

CHAPTER ONE



PRODUCING CULTURE AND CAPITAL

Three stories have been told about the silk industry of Como, Italy. The first is encapsulated in an adage that I first heard from an industry official soon after I had begun my research in Como. “Il nonno fondò, i figli sviluppano, i nipoti distruggono” — The grandfather founded (the firm), the sons develop it, and the grandsons destroy it. This adage, which distilled local knowledge about the rise and fall of firms in Como, was subsequently repeated to me by several firm owners. A less frequently cited, but notable, variation of the adage ends “i nipoti mangiano.” In other words, the grandsons eat the firm. My translation of this adage is intentionally gendered. It could, after all, be translated “the grandfather founded [the firm], the children develop it, and the grandchildren destroy it,” because the plural nouns *figli* and *nipoti* can include both males and females. It was clear from those who elaborated the adage, however, that this was a story about grandfathers, fathers, and sons.

In this tale of patrilineal succession, one generation of men succeeds in carrying forward their father’s project, while the next fails. The grandfather is characterized as a “self-made man,” much like the founder of a

silk dyeing and printing firm whose son described him in precisely these terms. This was a man who began working in arduous, laboring jobs at the age of nine, who acquired his vocation through practical experience and education in evening classes, who worked long hours and lived a frugal life while he built a firm that flourished because of his technical expertise and dedication. The founder's sons, in turn, acquire their father's technical know-how and discipline by working at his side in the firm. Having inherited the business reputation and contacts accumulated by their father, these sons have the social as well as financial capital to expand the firm. By the third generation, so the story goes, the drive and self-discipline that enabled the grandfather to build the firm no longer exist among the grandsons, who squander the firm's assets in ill-considered schemes and frivolous expenditures. The picture painted is more or less one of dilettante bourgeois youths who prefer to sail the Bahamas rather than put in the long hours needed to advance the firm.

Like all adages, this three-generational tale of firm succession has a moral to it. And like all compelling moral tales, it leaves several things out. First, it leaves out history. Fathers, sons, and grandsons play out their generational destinies in a timeless tale of succession detached from any historical context. Second, and perhaps most obviously, it leaves out women. The exclusive concern with male productive force and its dissipation over time reflects a monogenetic theory of procreation (Delaney 1986), in which males alone supply the creative force that produces succeeding generations and, in this case, capitalist firms. It replicates in the profane world of business the cosmological model of male reproduction embodied in the sacred origin myths of Christianity. Finally, the adage leaves out gender. Not only are there no women in this tale, but the goals of the three generations of men are ungendered. Indeed, the self-evident character of men's ambitions forecloses the possibility of asking why fathers would want their sons to develop the firm in the first place.

The second story told about the Como silk industry is a prophetic account of the coming of a second era of industrial capitalism. In a book widely read in the 1980s, *The Second Industrial Divide*, the economist Michael J. Piore and the sociologist Charles F. Sabel herald the coming of a new epoch of industrialism based on innovative small firms. According to the authors, the limitations of an industrial system based on mass production in vertically integrated firms, which emerged in the nineteenth century, have become apparent in the wake of political and economic events that transformed the international market in the early 1970s. The most promising alternative to mass production lies in the networks of technologically sophisticated, innovative small firms that rely on craft forms of production. The flexible specialization of these firms has enabled certain industrial districts, including those of

northern and central Italy, to ride the rough economic waters of the 1970s and 1980s and to usher in a new era of industrialism.

In contrast to the adage, Piore and Sabel's account situates this shift in a specific historical period of industrial capitalism. Moreover, it pays heed to the crucial role that politics plays in this transformation, recognizing that neither firms nor industries are autonomous from broad social and political movements. In their model of flexible specialization, "it is hard to tell where society . . . ends and where economic organization begins" (1984, 275). Thus, they highlight the political ideas and developments that created the preconditions for the emergence of such networks of flexible firms.

Like the adage, however, Piore and Sabel's account leaves out gender. There are no women, wives, daughters, mothers, or sisters, or for that matter men, husbands, sons, fathers, or brothers, in their industrial history—only artisans, subcontractors, skilled craftsmen, and other occupationally defined social actors. The political ideas and commitments that Piore and Sabel identify as having made possible the emergence and survival of flexible manufacturing include the struggle by nations for a place in the international order, by states to establish their power, and by Italian migrants to define a place for themselves in the large factories of the north. The politics of gender go unmentioned. Kinship, on the other hand, is attended to, as Piore and Sabel are aware that the innovative small firms in these industrial districts are predominantly family owned. They treat the "tradition of familialism" on which the firm owners draw, however, as a stable cultural resource rather than a historically situated, negotiated process that is itself continually being produced.

The third story is one in which Como's silk industry plays only a cameo role. The geographer David Harvey (1989) has fashioned an encompassing narrative linking an array of recent shifts in cultural life around the globe to structural adjustments in capitalism. Harvey attributes the rise of postmodern sensibilities and tastes in domains of cultural consumption as wide-ranging as art and architecture, cinema and coffee drinking, to the emergence of a new regime of capital accumulation—that of flexible accumulation. Like Piore and Sabel, Harvey identifies the early 1970s as the moment when new political and economic conditions necessitated the shift in capitalist strategies of accumulation from a Fordist regime of mass production and mass consumption to a late-capitalist regime of decentralized production and differentiated (lifestyle) consumption. In Harvey's thesis, however, the primary impetus for this shift comes from above—driven by capitalists' need to develop technological and organizational innovations to enhance profits and to control workers by undercutting their bargaining power (103). A key shift in industrial organization entailed in this new regime of accumulation has been increased subcontracting, which has both opened up

opportunities for small business formation and “in some instances permits older systems of domestic, artisanal, familial (patriarchal), and paternalistic (“godfather,” “guy’nor” or even mafia-like) labour systems to revive and flourish as centrepieces rather than as appendages of the production system” (152).

Harvey’s thesis of the postmodern consequences of late capitalism brings in kinship only marginally, treating it, like culture, as a dependent variable. Flexible accumulation has broad and pervasive cultural effects on people’s political identities and commitments and on their perception of time and space, but is itself not shaped by culture. “Cultural life” is pervaded with the logic of capital circulation and held within the embrace of the capitalist logic of our times, but capitalist production is itself outside the embrace of culture. As in most models of the global economy, late capitalism and the new institutional structures it has spawned are portrayed as acultural forces relentlessly bent on penetrating local communities and absorbing them into homogeneous regimes of accumulation. Local communities with culturally specific ways of life may mediate the effects of capitalism, but capitalism itself is not envisioned as shaped by cultural meanings and processes.¹

Each of these three stories offers useful perspectives on the economic, political, and social forces shaping the silk industry of Como. Each contributes to the analytic narrative of this ethnography. Each, however, overlooks the cultural forces that incite and shape capitalist production and capital accumulation in the industry. In placing the local adage of generational succession alongside the two scholarly theses of the post-1960s transformation in capitalism, my aim is to expand and enrich the theoretical narrative to include what they leave out: an analysis of the sentiments, desires, and meanings of kinship, gender, and capital that are crucial to the production of the industry at a particular historical conjuncture. Like the local adage, my primary concern is with the character and motives of the people who own and manage the industry’s firms. Like the adage, I situate them in families. In contrast to the adage, however, I am interested in understanding how these individuals have arrived at the sentiments and desires that lead them to pursue the particular entrepreneurial projects that, in turn, have shaped both their families and the silk industry of Como.

Toward a Cultural Analysis of Capitalist Action

This ethnography of Italian family firms eschews a model of capitalism as an economic system governed by universal laws. If we define capitalism, as did Marx, as a mode of production that is constituted by the

class relation between capital and wage-labor,² then a universal model of capitalism entails two assumptions. First, we would have to assume that those who own and control the means of production and purchase labor power everywhere engage in the same “economic action” in pursuit of the same goals. Second, we would also have to assume that workers who sell their labor power are everywhere endowed with identical motives and subjectivities. In other words, a universal theory of capitalism is predicated on a universally homogeneous bourgeoisie and a universally homogeneous proletariat. As several recent historical and ethnographic monographs (Chakrabarty 1989; Rofel 1999; Donham 1999) have persuasively demonstrated, labor is never abstract, but is always provided by people with particular social identities and histories. Workers are always constituted through historically situated cultural processes as particular kinds of persons whose labor is employed, extracted, valued, and commodified in particular ways. This ethnography demonstrates that, like labor, capital also is never abstract, save in economic theory. Like workers, capitalists are always constituted as particular kinds of persons through historically specific cultural processes. As a consequence, capital is accumulated, invested, dispersed, and reproduced through historically specific cultural processes.

Among the refinements in cultural theory that the turn away from structuralism has enabled is a recognition that people’s sentiments, identities, and social agency are not dictated by culture but are formed through everyday practices that are themselves culturally produced. It follows from this that bourgeois selves and orientations are constituted through these everyday practices, including what are conventionally construed as “business” practices.³ For the most part, these “business” practices have been treated by social scientists as forms of “economic action”; in other words, as utilitarian actions aimed at singularly material ends. But this assumes that people organize their thoughts and actions according to the analytic abstractions (institutions and domains) of social theorists.

Building on Weber, whose theory of economic action I discuss at length later in this chapter, Parsons’s (1955) division of modern society into the logico-meaningful and functional domains of economy, family, religion, education, and politics has led to an institutionally based theory of social action in which analytic abstractions (institutions, domains) have been mistaken for the actual processes through which people formulate action. The Parsonian model of institutional domains too readily grants cultural significance to the observer’s analytic categories without adequate ethnographic evidence as to how people actually organize their thoughts and actions. While this institutional model can be a useful analytic device, it also has profound limitations, because people

do not necessarily organize their everyday actions according to institutional domains. Instead, people think and act in ways that crosscut institutional boundaries.

All social action is constituted by a multiplicity of discourses and meanings. Consequently, cataloging and explicating these discourses and meanings will not, by itself, enable us to understand their articulation in the formation of social action. Such an understanding requires knowledge of the ways in which people in specific circumstances connect these discourses and negotiate their complex meanings. Rather than succumb to the temptations of a utilitarian-reductionist logic, I ask instead how capitalist strategies and actions are negotiated and forged by the members of entrepreneurial families who have heterogeneous desires, sentiments, and goals; how these change over time; and how they produce capitalist firms that are complex relations of love and profit, accumulation and distribution, communal solidarity and individual achievement.

This study draws on a second refinement in cultural theory that has been strengthened by the poststructuralist turn: the concept of culture as a process rather than a stable structure or system. If we think of culture in these terms, it makes little sense to speak of culture as something outside of “capitalism” or of capitalism as something outside of culture. A nondichotomous processual model of culture and capitalism treats capitalist action as culturally produced and, therefore, always infused with cultural meaning and value. It enables us to transcend the limitations of a passive concept of culture as either a resource to be used in the advancement of capitalist goals or a constraining system that must be broken through if capitalist logic is to be actualized. Treating capitalism as a culturally enabled process through which people continually rethink and reformulate goals, meanings, and practices allows us to better comprehend the creative, unfolding dynamic of capitalist action.

In proposing a model of culture and capitalism as mutually constituted processes rather than as distinct structures or institutions, I argue against Harvey’s conception of capital as a logic that lies outside culture. According to Harvey, “because capitalism is expansionary and imperialistic, cultural life in more and more areas gets brought within the grasp of the cash nexus and the logic of capital circulation” (1989, 344). For Harvey, capital is process and cultural life is that which has been pervaded by the logic of capital. Yet the logic of capital lies outside the embrace of culture. As an alternative to Harvey’s concept of the logic of capital, I argue that all capitalist practices are the product of historically situated cultural processes. The historical phenomenon that Harvey identifies as capitalism has certainly been expansionary and imperialistic, but it does not follow that it has been structured by a single “capitalist logic” or even that it is a single historical process.

I view capitalism as a complex and uneven historical process that entails heterogeneous capitalist practices shaped by diverse meanings, sentiments, and representations. I argue for a model of culture and capitalism that posits neither the existence of a single homogeneous capitalist mode of production nor culturally specific capitalist modes of production that are enacted by culturally distinct groups located in different national or regional spaces. I am not interested in salvaging the concept of culture as a distinctive system of symbols and meanings in the hope of discovering the distinctive characteristics of “Asian capitalism” and “European capitalism” or “Italian capitalism” and “Japanese capitalism.” Instead, I leave open the possibility of the coexistence in any geopolitical space—whether local or translocal, national or global—of heterogeneous capitalist practices, all of which are culturally mediated. In other words, the model I propose is not one of distinctive “cultures of capitalism” or “capitalist cultures” but one in which diverse capitalist practices coexist in the same geopolitical spaces and flow across their boundaries. The forms that these diverse capitalist practices take and their articulation with each other must be empirically investigated rather than assumed.

Beyond Capitalist Interest: Sentiments as Forces of Production

A key issue in the study of capitalism has been how and under what historical conditions the working class comes to realize its collective class interests. Indeed, a century and a half of Marxist theory and historiography has been devoted to the question of the relation between proletarian class interests, subjective consciousness, and collective political action. The class interests of the bourgeoisie have received considerably less attention. It has been more or less assumed that we know where bourgeois interests lie—namely, in accumulating capital, maintaining control of the means of production, and establishing and reproducing bourgeois political hegemony. While the proletariat must struggle to break through the mystifications of capitalist hegemony to realize their collective interests, the bourgeoisie apparently do not. Their class interests are transparent enough to be obvious to anyone, even themselves. While the French bourgeoisie may have engaged in self-deception “to conceal from themselves the bourgeois limitations of the content of their struggles and to keep their enthusiasm on a high plane” (Marx [1852] 1963; 17), they appear to have been well aware of their political interest in the French state.

The problem does not lie in the Marxist theory of the inherent structural conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but in the slippage between a theory of class interests and a theory of capitalist

subjectivity and motivation. An abstract model of collective class interests may be useful in understanding why and how the bourgeoisie or any of its fractions takes political action to protect its interests, but it does not help us understand how and why people come to be interested in accumulating capital and reproducing capitalist firms. An abstract theory of bourgeois class interests has only limited usefulness for understanding the subjectivity and practices of a historically specific group of capitalists. Marx himself was well aware of this.⁴ We can appreciate the insight offered by Marx's general theory of class interest without universalizing and naturalizing the dispositions, desires, and subjectivity of the bourgeoisie. The latter cannot be deduced from an abstract model of capitalism.

If we acknowledge—and as this study will show—that the bourgeoisie is not a homogeneous, undifferentiated group, then we cannot assume that they naturally share a set of common interests. Instead, we need to investigate whether and how particular interests come to be viewed as the common interests of the bourgeoisie as a whole. How, for instance, do particular ideas and practices concerning inheritance, the division of labor, forms of management, gender, hierarchy, and authority come to be seen as in the interests of the bourgeois family? How do particular ideas about family and business come to be accepted as the core values and goals of the bourgeoisie in an industrial network in northern Italy, especially when significant differences exist among them as regards capital resources, symbolic capital, past class trajectories, and opportunities for future mobility?

The concept of “interest” has been crucial in the slippage between a Marxist theory of class conflict and a theory of bourgeois subjectivity and social action. Critical scrutiny of this concept, however, calls into question its usefulness in social analysis. Hirschman's history of the ideological formation and transformation of “interest” in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries offers valuable insight into the process by which the idea of economic advantage emerged as its core meaning.⁵ The overwhelming acceptance of the concept of “interest” in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries derived from the promise it offered as a hybrid form of human motivation and action that could mediate between “the destructiveness of passion and the ineffectuality of reason” (Hirschman 1977, 44). In other words, interest offered a way to resolve the long-standing tension between passion and reason in Western thought. It was perceived, moreover, to have the assets of predictability and constancy. Money making, in particular, as a “calm desire” that acts with calculation and rationality would enable its triumph over a variety of turbulent and destructive passions.⁶ By the eighteenth century, “interests” and “passions” appear as synonyms in Adam Smith's argument that the material welfare of “the whole society” is advanced when ev-

everyone is allowed to follow his own private interests. Smith held that the lust for power and the desire for respect could all be satisfied by economic improvement, virtually equating the passions with the interests in a key passage of *The Wealth of Nations*. By substituting the blander terms “advantage” and “interests” for the terms “passion” and “vice,” moreover, Smith purified the concept sufficiently for it to prosper as a central construct of economic theory (Hirschman 1977, 19).

My concern here is not with the historical twists and turns that led from the Renaissance philosophers to the bourgeois political theorists of the nineteenth century, but with the deconstruction of the concept of interest that Hirschman’s history makes possible. Whether one agrees with his thesis that these philosophical arguments paved the way for the acceptance of capitalism, Hirschman’s excavation enables us to understand how interest became so self-evident a concept that no one bothered to define it precisely. In short, a compelling bourgeois theory of human motivation was fashioned.

Hirschman’s history ends at the close of the eighteenth century, setting the stage for the theories of economic action that have dominated contemporary analyses of capitalism. Sometime between *The Wealth of Nations* and Talcott Parsons’s twentieth-century theory of social action (Parsons and Bales 1955), “interest” was cleansed of the “passion” that Smith had incorporated into it, and the older antimony between the two concepts reemerged. Parsons’s concept of “instrumentality” entails a passionless interest, fashioned by reason and pursued through calculated rational action. “Affect,” on the other hand, like passion, incites uncalculated, irrational action. The instrumental/affective dichotomy is central to the Parsonian theory of social action that has facilitated the acceptance of the concept of *interest* as a motivating force for economic action and the failure to recognize its emotional component. Once instrumentality was defined as rooted purely in objective interest, the unpredictability and unmanageability associated with emotion were relegated to other institutional domains in the Parsonian model of modern society. Family and religion might be governed by affect, but the economy is governed by instrumental action.

As we shall soon see, Weber’s concept of economic action is the paradigm for Parsonian instrumentality, in spite of the former’s recognition that any activity, including making love, can be rationally pursued with calculation.⁷ Parsons’s instrumental/affective dichotomy closely parallels Weber’s distinction between economic action and other social action. For Weber, economic action is the quintessential pursuit of interest by means of rational technique—that is, technique consciously and systematically oriented to the experience and reflection of the actor (1978, 65).

The distrust of emotion as a force shaping economic action in all but the most affective (“female”) spheres of social life evidences a model of

human subjectivity and social action that has deep roots in Western European cosmology. In the 1980s, Michelle Rosaldo characterized these oppositions of thought/feeling, cognition/affect, outer “mask”/inner “essence,” and “custom”/personality as products of a “bifurcating and Western cast of mind” (1984, 137), wedded to a Western cosmology of self and society. Rosaldo argued that the interpretive turn in anthropology (Geertz 1973) provided potent conceptual resources for challenging these dichotomies and rethinking our notions of selves, affects, and personalities (137). She pointed to developments in psychology (Ricoeur 1970) and philosophy (Foucault 1972, 1978) that enable us to comprehend that human self-understanding does not emerge from an inner, presocial world, but “from experience in a world of meanings, images and social bonds, in which all persons are inevitably involved” (Rosaldo 1984, 139).

instead of seeing feeling as a private (often animal, presocial) realm that is—ironically enough—most universal and at the same time most particular to the self, it will make sense to see emotions not as things opposed to thought but as cognitions implicating the immediate, carnal “me”—as thought embodied. (Rosaldo 1984, 138)

Recognition of the fact that thought is always culturally patterned and infused with feelings, which themselves reflect a culturally ordered past, suggests that just as thought does not exist in isolation from affective life, so affect is culturally ordered and does not exist apart from thought. (137)

The idea that emotions are no less cultural and no more private than beliefs would seem obvious after a couple of decades in which cultural constructivist approaches have been in ascendance. Yet Rosaldo’s argument that selves and feelings are more productively understood as the creation of particular sorts of polities and social relations seems yet to have significantly affected studies of “economic action.” Such a change would open the door to a cultural analysis of emotion and economic action, reclaiming emotion as a product of social practices as well as a force shaping the production, reproduction, and transformation of economic action.⁸

In this study, I use the term *sentiment* to bridge the dichotomy between emotion and thought. As affective ideas and ideas with affect, sentiments are both emotional orientations and embodied dispositions. I include among them what are often described as concepts of selfhood and identity. Under particular conditions, sentiments generate particular desires and incite particular social actions. The patriarchal desire for succession by a son or children, which I discuss in chapter 3, is an

example of such an incitement. My use of the terms *desire* and *sentiment* rather than *value*, *ideal*, *goal*, or objective is intentionally provocative. I hope to blur the boundaries that have come to be taken for granted in much of cultural and social theory between desire, which is conceptualized as an embodied yearning—sometimes even viewed as originating in the body (as in the case of sexual desire)—and ideals or goals, which are characterized as mental constructs originating outside the body and internalized by means of ideological enculturation, thus lacking the physicality and energy associated with the body.

Bourgeois “economic” actions, like all culturally meaningful actions, are incited, enabled, and constrained by sentiments that are themselves the products of historically contingent cultural processes. The Como silk industry is the result of the continuous generation and regeneration of family capitalism by people whose desires for capital accumulation have been incited by sentiments of family unity and communalism, but also by sentiments of individualism, independence, and competition. The latter are as integral to the generation and regeneration of firms as the former. In chapter 4, for example, I trace the ways in which trust and betrayal, as conjoined sentiments, incite and are incited by processes of firm production and reproduction in the Como silk industry. As sentiments in play at different moments in the developmental histories of family firms, trust and betrayal shape the character of technological diffusion, firm competition, and the creation of new firms. They are, on the one hand, products of the workings of Italian family capitalism. On the other hand, they operate as *forces of production* of Italian family capitalism.

My conception of sentiments as forces of production follows Donham’s (1990) usage of Marx’s concept of *produktivkräfte*, which is usually translated into English as “forces of production.” Donham (1990, 59), following Cohen (1978), uses the alternate translation “productive powers” in order to highlight the fact that human capacities, rather than things outside human beings, were among the central referents of *produktivkräfte* for Marx. Like Donham, I am concerned with the ways in which human capacities, including skills, sentiments, and knowledge, influence and shape material production. In contrast to Donham, however, I construe these human capacities as both resources that are used in production and as cultural forces that incite, enable, constrain, and shape production. All human capacities that can be used in production, after all, also constrain and shape processes of production. As human capacities, they are not mere passive resources to be used in a neutral way for the sake of an acultural process of production. These human capacities, moreover, are constitutive of social actors themselves. In other words, I am interested in the ways in which sentiments, knowl-

edge, and skills operate simultaneously as material and cultural forces of production to incite, enable, constrain, and shape processes of production, in this case, specifically, Italian family capitalism.

Kinship and Gender: Bringing It All Back Home

In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist scholars engaged in rethinking the links between work, family, and economy identified a major limitation of Marxist analyses of capitalism—namely, their failure to address processes of reproduction. By “reproduction” feminist scholars meant more than the biological processes through which new generations of humans are produced; they also meant the social production of humans with labor capacity. They challenged androcentric Marxist formulations that omitted “domestic relations” from the analysis of capitalism because they do not produce exchange value, arguing that such exclusion overlooks the social reproduction upon which capitalist production depends. Crucial to social reproduction is the domestic work of women in nurturing and socializing children who will be future workers and in caring for husbands whose labor capacity is reproduced on a daily basis. Feminist scholars argued that women’s work in families includes not just the housework of cooking, cleaning, and shopping, but their emotional labor in creating a home and family that give meaning to wage-labor. The family as a refuge from the demands of work, the commodification of labor, and the market depends on women’s unremunerated labor. This feminist critique led to the recognition that a domain of relations, sentiments, and values that had been construed as “noncapitalist” in both popular discourse and academic theory is crucial to capitalist production and to the reproduction of capitalist relations of production.

The socialist feminist critique of Marxist theory in the 1970s and 1980s focused almost exclusively on the reproduction of the labor capacity of workers—in other words, on the uncompensated work of women as wives and mothers. The reproduction of the bourgeoisie was largely ignored. The reasons for this lie in Marx’s conception of the bourgeoisie as a class that is defined by the ownership of capital rather than by its labor. As we shall see in the discussion to follow, in Marx’s view capital reproduces itself through the estrangement of labor and commodity fetishism. Thus, the reproduction of capital is a systemic process of capitalism as a mode of production, rather than a human process. Even if we grant that capital reproduces itself through these processes, however, it remains that the bourgeoisie does not. The capital/labor distinction—while extremely productive for Marx’s analysis of relations of production—has the drawback of blinding us to the human

productive capacities of the bourgeoisie and to the processes by which they are reproduced. Defining the working class in terms of its labor power and the bourgeoisie in terms of its ownership of capital can lead us to overlook the fact that the productive capacities of the bourgeoisie are also produced and reproduced through cultural and material processes. In short, capitalists, like workers, are made, not born.

I do not mean by this that capitalists, both as individuals and as a class, must be biologically reproduced or even socially reproduced by bourgeois women through child rearing and socialization in bourgeois families. Obviously, the bourgeoisie as a class can be reproduced through the recruitment of individuals from nonbourgeois families. Regardless of whether those who make up the bourgeoisie are raised in capitalist families or are recruited from other classes, however, they must be sustained, nurtured, and endowed with the sentiments and motives to pursue capitalist goals. In other words, just as the labor power of workers—their productive capacities, which include knowledge, skill, and physical prowess—is socially and culturally produced, so are capitalists' productive capacities. Like workers, capitalists must have not only knowledge and skills, but sentiments and desires that enable and incite them to engage in particular kinds of productive activities. As capitalism entails more than mere commodity production and the pursuit of profit—it has at its core the relation between wage-labor and capital—it follows that capitalists must have both the capacity and the desire to own and control the means of production.

Family and kinship processes, relations, and sentiments are crucial for the production and reproduction of all forms of capitalism, whether family capitalism or nonfamily capitalism. Family capitalism, however, brings more clearly into view these processes, relations, and sentiments. Indeed, one of the benefits of studying family firms is that it brings to the fore the “other” supposedly “noncapitalist” processes crucial to capitalism. The study of family capitalism—a form of capitalism that has been marginalized in both Marxist and Weberian theories—enables us to see that its marginalization is itself part of the hegemonic process through which capitalism is made to appear as an economic system that is autonomous from family and kinship processes. One of the analytic projects of this ethnography, on which I focus in the concluding chapter, is to understand the discursive and material processes through which some relations, sentiments, and activities of the Como bourgeoisie come to be viewed as falling outside the realm of the “firm” and “business” and within the realm of the “family.” These processes parallel wider processes in capitalist society through which certain kinds of relations, sentiments, actions, and entire institutions come to be defined as outside the realm of the economy. The opposition between “family” and “business” and the irrelevance of “family” to the “economy” in popular dis-

course mirrors this process. In social theory it is evidenced in the division of society into “capitalist” and “noncapitalist” relations and domains.⁹

That social theory would relegate family and kinship to a marginal role in capitalist society is ironic in light of the fact that the intergenerational transmission of property through family inheritance is a primary determinant of an individual’s relation to the means of production and, thus, to his or her location in the class structure. Inheritance is also crucial in shaping the dynamics of firm development, expansion, diversification, reproduction, and decline. As we shall see, inheritance in Italian family firms is shaped by a dense cluster of sentiments about kinship and gender.

Gender pervades not only ideas and practices of inheritance and succession but all aspects of Italian family capitalism. Anthropological studies (Kondo 1993; Ong 1999; Greenhalgh 1994; Marcus 1992, 1998) suggest this is true of family capitalism everywhere. These studies provide useful comparative material on gender hierarchy and the marginalization of women in bourgeois families. Little attention, however, has been paid to the formation of bourgeois male identities. Yet, asking how particular capitalist masculinities motivate particular kinds of capitalist action would seem a powerful analytic strategy for challenging assumptions about the existence of a universal capitalist motive. In the absence of such analyses of bourgeois male subjectivity, it is tempting to naturalize and universalize particular forms of bourgeois masculinity and particular modes of accumulation.

Having learned from feminist theory the crucial role that discourse plays in producing women’s subjectivities, we need to consider how men are discursively constituted as persons with certain kinds of desires, characters, orientations, and limitations. We need to broaden our gender analysis to investigate how men’s subjectivities are produced in relation to women’s subjectivities through everyday discourses and practices. In the chapters to follow, I scrutinize the discourses and practices through which both husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons are culturally produced. If I focus more on masculine subjectivity, it is both for theoretical reasons (this is where gender studies is in greatest need of development) and empirical reasons (the vast majority of firm owners in the Como silk industry are men). Rather than assume that men are naturally motivated to accumulate wealth, power, and prestige and that their actions are the outcome of logical or rational strategies, I ask what men want and why they want it. This leads me to the link between Italian bourgeois men’s pursuit of capital accumulation and their desires as fathers for the continuity of their families and the independence of their sons. Bringing gender into my analysis of Italian family capitalism enables me to denaturalize both bourgeois masculinity and capital accumulation.

The marginalization of family and kinship, gender, sentiment, and identity in studies of capitalism is intertwined with key aspects of the theoretical approaches that have dominated the analysis of capitalism in the twentieth century. To understand how this came about and how we might move toward a more encompassing theoretical approach to capitalism, we need to turn to the two major social theorists of capitalism: Marx and Weber.

Marxist Reification and the Consciousness of the Bourgeoisie

Marx's analysis of the emergence of modern Western capitalism out of European feudalism is a compelling history of cultural transformation. His discussion of the historic formation of the European bourgeoisie, for example, includes a culturally nuanced analysis of how competition arose out of the bourgeois desire for independence from the fetters of feudal society and came to be experienced as a form of enlightenment (Marx and Engels 1976, 434). In arguing that societies characterized by an "Asiatic mode of production" lacked the requisite elements for the emergence of modern capitalism, Marx incorporated, albeit crudely, cultural analysis in his historical materialism (Marx 1970). He made it clear, moreover, that he was aware of the cultural specificities of British capitalism, which supplied the primary material for his model of capitalism.

Marx was primarily interested, however, in the systemic character of capitalism as a mode of production. For the sake of constructing a "pure" model of capitalism, he intentionally disregarded the historical particularities of the British case (1968, 23). According to this abstract model, once capitalism has emerged, it is self-perpetuating and requires no culturally motivated agents—either bourgeoisie or proletariat—to reproduce it. In contrast to his rich, complex analysis of the motives and strategies of the various fractions of the French bourgeoisie in their counterrevolution in the mid-nineteenth century (Marx 1963), in *Capital* the bourgeoisie are reduced to being the agents of capital.

Marx's powerful theory of the formation of proletarian subjectivity is not matched by an exploration of capitalist subjectivity. His brilliant discussion of the commodification of labor and the fetishism of commodities continues to stand as a compelling cultural analysis of how people, in this case an abstract proletariat, make sense of and come to accept their exploitation and their place in a social hierarchy.¹⁰ But this deft analysis has no parallel in his discussions of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, Marx's lack of interest in developing a conceptual apparatus to understand how capitalist goals, actions, and subjectivities are produced and reproduced over time has the effect of naturalizing capitalist desire

and action. For Marx, the capitalist has only one motive: namely, the desire for capital accumulation — “the ceaseless argumentation of value” (1976, 254). The capitalist’s aim is never use value or the profit on any single transaction, but always the “passionate chase after value” (254).¹¹

The first time the term *capitalist* appears in the main text of volume 1 of *Capital* is when Marx writes

As the conscious bearer [Träger] of this movement [i.e., the circulation of money as capital], the possessor of money becomes a capitalist. His person, or rather his pocket, is the point from which the money starts, and to which it returns. The objective content of the circulation we have been discussing—the valorization of value—is his subjective purpose, and it is only in so far as the appropriation of ever more wealth in the abstract is the sole driving force behind his operations that he functions as a capitalist, i.e., as capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will. (254)

In short, for Marx the capitalist is merely the medium for the circulation of money. He is Capital with consciousness, the personification of Capital, compelled by the “immanent laws of capitalist production” to accumulate capital and reinvest it (739). The capitalist, no less than the worker, is enslaved by capitalism.

The self-valorization of capital—the creation of surplus-value—is therefore the determining, dominating and overriding purpose of the capitalist; it is the absolute motive and content of his activity. And in fact it is no more than the rationalized motive and aim of the hoarder—a highly impoverished and abstract content which makes it plain that the capitalist is just as enslaved by the relationships of capitalism as is his opposite pole, the worker, albeit in a quite different manner. (990)

Marx’s analysis of capital accumulation sheds light on its fetishism of value:

Capital is money, capital is commodities. In truth, however, value is here the subject [i.e., the independently acting agent] of a process in which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, it changes its own magnitude, throws off surplus-value from itself considered as original value, and thus valorizes itself independently. For the movement in the course of which it adds surplus-value is its own movement, its valorization is therefore self-valorization [Selbstverwertung]. By virtue of being value, it has acquired the occult ability to add value to itself. It brings forth living offspring, or at least lays golden eggs. (255)¹²

Although he endows value with the agency to bring forth living offspring in order to display the perversity of capitalism and its subversion of the natural world, Marx falls prey to his to his own irony.¹³ Nothing is mentioned about the agency or desire of capitalists to accumulate capital. Instead, the social relations of capitalists, both their relations with members of their own class as well as their relations with those of others, are determined by the agency of value. A reified analytic abstraction supplants the consciousness of the bourgeoisie. Marx thus denies capitalists what he claims distinguishes human beings from animals—the ability to express a purpose or plan raised by one’s own imagination (projective consciousness).

For him [the bourgeoisie], only one relation is valid on its own account—the relation of exploitation; all other relations have validity for him only insofar as he can include them under this one relation; and even when he encounters relations which cannot be directly subordinated to the relation of exploitation, he subordinates them to it at least in his imagination. (Marx and Engels 1976, 434)

Given his focus in volume 1 of *Capital*, on the material and ideological processes by which surplus value is converted into capital, Marx is explicitly not concerned with any *other* uses the capitalist makes of surplus-value, let alone the broader range of sentiments and desires that inform those uses. In discussing the transformation of surplus-value into capital, he states:

We leave out of account here the portion of the surplus-value consumed by the capitalist. We are also not interested, for the moment, in whether the additional capital is joined on to the original capital, or separated from it so that it can valorize itself independently. Nor are we concerned whether the same capitalist employs it who originally accumulated it, or whether he hands it over to others. (728)

Marx was well aware, of course, that the drive for profit and capital accumulation was neither natural, universal, nor always socially acceptable. Indeed, one of his major contributions was showing how capitalist relations that were an assault on preexisting ideas and social relations came to be accepted and glorified. Lust for money, after all, had been denounced by Saint Augustine as one of the three principal sins of fallen man (lust for power and sexual lust being the other two), and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries social philosophers condemned moneymaking pursuits as a form of avarice (Hirschman 1977). By endowing capital with social agency, however, Marx did not help us to understand how and why people become capitalists.

Max Weber, on the other hand, undertook to do just that.

The Iron Cage of Weberian Binaries

In his most influential and broadly cited work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber set out to answer the question of how activity that had been barely tolerated in Europe before the seventeenth century came to be seen as a lofty calling. In sharp contrast to Marx's willingness to sacrifice historical specificity for the sake of discovering the generic mechanisms of capitalism, Weber's analytic project was decidedly historical. His attempt to identify the distinctive characteristics of modern capitalism was in keeping with his commitment—in contrast to the approach of the British political economists—to understanding economic action within a broader cultural history (Giddens 1992, viii). Like Marx, Weber underscored the distinctiveness of modern Western capitalism from other forms of capitalism—for example, the pariah capitalism of European Jews and medieval Italian capitalism. But he went further in locating the origins of modern Western capitalism with its ethos of rational calculation within a historically and culturally specific conjuncture.¹⁴ In characterizing the Protestant capitalist's striving for the continual accumulation of wealth as the unintended consequence of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, Weber built a historical link between capitalist subjectivity and economic action that is missing in Marx. Rather than being the agent of capital—itsself the fetishized effect of an abstract process—the Protestant capitalist is impelled by deeply felt moral sentiments to pursue a distinctive mode of economic action that integrates ascetic self-control with disciplined accumulation.

At the same time, however, Weber shared Marx's vision of capitalism as a self-reproducing institution that, once established, is independent of the historical forces that created it (Weber 1992, 181). Once capitalism is in place as the “modern economic order,” it quickly becomes detached from the specific religious motivations that initially produced it. What was once an entrepreneurial practice driven by a spiritual ethic becomes an “iron cage” that determines the lives of all those born into it. Even by the time of Benjamin Franklin, the religious basis of the spirit of capitalism had died away (180). The rationalization of a religious ethic produced a secular logic of rational calculation and “in the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often give it the character of sport” (182). According to Weber, “The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so” (181).

By the end of the *Protestant Ethic*, Weber has offered a provocative and ironic cultural history of how a religious sentiment produced a purely “economic action.” But he leaves us without an adequate theo-

retical framework for understanding how capitalist goals and actions are produced in subsequent historical periods among specific cultural actors. He makes it clear that once modern capitalism had taken hold in Europe, the Protestant ethic was no longer necessary for its continued practice and dominance. Weber's project was to explain the *origins* of modern capitalism in Europe, not its subsequent adoption and diffusion to other areas of the world. His concept of institutionalization allows those lacking the preconditions to have been the original creators of modern capitalism to adopt it. In other words, capitalism and its techniques of formal rationality and diligence can be appropriated, practiced, and even developed to a higher level of competitiveness by people entirely unfamiliar with Protestantism or who lack any parallel religious ethic—whether they are German Catholics or Chinese. At the end of the *Protestant Ethic*, Weber concludes, “No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise” (192).

The idea that a Russian or Indonesian must internalize the Protestant ethic or its functional equivalent in order to become a modern, rational capitalist rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of Weber's thesis. Only an “Occidental” version of his historical argument would claim that the Protestant ethic is an essential element of modern capitalism. A good deal of the scholarship documenting the success of Buddhist, Confucian, Islamic, and Catholic capitalism in order to refute Weber's thesis has misplaced its critique in focusing on the link between Protestantism and capitalism rather than on his failure to provide an analytic framework for understanding how people from diverse cultural “traditions” might practice heterogeneous forms of modern capitalism.¹⁵

A more fundamental theoretical dichotomy, however, gets in the way of Weber's formulation of an analytical framework for understanding the cultural production and reproduction of capitalist meaning and action. This dichotomy is one that Weber laid forth most clearly in his major work, *Economy and Society*. At the core of this treatise is Weber's concept of “economic action.”

Action will be said to be “economically oriented” so far as, according to its subjective meaning, it is concerned with the satisfaction of a desire for “utilities” (*Nutzleistungen*). “Economic action” (*Wirtschaften*) is any peaceful exercise of an actor's control over resources which is in its main impulse oriented toward economic ends. (63)

“Rational economic action” requires instrumental rationality in its orientation, that is, deliberate planning. (Weber 1978, 63)

Weber's definition of “economic action” rests on the distinction between action oriented toward the satisfaction of a desire for utilities and

action oriented toward the satisfaction of other desires (68). He defines utilities as “the specific and concrete, real or imagined, advantages of opportunities for present or future use as they are estimated and made an object of specific provision by one or more economically acting individuals” (68). In addition to “goods” (nonhuman objects that are the sources of potential utilities) and “services” (utilities derived from a human source, so far as this source consists of “active conduct”), “social relationships . . . valued as a potential source of present or future disposal over utilities are . . . also objects of economic provision” (69). This definition of utilities opens up his definition of “economic action” to a much broader range of actions than might be initially surmised. Indeed, it makes it difficult to distinguish “economic action” from other social actions, including those oriented toward establishing and maintaining kinship relations and friendships. Thus, what seems at first glance to be a rigorous and narrow definition of economic action turns out, on closer scrutiny, to rest on concepts that blur the boundaries of the definition. The problem is not that Weber’s definitions are not sufficiently rigorous, but that his analytic strategy of differentiating economic action from other social actions is ill conceived.

On the other hand, Weber makes it unambiguously clear that it is the subjective meaning that processes and objects have for human action that determines whether they are economic actions. While he recognizes that actions may be oriented toward multiple ends and shaped by multiple considerations, Weber assumes that they can be classified on the basis of their “conscious, primary orientation” (64). Indeed, his confidence in our ability to discern the primary orientation of social actions is so great as to lead him to distinguish economic action from economically oriented action.

As distinguished from “economic action” as such, the term “economically oriented action” will be applied to two types: (a) every action which, though primarily oriented to other ends, takes account, in the pursuit of them, of economic considerations; that is, of the consciously recognized necessity for economic prudence. Or (b) that which, though primarily oriented to economic ends, makes use of physical force as a means. It thus includes all primarily non-economic action and all non-peaceful action which is influenced by economic considerations. “Economic action” thus is a conscious, primary orientation to economic considerations. (64)

Modern capitalism, with its calculative spirit and singular goal of profit and accumulation, is accordingly distinguished from the economically oriented actions undertaken by the large capitalist households in the medieval cities of northern and central Italy (359). Because these households were committed to a principle of solidarity in facing the

outside and to a “household communism”—that is, a communism of property and consumption of everyday goods (359)—Weber considered them to be based on “direct feelings of mutual solidarity rather than on a consideration of means for obtaining an optimum of provisions” (156). Hence, he concluded, they have a “primarily non-economic character.” According to Weber, “Willingness to work and consumption without calculation in these communities [the family, comrades in the army, and religious communities] are a result of the non-economic attitudes characteristic of them” (154).

Weber’s concept of economic action—which lies at the core of his notion between “modern capitalism” and other forms of capitalism and profit seeking—relies on the boundary between actions oriented toward the satisfaction of a desire for utilities and actions oriented toward the satisfaction of other desires. But few social actions are so singularly oriented as to be easily classified according to such a scheme. Indeed, Weber’s general theory of economic action and his definition of modern capitalism are at odds with his own analysis of Puritan capitalism. According to his general theory, the Puritan capitalism out of which modern capitalism developed was not a form of economic action because its primary orientation was spiritual affirmation and not the satisfaction of a desire for utilities.

In Weber’s scheme, “modern family capitalism” is an oxymoron because its orientation toward communal commitments of family unity and continuity disqualifies it from his definition of modern capitalism, which is oriented exclusively toward the rational, calculated pursuit of profit and accumulation. In the chapters to follow, I show that Italian capitalists engage in both the deliberate, calculative pursuit of profit and the fulfillment of other culturally meaningful desires. These include both the “communitistic” desires that Weber associates with “household communism” and “individualistic” desires for self-realization and independence. In challenging Weber’s binaries of economic action versus “other” social action and modern Western capitalism versus “other” capitalisms, I hope to clear the way for a cultural theory of economic action that treats all social action—including capital accumulation, firm expansion, and diversification—as constituted by both deliberate, rational calculation and by sentiments and desires: in other words, as cultural practices.

Weber’s early work on medieval Italian capitalism led him to conclude that the legal and accounting separation of the business enterprise from the household was crucial for the emergence of modern Western capitalism. While this separation may have been a significant innovation, Weber’s error was to misconstrue the *legal fiction* of separation—which was put in place for the purpose of limiting individual and familial financial liability—as a *de facto* separation of family relations from

business relations. In other words, Weber turned a legal fiction of the separation of the family from the firm into a social theory in which the family and economy in modern capitalist society were cast as distinct institutions. In doing so, Weber appears to have fallen victim to the illusions of a bourgeois legal apparatus.

Other Capitalisms: A Cautionary Tale of Orientalism

Weber's distinction between "modern Western capitalism" and other capitalisms has had a profound impact on the ways in which capitalism outside the West continues to be perceived today. His emphasis on the "individualistic" desires for self-realization and independence of Puritan capitalism has encouraged a cultural essentialist theory of capitalism in which "non-Western culture" is viewed as either an impediment to modern capitalism or the basis for a different species of capitalism. "Asian capitalism" has been the prime candidate for these kinds of characterizations of "non-Western capitalism" in both scholarly and popular discussions. The current discourse about the global competition between Asian capitalism and Western capitalism for international markets and economic hegemony depicts each side as employing a distinctive mode of capitalist organization and being driven by a distinctive cultural ethos.¹⁶ Whether the claim is that Japanese capitalism draws its inspiration from deep-rooted traditions of Confucian and Buddhist morality (Coates 1987; Yamamoto 1992) or that the rapid economic success of East Asia's four "mini-dragons" (Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore) and of diasporic Chinese entrepreneurs is due to a "Confucian ethic" that is the functional equivalent of the Protestant ethic (P. Berger 1988; Chan and Chiang 1994; Kao 1993; Yao 1991), culture is envisioned as a static tradition in which distinctive values of communalism, group orientation, hard work, social discipline, harmony, and the centrality of the family have produced an Asian capitalism to rival that of the West.

If we are to avoid the pitfalls of this popular version of an essentialist theory of capitalism and culture, we need to consider the implications of current representations of "Asian capitalism" for the analysis of "Western capitalism." In these discussions, "Asian capitalism" is the marked category that carries culture, while "Western capitalism" is the unmarked category—the normal, rational, logical capitalism. Hence, crucial to representations of "Asian capitalism" are assumptions about "Western capitalism." Understanding these representations is a necessary step toward a cultural analysis of capitalist practices in Italy as well as in other European sites.

The replication of an older Orientalist discourse (Said 1978) in con-

temporary celebrations of an Asian spirit of capitalism, which lauds precisely the features that in the past were identified as obstacles to Asian modernization, has been roundly and deservedly criticized by anthropologists and other East Asian studies scholars (Hamilton and Kao 1991; Greenhalgh 1994; Ong 1999; Rofel 1999; Wei Ming 1996, 1998). Beyond its oversimplification of Weber's thesis of the origins of modern capitalism and the failure to demonstrate how the Confucian ethic is manifest in actual entrepreneurial organization and behavior (Wei Ming 1998), the thesis of the Confucian ethic treats values and beliefs as if they have a life of their own apart from the people who embody and enact them in historically specific circumstances.¹⁷ To move beyond such portrayals of capitalist difference, we need guidance from a cultural theory that will steer us clear of essentialist models of culture.

Theorizing the relation between culture and capitalism turns out to be no simple task, however, and it is easy to run aground on an unanticipated set of shoals while trying to maneuver around others.¹⁸ Attempts to refute essentialist models of culture and capitalism often lead back to acultural models of a universal "capitalist logic" of the sort proclaimed by Harvey. Antiessentialist approaches to Chinese capitalism provide a useful case in point. In challenging the Orientalist characterizations of Chinese capitalism promulgated by both Western observers and the transnational Chinese corporate elites she studied, Ong argues that claims about insurmountable cultural differences between East and West "can occur in the context of fundamentally playing (and competing) by the rules of neoliberal orthodoxy" (1999, 7). She contends that discourses of the distinctiveness of Asian values "disguise common civilizational references in a world where the market is absolutely transcendental" (7), thus suggesting that homogeneous rationalities and modes of action are demanded of those who wish to be effective players in the global economy. Along these lines, Ong suggests that "there may not be anything uniquely 'Chinese' about flexible personal discipline, disposition and orientation" or in the "mix of humanistic relations and ultrasentimentality" that she observed among diasporic Hong Kong Chinese capitalists (136). At the same time, however, Ong defines their kinship and *guanxi* networks as a "historically evolved regime of kinship and ethnic power" fashioned by subjects accustomed to "living on the edge of political and capitalist empires" (111). Rejecting cozy images of Confucian family harmony and collectivism, she characterizes these kinship and fraternal networks in Foucauldian terms as regulatory regimes that facilitate the accumulation of wealth while controlling and trapping women and the poor (116).

Ong's critique—which shares much with Greenhalgh's (1994) analysis of Taiwanese family firms—is a welcome antidote to the naïve glorification of the "benevolent paternalism" and "collectivism" of Chi-

nese family firms. In their attempt to refute the Orientalist thesis that attributes the “utilitarian familialism”¹⁹ of Chinese entrepreneurs to traditional values, however, Ong and Greenhalgh overcorrect in characterizing them as instrumental appropriations and reinventions by entrepreneurs adjusting to the demands of the world economy and state policies (Greenhalgh 1994, 75; Ong 1999, 136). The characterization of Chinese capitalist families as governed by “family strategies of regulation” that are “expressions of a habitus that is finely tuned to the turbulences of late capitalism” (Ong 1999, 117, 136) reflects a utilitarian theory of subjectivity in which people’s goals follow from their strategies. Family sentiments and commitments are discursively constructed and legitimated simply, it seems, because they are the most effective means toward economic ends.

The language employed by Ong and Greenhalgh conveys an analytic preoccupation with the regulation and constraint of action. In Taiwan, “powerful family patriarchs” were “constrained to build their firms out of their families by powerful currents in the domestic and global political economies” (Greenhalgh 1994, 748) “because they faced intense pressures from the global and national political economies that left them with few alternatives” (764). Among diasporic Chinese capitalists, “the disciplinary norms of capitalism and culture also constrain and shape strategies and flexible subject making”—including flexible attitudes toward citizenship (Ong 1999, 19).

An adaptationist model of people struggling to adjust to the economic and political exigencies of a global political economy is not unfamiliar in anthropology, especially in light of our discipline’s historic focus on less-powerful communities and societies as they are pulled into the orbit of European colonial and postcolonial states. But we have come to realize that even in the case of colonized and subaltern communities, an adaptationist scheme that fails to trace how cultural sentiments and subjectivities have shaped the path taken has serious limitations (Tsing 1974). When such an approach is applied to “powerful family patriarchs” and “Chinese corporate elites,” its shortcomings are amplified. It is not that the powerful and wealthy are free from the constraints and pressures of forces that are not of their own making. But those forces open up and make possible, as well as constrain, goals and strategies. Among both wealthy elites and the subaltern they incite desire and enable action, not just suppress them. While it may seem a minor quibble whether we employ a vocabulary of constraint and regulation or one of enablement and incitement, the analytic consequences, I would argue, are significant. The former tends to lead toward economically reductive, utilitarian interpretations of strategies of action, the latter toward an understanding of the culturally meaningful ways in which

people fashion strategies and, in the process, reformulate their desires and commitments. The former may be useful for understanding changes in the means people employ, but the latter enables us to understand the unfolding dialectic through which both means and ends are transformed. It prods us to ask how people reformulate ideas and sentiments of family and personhood, masculinity and femininity, parental commitment and filial loyalty, as they confront political, economic, and cultural shifts.²⁰

From the perspective of an anthropologist studying Italian capitalism, these critiques of Orientalist portrayals of “Asian capitalism” have an additional blind spot. They fail to challenge the other half of the essentialist dichotomy—the representation of “Western capitalism.” This leaves in place a vague and monolithic model of “Western capitalism” that appears to be imagined roughly along the lines of a Weberian individualistic, rational capitalism.²¹ The critics of the Confucian-ethic thesis may be forgiven for this oversight, as their concern is to counter the West’s representation of the East. As Said (1978) made clear, however, Orientalism is a discursive practice through which the West constructs itself as the modern antithesis of the Orient. It follows that a thorough critique of Orientalism requires a critical examination of both representations of “Asian capitalism” and representations of “Western capitalism.”²²

Italian Capitalism

In the mid-1990s newspapers in Tuscany published several investigative stories describing the alarming labor practices of small Chinese family firms that had moved into the lower end of the leather industry in Tuscany. Replete with allusions to shadowy “secret societies” that controlled the flow of illegal immigrants from China, these newspaper accounts honed in on the long hours that family members put in at low pay and under oppressive work conditions. In the context of the rising antiimmigration sentiments throughout Italy in the 1980s and 1990s, as the country for the first time faced a greater influx of immigrants than outflow of emigrants, sensationalist stories about the un-Italian cultural practices of immigrants were not surprising. What I did find surprising was the absence of any hint of self-recognition in these stories. Why was it, I wondered, that the journalists writing these accounts did not comment upon the similarities between these immigrant subcontracting firms and the small Italian family firms that have been the mainstay of numerous manufacturing industries in the country? After all, a common complaint I had heard voiced by the owners of subcontracting firms in Como was that even smaller (local) family firms were undercutting

them by offering their services at costs so low that it was clear they were exploiting family labor.

During the same period, the popular press in the United States occasionally featured stories of the internecine squabbles over succession and control of famous Italian capitalist families such as Agnelli, Gucci, and Benetton. Over the years, I accumulated a file of clippings sent by friends and colleagues in Italy and the United States who knew of my research project. Family conflicts among the rich and famous in the United States, of course, also entice the interest of U.S. readers, but those involving Italian capitalist families seem to have the added appeal of a genre in which passionate family battles conjure up the drama of the *Godfather*. Clearly, these conflicts are read as emotional psychodramas much more enticing to follow than corporate takeovers in U.S. capitalism.

In this popular discourse, Italian capitalism sits awkwardly in the cultural essentialist divide between “Eastern” and “Western” capitalism, and a consideration of why this is so raises important questions both about Italian capitalism and about “Western capitalism” itself. As will be seen in the chapters to come, Italian capitalism is shaped by commitments to forms of collectivity, filial loyalty, and patriarchal authority—all features associated with “Asian capitalism.” At the same time, however, it is influenced by commitments to individualism, independence, and rationality. It is not my intention to turn the tables on the West and subject “Italian capitalism” to an Orientalist analysis that characterizes its motivations and orientations as irrational expressions of cultural “tradition.” This, of course, would merely recycle the analytic dichotomies that have impeded our understanding of the multiple commitments and desires that shape all “economic actions” and of the complex sentiments, orientations, and relations that make up “Western capitalism.”

The familial character of Italian capitalism has contributed to its “othering” in the West. But it is not the only reason for its reputation as a “culturally traditional” form of capitalism. For one, Italy, along with other Mediterranean societies, has been viewed by northern Europeans and North Americans as more closely linked to the agrarian, preindustrial past of Europe. Until recently Italy, like Greece, signified both Europe’s glorious “classical” past and its more recent, premodern backwater.²³ The anthropology of Mediterranean societies has reflected this view in its near exclusive focus on rural or small-town life in the least industrially developed regions of Italy. Ethnographic studies in Italy have tended to focus on the south (e.g., Davis 1973; Schneider and Schneider 1976) and other less industrialized areas (Silverman 1975; Holmes 1989; Pitkin 1985), and there have been almost no studies of the urban north.²⁴ The “honor and shame” complex and its associated

gender hierarchy came to be the marker of Mediterranean society just as caste has been for India, lineage for Africa, and the closed peasant community for Mesoamerica.

Italy's relatively late transformation in comparison to other Western European nations from an agrarian society to an urban-industrial one, of course, contributed to the characterization of its social and economic institutions as holdovers of a preindustrial, southern European folk society. Industrial development did not get underway in Italy until the 1880s, and its timing and sequence has had a long-lasting impact on its place in the international market and its national politics. Confronting a regional and international market already dominated by more industrially developed nations, the northern Italian bourgeoisie had to ally itself with agriculture-estate owners in the south to create a national market sheltered by tariffs (Piore and Sabel 1984, 151). The result was the dependence of the bourgeoisie on the newly formed state and its concession of considerable political power to other social classes (Martinelli and Chiesi 1989, 110).²⁵ Although the political legitimacy of the bourgeoisie has been significantly strengthened in Italy over the last quarter-century, their earlier lack of clear-cut political hegemony led other advanced industrial-capitalist nations to view Italy as politically unstable.

Weber's thesis of the lack of "affinity" between Catholicism and the regularized investment of capital contributed as well to the relegation of Italian capitalism to the margins of "Western capitalism." Although Weber considered the medieval cities of northern and central Italy the source of the "uniquely Occidental" innovations that eventually led to the development of modern capitalism, he concluded that Catholicism lacked the "this-worldly asceticism" of Puritanism and the moral energy and drive to generate modern capitalism (1978, 359). The impact of Weber's thesis has been great, despite its basis in his misunderstanding of Catholic doctrine (Giddens 1992, xxiii) and his failure to study the actual workings of Catholic and Protestant capitalism. Whether we regard "Western capitalism" as an essential, stable practice of the West or as a discursive construction, Weber's thesis of its Protestant origins has had the effect of marginalizing Italian and other non-Protestant European capitalisms in models of "Western capitalism."

Finally, the predominance of family firms and the weaker development of public joint-stock companies in Italy in comparison to other Western European capitalist nations has contributed to the view that Italian capitalism has yet to mature into advanced capitalism. The persistence of communal values in family capitalism is problematic for both Marxist and Weberian theories of capitalism, as both Marx and Weber assumed family firms would eventually decline and be replaced by joint-stock corporations. The Parsonian model of capitalist moder-

nity that has dominated sociology in the twentieth century elaborates the Weberian thesis into the theory of structural differentiation (Parsons and Bales 1955). According to this social evolutionary theory of increasing functional specialization, the spatial and institutional differentiation of family and work is central to capitalist-industrial society. A functionally reduced family that specializes in the reproduction functions of child care, nurturance, and socialization evolved out of the multifunctional, preindustrial household (Parsons 1943; Parsons and Bales 1955; Smelser 1959). This theory of capitalist modernity renders those for whom family relations are productive relations an anachronistic vestige of precapitalist society. The family, after all, is supposedly an insufficient basis of accumulation, and the dynastic character of entrepreneurial families is considered incompatible with the meritocratic values of modern bureaucracies and technostructures. Consequently, where family firms have been crucial to the industrial dynamism attributed to flexible specialization and flexible accumulation in economically successful nations such as Japan and Italy, their persistence is seen as calling for explanation.²⁶

In Italy's case, these explanations have focused on the political-economic forces that have created a large entrepreneurial middle class engaged in small family enterprises. Most scholars agree that Italy's place in the global economy has been crucial in the creation of this family business sector, but they do not agree as to how. Suzanne Berger (1980) contends that this sector fills a shock-absorbing function in an international market with its ups and downs, while Pizzorno (1981) emphasizes the ruling Christian Democrat party's political motives for supporting it, arguing that its strength is crucial to continuing the party's political hegemony. Martinelli and Chiesi (1989, 123) add that the big capitalist families in Italy have been able through adept financial strategies to counteract the difficulties posed by state managers, insufficient accumulation, a progressive tax system, and inheritance taxes.²⁷ All agree that whatever the multiple causes of the persistence of family firms in Italy have been, there is no indication that the system is in decline (Chiesi 1986).

The paucity of empirical studies of family firms makes it difficult to assess these explanations of the continuing vitality of family capitalism in Italy. Sociological research has yielded useful information on family firms in a number of regions and sectors (Martinelli, Chiesi, and Dalla Chiesa 1981; Paci 1982; Frigeni and Tousijn 1976), and there have been a few historical studies of dynastic families (e.g., Bairati 1988; Scasellatti 1994). The one ethnographic study of family firms by Blim (1990), which does a superb job of locating these firms in a regional political-economic history, is focused on small firms primarily in the shoe industry of the Marche region. Given the paucity of ethnographic research on

Italian family firms, we lack an understanding of the processes through which individuals and families create, develop, expand, reproduce, and divide firms. As a result, attempts to bring culture into the analysis of Italian family capitalism have tended toward what could be labeled a “culture resource” model. I discuss this model in chapter 4, where I review the literature on Italian family capitalism. Here it is worth noting the parallels between this approach and the Orientalist analysis of Asian capitalism. Several researchers (Paci 1982; Frigeni and Tousijn 1976; Blim 1990; Piore and Sabel 1984) trace the formation of small firms in Italy to the family traditions that have facilitated the pooling of labor and capital in various regions of Italy. Like Confucian communal values of filial piety and family unit, the communalism of agrarian households and other preindustrial kinship formations in Italy are presented as stable resources that have been drawn upon to develop efficient capitalist enterprises. Family and kinship, indeed culture in general, are treated as institutional resources that are distinct from capitalist enterprise and as means that can be useful for capitalist ends.

The Silk Industry of Como

Even before the proximity of hydraulic power from Como’s many rivers and streams made it one of Italy’s first industrial manufacturing industries in nineteenth century, silk production in Como was spread over a loosely organized network of production units.²⁸ As in the early development of the northern European textile industry (E. Goody 1982), merchants functioned as the industry’s entrepreneurs by taking on both supply and marketing functions. Instead of grouping weavers together in factories, merchants bought the thread that had been spun in the homes of farmer-artisans, who often raised silkworms and cultivated mulberry trees along with other agricultural products. The merchants then had the thread woven by artisans who owned their own looms. Even after the industrial transformation of the industry led to the concentration of the spinning of thread in large factories (*filature*) and the adoption of mechanical looms, production continued to be dispersed. Although there were a few vertically integrated firms, the vast majority of firms operated in only one phase of the production process. After the 1930s, the cultivation of silkworms declined rapidly in the region and the industry came to rely entirely on raw silk imported from China. But the other phases of the production process—including the twisting of the silk thread, its preparation for weaving, the dyeing, weaving, and printing of the fabric, the preparation of screens for printing, and the packaging and marketing of fabric—continued to take place in different firms.

In the late 1950s and 1960s—the period considered the “miracle years” of rapid economic development and growth in Italy—there was a move to centralize production in vertically integrated firms. But the decentralized industrial structure of production was reinvigorated by the labor conflicts of the late sixties and the rising labor costs and world recession of the early seventies—all of which underscored the advantages of decentralized, but coordinated, networks of small firms. Firms called “converters” put the production process in motion by deciding what kind of fabric should be produced and then ordering the spinning and twisting of thread and the weaving, dyeing, and printing of fabric by other firms.

During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a decline in the total number of firms and employees in the industry along with an increase in output per worker, but the size distribution of firms was fairly stable, with 68 percent of the firms having fewer than ten workers, 18 percent having between eleven and fifty workers, and 14 percent having fifty-one or more workers. In 1985 the industry employed about thirteen thousand workers in the province of Como, thus constituting its leading manufacturing industry.

Throughout its history, the industry has been characterized by the overwhelming predominance of local ownership by Como families. In 1985, out of the approximately four hundred firms in the industry, there was only one joint-stock company that had been started by investors outside of Como and there was no multinational ownership. Local ownership does not mean, however, that the industry is, or ever has been, an autonomous local system of production and distribution isolated from international flows of capital, technology, and labor or from international markets. During its industrial beginnings in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the industry depended on German and Swiss finance capital, German textile machinery firms, and French textile firms—for which it performed many of the earlier stages of production, leaving the final, and greater valued-added, phases to the French firms. Since World War II, moreover, Como has not produced any raw silk and instead has relied entirely on China for its supply. With Italy’s increasing industrial success, Como’s firms have come to be tied in more with Italian finance capital, but they are still integrally linked with transnational industrial and commercial networks.

Como’s silk industry is commonly described, by both outsiders and insiders, as a “provincial” industry rooted in local entrepreneurial values. One of the frequent complaints voiced to me, especially by the owners of larger firms, was that the industry was being kept from achieving its true potential by the “conservative” “closed,” and “provincial” mentality of the small firm owners. In the last chapter of this book, I argue that the “provincial” character of capitalism in Como is

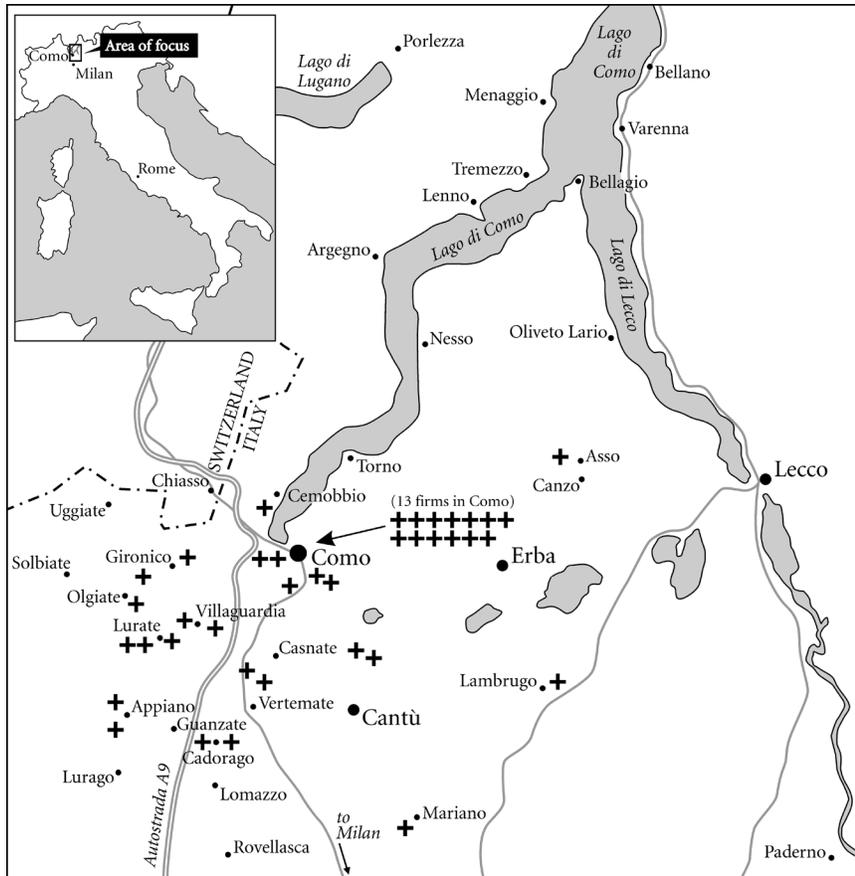


FIG. 1.1. Location of Firms in Study

not merely the expression of a unique local culture of entrepreneurship or, as some Comaschi claim, of a personality type wrought by the province's northern exposure to the Swiss. Rather, it is the discursive and material outcome of the relations of production among fractions of the Como bourgeoisie which have been historically constituted by sentiments of kinship and gender, regional and international political economies, and the Italian state.

The Scheme of This Book

This introductory chapter sets the stage for what is to follow: an ethnographic study of Italian family capitalism that treats capitalist action

as culturally produced and, therefore, always infused with cultural meaning and value. My critique of the concept of economic “interest” has led me to propose an alternative theory of capitalist motivation in which sentiments operate as forces of production that incite particular kinds of capitalist action. I have argued that the productive capacities of the bourgeoisie are, like those of workers, produced and reproduced through cultural processes in which kinship and gender are crucial. The marginalization of kinship and gender, sentiment and subjectivity in models of capitalist action was traced to the ways in which the two major theorists of capitalism—Marx and Weber—conceptualized capitalist agency. This was followed by a cautionary tale of the way in which a Weberian binary between “modern” and “premodern” capitalism has been replicated in recent popular and academic discussions of the struggle between “Western capitalism” and “Asian capitalism.” My discussion of the adaptationist reductionism of some anthropological critiques of this essentialist model of culture and capitalism led me to question both halves of this binary. Finally, I have attempted to consider the challenges that an ethnographic study of Italian capitalism confronts and to provide the reader with an abbreviated history of the silk industry of Como.

In chapter 2, “The Generation of Firms,” I mine the “official” histories of firms, treating them as origin narratives that tell us a good deal about Como entrepreneurs’ concepts of personhood, entrepreneurial success, family, firm, and society. All “official” firm origin narratives recounted to me by the current owner-managers of firms identify a beginning and a founder who is represented as having used his creative energy to generate his own firm, his own family, and his own destiny. Fathering a family and fathering a business are mutually interdependent projects of creation in Como firm owners’ cosmology of kinship and business, family and capitalism. The interpretation of these “official” firm histories leads me to consider issues of representation that have been raised by recent challenges to ethnographic authority. I extend the reflexive critique of ethnographic accounts to argue that the stories our informants tell, like the stories the anthropologist tells, must also be situated within the broader context of the stories told by other people. Accordingly, I draw on alternative histories provided by other family members and on the “stories the state can tell” contained in the archives of the Camera di Commercio (state-sponsored chamber of commerce) to verify, supplement, challenge, and raise questions about “official” firm histories. My investigation reveals systematic exclusions of the flow of capital from founders’ wives’ parents, which suggests a comparison to the gender amnesia that Evans-Pritchard discovered among the Nuer. This leads me to conclude that the sentiments and commit-

ments shaping capital and kinship investments among the Como bourgeoisie are more complex and more compromised than those portrayed in official firm histories.

Having shown that founding a firm and founding a family are integral achievements of male adulthood among the Como bourgeoisie, I address the challenges facing the sons of founders, who cannot claim to have created their own businesses and, thereby, their own destinies. In chapter 3, “Reproducing the Firm,” I bring into dialogue the concerns about continuity expressed by bourgeois fathers in Como and those expressed by British kinship theorists to question the notion that law, rather than sentiment, ensures the continuity of the social order. The distrust of sentiment and the abiding faith in law as the basis of corporate continuity, which characterized the work of British kinship theorists, is not borne out by Italian family firms. More than law, the patriarchal desire of fathers to endow their sons with the means of independence from subordination to other men operates as a force for the continuity of firms. The question of how likely it is that sons will successfully continue the firm leads, at the end of the chapter, to a discussion of social mobility and internal differentiation among the Como bourgeoisie. In order to understand the strategies and struggles for firm continuity and mobility among the Como bourgeoisie, I need first to address the issue of what they share as a class and what differentiates them internally. I divide the Como bourgeoisie into three fractions on the basis of their effective control over the means of production, their class trajectories, and their strategies of class reproduction and social mobility. This lays the groundwork for my analysis in chapters 4 and 5 of the different configurations of capital and kinship that shape the development and demise of firms in different fractions.

Chapter 4, “Betrayal as a Force of Production,” begins by contrasting the distrust of kin voiced by Como firm owners with what scholars have written about the key role that collectivity and commitment to extended family ties have played in the success of Italian capitalism. I ask why Como firm owners’ descriptions of their collaboration with other firms and the constraints on innovation diverges from the rosy picture of flexible specialization touted by some scholars. I show that betrayal and estrangement are as much a part of the experience of the lower fraction of the Como bourgeoisie who own and manage small subcontracting firms as are trust and collaboration. Moreover, the histories of these firms and their relation to other firms reveals that the decentralized structure of production of the silk industry of Como was not an “accidental discovery” of the postwar years, but the reinvigoration of a long-standing system in which larger firms rely on small firms for manufacturing services. The metamorphosis of some employees, includ-

ing relatives, into competitors connects trust and betrayal to issues of control of technical knowledge and clients, which are the primary means of production among small subcontracting firms.

Where chapter 4 focused on the lower fraction of the Como bourgeoisie, chapter 5, “Capital and Gendered Sentiments,” describes the processes of family and firm reproduction and division among the upper and middle fractions of the Como bourgeoisie. The struggles over the concentration and fragmentation of capital in these families parallel those over the control and deployment of technical knowledge among families of the lower fraction. In the upper fraction, family maturation and segmentation are anticipated and managed by strategies of capital diversification that often begin with the division of management labor among children. New firms may be created in allied sectors of the industry rather than in the same sector, thus complementing the work of the original firm and avoiding direct competition with it. Families in the middle fraction, however, generally do not have sufficient capital to support this process of diversification and, as a result, some siblings leave the firm. The eventual conflict between the divergent class reproduction strategies of siblings divides the family, some of whose members move into other fractions of the bourgeoisie. My investigation of the struggles over inheritance and succession among these upper- and middle-fraction families is set in the context of the 1980s as the demographic, cultural, and legal shifts initiated in the 1960s and 1970s began to be felt by the Como bourgeoisie. This brings to the fore issues of gender and the inclusion of daughters, as family members rethink and reconsider sentiments and strategies of capital accumulation, firm reproduction, and family continuity.

In the concluding chapter, I argue that the struggles within the families of the Como bourgeoisie not only shape family and firm processes; they are also processes of class making and self making. Thus, the making of the Como bourgeoisie cannot be understood without considering kinship processes. Having shown that entrepreneurs who share cultural sentiments, meanings, and desires can have capitalist ethics as different as those labeled “provincial” and “global” in Como, I circle back to the theoretical issue that I raised in the introduction to this book—the relation between culture and capitalism. The answer I propose lies in an approach to culture and capitalism that enables us to understand the connections between the diverse capitalist orientations and practices that not only coexist in an industry, but that are constituted in relation to each other.