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BEHIND THE FAMILY FIRM: WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN ITALY ()**

(DRAFT)

Part I. Theoretical issues

This paper is a study on the role of women in the management and running of family enterprises in the Italy of the twentieth century. This theme is still little explored by historians and here it is tackled from a fresh viewpoint which is the representation and self-representation of women's entrepreneurs.

Recent theoretical formulations have indeed demonstrated that the entrepreneur is not motivated in his action only by mere economic ends (Casson), but that the systems of values and cultural elements contribute towards forging the entrepreneurial image and therefore entrepreneurial decisions (Lipartito).

This essay shows that, beyond the picture of legal and formal regulations, the public representation of the women engaged in the world of business according to female archetypes and ideal types accepted by common opinion has for many years ended up by relegating women's entrepreneurship to the real and symbolic family universe. Remaining opaque for a long time, the entrepreneurial action of women has thus escaped the best known and accredited theories on entrepreneurship.

In Part I are examined the conceptual references and the theoretical models which allow us to include in the analysis of entrepreneurship and of family business the category of gender (Scott, Kwolek-Folland). The social and cultural dimension of the economic action is placed however in a historical perspective which takes into account also gender differences. Instead the concepts of representation and self-representation are motivated following the theoretical formulations of

economists (Hayek), psychologists, sociologists, theorists of the cognitive approach to the economy (Kahneman).

The empirical evidence of the study is presented in Part II. Indeed by using many sources and documents (archives, interviews, interviews with journalists, newspaper articles) it has been possible to define and formulate the most significant ideal types and models produced by the representation and self-representation of women's entrepreneurship in the second half of the twentieth century, showing how the symbolic and real universe of the family has been constant to women's entrepreneurship.

Part I. The theoretical problems

1. A question for many disciplines: who is the woman entrepreneur?

Women's entrepreneurship is an elusive study subject. At the theoretical level this is because – as a vast literature has demonstrated – it is not easy to demonstrate who the entrepreneur is in any case. For economic and social history, because women's entrepreneurship is a peculiar phenomenon, which disappears and re-emerges in the course of time in relation to the changes which take place in the economy, in law, in the family, in culture. For the history of enterprise, because scholars have long neglected the study of small enterprises, focusing their attention on the large organizations (and it is well known that enterprises with women as their owners and partners are above all small in size, connected to a family organization of work and conducted with relatively meagre investments).

(**) This paper refers to a study carried out for the Fondazione Assi-Università Bocconi di Milano (in press).

Historiographically there have been many reflections on the theoretical models and interpretative categories adopted by scholars in their work of reconstruction of the past. And yet the most

stringent question for historiography in this context has remained the one raised by Jerzy Topolski, i.e. the ambiguity between objectivity and subjectivity in the process of “creation” of history. To show “the link between the subjective and the objective sides of the historical process is however always unitary” still constitutes one of the most difficult and at the same time important challenges of human sciences.

Within these historiographical coordinates may be found some of the problems of substance and of method of this essay: from the objectivity of the growing and visible presence of women’s entrepreneurship, to the epistemological question whether another economic agent can be the object and subject of history by reason of his/her belonging to a gender; from the necessity for the researcher to identify and utilize new sources to answer the new questions posed to the history of economic phenomena with the introduction of gender variables, to the subjectivity of the perception of self of the economic agents, to the representation of business which is widespread and commonly accepted in our culture. This is a research terrain which has yet to be explored, with paths that are to a large extent to be defined among the various disciplines, but from which it is possible to draw some initial indicative interpretative elements.

In particular, the inclusion of the concept of diversity in the analysis of the models and economic mechanisms allows us today to be able once more to include women’s entrepreneurship in the historical and economic analysis. Indeed the revision of the theories on entrepreneurship carried out since the Eighties and above all in the Nineties has led us to consider the Chandlerian model with new eyes. This model assumed that there was instead an evolutionary conception of the economy, with the convergence of entrepreneurial behaviour and strategies of enterprise towards the large organization. In reality observation and studies by economic historians and sociologists have demonstrated that in real experience diversity prevails (of behaviour, strategy and organizational forms even when entrepreneurs and enterprises compete in the same sectors and markets). And diversity also constitutes one of the theoretical nodes for the elaboration of gender history.

The mingling of functions and values is moreover at the basis of Casson’s theoretical reflection which has allowed us above all to overcome the segmentation of the entrepreneurial role suggested by traditional literature (Baumol, for example). The entrepreneur, as Casson observes, can in alternate moments be the owner, manager or intermediary in a sort of division of the entrepreneurial work which, in certain places and in certain circumstances, qualifies the entrepreneurial function compared to the other roles.

Secondly, if the entrepreneur is the one who takes *judgemental decisions* bearing in mind uncertainty (which is perhaps limited to the stock of the goods in the warehouse rather than investments in important innovations) rather than risk; and appears, rather than the Schumpeterian

hero or the arbiter of the market according to the Austrian school, instead an “everyday” entrepreneur; then the many tiny economic activities managed by women (such as in traditional trade or services, which have been totally neglected both by the *mainstream* and by the Chandlerians) can be incorporated into the analysis on entrepreneurship.

Thirdly, and finally, there is the category of Casson’s “ethical man” who acts because he is stimulated by a personal and social system of values. This definition cracks the rigidity of the paradigm of the “economic man” who is motivated solely by the quest for pecuniary satisfaction and who has been the ideal reference of the rationality of the market in neoclassical economy. The analysis of the motivations of the entrepreneurial action has allowed the dogma of rationality of the market to be overcome and has led to the recognition of the importance of cultural elements in the choices made by individuals. This opens up new investigation horizons for the study of women’s entrepreneurship.

On the other hand, various studies and social history works have demonstrated that women escape the traditional definitions and categories of entrepreneurship. Indeed women often practice entrepreneurship in informal ways (for example in charitable or welfare institutions or in family enterprises), straddling the boundaries between public and private as codified by a certain interpretation of the nineteenth century.

The study of the concept of entrepreneurship, as Lipartito observed, has to take into account not only the economic profile of the entrepreneur, but also the social portrait constructed by the media, by popular culture, by politics. In effect, in Italy (as happened also in the USA, the country which led the way in modern capitalism) research on entrepreneurs has suffered delays due to a widespread ambivalence towards the image of business and to various prejudices towards its protagonists. And all this has ended up by also restraining the study of the women’s professional entrepreneurial activity.

The hypothesis of this paper is that in Italy the public representation of the women engaged in the world of business according to feminine archetypes and ideal types, as accepted by popular opinion, ended up by relegating for many years women’s entrepreneurship to the real and symbolic universe of the family. For a long time it remained opaque, and the entrepreneurial action of women has thus evaded the more formal definitions of entrepreneurship.

2. Objectivity and subjectivity of the entrepreneurial role.

In traditional economic analysis of a neoclassical origin it is implicitly assumed that the reality exists beyond any subjective or sensorial experience. And, consequently, that all subjects utilize the same decisional criteria.

Instead scholars of the cognitive approach to economic phenomena, of which Hayek was a pioneer, have highlighted the strict relationship that exists between economic images and behaviour. As it is known, Hayek wondered in particular about the process of acquisition and elaboration of information. In his analysis perception is permeated by subjectivity and the relationship between subject and object is dynamic: “the environment is an elastic concept” which expands and contracts according to how its representation in the mind takes place.

More recently psychologists, who since the second half of the nineteen eighties have analysed decisional processes in the economic field, have identified various phases through which the decision-making process takes place. The first and determinant passage is self-representation which consists of values, moral rules and, more generally speaking, principles which guide in the choice of objectives and help to grasp their potential. The other phases which complete the decisional process regard, on the one hand, the individual’s representation and expectations about the future and, on the other, her image of the action and the plans to be adopted.

The decision-making process therefore takes place between the plane of reality, which is sometimes measurable and apparently objective but not necessarily the principal one, and the symbolic plane which is permeated by subjectivity and motivations. The decision-maker has a limited capacity of calculation and information, she moves in the uncertainty of the environment and she can only concentrate on a small number of alternatives. Therefore representation and self-representation are important segments of the construction of the entrepreneurial action. This is even more so in the case of women’s entrepreneurship which for a long time has been exercised informally in family firms or in the tiny productive activities of “single women” who have had to provide for themselves.

It is no accident -as Anglo-Saxon researchers point out- that the word business has remained one of the most obstinate gender ones of our times. Indeed the meanings and the current uses have evolved from a centuries old and prolonged process of construction of gender which has seen the most important business activities associated always more closely with men rather than with women. Thus the general perception is that business has been increasingly connected with production than with consumption; more with profit and the formal economy of market transactions than with the informal and non pecuniary economy; more with goods than with services.

As Pierre Bourdieu teaches us, the social world that tends to identify normality with identity in the sense of the self-constancy of a responsible being, and therefore predictable or intelligible in the

manner of a well constructed story, has at its disposal the means and institutions for generating a “totalizing unification of the self”. “Le recit de vie” tends therefore to approach as closely as possible the official model of the presentation of self and it varies according to the social quality of the role that is offered.

3. Family enterprise and the entrepreneurial identity of women.

What is the “family business” is a question which scholars have not yet fully agreed upon. Some privilege the aspects of ownership, others the control of shares and management, still others continuity between generations. Attention has thus been shifted onto the existing relations in the various countries between national cultures and the organization of the economy. In effect, the conceptual definitions always take into account the cultural, economic and institutional characteristics and their change over time. This is so despite the fact that single nations are not homogeneous cultural entities and, as is highlighted by the various characteristics of women’s entrepreneurship in Italy, they are in their turn fragmented into multiple institutions and customs linked to the regional cultures, ethnic flows, territorial, organizational and dimensional specificities of the various sectors and of the production activities.

In Italy the role of women has been determinant for the growth of family capitalism and for the diffusion of systems of small enterprise. And many clues lead to the conclusion that this is a long-standing characteristic (for instance, the informal role of well-to-do women in loaning money for family activity between the 18th and 19th centuries in Milan). The weight of tradition, the reference to the values of the Roman Catholic culture, the symbolic and the real function of the family in Italian society have been highlighted by scholars who have reaffirmed in this way the utility of cultural categories for the history of women. Historiography has indeed identified in the centrality of the family and in the re-formulation of the family produced by the Roman Catholic culture some constants that are peculiar to Italy. As an element of continuity the family provides order and meaning to the individual’s actions well beyond its function as a basic cell of social organization. And the reference to tradition and to the symbolic and real function of the family and its continuity in time are further elements in the building of the entrepreneurial culture of this country.

To explain the persistence of family capitalism, Casson put forward the hypothesis that the bonds of trust and altruism among the members of the family, which reduce the costs of transaction and provides more effective training of the younger generations, reinforce the dynastic motivation of the

family enterprise. And in effect it is precisely the dynastic motive that is today at the origin of much women's entrepreneurship. As the demographic changes of recent decades have also influenced the strategies of family continuity of the entrepreneurial role, they have opened up access to places of responsibility in the businesses to women.

For a long time women have in fact played an informal role in the family businesses, as is highlighted by the numerous biographies analysed and collected in the most recent studies. On the other hand, inside the family the relationships are interwoven with a process of constant interaction among the parties and nobody is simply passive or without influence with respect to the way in which the economic, power and solidarity relationships are manifested. The social representation commonly accepted by the gender roles (at least until the nineteen seventies) may therefore have rendered opaque the substance of the relationships and the functions of women in the management of the family business, when they were not legally owners or in charge. Nonetheless it should not be forgotten that the formal control of the money connected with the ownership of the enterprise is always the essence of hierarchical power within the family.

On the other hand, the diffusion of women's work in offices during the first half of the twentieth century contributed for many years towards spreading the representation of the function of women working in companies only in office jobs, as they were always entrusted with the work of accounting and administration. In reality the family enterprise as a social and economic group arose from the division of labour and collaboration and the decisions were for the most part the outcome of discussions and confrontation among the various members of the family.

From these complex interactions probably derives the fact that in Italy, according to the findings of a study conducted by Bocconi University in the second half of the nineteen nineties, women occupy multiple roles in family enterprises (52.6%), adding together at the same time the roles of business partner, member of the board of directors and director.¹

On the other hand, if we place the legal changes in the various historical phases we can see that, even though recognition of the full legal capacity of women and of their right to exercise all professions was sanctioned after the First World War, it was only in the seventies with the new family law (1975) and with the first law on equal opportunity between the sexes in the workplace (1977) that an institutional framework was created which favoured a more formal codification of the roles of women in the management of enterprise. The generational transition remained however a delicate and complex moment (whether the successors were the sons or instead the daughters) because from its preparation depended the changing or not of the identity of the firm.

¹ The research, conducted on a sample of 135 women entrepreneurs, points out that over 40% of women are both partner and in charge like director or member of the board of administrators.

Part II. Sources and Representations

1. Ideal types and public representation

In what way and how has the public representation of women entrepreneurs changed over time? Sources of great importance for understanding the transformations which have taken place in the social, economic and cultural portrayal of women entrepreneurs are the biographies from the archives of the *Federazione dei Cavalieri del Lavoro di Roma*, daily newspapers and economic periodicals. In Italy the “*merito al lavoro*”, instituted in 1901, is the most prestigious honour for the protagonists of the economy as it is bestowed each year on only 25 entrepreneurs. This award highlights important aspects of “Italy at work”, providing the recognition of the highest institutions of the models of entrepreneurship that are proposed by the professional associations to public opinion and which are representative of the many regional socio-economic realities of the nation.²

First of all, this honour was bestowed on a woman for the first time in 1964. Although from 1901 until today 2,551 entrepreneurs have been so honoured, only 30 women are among them. Until the end of the nineteen sixties this recognition was assigned with a certain degree of continuity, but in the following decade awards for women entrepreneurs became rarer (three compared to the

² This honour was instituted in 1901 by the prime minister of the time Giuseppe Zanardelli. The new “Ordine cavalleresco al merito agrario, industriale e commerciale (Knightly order of agrarian, industrial and commercial merit)” among those who have distinguished themselves as “singularly useful to society” in promoting the economic development of the country was an acknowledgement of the transformations in progress in Italy and at the same time it was an explicit political indication in favour of the “new Italy” of industry and production.

previous five). They became more frequent again between 1984 and 1989 (eight) and stabilized in the nineties (eight again). In the last five years between 2001 and 2005 six women entrepreneurs have received this award. The biographies represent those awarded according to four main aspects: regional and sectorial appurtenance, social origin and training, entrepreneurial achievements and innovations, commitment in political, associational and social networks.

The sectors where the visibility of the women entrepreneurs is greatest are the traditional ones of the women's productive, creative and patrimonial areas, in other words the areas of clothing (nine awards) and agriculture (five) which together makes up nearly half of the total number of awards. The regions with the highest number of women awarded are Lombardy and Tuscany (six each). While the Lombard women entrepreneurs are exponents of a polymorphous family capitalism (from chemicals to electronics to construction), in Tuscany the women represent more traditional production and economic sectors connected with the ownership of land and assets (agriculture and clothing).

The references to the family and to the elements that make up the symbolic and cultural universe of the family are a constant in the public construction and communication of the image of female entrepreneurship. Ideal type figures of a culture of family capitalism that acknowledges women's visibility in a function that is prevalently of support and substitution of other components of the family are in particular the first women entrepreneurs who obtained their awards in the nineteen sixties and early seventies. A representative figure of this model is, for example, Gilberta Gabrielli Minganti, the first woman to receive the award. She is described as "an attentive collaborator of her husband on the material plane" and as a "stimulus and support on the moral plane above all in difficult moments". And who, alone as a widow in the years of the reconstruction, took the reins of the company for the production of machine tools in Bologna, introducing innovations to the process and to the product, betting on exportation and creating an extensive network of branches for marketing and distribution. Likewise Angiola Maria Barbizzoli who in 1954 at her husband's death (he was the grandson of Davide Campari and managing director of the Milan company) was called upon to take his place. The iconography of the time presented her as an ex-teacher with little knowledge of the company techniques or of wine-making. And nevertheless as "an attentive collaborator of her husband" and "full of experience obtained living at her husband's side", "quick to capture the signs and the instants of progress" she enlarged the production plant and extended the commercial structures for the exportation that made Campari Soda and Campari Bitter become two aperitifs of world-wide fame.

Ideal type figures of the industrial culture of the North West and of the process of transformation of the sectors of the second industrial revolution, linked in popular imagination with male

competence and skill, are instead the women entrepreneurs who reached the top of the medium-sized enterprises which are the emblem of Italian “fourth capitalism” and who received the award in the last two decades. Such as Teresa Novarese Cerutti of Casale Monferrato in Piedmont. President of the family business for the production of technologically advanced printing presses since 1973, she transformed the company into a multinational group with factories in Piedmont and direct investments in the USA and in Spain. Novarese Cerutti subsequently widened her entrepreneurial scope into the financial field, participating in the privatization of Mediobanca and Banca Commerciale Italiana. Today the turnover of the Cerutti group is about 250 million euro, and the family is now at the fourth generation.

From the family capitalism of the North West come also the few entrepreneurs who entered the governing bodies of the entrepreneurial associations. Like in Turin where Claudia Matta was the first woman to enter the Board of the Confederazione Generale dell’Industria Italiana (Confindustria) at the end of the nineteen seventies. And in Milan there is Diana Bracco, a woman entrepreneur of the third generation at the head of an international integrated group in the chemical-pharmaceutical sector, a world leader in video-diagnostic instruments which has achieved industrial pre-eminence also in avant-garde treatment sectors. Diana Bracco entered the family business in 1966, and she is among the few women in Italy to hold office at the top of the entrepreneurial associations of her sector (among which the presidency of Confarma since 1985 and in 2005 of Assolombarda).

The ideal type of the “husband & wife” firm is instead Brionvega. Rina Tomasin Brion devoted her energies to the administration and organization of the commercial network of the little company for the production of radio components and apparatus which she set up together with her husband Giuseppe. They then entered the market of televisions, the first to be entirely projected in Italy with a design that was sought and obtained through collaboration with great architects and designers. The excellence of Brionvega obtained important international recognition, including exhibition in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art of New York and at the Louvre.

Instead in the “Third Italy” of the small enterprises organized in specialized local systems and with widespread development (like most areas of Veneto, Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli, Romagna, Marche, Toscana) the ideal type woman entrepreneurs are the ones to put to good use the ancient craftswomen’s skills (for example, dressmaking and tailoring) and the tradition of cultural, commercial and tourism relationships with foreign countries in the textiles-clothing, agriculture and food production sectors. Like Alberta Ferretti, who opened her first clothes shop in Cattolica in Emilia Romagna at the end of the nineteen sixties, working at the same time as an outside producer for well-known designers of Italian and European fashion. She then set up the production of *prêt-à-*

porter with her own brand, aiming at international markets. Or Silvana Spadafora who in 1957 founded in Trentino Alto Adige the firm Silvytricot for the production of knitwear; eleven years later she designed the uniforms for the Italian Ski Federation which launched her to fame with exports to Europe, Japan, Korea and the United States.

In the agricultural and food sectors the gender role has been represented in the most recent years as an added value for the success of the family business. Indeed the description of these businesswomen at the same time provides recognition of the “femalisation” of agriculture in the last half century and highlights the most ancient custom of entrusting pieces of land and estates to the management of the women of the family. Which is what happens for the descendents of the most important landed dynasties (for example, in the Veneto region, with Maria Luisa Gallarati Scotti). Or in Tuscany Maria Antonietta Di Frassinetto who managed the complex transition of the estate in *Val di Chiana* from sharecropping management to that of economy farming in the years of the post war reconstruction, and she introduced great innovations in the selection of the grains to be sown and those to be given to cattle, thus creating the nucleus of the *Chianina* pure breed that is the most important one in Italy. Or another, Maria Concetta Giuntini Spinola, who set in motion a work of radical transformation of the family’s landed estate in Maremma. Her daughter Franca Spinola Malfatti has subsequently enlarged on her mother’s activity with the production of D.O.C. wines well known on the international markets, and she has also set up a broad commercial distribution network in Rome.

Among the women who became “*cavalieri del lavoro* (knights of work)” prevail however the entrepreneurs of fashion and clothing (nine out of thirty), or in other words the exponents of historical sectors within which women have been able to manage for themselves the activity of artisan production and trade. The story of Paola Fendi, for example, is a woman’s story. In the transition phase from up-market dressmaking and tailoring to industrial production, in Rome she followed in her mother’s footsteps in the fur business together with her sisters Anna, Franca, Carla and Ada. She bet on diversification, creating a line of women’s clothing, and on innovation, experimenting the working of new materials for the clothing industry. Also Laura Biagiotti continued the activity of her mother Delia, who managed a high fashion atelier in the capital. And in collaboration with her husband, she diversified the activity into accessories, objects for the home and cosmetics.

The dual role of mother and woman entrepreneur connotes instead the representation of Wanda Miletta Ferragamo. Native of the province of Avellino, when she was very young she married Salvatore Ferragamo, a well established industrialist in the shoe industry, and she took on

entrepreneurial responsibility after her husband's death. Together with her six children she diversified production from leather goods to accessories and prêt-à-porter, increasing the international investments of the company. In Florence she set up a museum which exhibits the creations realised by her husband for the most famous people in the show business and she contributed to the organization of exhibitions and retrospectives in London and Los Angeles.

The ideal types that narrate women's entrepreneurship in the South of Italy are similarly as polymorphous as the many "South of Italys" highlighted by recent studies on the economy of those regions. It starts with the *topos* of the descendant of one of the most ancient dynasties of ship-owners of Campania (like Maria Laura Cafiero Mattioli, head of a ship-owning group whose activities in shipping dates back at least to the sixteen hundreds). It then ranges to that of the self-made woman like Bruna Vecchi Culcasi, who was born in Emilia but who emigrated to Sicily. She started out with a modest chicken farm in the early nineteen fifties, and she enlarged and specialised the company with a vast programme of modernization, diversifying her activities in the services sector.

On the other hand other stories are described as careers of "entrepreneurial emancipation" within the family. Like that of Elvira Giorgianni Sellerio who left her civil servant job to follow the little publishing company *Sellerio*, founded with her husband at the end of the nineteen sixties with the collaboration of the writer Leonardo Sciascia. As she herself narrates, although she was financially committed to the company, at the beginning her role was a marginal one. "I was the coffee-maker. Like a minor character, I would enter the scene and ask: coffee?" Only some years later did she take the initiative of autonomous publications, thus defining her role as an intellectual and promoter of culture.

From the mid nineteen nineties the specialist press and the daily newspapers tend to credit the evolutionist thesis of a positive female presence in enterprise. This, although it is still far from the male percentages, has already crossed the boundaries of being an occasional phenomenon. Thus women's entrepreneurship has been imagined as the diamond tip of the army of women who have entered the job market in the last half century, while business is seen as the last male bastion that has been stormed thanks to the completion of female emancipation in the twentieth century.

In this picture narratives of old and new archetypes relating to the family universe contribute towards drawing the image of entrepreneurs in the everyday press and in specialist economic publications. Like that of the women entrepreneurs favoured in their professional achievement by family backgrounds that are "open" to the values of "equal opportunity" between men and women (like Emma Marcegaglia and Anna Maria Artoni) and who have had important roles at the head of entrepreneurial associations (for example, in Confindustria).

Moreover it should be said that the archetype of the ancient family tradition has been revised as an “added value” in the media by many woman entrepreneurs from the South. And this is to make their own brand more credible on the markets, with consumers who are careful about the quality of the products they buy, through the use of centuries-old resources, artisan skills and technological knowledge in the sectors that are most closely linked to traditional production. This is the case, for example, of Vincenza Cassetta, a third generation entrepreneur, who produces the coloured ceramics typical of the Mediterranean and who directs five companies that give work to 180 employees at Vietri sul Mare in the province of Salerno.

In a long history of women able to dictate the rules of government and succession in a company there is instead the archetype used by Pina Mengano Amarelli as a narrative thread which tells the fortunes of the liquorice factory called Fabbrica di liquirizia Amarelli di Rossano Calabro, founded in 1731.

Positive heroines, the women entrepreneurs have been represented in the media, and they also represent themselves, as bearers of a new business ethic. In 2002, in an international scenario marked by turbulence and financial scandals, the AIDDA (Associazione imprenditrici e donne dirigenti d’azienda – Association of women entrepreneurs and women directors of companies) approved a document to launch a message of attention to themes such as transparency and trust in company life.³ The awareness of an enterprise as a social group and of the responsibility of the entrepreneur was reaffirmed as the moral epicentre of collaboration with employees, shareholders, investors, consumers, suppliers, public powers and the mass media. Individual feelings of obligation such as loyalty, equity, correctness, diligence, trust, integrity; ethical and community objectives such as the development of human resources, protection of the environment, good reputation, active and responsible commitment of the company in society as an “exemplary citizen” were proposed to public opinion as a new system of values and of entrepreneurial culture.⁴

2. Self-representation

The common view of entrepreneurship as a male profession has for many years led businesswomen to represent themselves as people less gifted with the requirements specific to entrepreneurship and

³ AIDDA was set up in Turin in 1961; subsequently it was extended to the other regions and it boasts about 1,400 members in Italy.

³ “A company is not only a machine for obtaining profit” stated Marina Danieli, president of the Delegazione Friuli Venezia Giulia di Aidda (Friuli Venezia Giulia delegation of AIDDA) – “but rather a reality with its own social dimension; the profits should be spent in innovation, in solidarity and in culture, especially in Italy”

as women who are legitimated in their working in enterprise above all for their function of stepping in to substitute for another family member. And therefore it is of great importance to understand what the system of values is and what the subjective motivations are that induce women to become entrepreneurs.

Culture, taken to mean that “system of values, ideas and convictions that forms the mental apparatus with which you seize reality”, in its time was broadly acknowledged by scholars such as Weber and Pareto although it was excluded from the neoclassical economic models. It is a very important variable for economic history. Indeed culture can reinforce the natural feelings of obligation (to be honest, loyal, work hard) of individuals and improve interpersonal coordination within a group, whether it is a local community or a business. This is the more so as the entrepreneur is an agent who knows how to understand, within the social group in which he operates and moves, the motivations that drive him to undertake an activity for which he sometimes does not even have the resources.

To reconstruct the motivations and the system of values of the women entrepreneurs we use new sources, that is the biographies of about 350 woman entrepreneurs that are the result of a study carried out to analyse the training process of women entrepreneurs in the North West.

The first peculiarity of this investigation, of which we shall examine here only some aspects in order to obtain the first indicative elements necessary for understanding their self-representation, is the use of prosopographic methodology. This has by now been broadly accepted by scholars of *entrepreneurship* (for example, Cassis). Therefore the most visible and exceptional stories have not been considered here. Instead an attempt has been made to collect and construct the biographies of the “everyday” women entrepreneurs. So women entrepreneurs are understood here in the broadest sense. This has been done to pinpoint the training process of entrepreneurship, starting from the assumption that the market is not an abstract place in which anonymous individuals interact, endowed with geometrical rationality without “blood and feelings” as theorised by the *mainstream*, but that it is instead the product of individual social and political choices. The study, and this is the second peculiarity, has therefore examined not only the experiences of the women who are to all effects the owners of the enterprise, but also those of women who, even though they have achieved roles of responsibility in the family firm, do not have formal ownership while having responsibility in the financial management. And this is because, as we have already observed, women often exercise an entrepreneurial role in a way that is not formal.

Finally, the third peculiarity is that the sample has been built with criteria that are not statistically descriptive, but instead qualitative. Thus, in the sample woman entrepreneurs are present who operate in the different sectors of Italian economic activity and not only in the sectors considered to

be a traditional prerogative of female initiative and where the presence of women is numerically more important (such as retailing, or activities in the fashion sector, or services to people). Particular attention has been devoted in any case to the production sectors where the presence of women is increasing (for example, in wine production) and to the manufacturing sector that historically has had greater specific weight for the economy of the North West (such as the engineering industry).

The lack of written sources and documents is a constant difficulty for studies on women. In general, researchers have tried to overcome these gaps by resorting to oral narration, although they are aware of the “traps of the memory” and of the peculiar “implications of power balance” that characterise the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewed. In any case, among scholars the importance of the subjective dimension of the individual is now recognised and with it oral narration has been accepted which expresses its self-representation. And also for research into the woman entrepreneurs of the North West we have used the actual voice of the protagonists.⁵

The vast majority of woman entrepreneurs attributes an important social responsibility to entrepreneurship and the entrepreneurial function is identified with the ability to “tackle and manage problems” with “independent judgment” and with values such as “seriousness, honesty, loyalty”. Among the factors that facilitate the construction of a business they put in the first place what they generally call the “entrepreneurial vocation”, and therefore the individual predisposition to exercise these functions, followed at a distance by technical skills and knowledge of the market.

In their representation and narration of themselves, the feelings of obligation (honesty, work, family, respect) are in effect in the first place among the values that the woman entrepreneurs say that they have received from their family education. Meanwhile the behaviour that drives them to enterprise such as competitiveness, the search for independence and economic security, and the aspiration to improve their own social and professional condition is described as being of little importance in the system of values received from the family. These answers seem to confirm that in Italian society and in particular in the training of woman entrepreneurs the weight of tradition and the values of the Roman Catholic culture, the building of relationships of trust in the closest community and the symbolic, besides real, function of the family are a constant.

⁵ To collect the women entrepreneurs’ biographies we particularly used the qualitative interview, whose objective is to *accede to the perspective of the subject studied*, capturing her mental categories, her interpretations, her perceptions and her feelings, the reasons for her actions. The interviewer has in any case followed a precise outline, so as to allow her to fill in the areas of a computer-based questionnaire. The main areas regard: the family, education, professional training, entrepreneurial choice, the enterprise, relations with the professional associations, banks, political organizations.

Indeed, among the motivations behind the choice to become an entrepreneur, we find that the women entrepreneurs place money and income questions after all the others. And yet, even though business is not the fruit of mere rational economic choices with the purpose of the maximum profit, it is however misleading to ignore the pecuniary aspects and forget that business is first of all an organization that must produce wealth. However, the representation of the scale of values and motivations that places profit in second place compared to other motivations and objectives, on the symbolic plane, gives credit to Casson's *ethical man*.

Is the family therefore the first value for woman entrepreneurs? In reality in Italy after the Second World War the experience and the emancipation of women had alternate phases, which were reconstructed by the memory and in the representation of the businesswomen. Thus if we highlight the differences in the representation of the values for generations, we can see that the family in itself is a very important value for the generations which grew up after the nineteen sixties, while it is relatively less so for the previous generations (table 2). And religion constitutes a more determinant cultural reference for the more recent generations than it does for those which grew up between the two World Wars.

These findings place in another light the common feeling that identifies in the family in itself and in the Roman Catholic religion the first and the most widespread values inherited from the past. Indeed for the generations which grew up before the nineteen sixties the most important value transmitted by family education is work. Nevertheless, in the nineteen fifties for many reasons work for Italian women was the source of disappointment (let us remember that the law which permitted companies to dismiss married women remained in force until 1962).

After the interruption of the Second World War, which saw women working to substitute the men, women had to leave the offices and factories and return to the home. But, as the businesswomen narrate, even though they lost visibility for the statistics, in the case of thousands of small and very small businesses created during the years of the *Golden age*, they became collaborators, administrators, women engaged in the family businesses to all effects, whose construction was facilitated by the widespread competences in administrative questions that women had acquired in the first half of the century as employees in office work. And, in effect, as is highlighted by what the women entrepreneurs tell us, the role of women was determinant in the growth of family capitalism and for the diffusion of systems of small enterprise.

The nineteen sixties corresponded instead to a "generational changeover" which, in full economic boom, saw mothers push their daughters towards emancipation through studying and access to the professions.

These are the daughters of a new and widespread affluence who declare in their self-representation that independence at work is the motivation behind their entrepreneurial choice, while for the previous generations equally cogent were the elements of constraint and necessity.

On the other hand, economic action cannot be explained only by referring to the individuals and to their motivations as atomized agents, but it is rooted in the system of personal relations and it must be interpreted with reference to the social context. Thus the generation that describes its own entrepreneurial choice as motivated by the quest for independence and professional realization is the same one (1963-73) that places the family at the top of the system of values.

The representation of the family in the system of values has therefore undergone an anthropological change: from hierarchical institution and of gender it has become the symbolic and real place of emancipation for the generation of woman entrepreneurs which grew up between the nineteen sixties and seventies. And this is the generation of women that has acquired full visibility in the family enterprises and that has made the “dynastic motive” its own.

In the case of the younger entrepreneurial generations which grew up during the eighties, in other words in the historical phase marked by private reaction and by a widespread individualistic culture, the feelings of obligation and the determinism of the family enterprise have apparently lost momentum at least on the symbolic plane. On the plane of reality, this is in effect the generation of women’s *self employment* in the sector of services and of the capitalism of the self (table 4 and table 5). According to the data from ISTAT (the official Italian institute of national statistics), in 1951 there were in fact 4,024,904 entrepreneurs in Italy and of these the women entrepreneurs were 580,353. Half a century later the overall number of entrepreneurs has fallen to 3,807,241 while women in enterprise have tripled to 1,438,230.

Conclusions

One of the questions that in the nineteen nineties still animated the debate on the presence and on the commitment of women in the business world, both in academia and in the broader sphere of specialists (the press, professional associations etc.) was the question as to whether there persisted or whether there were any differences between being a woman or a man in enterprise and in management. In general we tended to credit the specialist press and the daily newspapers with the evolutionist thesis of a positive and winning female presence, even though it was still far from the male percentages. Women’s entrepreneurship was represented as the diamond tip of the army of

women who had entered the job market during the last half century and business as the last bastion to fall for the achievement of female emancipation in the twentieth century.

In effect in Italy the diffusion of professional associations and of women's entrepreneurship, which took place in particular in the nineteen eighties, had once more raised the debate about the representation of the entrepreneurial profession as an activity marked in common opinion by characteristics specific to the male gender.

On the legal plane, substantial equality between women and men in the labour world was sanctioned by law n. 125 of 1991, when the more vast process of economic, social and cultural transformation was achieved since the Second World War and it was determined by the advent of the third industrial revolution and by the diffusion of the information technology paradigm.⁶ The I.T. revolution indeed accelerated the crisis in the Taylor-Ford organization of work with the male hierarchy which had led the production system of the twentieth century and of the *welfare* systems centred on the figure of the working man as head of the family. The transformations in the spheres of production and communication of enterprises seemed then to open up the road to the exploitation of women's competencies and aptitudes as the expression of a different way of "producing relations". Thus the forms and the opportunities for initiative for female entrepreneurship multiplied.

Despite these vast transformations in the organization of work, the central position of the family and the re-formulation produced by the Roman Catholic culture of the family have continued to present some constants which are peculiar to Italy. In particular, reference to tradition and to the symbolic and real function of the family and to its continuity in time have been other equally important grounding elements in the construction of the entrepreneurial identity of the country.

For many years the public representation of women engaged in the world of business according to female archetypes and ideal types accepted by common opinion has relegated the entrepreneurial activity of women to the real and symbolic family universe. Indeed, in the representation and narration of themselves, woman entrepreneurs say that the feelings of obligation (honesty, work,

⁶ Among the most important legal regulations that have tried to ensure for women in Italy the same opportunities of access and of career to men in the field of the public administration and of the companies, law n. 903 of 1977 states the formal guarantee of equality of treatment. Law n. 125 of 1991 marked instead the passage to the confirmation of substantial equality. With this provision numerous innovations were introduced compared to the laws of the past. Among the other novelties of a company and organizational nature were established the rules for the so called "positive actions", or in other words interventions aimed at improving the quality of the human resources in a company, such as training, to which women began to have access only in the nineteen nineties.

family, religion, respect) are at the top of the list of values that they say they have received from their family education. For many aspects this system of values coincides with that of the values of obligation of the *ethical man* indicated by Casson as the paradigm of the entrepreneur who carries out *judgemental decisions*.

Nevertheless in historical reality the hierarchy of these values changes from generation to generation. The cultural transformations can in fact re-shuffle the cards bringing to the surface, for example in the younger generations, traditional values which had weakened (such as religion) and forget the values of *entrepreneurship* considered to be of greater weight by the previous generations (such as the spirit of initiative).

In Italy the delay in the recognition of the equality of rights between husband and wife and between men and women in the work place has contributed towards rendering opaque the entrepreneurial action of women, which has thus eluded the more formal definitions of *entrepreneurship*. On the other hand the same entrepreneurs have interiorised and contributed towards perpetuating this image of gender in society, privileging in their outward representation the role of wife, mother and daughter compared to the role they actually hold in the company and in the business world.

Overcoming this narrative archetype came about with the generations that grew up during the nineteen seventies and eighties, when the legal rules of equal opportunity between men and women in the labour world, and in the paradigms of the economy, and the various aspects of gender education and culture changed together with the demographic transformations. These changes came together to produce a different awareness and a greater freedom of choice for the new generations.

On the symbolic plane, the *topoi* of the tradition and of the family thus shifted from the individuals to the company and they became the semantic references of Italian culture in the communication of enterprise.

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APPENDIX**

** The data refers to the sample of entrepreneurs of the North West and regard their self-representation.

Tab. 1 -The women entrepreneurs of the sample according to age range

Age range/b.y.	%
1910-1919	0,30
1920-1929	2,07
1930-1939	6,51
1940-1949	17,75
1950-1959	23,37
1960-1969	20,71
1970-1979	10,36
1980-1989	0,30
Un.	18,64
	100,00

Tab. 2 - System of values for the generations considered

Generations considered	%Family	%Work	%Duty	%Honesty	%Independence	% Spirit of initiative	%Religi
1920-1945	14.29	16.07	8.93	25.00	1.79	5.36	10.71
1946-1962	14.07	21.48	10.37	26.67	1.48	2.22	13.33
1963-1973	20.59	20.59	10.29	36.76	1.47	0.00	7.35
1974-1989	18.75	6.25	6.25	25.00	0.00	0.00	12.50
Un.	11.11	25.40	6.35	47.62	7.94	7.94	4.76

Tab. 3 - Motivations behind the entrepreneurial choice according to sector

Motivations behind the entrepreneurial choice	Crafts and		
	Agriculture	Industry	Trade-Services
Improvement of income and social position	17.24	11.38	12.30
Difficulty. Necessity	25.29	26.02	18.85
Improvement of professionalism	28.74	23.58	36.07
Independence	51.72	31.71	50.00

Tab. 4 - Motivations behind the entrepreneurial choice according to generation

Generations considered	Independence	Development of		
		professionalism	Improvement in income and social position	Difficulty/Necessity
Un.	49.21	47.62	22.22	11.11
1974-1989	50.00	37.50	0.00	12.50
1963-1973	54.41	30.88	13.24	19.12
1946-1962	37.04	24.44	10.37	27.41
1920-1945	33.93	16.07	12.50	32.14

Tab. 5 - Main opportunities for starting up enterprise according to sector

Settors	Original		Family opportunity
	Idea	Outside stimulus	
Trade - services	25.41	24.59	22.95
Crafts and Industry	12.20	13.82	51.22
Agriculture	12.64	4.60	66.67