

Walter setting the price.

Walter is currently the youngest vendor of *La Bussola*: He is 27 years old. He was born in a small village in the periphery of Turin. His father was a hawker from Southern Italy. Walter left his hometown and family a couple of years ago. He started travelling with a group of friends throughout Italy, busking, begging, etc. When the group split up, Walter stayed in Borgo. He started selling the paper and squatting in different abandoned houses.

Daniel: You've told me there's no minimum price, if they give you 1,500 lire you accept it

Walter: No, I accept ... it depends on... Sometimes it happens that I stop a girl, she gives me a thousand lire and I say: 'come on, make me smile a bit, a thousand lire, don't you have a couple of thousand more to give me?' And usually they do Sometimes you get the sticky kind who give 1,500 lire, so I take it ... That's not the problem.

Salvatore setting the price and giving the paper as a gift

Salvatore was born into a relatively well-to-do family from Naples. Yet Salvatore's father and uncles could not keep the grandfather's shoemaker's workshop and they went bankrupt. After immigrating to North-Central Italy, his father died. Salvatore left home and found himself in the streets of Rome. There he started collaborating for a religious community where he stayed for seven years until a change in the direction caused him to leave. He moved to Borgo and started selling *La Bussola*. Now he rents a room and works for a building cooperative. He still sells *La Bussola* because of his commitment to the association, to make some extra money and because it helps him fight his betting habit in horse racing.

Salvatore: Some people give five, some more, some a thousand lire, some two thousand, it DEPENDS²¹ also on what possibilities the people buying *La Bussola* have

Daniel: You never haggle over the price?

Salvatore: Never. Absolutely. When they ask me 'how much do I owe you?' I say: 'Up to you, madam' ... I [*interruption*] or rather, when sometimes, when they give me ten, I say: 'do you need the change, madam?' But the ones that give me ten right away, I know, they don't want me to... [*laughs*].

Daniel: If they give you a thousand lire you still accept? The minimum price?

Salvatore: Yes. I never hold back, if only to spread *La Bussola*, to get it known. Even if [*interruption*]... sometimes I've given it AWAY.

Daniel: How come, in what sort of situation?

Salvatore: A boy coming along, look like a student, he said: 'listen, I don't have a lira, will you give me a paper?' 'Yes.'

Daniel: So you gave it away?

Salvatore: Yes.

Therefore, the buyer has to take into account some elements that are normally and comfortably outside the frame of commercial exchanges. The first thing one has to frame is the personal difficult situation of the vendor, which implies, I argue, the implicit entering within an ethos of compassion. If the buyer fails to do so, he or she might flee or start looking for spare coins. Carlotta, the vendor at the train station, illustrates this situation vividly.

When I see rich people, with a leather wallet, looking for change to make two thousand lire, because they think where its written 'year 2000' that means the paper costs 2,000 lire, and maybe they give me 1,900 saying they don't have the other hundred ... I'm quite categorical: 'no madam, I can't give you the paper for two thousand lire.' And then I look at them with contempt and say: 'if you want to give me [*the money*] as an offering, I'll go and drink a coffee to your health, but not the paper'. I take the two thousand, go and have the coffee, [*but*] I don't give them the paper.

As Carlotta shows, in the face of the buyer's incorrect framing, the vendor can blatantly refuse the exchange, or accept literally the charity money without subsequently giving the paper in exchange. In the latter case, the sale of the paper has been reduced to a form of gift exchange. As we have previously seen with the case of Salvatore, there is yet another way in which the selling can be transformed into a gift exchange: The vendor may turn the selling in a gift exchange by giving the paper for free in order to communicate what the correct framing of the exchange is.

The ethos of compassion

Now let us see how and why the exchange relies on the ethos of compassion. Goffman claimed that each class of social occasions has a distinctive ethos and emotional structure (Goffman, 1980: 19). Drawing on Gregory Bateson, Goffman worked with the hypothesis that the ethos of an encounter consists in a standardized system of emotional attitudes. Goffman further argues that it is this ethos that gives a sense of the thing participants are doing. In practical terms, the ethos of an encounter may consist, for instance, in serious vs. light-hearted attitudes or sincere vs. cynical talk (ibid.: 97).

In order to determine what type of ethos frames the selling of a street paper, one possibility is to think of a (Western) prototype of encounter with the unfortunate, i.e., the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan. By doing this, Boltanski concludes that moral action towards the unfortunate is performed under the frame of compassion (Boltanski, 1999: 7-11). I take from this the working hypothesis that compassion forms the ethos of moral action in the face of local and immediate suffering.

Of course, compassion can be rejected, as the two travellers that passed by before the Good Samaritan stopped. The refusal takes shape by 'fleeing.' The following Snapshot illustrates how 'fleeing' can be done in a single gesture:²²

Snapshot III: Freezing compassion

Daniel: Once you told me about a priest ...

Walter: Bloody hell! ... a priest ... looked at me with a glare! wickedly, indifferently, hypocritically, false ... And went off. That is, he ... froze me with a gesture, understand? And I flew off the handle and went: 'but you're not a priest, you're the devil. You eat in church, don't you? You sleep in church, don't you? You're afraid of being outside the church, aren't you? You're afraid of what's around you, aren't you? And for fear of starting something you shut yourself up in that black mask, fine! ha ha.' He looked at me, get it? He stared me down with his eyes: he went pale and ran off. He'd found ... he'd found someone that answered back, that said something interesting. It hurt him, see? Me, someone like that doesn't hurt me, since I'm sure of myself ... I'm sure of myself.²³ (emphasis added).

Refusal can also materialize not as flight but rather with the fortunate justifying himself or herself. This is what happened one afternoon I was with Carlotta while she was selling the paper. Carlotta is a woman in her sixties from Calabria, in Southern Italy. For reasons nobody knows she left her hometown and arrived at the train station in Borgo. There she stayed begging for five years, until she started selling the paper three years ago. The following example illustrates Carlotta's typical way of breaking 'civic inattention' (Goffman, 1980) and drawing people's attention in order to sell the paper. On this occasion the object of her overture was a young woman in her thirties who was waiting for her train to Rome. As usual, Carlotta curved her back slightly to one side of the would-be buyer, thus catching the latter's attention. Then she asked with a smile 'Are you interested in people with no fixed abode?' The woman took a couple of seconds to react and then, returning the smile, said: 'look, my mother is always with you. I have to rush now to Rome for work,' and continued explaining that her mother volunteers in one of the major charitable associations in the city. Carlotta tried to guess who her mother was and they kept talking for a while until Carlotta decided to continue wandering through the station with her papers.

Conclusion

In short, my hypothesis is that the successful performance of the selling of the paper relies on an ethos of compassion. Compassion means literally 'to suffer with.' Correspondingly, the selling of the paper proceeds by engaging the passer-by's attention (the would-be buyer) with the vendor's social suffering. As we will see, there are different ways, more or less overt, of doing so. Nevertheless, however it is done, the vendor calls the attention of the passer-by to his or her suffering.

Snapshot IV: Francesco silently calling the attention of the passer-by

Daniel: I wanted to ask you about how you approach people.

Francesco: It depends on the person, some people do the shops [*i.e. they try to sell the paper inside shops and bars*]. I've never done the shops, and I never will ... because ... not only, if there's a customer, you can't go disturbing him. But then if you go into a shop and the first person says 'no,' that's enough, I'm blocked. So I stand there, they see me there [*he stands still in the street with the paper in one hand silently*]. One day I was standing there in Via Cavour. It was eight in the morning, since at eight they start going to school. At a certain point a man comes along. He says, he goes: 'listen, you've convinced me.' I looked at him and I say: 'what of?' He says: 'selling that paper. Tell me what it is ... I've seen you here punctually every morning: eight, quarter past ... I've seen you for seven days.' He said: 'you've persuaded me to buy this paper.' I explained to him what it is, how it is, [*and*] he became a customer. (emphasis added).

Collective misrecognition and face-work

My line of reasoning then is that the exchange between the buyer and the vendor occurs within the implicit framing of an ethos of compassion. In other words, compassion is the spirit of the occasion. And yet the overall aim of *La Bussola* as an organization is to help homeless people move away from compassion-related forms of care. *La Bussola* stands as an alternative to the latter, enabling the homeless vendor to gain his or her income in the course of equal exchanges with non-homeless members of society. However, my argument goes, it is in this detail that a non-equal relationship between the homeless and the non-homeless is reproduced: firstly, the fact of selling a street paper signals one as an unfortunate. Secondly, whether a passer-by interacts with an unfortunate or not depends, at least in part, on his or her moral appreciation of the situation. If the passer-by does interact with the unfortunate, such an interaction will be a helping behaviour driven by compassion (at least in part, again). This point merely means that helping an unfortunate implies understanding his or her suffering and/or sympathizing with it. In other words, engaging in a social encounter with an unfortunate has an inescapable moral dimension to it that is best described, I argue, as com-*passion*. Thirdly, the fact that the paper does not have a fixed price reinforces the fact that this is not a mere commercial exchange, but also a moral one.²⁴ And yet, the official agenda of *La Bussola* is the avoidance of asymmetrical relationships in which there is a benefactor and a victim. Consequently, those vendors that fully subscribe to this vision of *La Bussola* (who, during the period of my fieldwork in the paper, were Pietro, Francesco and Salvatore) have an uneasy relationship between this explicit agenda (the 'politics of pity' and its underlying 'metaphysics of justice') and their practical experience when selling the paper (characterized by the 'ethos of compassion'). On the contrary, those vendors who do not take that seriously the political programme of the organization (as we will see in the cases of Giuseppe and Carlotta) have no problem in weaving together the compassion-based

selling of the paper with the ‘self-management’ role that *La Bussola* proposes for them.

Bourdieu’s concept of ‘misrecognition’ helps us capture the uneasy experience of the first group of vendors. Their proud allegiance to the anti-compassionate approach to helping the homeless that the organization has, co-exists with the practice of selling the paper by means of their ‘doxic belief’ in the compassion-free nature of the exchange.²⁵ Doxic beliefs, in contrast with reflexive beliefs, are embodied literally in practice. In the case at hand, the belief in the compassion-free nature of the exchange is accomplished by the vendors’ maintenance of their personal front (just as non-homeless people do. See Goffman, 1973).²⁶ Other strategies or practical resources underpinning this misrecognition is Pietro’s, Francesco’s and Salvatore’s insistence on not breaking civic inattention, on remaining still and quiet, and on not selling inside shops or bars.

Francesco makes explicit this doxic belief that is embedded in his ‘face work’ by commenting on those vendors who do not make an effort to keep up their personal front. In so doing,

people think it’s a tramp’s paper and, if that’s the way you look, obviously they’re right. But if you go along dressed not well [*but*] clean, you give a different picture, a different view to the person coming along to buy the paper. They stop to speak to you, not to ask if you need something. With me they stop and talk about anything. I talk about sport, politics, about [*interruption*] OK? That is, like a normal person [*Salvatore, also present in this conversation, says ‘normal’ together with Francesco*]. It’s not that they stop and talk to me because I’ve got a long beard, to say some comforting words. Ay... it’s all these details that... [*he leaves the phrase unfinished*] (my emphasis).

Moreover, face work is not only a ‘doxic belief’ on the compassion-free nature of the exchange, but also an attempt to practically ward off miserabilism, one possible ‘drift’ (to use Grignon’s and Passeron’s term) of the ethos of compassion. Miserabilism can lie either in the vendors’ way of selling or in the gaze of the passer-by. Indeed, in this case miserabilism consists in the ultimate reduction of the unfortunate to ‘the passive state of hapless victim.’²⁷ Thus, it clashes with the self-management role the unfortunate gains, or is supposed to gain, by selling the paper. As Isabella states (using the now current pejorative connotations of ‘pity’):

The pitying goes away by itself when you bring out the values of these people, that they don’t need your pity. In fact, their whole fight is not to have pity, no? Most of them because they still have that deep sense of dignity, for what they’ve gone through, for the wounds they’ve got inside, no? They don’t want, in fact they get indignant, just because pity’s one of the ugliest things you can do to another person, I think, no? So if someone values what’s in that person, and there’s a lot to

value, then you don't start pitying. Those who start pitying, that means they've not understood a thing, and say: 'Poor things, there's nothing to do, forget it,' no?

Francesco makes the same point as follows (though he uses the word 'compassion,' the same pejorative connotations that 'pity' had for Isabella come up):

Our paper has life stories written by the various distributors, not in order to move, to move people, but to show that each of us has a story behind them, had not chosen to go on the streets. It's important to recall these things, okay? Right? Since maybe I'll write my life story and, to get, to get, to have some compassion. [Then] he [*a hypothetical reader of the paper*] says: 'Look, poor guy, he's lost his job.' No! I'm writing my story to make you understand that you could lose your job too.²⁸ (emphasis added).

There are two aspects to Isabella's and Francesco's statements. On the one hand, there is a sanction against miserabilism in the eye of the spectator and, at the same time, in the vendor's practice. In fact, as we will see below with the case of Giuseppe, some vendors can occasionally use miserabilism as a 'selling technique' or compassion-forming device.

Yet, on the other hand, Francesco's denial of compassion has more to do with a detached reflection on the selling, rather than with the actual practice of selling the paper. In point of fact, even the vendors most concerned about guarding against any compassion felt for them by the buyers, have to confront this ethos when actually selling the paper. Let me try and make this point more clear as follows: The vendor unwittingly re-enacts the framing of compassion in his or her praxis, mainly by the paper's displaying that he or she is a person in extreme economic necessity. At the same time, I have argued, the vendor can practically misrecognize the ethos of compassion by his or her way of selling.

Shame-eliciting compassion

For vendors like Pietro, Francesco and Salvatore, the act of selling the paper is a potentially shame-eliciting social event.²⁹ Occasions in which the passer-by buys the same issue twice gives us privileged access to the implicit ethos of compassion.³⁰ This happens regularly whenever the new issue is delayed, or the current one is a two-monthly issue. Then, buying the paper, Francesco recognizes

may be, it is a sort of handout, of, of assistance, but he tells you [*the sensitive buyer*], he says: 'Look, I've already got the paper.' I don't say 'no' to them! I repeat, I don't say to them [*interrupting the phrase*], but it bothers me [*shame cognate*]. It's not that I tell them 'no.' It's hard to have to say it. But you feel a bit, at least I do!, I feel a bit embarrassed [*shame cognate*]. 'OK, thanks for the

coffee,' I answer, but it is a bit annoying [*shame cognate*] (emphasis added).

The deference ritual: Euphemization of charity

Another practical resource that helps produce the collective misrecognition of the ethos of compassion is the buyer's euphemization of charity, of his or her helping action (which 'may be, it is a sort of handout, of, of assistance,' as Francesco said). If they correctly frame the exchange, buyers act as if they were not helping out the unfortunate. They anticipate the vendors' shame³¹ in receiving charity ('but he tells you, he says: "look, I've already got the paper"'). In other words, the buyer takes into account the demeaning danger (Goffman, 1956) that charity contains for the unfortunate's self-image (Douglas, 1990: ix). Isabella comments on this by saying that

some of the people are very sensitive and then they say 'I've got it already, but I'll give it to a friend' [*short laugh*]; that may even be true, or it may be from delicacy [*deference cognate*], not to show they're giving a handout [*euphemism cognate*] (emphasis added).

Denouncing the strategic seeking out of the ethos of compassion

However fragile the euphemisms and the resulting collective misrecognition be, the ethos of compassion has to remain unspoken. One key aspect sustaining this realm of the unsaid is the fact that the vendor must not have the intention to move the buyer. When one has this intention, or is liable of being accused of it on the basis of his or her behaviour (by other vendors or by the non-homeless volunteers of *La Bussola*), then the only thing that remains is a beggar receiving charity.

In this regard, some of the vendors of *La Bussola* (in particular Salvatore and Francesco) judge other vendors' (Giusseppe, Carlotta and Walter) way of selling as a strategic and deliberate attempt to win the would-be buyer's compassion and tender-heartedness. The underlying argument takes this to be illegitimate and offensive to one's own dignity and to the moral purpose of the paper.

One afternoon I joined Salvatore while he was selling the paper in a big centric *piazza* of Borgo. There he told me about Carlotta's way of selling the paper that 'that's a handout. It's selling your dignity, and also the dignity of *La Bussola*. Carlotta used to ask for handouts, now she does it with *La Bussola*. It's the same thing, drawing on people's compassion.' Instead, as we have seen, he and Francesco have adopted a passive way of selling the paper: They stand still in a place of their choice. They put the paper folded on one arm, showing half of the front page. They say nothing, but merely wait for someone to initiate an overture. This way of selling is what allows Salvatore to proudly state that 'I don't panhandle,' that is, 'standing with my hands like that,' he said while opening and outstretching

his hand. However, the same Salvatore, when commenting on the ‘open offering’ formula, explains it as an ‘open offering, from people’s heart. We rely on people’s hearts.’

In conclusion, for these vendors the selling has to be done as if compassion did not exist, or better still, practically denying it by selling the paper silently. For them, to deliberately make explicit the ethos of compassion erodes its legitimacy as the ‘implicit contract’ (in Goffman’s sense) framing the selling.

Giuseppe: The emperor is naked

Giuseppe is a vendor whose particular way of framing the exchange cost him the suspension of his selling rights. He adds to his ‘beggar’s uniform’ *La Bussola* vendors’ ID card, which hangs from his sweater. One usually finds him sitting on a cardboard box at one of the main entrances to the train station, often with a cigar in his mouth. He places around him a set of pieces of cardboard on which the passers-by can read statements about his troubled situation, together with cards printed with religious images of the Virgin and of Catholic saints. In between all this material, before his suspension as a vendor, he used to place a bundle of copies of *La Bussola*. Referring to Giuseppe’s ‘front stage’ (Goffman, 1973), Salvatore told me with a sneer of disgust in his face, ‘you can’t do it that way, with the cardboards reading “I’m poor”.’

The reason for Salvatore’s disgust and the final suspension of Giuseppe’s selling rights is Giuseppe’s ‘creative manipulation’ (Davis, 1992: 45) of the implicit contract ruling the exchange. In fact, Giuseppe reduced the selling of the paper to a pure gift exchange, which, in this social context, amounts to begging. He arrived to the point of not giving the paper in return for the money received from the casual passer-by. Giuseppe’s acting and face work earmarked the money given to him as unephemized charity.³² As John Davis has noticed, the open and context-bounded interpretation of some exchanges makes them amenable to actors’ attempts to creatively manipulate them. He mentions as one example when ‘people try to pass self-interested actions as altruistic’ (ibid.). In our case it consists in Giuseppe trying to pass plain begging as the selling of the paper.

The miserabilistic drift: Devices for invoking the ethos of compassion

Let us illustrate now how Giuseppe accomplished the creative manipulation of the exchange in practice, and how in so doing he stripped bare the ethos of compassion. However, it has to be pointed out that by raising the curtain of collective misrecognition that maintains the ethos of compassion, the latter does not remain the same as when it is kept unsaid or ‘is said euphemistically.’ Without all the ‘social magic,’ as Bourdieu calls it, which is sustained by euphemization, deference rituals, the vendor’s

keeping up the personal front, and the equilibrium between the commercial and the gift sides of the exchange, what we have is a naked emperor: the vendor is transformed into a beggar and the ethos of compassion drifts towards miserabilism.

First of all, placing the paper together with other, explicit compassion-forming devices such as religious images and the cardboard signs on which Giuseppe has written statements about his troubled situation, makes *La Bussola* and the vendor's ID card by analogy and explicitly another compassion-forming device. It has to be remembered that the fact of selling the paper displays one's situation as a homeless person or, at least, as a person with extreme economic and social difficulties. As such, the paper always functions as an implicit compassion-forming device that frames the exchange within an ethos of compassion. The 'correct' way of selling, however, makes this fact the object of collective misrecognition by vendors and buyers alike. On the contrary, Giuseppe used the paper explicitly to deliberately produce compassion in the passer-by. In doing so he turned upside down *La Bussola's* explicit role as an alternative to begging.

One afternoon in the paper office of *La Bussola*, Francesco underlined to me this aspect of Giuseppe's and other vendors' manipulation of the exchange:

Some vendors go into the churches, the parishes, saying: 'I'm from *La Bussola*, I'm in difficulties.' They've got the card to show who they are. But that's AGAINST our idea, since we don't want that; because people are already (murmuring-?): 'that's the tramps' paper,' and not. It's not a tramps' paper, since being a tramp is a life choice. Tramp is a life choice, but mine was not a life choice, nor his [*pointing to Salvatore who is listening to our conversation*].

As a consequence, Giuseppe eroded the meaning of *La Bussola* as a way of gaining a sense of moral purpose. As Isabella contends:

some of them fall into that trap. Anyway, they're the ones that do it just to earn something independently, that haven't understood either the spirit of the paper or the value of self-worth, which is what they should really be communicating to others.

Carlotta's way

Carlotta represents a more subtle case. She is able to explicitly bring out the passers-by's tender-heartedness while, at the same time, avoiding the miserabilistic drift. Firstly, as the following excerpt shows, she keeps (together with buyers) the euphemization work that maintains the ethos of compassion implicit:

In short, they [*she uses 'they' to refer to the staff of the paper generically, i.e., Massimiliano and Isabella*] don't want the paper to be used for begging, that's [*begging*] not right. I really don't beg with the paper. But sincerely, I say that if someone tells me, a traveller or people I knew in the past [*when she begged at the train station*] tell me: 'Look miss, I don't need the paper, I've got all this luggage. Let me give you something and you can have a cup of coffee on me.' Me, honestly, I don't refuse, because seventy percent of the people that talk like that are people I already knew when I was begging. But with the paper, I don't ask for charity, because that's not right. That's why Giuseppe didn't want to [*interruption*]: either you sell the paper or you beg. (Emphasis added).

Secondly, she used compassion strategically as a survival strategy when she begged and keeps resorting to this emotion explicitly, which frames the exchange in any case, while selling the paper. She is able to do so without drifting towards miserabilism by the adoption of a 'professional idiom' (Wacquant, 2000) about the selling:

They [*the policemen patrolling inside the Central train station*] saw I was approaching people very politely, not giving any annoyance. In fact, when they [*the buyers*], something I do even now, open their wallets, I move away ... because I don't want to go looking into people's things; I want them to have their privacy about what they've got in their wallets.

In both cases she has clients – as other vendors also remark³³ - whose privacy one has to respect. The money offered transforms the passer-by into a fleeting benefactor in relation to the vendor's misfortunes and, at the same time, a client both of the paper and of the spectacle of social suffering that the vendor represents. In this regard, apart from her professional idiom, Carlotta does not differ from Giuseppe. Let us see for example Carlotta's illuminating remarks on her psychological spotting of possible clients amenable to engage in the ethos of compassion:

More than anything it's the stout people that give me a hand, since stout people [*interruption*]. They say that if you're stout, if you eat a lot, you do that because you need affection. So, this affection, they don't just want it, but they express it. I know a man, rather stout, kindly, and I say to him: 'Good morning don Leccio, how are you today?' Then he's happy, he gives me ten thousand lire!, just for that phrase; but, but it's not that I've searched out that phrase for the ten thousand lire, even if I can use them, but because that phrase makes him feel happy. People with beards [*interruption. She means that they are also kind and sensitive*]. People who are very elegant, very elegant, remember this, are not people with much heart [*Then she tells me about a very expensive brand of suitcases*]. One day a lady came along with three of these suitcases, a real snakeskin jacket and she didn't melt one bit! [*stressing and stretching 'bit'*] (emphasis added).

The difference with Giuseppe lies in the fact that Carlotta, as a good vendor, gives a product (the paper) in return for the money taken and, as a good vendor of the paper, she explains to the buyer what it is about. In this way she conforms to one moral purpose of the paper: making people aware of the problems of the homeless. For example, in one occasion in which a father and his son did not understand what ‘with no fixed abode’ means, Carlotta explained it patiently:

[*He*] wanted to buy the paper from me, make an offering, but he also wanted to UNDERSTAND what he was buying. I tried to explain to him what the paper was, and in fact I heard [*them saying*] ‘you’ve really been very nice.’ I could maybe have just gone away. Instead I wanted to satisfy them about, the material I had to offer.

This is the crucial difference between Giuseppe and Carlotta, objectively and also with regard to Carlotta’s ‘lived experience’ (in Schutz’s sense, 1962) of the exchange. As we will see in the following section on status, Giuseppe is impervious to status signalling, while Carlotta has experienced considerable status improvement after becoming a vendor of the paper.

Conclusion: Averting the dangers of charity money

The selling of the paper wards off the danger of a gift in most cases by sharing some of the characteristics of a commercial exchange (to which it comes close in that it has a price, and moves away from it by the way this price is formed). These dangers are especially present in the case of vendors insensitive to status signalling. Essentially, the commercial part of the exchange consists in that there is a give and take within an extremely short space of time: Money for the paper, and the paper for money. This exchange is always qualified, however, by the ethos of compassion that frames it.

Despite these limitations to the commercial part of the exchange, this element is crucial for counteracting the risks of a pure, uneuphemized gift, that is, the threat that pure charity poses to the moral purpose of the paper. The give and take grants the dignity, the self-feelings of pride and the moral status and purpose associated with the selling of the paper, in contrast to the self-feelings of shame and diminished status originated in uneuphemized charity.

Section III: Status and we-feelings

Stigma

Randall Collins has recently shown how clear-cut and legally sanctioned status groups in modern society are few. Teenagers are one of these.³⁴ In this third section I suggest the homeless constitute another status group in modern society. The euphemized name with which they are referred to in Italian, 'senza fissa dimora' ('with no fixed abode'), connotes not only a matter of fact, but also their legal status as second-rate citizens. Having no fixed abode means that the homeless people become invisible to welfare state provision and to the political apparatus, losing their voting rights.

Stigmatization of the homeless is a process with an informal and a formal side. A recent episode has given a rare opportunity to explicitly examine some of the (normally implicit) judgments shaping informal stigmatization. They were made explicit in the form of justifications in a court of law, arguing (successfully) for the cancellation of a lease contract that the owner of an apartment had signed with *La Bussola*. Once the owner knew the apartment was going to be used as a day centre for homeless people, she broke the contract

since it will obviously bring the whole tone of the place down; because of all the problems that will be brought by the inevitable closeness to people with no fixed abode who are certainly not an ideal reference model for the community. (April/May 2000 issue of *La Bussola*).

This quoted excerpt condenses Goffman's definition of stigma as a discrediting attribute that impedes the full social acceptance of its possessor (Goffman, 1963: 13).

On the other hand, people 'with no fixed above' may be the object of attempts to further objectify and legally sanction their stigmatization in official records. At the end of 1999 and beginning of 2000, the town council, ruled by one of the former communist party's heirs, suspended the right that some voluntary associations, including *La Bussola*, had to submit applications for the residence ID cards on behalf of those homeless people who applied for it at any of these associations' head offices. As an alternative, and in response to the media's daily alarms about immigration, the council proposed issuing an ID card reading 'senza fissa dimora' on it. The card would be checked and renewed every six months by the police. The alternative would be not to have a residence card at all. Without it, one cannot vote and it is barely possible to initiate any bureaucratic procedure.

Status group and we-feelings

Pablo Jáuregui has recently reappraised Norbert Elias' work on the emotional dimension of human groups (see Jáuregui, 2000 and Elias and Scotson, 1994). As Jáuregui succinctly puts it, 'when people find themselves in degrading positions of social exclusion, Elias suggested that the principal deprivation they suffer is not so much a deprivation of food, but rather a deprivation of value, meaning, and self-respect' (ibid.: 3). This deprivation is paired with the lack of resources to any type of self-praising vocabulary.

Consequently, finding oneself as a member of the homeless status group is a source of self-feelings of shame and lack of self-respect that affect the individual's whole personality (Kauffman, 1996). In the following excerpt, Francesco vividly exposes 'the emotional dimensions of collective identification' (to use Jáuregui's phrase) which - for the homeless - are confined to self-images of inferiority and self-feelings of humiliation and shame:

My first day without fixed abode was dreadful. I was terribly hungry, and not a penny in my pocket. I was ashamed to pick up the fruit left at the market stalls, even though it was closed. I felt as if I don't know how many people were looking at me. It was three in the afternoon, blazing hot, the street was deserted.

Thus, it is clear that becoming homeless carries with it enormous difficulties in dealing with this new and hurtful status. This status forms a 'sore spot,' as Elias put it, in one's self-image that erodes personal integrity (Moodie, 1994).³⁵ For example, Claudia, a former vendor from Yugoslavia, avoided attending the weekly meetings between the volunteer staff and vendors of *La Bussola* by arguing that 'people there stink.' Moreover, she opted not to sell the paper in the streets of the city, but to travel to the sprawling network of middle-size industries on the outskirts of the city. There she sold the paper in the offices of the managers, to the amazement of the other vendors and of *La Bussola's* left-wing personnel.

Selling *La Bussola*: Status and biography

Therefore, I suggest that selling *La Bussola* has different effects on the vendor's status depending on how it intersects with his or her own biography and self-image.

Status indifference

In the first place, *La Bussola* can make no difference to one's status. This is the case of vendors who are insensitive to status signalling (Goffman, 1980).

Snapshot V: Giuseppe's status indifference

Let's add to the previous portrait of Giuseppe that he is a man between 55 and 65 years old with severe diabetes. As some of the persons belonging to the homeless status group, he has ceased to do any 'face work.' Maybe it could be argued that he does 'beggar's face work.' In fact, his aspect sums up some of the most characteristic traits in the dominant imagery of the 'good homeless': An untidy white beard, a permanent wool hat covering his white hair, dusty sweater and pants, and cut gloves on his hands. Giuseppe's insensitivity to status signals immunizes him from, or maybe is his strategy for avoiding, self-feelings of shame.

However, the scope of *La Bussola* as an association is to promote the structural (i.e., in relation to social hierarchy) and situational (i.e., in the local and contextual interaction with the fortunate) position of homeless people. Consequently, status indifference and selling the paper have a difficult and fragile relationship for it easily results in the transformation of the selling into a form of begging, as we have seen with the suspension of Giuseppe's selling rights.

Status denigration

Selling *La Bussola* can also be lived as status denigration and, indeed, as objectively marking one's own downward fall in the social hierarchy. This was the case for Claudia. Her choice of the place to sell (outside the city and inside offices, that is, outside the public space and gaze) and the target (industry management), together with her avoidance of any further contact with the staff and other vendors of *La Bussola*, constituted her attempt to practically deny her new status.

In her case, as in Giuseppe's, selling *La Bussola* clashes with one's personal biography, but for rather opposite reasons. Indeed, becoming a vendor of *La Bussola* highlighted Claudia's drop in status. Correspondingly, her selling the paper also contradicted the explicit purpose of *La Bussola*: moral and status improvement.

Status improvement

The rotation rate among *La Bussola*'s vendors decreases only in the case of those who live subjectively, and experience objectively, status improvement resulting from their activities in the paper. Currently, at *La Bussola* this is the case of four vendors, Pietro, Francesco, Salvatore and Carlotta. All three have entered *La Bussola* from a position of homelessness, in which the economics of survival are basically reduced to a restricted set of activities: begging, collecting used telephone cards that are then sold to hobbyists,³⁶ and receiving aid from welfarist voluntary associations, among others. Usually, these activities interweave together in a single day.³⁷

To these vendors, *La Bussola* represents a stage for status

improvement in relation to their previous status as mere ‘tramps.’

Carlotta lived this improvement of her status in relation to the people she takes to form the lowest ranks of society. On top of it, she adds to this improvement the additional benefit of the prestige she gains in her new job by helping the cause of the homeless:

[*Selling the paper*] is better from the dignity angle, since when I was begging I was putting myself on a level of the gypsies, the Neapolitans, all these people that steal; instead, this way, with a badge and, and selling my paper I help the homeless.

As shown in the previous section on exchange, one first consequence of this status improvement lies in the new possibility of giving something in return in the fleeting relationship established between the unfortunate and the benefactor. Carlotta stresses what this difference meant to her self-feelings (mainly in terms of overcoming shame), even though she made more money begging than she does selling the paper:

Carlotta: I didn't feel like begging any more because yes, they gave, and I even made a good collection, but there was some people who maybe mortified me, and at my age I didn't feel like being mortified like that.

Daniel: That is?

Carlotta: And then maybe they gave me [*the money*] and said something nasty. But now, instead, with the paper ... In fact if somebody tells me: ‘I haven't got anything,’ I say back: ‘I'm not asking you for anything,’ because I've got something of mine in exchange for a bit of money. Instead, the other way, when maybe they said to me a bit harshly: ‘I haven't got anything,’ I really felt mortified, because I wasn't used to that sort of thing.

Status and the looking-glass self

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that the ‘lived experience’ of status indifference, denigration or improvement in one's own biography is mediated by what Cooley called the ‘looking-glass self.’³⁸ Cooley assumed that individuals monitor themselves constantly. The outcome of this monitoring is our self-feelings. To be more specific, let us see the three steps in which self-monitoring consists:

- 1) Imagining our appearance to the other person.
- 2) Imagining his or her judgment on that appearance.
- 3) The rising of some sort of self-feeling, primarily self-feelings of pride and self-feelings of mortification.

For Claudia, selling *La Bussola* was a motive for self-feelings of mortification, a sore spot in her self-image that she dealt with by changing the usual selling place and its customary target (from anonymous passers-

bys to *cadres*). For Carlotta, selling *La Bussola* meant having her acquaintances acknowledge her true social value: When she started selling the paper

... even the stationmaster called me. He spoke to me, hugged me, kissed me, congratulated me. And said: 'Madam, I understood from the way you behaved that you weren't in the right place.' In short they understood ... that I ... I was asking for charity, but I wasn't made to be some sort of beggar. From the way I behaved they understood I was a very proper person. It was unanimous. All the people who'd helped me in the past by giving me charity were full of joy when they saw me with the paper and the badge. Look, the stationmaster even began weeping with joy. (emphasis added).

Therefore, selling the paper objectively changed Carlotta's appearance to others, making them see what she already knew about herself (i.e., 'I wasn't made to be some sort of beggar.'). Besides, the fact of selling the paper further confirmed other persons' positive judgments on her ('Madam, I understood from the way you behaved that you weren't in the right place.'). The paper provided the vehicle for a 'hear-to-heart' recognition of her (now simultaneously) lived and objective status (in opposition to 'the gypsies, the Neapolitans, all these people that steal').

Finally, for Giuseppe, selling *La Bussola* meant no change in his status. Instead, he adopted the paper within his previous lowered status as a new device in a begging strategy for survival that reinforced this status.

Moral purpose, ethical values and we-feelings of pride

Thus vendors who assume the paper's moral purpose give more importance to broadcasting it, and to writing in it, rather than to the selling *per se* or the money earned by it. As we have seen, the paper's sense of moral purpose favours self-esteem and self-feelings of pride. As Francesco says,

our paper is for those who have no voice. That is, when you lose all your rights you have no voice, you're no one, you don't exist even on the register books. So you've got no voice. So, to give a voice back to the people that have no voice ... it's selling that paper. But to make them understand, to get it read, not for the two or three thousand lire they give me. Otherwise I could go and sell the *Giornale* [*the local newspaper which is sold in news agencies and in traffic lights*]. I'd stand there with the special bag on, nobody asks you what the hell the *Giornale* is [*short laugh*].

On the contrary, for those who have not taken on the paper's moral purpose, the paper is 'a point of arrival, like that one, like Giuseppe: "I sell the paper, I make 50,000 lire, I eat, I have a cigarette"' [*he says as if Giuseppe were talking*].

Conclusion: *La Bussola* as a moral stage

To conclude I would like to bring in Wacquant's statement on prize fighting in order to characterize *La Bussola* from the viewpoint of the homeless. In this way, *La Bussola*, like the ring for US inner city black population, is 'a stage on which to affirm [*one's*] moral value (...) which allows [*one*] to escape the status of 'non-person' ... to which [*homeless people*] are typically consigned.' (Wacquant, 2000: 8).

Consequently, *La Bussola* is a means for the seller 'to maintain a sense of personal integrity and moral purpose', that allows one to take 'responsibility for one's own life project' (Moodie, quoted in Wacquant, 2000: 6). In fact, the maintenance of personal integrity and moral purpose are two of the reasons why fixed vendors take pains to break away from the denigrating image of the 'tramp.' The beggar is thus seen as abdicating willingly from his or her life project. Ultimately, vendors like Giuseppe, by being insensitive to status signalling, undermine *La Bussola's* moral purpose and are eventually sanctioned with the cancellation of their selling rights.

Endnotes

¹ This article is based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork (2000 - 2001) and in-depth interviews (7) in the voluntary association that writes up and sells *La Bussola*, the street paper of Borgo (both invented names that mean 'The Compass' and 'City' respectively). The article also draws partially from another 15-month fieldwork research in other three voluntary associations dealing with the homeless from the same city (1999 - 2001).

Somehow strangely, in exchange for the patience and friendship of the people portrayed in this article, I could only offer them the promise that their identities would remain confidential. Loosing the connotations that the real names of people, places and organizations have is nothing in comparison with their priceless trust on me. However, I can express openly my enormous gratitude to Valentina Romano for her BA dissertation (1998, *Informazione ed emarginazione: I giornali di strada in Italia*. Università degli Studi di Catania) from which I quote two verbatim without direct recognition in order to keep the identity of some of my informants confidential.

² From now on I will use the name *La Bussola* to refer, as members do, to both the association and the paper. The paper distributes an average of around 4,000-5,000 copies per monthly or bi-monthly issue. The calculation of how many copies to print is made on the basis of how many vendors there are available, and on how many copies were sold the previous month.

³ The Milanese street paper is the Italian representative in the International Network of Street Papers, the federation sustained by the English *The Big Issue* (Romano, 1998: 47-8). There was a clash between this street paper and *La Bussola* when the former tried, unsuccessfully, to sell in Borgo. Mainstream media published reports on it as 'the war of the poor.'

⁴ It is clear that it would be very interesting to explore the micro-history behind these radical changes in the structure of the organization. My broader PhD dissertation does so, but in this article I give preference to other arguments.

⁵ However, I would agree with Stanley Cohen's argument that the meaning of 'distance' goes far beyond its literal sense of physical distance: 'There is also a fathomless distance ... the unimaginability of this happening to you or your loved ones' (Cohen, 2001: 169).

⁶ In the second section of this article, we will see that some agents themselves use 'pity' and 'compassion' as synonymous and attach to both connotations of condescension.

⁷ On this opposition see also Mark Johnson, 1993: 114-16.

⁸ A fluctuating population of around 2,000 persons.

⁹ The main ones were and are an old charity centre directly linked to the Catholic Church, a number of Catholic soup kitchens distributed around the city, and *Solidarietà e Carità*, a lay altruistic association with a strong Catholic presence in its ranks.

¹⁰ In this sense, 'assistenzialisti' (welfarist) associations play the role, as Boltanski puts it, of the Smithian agent, 'whose dealings have a direct effect on the unfortunate that remarks the unfortunate's passive role by negative implication' (Boltanski, 1999: 46). In much of his book, together with Arendt, Boltanski relies on Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (in particular Smith's imagery of theatre, spectacle and spectators used in order to understand the social space where moral sentiments develop).

¹¹ Even though a systematic study of the paper's contents would obviously require the examination of many more issues, I take this one to be highly representative. As Carlotta, the vendor at the train station, puts it whenever she sells past issues to travellers from outside Borgo, 'our paper is not a daily newspaper... where you want to know what the government, D'Alema or Berlusconi does, who steals more, who steals less, and this sort of things. Our paper talks about the people who live in the street, about their stories... hence, what is not written in one issue is written in another.' That being said, my PhD dissertation does include an analysis of 12 issues from different years of *La Bussola* that confirms Carlotta's insight.

¹² The section on jail is written by an association of ex-prisoners from a neighbouring town.

¹³ Pity, as a politics, needs to 'convey a plurality of situations of misfortunes brought together for their singularity and for what they have in common' (Boltanski, 1999: 12).

¹⁴ This is due to the prosecutor's difficulty in unravelling long and strong chains of objective proofs. On this issue see Boltanski and Thevenot, 1991.

¹⁵ It is well known that irony is a trope particularly suited for channelling the emotion of indignation in discourse.

¹⁶ On this trope see Boltanski, 1999: 25.

¹⁷ In fact, Boltanski points out that the main feature of charity is its practicability: 'The person who practices charity does not accomplish the impossible. He sacrifices time, good, and money, but it is a limited sacrifice.' Again, these compassionate acts are local and practical, and are thus completely diverse from a politics of pity (1999: 8).

¹⁸ Recognition and gratitude though do not preclude criticism of the sort Pietro put forward in his article quoted in section (d). Also due to their practical relationship with welfarist groups, the homeless are the direct target of the occasional middle-class volunteers' misrecognition of their suffering (as exemplified in volunteers' occasional patronizing and condescending treatment).

¹⁹ In this article I am using the concept of 'gift' in the broad sense of a giving without immediate return.

²⁰ For a detailed presentation of diverse types of exchanges, see Davis, 1992. For a presentation of the concept 'framing' in the context of exchange, see Callon, 1998.

²¹ Following transcription conventions, capitalized words indicate a rise in intonation.

²² Fleeing is a flagrant case of ‘moral blindness,’ as Arendt calls it (see Hannah Arendt in Boltanski, 1999: 5).

²³ Interestingly enough, this interaction is exemplary in one of the ways the parable of the Good Samaritan is: in both cases those refusing to enter in the ethos of compassion and to take moral action belong to the status group that would appear, in principle, to be most likely to enter it, i.e., priests.

²⁴ Of course, this does not eliminate the possibility of limiting cases in which, for example, the buyer interacts with the homeless vendor with no more and no less compassion than that found in his or her interactions with a greengrocer. Later on we will see that, if this is the case, the buyer will tend to treat the exchange as purely commercial. He or she will be unable to ‘read’ the interaction correctly (i.e., in the lines intended by the whole enterprise of selling a street paper). In another words, entering the exchange without the moral sentiment of compassion distort that very same exchange by obliterating its gift side. Alternatively, as Carlotta’s previous excerpt about a buyer looking for spared change showed, the buyer can misread the exchange as yet another example of begging, thus obliterating its commercial side. Finally, all this shows that both a purely commercial and a purely gift exchange with an unfortunate can be devoid of compassion.

²⁵ As it is well know, these concepts belong to Bourdieu’s conceptual apparatus (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1990). Wacquant (2000) gives a very specific example of how these concepts apply to and help construct our object of research. As Wacquant explains in his case study of prize-fighters, a ‘doxic belief’ consists in a practical and embodied belief that help reconcile oneself with what collective misrecognition denies, i.e., in Wacquant’s study, the reality of the prize-fighters’ commercialization or, in my case study, the reality of the ethos of compassion. Hence ‘doxic beliefs’ contrasts reflexive beliefs of the kind ‘I think that ...’

²⁶ For the concept of ‘personal front’ and ‘face-work’ see Goffman, 1973. Also, in this regard, it is useful to recall Grignon and Passeron (1989) remark that ‘the dominant classes do not have the monopoly of playing with social identity or, in other words, the monopoly over stylization, i.e., the monopoly over the erasure of external, physical indicators of social class’ (my translation).

²⁷ In ‘the ‘miserabilistic’ interpretation (...) one is moved to compassion by the spectacle of human beings thus reduced to the passive state of hapless victim.’ (Wacquant, 1999).

²⁸ In this latter remark Francesco points to the quality of his story as ‘exemplary,’ in the sense that was explained in section I.

²⁹ Drawing on Cooley’s concept of the looking glass self (to be further explained in the section on status), we may suggest that shame arises by Francesco imagining himself in the eyes of the buyer as ‘a hapless victim.’

³⁰ Moreover, these occasions serve as a test for my assertion that there really is such an ethos.

³¹ For the issue of shame, ‘shame-loops’ and their anticipation, see Scheff, 1990.

³² On the earmarking of money, see Zelizer, 1997.

³³ This professional idiom is shared by those vendors who want to stress the commercial side of the exchange. Previously we saw Francesco referring to one buyer as ‘becoming a customer.’

³⁴ He actually calls teenagers a ‘quasi-status group’ insofar as membership of it is not permanent, but is ‘real in (its) social effects during the years that (it) shape(s) youths’ lives’ (Collins, 2000: 27).

³⁵ In this regard, Moodie has pointed out that personal integrity consists in ‘taking responsibility for one’s own life project, within the limits and pressures imposed by structural constraints, in accordance with consistent conceptions for the right way to live, and in partnership with others.’ (Quoted in Wacquant, 2000: 6). In point of fact, the state of homelessness is probably the most objective and cruel confirmation of one’s failure in ‘taking responsibility for one’s own project,’ and of being overwhelmed by ‘pressures imposed by structural constraints.’ In short, taking on board Moodie’s definition means to conceptualize the personal integrity of the homeless as diminished, by virtue of they being literally ‘crushed’ by such life constraints.

³⁶ For arriving to a price of 1000 lire one card has to have a circulation of, at least, less than 1 million copies. Most telephone cards have a circulation of 1 million or more and hence their immediate value in the market of collectors is zero. That is why this economic activity requires many hours per day wandering about the city from one telephone booth to another.

³⁷ Of course, there are other activities that the homeless undertake in response to the sheer weight of material constraint they suffer. These activities are particularly present during nighttime: male and female prostitution (where clients are mainly other homeless or deeply derelict individuals) and theft (again, mainly, against fellow homeless people) are two well-know examples in the literature and in the everyday life at Borgo’s train station. I also got to know a homeless man who rents blankets during the Winter in exchange of small amounts of money, wine or cigarettes.

³⁸ See Cooley (1922) and also Scheff (1990) for the reappraisal of this concept in terms of ‘self-feelings.’

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