Antonella Ceccagno  
*City Making and Global Labor Regimes: Chinese Immigrants and Italy’s Fast Fashion Industry*  

**Reviewed by Nikolaus Hammer, University of Leicester**

This book analyses the specific labour and production regimes that underpinned the rise of fast fashion in Italy and have come to characterise the industrial district (ID) of Prato in the decades around the millennium: its headline features point to around 30,000 Chinese workers and entrepreneurs and almost 5,500 businesses in 2015 (p.83). At the same time, it is about much more as it focuses on the complex embeddedness of the production regime across scale, the blurred boundaries of formal/informal economies and insiders/outsiders of the ID, as well as the inter-linked dynamics across different social and ethnic relations. This ensures the book is of interest to scholars of work and employment, industrial restructuring, Italian IDs, globalisation, migration studies and entrepreneurship alike.

The book is structured into six substantive chapters that analyse the impact of globalisation on the Italian fashion industry, the ‘emplacement’ of migrants, the way ethnicisation and social reproduction supported the emergence of a specific production regime, and the criminalisation of ethnic entrepreneurship. Rather than focusing on a specific disciplinary framework, Ceccagno consistently pursues a multi-disciplinary analysis throughout the book. For example, the relative success of apparel manufacturing driven by Chinese entrepreneurs helped to sustain the older Italian ID-type structure of textile manufacturing. This happened precisely at that time when the latter’s local embeddedness and established state policies turned from opportunities to barriers in adapting to the way large brands’ offshoring strategies restructured global production networks. Relatively quickly, the Prato ID and, indeed, the city came to rely on the local Chinese production regime for fast fashion, both, as customers of textiles as well as real estate.

The research stands out for its multi-faceted analyses that underline time and again the way Prato was constructed as a global hub of fast fashion production. For most of the 1990s, for example, the Italian state imposed a ban on immigrant entrepreneurship, creating divisions between Chinese pioneer entrepreneurs and ‘late comers’, fuelling the informal economy which, in turn, served as pretext for rising tensions between Italian and Chinese business communities. Yet, again, it was the state that made it easier to hire undocumented workers ‘off-the-books’ than workers with permits (p.65). These dynamics were mirrored in the housing market, where migrant workers often depended on the complicity of their bosses in providing the necessary documentation.

Most interesting for scholars within the sociology of work and employment is the way Ceccagno draws on theories of ethnicity and migration, social reproduction, urban governance and politics, weaving a range of social relations into explaining dynamics at work and in the labour market. What she calls the ‘mobile regime’ — “a unique form of synergy … between the requirements of fast fashion production and the space reorganization of production adopted in the Chinese workshops” (p.63) — constitutes
the central contribution of her research. This mobile regime is characterised by the following key features: it is a ‘sleeping regime’ in the sense that most workers sleep in the factory, ensuring virtually permanent availability to the rhythm of orders, production processes, deadlines; and, workers are de facto assigned to a factory but can exercise inter-firm mobility if, for example, their own factory is low on orders. Two other factors that frame this mobile regime are, on the one hand, what she calls the compression of workforce diversity (entrepreneurs and workers are not only Chinese but from two specific regions in the NE of China) which facilitates not only communication but also the communal life that is subordinated to production. On the other hand, the outsourcing of reproduction (children were sent to carers in other parts of Italy or boarding schools in China) is equally crucial as childcare, even more so within the factory, would disrupt key aspects of the mobile and sleeping regimes.

The data and analyses are wide-ranging, rich, and based on Ceccagno’s privileged entry into this field, as anthropologist, Chinese linguist, as well as former research director and director of services in the Centre for Immigration Research and Services in Prato. Subject specialists might well crave more detail, however, the integrative analysis constitutes an important contribution, linking internal hierarchies in the workshop, wage formation, the employers’ responsibility for board and lodging, worker mobility, the changing balance of power in the labour market, and childcare arrangements.

The mobile regime establishes an important corrective to culturalist conceptions of migrant work and entrepreneurship and analyses strategies of tax and labour standards avoidance as well as enforcement against the changing local politics as well as the dynamics in the global production network. Far from conceiving this specific production regime as self-contained, this volume makes a very important contribution in situating this ‘mobile’ production regime in its local, transnational, institutional, economic, and social contexts and in highlighting the inter-relations and inter-dependencies between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ sides in the trajectory of the industrial district.