NAMES, SIGNS AND MESSAGES: IDENTIFYING FOUNDLINGS IN LATE 19TH CENTURY NAPLES

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European kinship has figured in anthropological kinship studies mainly as an implicit point of comparison. David Schneider (1980) argued that the "biological" and the "natural" had a grounding function in Euro-American kinship, and this conceptualisation was also reflected in the anthropology of kinship. Recent developments – like the new reproductive technologies – have, according to many anthropologists, led to the destabilisation of the relationship between the "biological" and the "social." Yet, it is too often forgotten that even as a symbolic system, European kinship has had a complex history that cannot be reduced to conventional views regarding modernisation. Institutionalised infant abandonment is a case in point.

On the basis of archival documents, I will investigate child abandonment at the Neapolitan foundling home, or Real Santa Casa della SS. Annunziata, at the beginning of the 1870s. This research is social anthropological in orientation, but anthropological discussions provide only an implicit background for the empirical analysis here. My approach is also microhistorical, both methodologically and through related analyses within Italian social history. I consider the expressions that convey views on parenthood and infant personhood, mainly with reference to the messages and objects left with the children.

The term "micro" seems to be at odds with the very nature of the phenomenon. What the archives can offer in abundance is numbers. The period investigated here covers only three years, from 1870 to 1872, but the number of children left at the Annunziata was 6,961. It is

also obvious that the approaches of historical demography render possible the analysis of the connections involved, since these may indeed become visible only at the macro level. For example, it has been demonstrated that the increase in abandonments correlated not only with the rate of illegitimate births but also with the price of bread and the rates of rural-urban migration. Fosterage can also be explained by material needs. In short, "child abandonment was a system of exchange whereby poor women who could not keep their babies gave, or loaned, them to other poor women [in the countryside] who needed the extra income or eventual labour that the child provided" (Fuchs 1992:11–12). Ransel (1988:221) refers to foundlings as "perishable commodities" circulating within a "traffic of misery – much in the same manner as capital." This traffic appears to be directed by an invisible hand and run by rational, maximising agents.

The accuracy of these analyses is not my concern.[1] What I find questionable is the implicit distinction between interest and emotion (see Medick and Sabean 1984) in these generalisations, although the question of parental indifference (Shorter 1977) is largely left unaddressed. The dominance of historical demography has brought about a tendency "to infer the existence of special kinds of emotional relationship within the family from the harsh demographic facts that their statistics reveal" (Wilson 1984:181).

There are two presuppositions behind this leap from the aggregate to the individual level. First, individual and familial strategies are delineated on the basis of supposed rationality. For example, Ransel (1992:22) refers to economic interests and manoeuvres and adds: "People who take advantage of economic opportunities are seldom moved by high moral purposes." The second shortcoming is the focus on outcomes, which may divert attention away from the actual makings and transactions. The present-day ideological notions of gender, motherhood and the vulnerability of children are thereby easily projected onto the past in an anachronistic way. Interestingly, these leaps are often marked by affixing words like "naturally" or "obviously."

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[1] The empirical studies of the researchers cited here are thorough and perceptive. I wish to emphasize, therefore, that my criticism concerns certain tendencies in generalization rather than the analyses as such.

Like the social anthropologists often projected by microhistorians, I will look at processes of social interaction that can express unexpected connections and incoherence (see e.g., Zemon Davis 1981; Levi 1991), and, like the anthropologists of the interpretive or symbolic orientations, I will look at these processes as symbolically mediated practices. From this relativistic viewpoint, abandoned children can hardly be equated with commodities. Although it is quite easy to enrich the findings of historical demography by scaling down and by concentrating on ordinary people as subjects, there is more at stake in microhistorical approaches. In this case, the utterly enigmatic nature of archival documents must be respected because it reflects the central tenets of the system, namely, anonymity and secrecy. "Subjects" and voices cannot be easily delineated.

Over the centuries, institutionalised child abandonment had become a transnational phenomenon, and a central concern of complex ideological, political and institutional formations. The years examined here were the final years of the old system in Naples, but the related ideological currents and transformations are not discussed in this paper – although after Unification (1860–1870), a plethora of reports were written that addressed the social problem in a reform-minded spirit. It is certainly difficult to make sense of the working of the system even at the local level if the more encompassing context is ignored (see Kertzer 1993; also Tapaninen 1999). The fact is, however, that there was not a single system – political, legal or ideological – that could *explain* the existence of child abandonment in its institutionalised form. Rather, both constraints and possibilities took form in social relations that were permeated by complexity. This history cannot be constructed "from the bottom up," but neither were abstract forces simply reproduced in the practices of the various actors on the scene.

Special emphasis has to be given to concrete facts that cross-cut the presumed boundaries and may bring out significant incoherencies and paradoxes. This stance refers to a particular form of positivism. In the words of the social anthropologist Edmund Leach, "[p]ositivism is the view that serious scientific inquiry should not search for ultimate causes deriving from some outside source but confine itself to the study of relations existing between facts which are directly accessible to observation" (Leach 1966:39). This approach is reminiscent of the methodological principles within microhistory, of "evidential rigour" (Muir and Ruggiero 1991) or the intensive study of concrete facts within the documentary material (Levi 1991) despite obvious diversities in the method and subject matter between the two approaches. Furthermore,

the methods of both microhistory and anthropological fieldwork lead the researchers to unconventional terrain with the purpose of challenging received notions.

One theme that ranges from the most general to the most microscopic level of material is the multiple meanings of motherhood and fatherhood. In addition to birth parents, institutional paternity, the sacred motherhood of the Madonna, fosterage and *de facto* adoptions stand out as forms of relatedness expressed in a kinship idiom. This multiplicity takes a tangible form in various transformations, and the transformability of relatedness can be traced through two concrete facts. The first consists of connections of nurturance that crystallise in a symbolically laden substance *breast milk* (see Tapaninen 2004). The second aspect is related to connections of relatedness and filiation, that is, to notions of belonging and personhood, epitomised by the *name*. By focusing on these aspects, the complex phenomenon of child abandonment can be simplified in ways that allow for "defamiliarisation" or "estrangement" (Ginzburg 1996).

In this article, I will concentrate on the second aspect, the names. The approach is nominalistic in the sense outlined by Ginzburg and Poni (1991), the guiding method being the tracing of the names of individuals in different archival sources that may provide "a graphic image of the network of social relations into which the individual is inserted." In this case, however, this approach cannot yield rich portraits of named individuals. Personal names may be the most critical aspect of the system and thus the practices of naming must be related to namelessness. How did the parents leave traces, identify their children and forge connections? How did notions of parenthood and infant personhood find expression in the messages? How were these forms of communication patterned and conditioned? Further, how did the questions of legitimacy and illegitimacy – paternity, in particular – appear in the documents? These interrelated questions concern the central tenets of the system at large.

"THE CHILDREN OF NOBODY"

The principle of anonymity loomed large in institutional child abandonment. In the words of Donzelot (1980), foundling homes formed part of a complex whole that dealt with "the inevitable casualties of the family regime" delineated by a "tactical collusion" between the order of the state and the order of families. The main purpose was to

save children born out of wedlock from the dangers of infanticide and abortion – and, more importantly, to provide for the veiling of scandalous liaisons. To gather these children, the hospices had a simple technical apparatus: the wheel *(ruota)*. The wheel was simply a rotating box that turned behind a small hole in the wall. It guaranteed (fictive) invisibility and anonymity to the person leaving the child.

In this paper, the actual turning of the wheel – its frequency or the ideological and socio-political forces behind this motion – is not the issue. Rather, the questions posed concern the passage through the wheel: what kind of transformations took place? What can the messages that accompanied the babies disclose – or not? The question of names was, I maintain, at the centre of the system irrespective of its varying and changing forms.

In Naples, the wheel had kept turning for centuries, and with increasing frequency. In the 19th century, the establishment of wheels and the principles of secrecy were codified in the Code Napoléon (Kertzer 1993:89). The pillar of the system was the prohibition of paternity inspections and a parallel "secrecy of motherhood" secured by the wheel and maternity wards (Hunecke 1991:60). After Unification, paternity searches were still forbidden but the "natural" motherhood of unwed women was, in practice, under increasing surveillance (see Pomata 1980). The hospices, one after another, closed their wheels. In Naples, the closure (1875) was anticipated by the opening of a reception office at the end of 1872.

In 1857, Cossovich (1990 [1857] described the origin of Neapolitan foundlings as follows: "Necessity or sin, but, disgracefully, more often sin, almost daily [*sic*] throw these unhappy beings without name or title to the charitable nursery." "Sin or misery" was a recurring abstraction that referred to illegitimacy or poverty. Abandonment at the hospice was not discouraged, nor were there any efforts to find the reasons behind abandonment until the reforms. Consequently, foundling homes gathered not only the offspring of unwed mothers but also children who could not be maintained because of poverty. No wonder, then, that child abandonment has been conceptualised as the "social mechanism to redistribute 'surplus' children" (Tilly 1992:3). These children were received at the foundling homes as "children of unknown parentage" irrespective of their origin, and were subsequently called *esposti* ("put out" or "expelled"), *proietti* ("cast off"), *gettatelli* ("thrown away") or *trovatelli* ("foundlings") (see Kertzer 1993:11).

De Crescenzio (1873:276), the Director of the Annunziata, aptly described this strategy as "aid with closed eyes." In the name of

anonymity, the children "thrown" by abstract forces were gathered as if they were veritable foundlings. In the high-flown words of De Crescenzio (1873:22), "[the wheel] produces a class without name – for an abyss is created between the hospice and the mother." The word "abyss" indeed captures a crux of the system. At the wheel, in principle, births could be erased, identities veiled and the personhood of infants unmade. All in all, anonymity – both as a form of protection and as namelessness/exclusion – was the central tenet of the system.

De Crescenzio, like reformers in general, saw the wheel as the emblem of obsolescence. In the *Statuto Organico* of 1875 – largely designed by him – the counterproductive nature of this form of assistance is brought to the fore. But, interestingly, necessity was still of a moral nature. The concepts of "family honour" and "social prejudice" continue to evoke images of social and moral order.

CHILDREN OF THE MADONNA

After the child had been passed through the wheel, a new, anomalous social identity was constructed to compensate for the cancelled one. The wheel was indeed a void, since forming the new identity actually constituted a second birth.[2] The children were baptised (often *sub conditione*) and given a new surname even if they were known to have been already registered by the parents or authorities. All foundlings were given the surname Esposito until 1814,[3] and thereafter their surnames were invented, following an alphabetical order based on the month of entrance. They were also registered by identification numbers, or a combination of a letter denoting the year of entrance and the sequential number of the child.

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2 Entrance indeed corresponded to the date of birth, evidenced, for example, in the conscription of boys. One boy who had entered at the (approximate) age of two was due for call-up simultaneously with those that were two years his junior. The idea of several (legal) births, I would argue, also reflected contemporary views on birth as a process that comprised of conception ("animation"), actual birth ("manifestation"), baptism ("second birth") and registration ("legal birth") (see Filippini 1997).

3 The name Esposito is actually not a proper name, being based on the attribute e*sposto*. In other foundling homes, similar, stigmatising epithets were used but some hospices assigned first names only (Kertzer 1993:119). Thus, it seems that these epithets were not actual names but denoted namelessness.

The (re)birth was also recorded at the local registry office. These children were identified by names, registration number and the affix *di A.G.P.* (of Ave Gratia Plena)[4] in lieu of the normal patronymic. The three letters designated not only "unknown parentage," or the missing paternal name, but also institutional filiation and tutelage. Many children had already been registered on entering the Annunziata – possibly in the very same registry office – and the two identities co-existed because their previous identity was not to be revealed. In short, children were both de-legitimated and legitimated at the wheel.

The children were immediately given a *marchio*, or medallion bearing the image of the Madonna of Annunciation and their identification number. This medallion was an emblem of their institutional affiliation. The unbroken *marchio* identified the girls as "true daughters" who, unlike the boys, had the right to institutional guardianship and to domicile at the "holy home" for the rest of their lives. The first regulations of the institute (*Regole* 1739) were downright obsessed with the *marchio*. It was seen as a token of legitimacy that secured "privileges" for the "daughters" of the "family." Because the marchio alone enabled the identification of the "real daughters," it was seen as a potential instrument of fraud. The logic centred on the legal principle of *patria potestas*.

The other facet of this kind of legitimacy was social anomality and spiritual liminality. The carriers of the medallion were known as "children of the Madonna."

> [The wheel of the Annunziata], like many secret societies of the ancient and modern times and of privileged castes, is a symbol, is a form of initiation, and therefore one is accepted into the class of individuals distinguished from the community of men which forms the caste of the children of the *Ave Gratia Plena*, named by our populace *children of the Madonna*. [...] [The wheel] was like the cloak of the Madonna that, put on the admitted child, made him worthy of belonging among her children and of placing himself under her protection. (De Crescenzio 1873:207–08, emphasis in original.)

[4] These letters are inscribed on the coat of arms of the Annunziata. Also in official letters, the institute was occasionally addressed by the name Ave Gratia Plena.

FOUNDLINGS IDENTIFIED

How did these principles take form when children were sent to the Annunziata? Unlike many other foundling homes, the Neapolitan hospice did not have a maternity ward where unwed pregnant women could be confined. The babies were brought to the Annunziata by individual people but also sent there by the authorities from the surroundings of Naples and from hospitals. The presumed namelessness of foundlings took many forms. An extreme case is the town of Torre del Greco, where the mayor and the priest, on a regular basis, certified that the local wet-nurses had found a newborn baby at the doorsteps of their habitations "when alone." The foundlings were named, baptised, registered and sent to the Annunziata to be renamed and registered anew.

The two Neapolitan hospitals with maternity wards adopted different strategies. The newly established Clinical hospital (Gesù e Maria) did provide information on the identity of the mother in the official accompanying notes, but not on the father. In addition, however, the superior midwife and two priests together wrote certificates of baptism that were attached to the official letter. In these, the father's name, if communicated by the mother, was written down, and the child was automatically identified with his surname.

The other hospital, or Ospedale degli Incurabili, did not officially provide any information, although a significant proportion of parturients were unwed women whose babies were to be sent to the Annunziata (Guidi 1986). There was a daily delivery of foundlings from the hospital, and these were equipped with simple notes that contained minimal information – time of birth, gender, usually the name – and were penned by the same scribal hand, presumably a servant of the hospital.

Even though institutionalised child abandonment was indeed a system, it did not comprise a coherent, impersonal order. At times the covering and uncovering of identities took highly incoherent forms. Furthermore, the mothers could sometimes influence the information given, for example, by naming the child and the father. These divergences in institutional practice suggest that the distinction between the "official" and the "popular" was quite relative.

The conventions in unofficial messages also suggest this. To begin with, the non-coincidence of the different roles, as delineated by Goffman (1983) and discussed by Hanks (1996), is apparent. Who penned the messages; that is, who was the *scribe* (cf. *animator*)? Who was the *author* responsible for the words and phrasings? Finally, who

was the *principal* responsible for the statements expressed and information given? Even when these roles coincided, the messages were conventionalised products of social relations with many intermediaries and varied communicative registers. Moreover, they echo the idioms and conventions used elsewhere, in Milan (Hunecke 1988), and earlier in Verona (Cappellotto 1983), Turin (Doriguzzi 1983) and as well as in Paris (Robin and Walch 1987), albeit often in the local vernacular. Few Neapolitans mastered standard Italian.[5] Describing professional scribes, Albano (1990 [1857]) emphasises the importance of their services for illiterate people. Some of the messages are so beautifully penned that they look like specimens of the scribes' skill. But other intermediaries were also necessary, midwives and priests, in particular. All in all, the methodological perils of populism and the exaggeration of cultural coherence are quite apparent**.** But the sources can be read in ways that circumvent both the seductions of over-interpretation and excessive scepticism, I believe.

SIGNS OF RECOGNITION AS MESSAGES

The notes and objects left with the babies were called *segni di riconoscimento*, or signs of recognition. These tokens would enable the identification of the child and the parents in case of reclamation. Sometimes the written message (*cartula*) and the actual sign *(segno)* were seen as separate, the first being only a covering letter conveying information on the existence and nature of the sign(s) proper. Some of the *cartule* were elaborate letters, while others were detailed notifications, but the majority were brief, laconic and impersonal notes. But even concise notes can sometimes, in their enigmatic way, convey a complex symbolic repertoire: "God has given me an angel [*angelo*] to guard, and this is the name I want 1870."[6]

Although the sign of recognition was not the only piece of information enabling acknowledgement, many parents evidently saw it as

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5 Among the wives of artisans and manual workers, the rate of illiteracy varied between 64 and 99 per cent in 1871 (Laurita 1984).

6 Archivio storico municipale di Napoli. Sezione ex-Real Santa Casa dell'Annunziata (hereafter ASMUN, RCSA), Ramo 'Esposti' (hereafter RE). Filze dei proietti 1870, no. P 1222. The numbers of documents are the identification numbers of individual children, and the letters P, Q and R refer to the years 1870, 1871 and 1872, respectively.

indispensable. The parents often appeal to the authorities that this sign be meticulously conserved – be it a letter, a name, an amulet, a coin, or a votive picture.

For the parents, the wheel was not a mere void between two separate worlds. Sometimes the parents explicitly consigned their parental rights and duties to the institute or to the Madonna. There were references and appeals to the charity of nuns, to the care of directors and to prospects of well-being through fosterage. Fear of death was seldom directly expressed, for the messages were also letters of recommendation. In a persuasive manner, they praised the personnel in charge and evoked a personal relationship between them and the petitioners (and their children) that was patterned by idioms of patronage and kinship. However, it is quite probable that these recommendations did not reach the directors without supplementary transactions and influential intermediaries.

The notes, humble letters, display a combination of two communicative acts: claiming and abdicating of parenthood. The first person singular form, as well as the words "mother" and "father" are used rarely enough to become conspicuous. Conversely, the forceful and rather violent expression "thrown into the hole of the Annunziata" appears in a few notes. The drastic nature of separation is accentuated in notes that specify the exact time of this "throwing" while omitting the date of birth or the name of the baby. The following message provides a graphic illustration of the ambivalence involved. Within the various meanings of motherhood and fatherhood – of relatedness and care – that coexist in this message, only references to the Madonna are missing.

> The inconsolable parents consign the unhappy boy entrusting him to your care and intentions, that is, all the care and [good] intentions that a real father can direct to his son in which we trust, [to] You, who are in charge of such a beautiful and blessed shelter, the present child [is consigned], asking you also to conserve the note that is here attached so that, God willing, we may fulfil our wish to be able to embrace him one day as our beloved son. We also beg that the name Vincenzo be added in the Holy Baptism, and if, by chance, a good family would present itself you have ample faculty to give him, so that he will not be made to miss a good fortune. Born on the 24th of April 1871 at 2 p.m.[7]

[7] ASMUN, RCSA, Filze dei proietti 1871, no. Q 760.

NAMES AS SIGNS OF RECOGNITION

The name in itself constituted a sign. The forename can carry genealogical memory more accurately than the surname, because of the convention of alternating names between generations and in birth order. This pattern operates bilaterally and for both genders, but because of the convention of patronymic identification, only the names of the paternal and maternal grandfather may appear in the documentation. Sometimes natural children, as well, were named after their paternal grandfather, but they might also carry their father's or mother's forename. The patronymic can thus convey information on paternity, and on the role of the father also in the case of unwed births. Was the child to carry this token of filiation for the rest of his life, even when abandonment was destined beforehand? A note saying, "Ernesto if a boy," for example, must have been compiled before birth.

The names can also convey the discrepancy between the bureaucratic forms of record-keeping and the social world of the mainly illiterate populace in the city. Albano (1990 [1857]) argued that many Neapolitans did not even know their official names because of the widespread use on nicknames.

The vernacular and diminutive forms of names indicate humble origins, and these typically appear in notes that were written in an almost illegible handwriting. By the same token, multiple first names, like refined writing, may indicate a pretension to high social status. Names are also blessings, tokens of protection, and the various nominations of the Madonna recur. The very act of naming the child could be testimony to the intentions of the parent(s), however: "[It is asked that] the following names be given for she has to be taken back."

The question of surnames is more complicated. Conferring the surnames of both parents was not uncommon. It has been claimed that the existence of the message and, in particular, the surnames was an indication of the legitimate status of the child. Largely on the basis of this supposition,[8] De Crescenzio estimated that the ratio of legitimate

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[8] According to De Crescenzio's figures (1873:273), of the 2,230 babies received in 1871, 80 had a document on their legitimacy, 104 *cartule* indicated the names of both parents, 117 babies had a name and a surname, and 106 messages "declared the mother." Thus, only a fifth (19 per cent) of the babies entered with a name attesting to their filiation. I have systematic information only on the first months of 1870, in which the parents' names similarly appeared in every sixth *cartula*.

children was two thirds (1873:217), or, later, that it "may exceed one third" (*Statuto Organico* 1875:2). However, these estimates were not and cannot be endorsed by documented evidence in an uncomplicated manner. As Neapolitan women keep their paternal surnames after marriage, family names do not disclose a woman's marital status. The problem of surnames was tackled in many ways.

The messages illustrate intricate combinations of informing, misinforming and concealing. Occasionally, the absence of surnames was quite conspicuous, these being first written and then scratched over. Similarly, empty spaces or three dots may indicate missing surnames. It was not uncommon for the entire name of the mother to stand next to the father's initials or to a phrase: "for the time being, father unknown," or "surname non-existent." But, interestingly, this asymmetry could also take a reverse form: the mother remained nameless but the father's name was communicated in its entirety. Most parents refrained from disclosing their names, but so did many other writers. The scribes and intermediaries – midwives, in particular – usually preferred anonymity.

MATERIAL AND CORPOREAL SIGNS

> The unhappy genitrix of this Girl appeals cordially to the *Signor Cavaliere* in charge to have the courtesy of giving her the baptismal name of Adelinda Erminia. So that one day she can recognise her daughter through the baptismal names and a [birth]mark on the left leg.[9]

As signs of identification in case of reclamation, the names were also akin to certain objects and physical marks. In the following case, the name inscribed becomes a veritable, corporeal sign of recognition. And indeed, Ida was later recognised by the mother as her natural child.[10]

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9 ASMUN, RCSA, Filze dei proietti 1870, no. P 1091.

10 A later correspondence concerning tutelage shows that Ida's father was subsequently present in her life, also after the early death of her mother. Thus, the word "parents" in the *cartula* seems to be justified. Later it was indicated that he had not "given his name" to Ida, for he had a "family of his own." Ida would thus be the fruit of an adulterous union, the recognition of whom was legally forbidden – in principle for the unmarried parent as well (Vincenzi Amato 1989:652). The father's name was never revealed. This case illustrates the complex nature of paternity, as discussed in the following sections. See ASMUN, RCSA, RE, Libro Maggiore 1871, no. Q 131; ASMUN, RCSA, RE, Pratiche per i riconoscimenti e per le consegne. Serie fino al 1915. Fasc. 1, no. Q 131.

> The baby girl that is presented comes from the Section of S. Lorenzo and she was born today at 3.30 Italian time. She has been baptised only in the maternal womb with the name of Ida. It is asked that this name be preserved and taken into account because she will be reclaimed by her own parents soon. The child's right buttock has been marked with the initial of her name, that is, with [the letter] I. Naples [the date, paper torn].[11]

It was not exceptional to mark the baby physically, and sometimes this was also mentioned in the written message. Another corporeal sign was the piercing of one ear only (and threading it with a coloured ribbon). In some notes, it is asked that the child be "marked," which could refer to registration in general, the medallion or to actual marking, even branding.

The most common signs, however, were objects, typically medallions, coins, images of saints or amulets. Perhaps it was also presumed that the ribbons and the amulets were indeed carried by the child "for her entire life," as one message read, so that "there will be a sign, different from all the others." The objects were typically halved, the parents keeping the other half.

Like other signs, the messages are not merely messages in writing but also text artefacts or textual objects. The quality of the paper, the ink, the handwriting, and the (untypical) layout were signs of recognition. The principal of the text would later come and reclaim the child with an identical piece of paper, it was emphasised. In this sense, the *cartule* were halved like other objects – and in some cases also literally cut in two. In one halved *cartula*, the curves penned on the paper mimic writing but there is not a single word written. Information was not necessarily the main issue.

As objects, the messages illustrate the magical uses of writing (Burke 1987). It was sometimes also spelled out in the message that a particular combination of letters (presumably the initials of parents' names or abbreviations of religious formulae), distinct words (like "authorised midwife") or the signature in the *cartula* was a distinguishing mark. Halved objects and papers had a magic of their own, I would argue, since the two halves were always connected, and with them, the suspended bond maintained.

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[11] ASMUN, RCSA, RE, Filze dei proietti 1871, no. Q 131.

> To the director of the hospice of Naples. It is humbly asked to keep this writing, for one day it could be asked through another identical one to have the baby girl entrusted to your pious care, belonging to a girl that presently has to keep herself hidden from the eyes of the world.[12]

"SHE IS FURNISHED WITH PARENTS"

Half of the children abandoned in Milan were eventually reclaimed, and more than 90 per cent of these were legitimate (Hunecke 1988:139). In Naples, fewer children were reclaimed than in the other major hospices, and another distinguishing feature is the predominance of natural children. Only a quarter of the children acknowledged in 1861–71 were legitimate (De Crescenzio 1873:220). The reclamations of the children received in 1870–1872 complied with this pattern. Less than two per cent were acknowledged by the parent(s). Half of these were recognised as natural children by their mothers. A quarter were acknowledged as legitimate children by one (widowed) parent or by both parents.[13] I am inclined to see the remaining one fourth as a particularly interesting category. These were natural children recognised by the father alone or by both parents. This category alludes to "natural paternity," that is, to an issue that figures both in contemporary texts and in scholarly literature only through its presumed absence.

But were the majority of children illegitimate? It is hard to tell, but the messages do testify to the variety of liaisons. It seems that the stigma of illegitimacy tended to pattern the expressions in the messages. The name of the father could also be used performatively to convey a message that might affect the future of a child, thus serving the same purpose as designations such as "belongs to distinctive people" or "child of *signori*."[14] When the names are not revealed, even the fact

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12 ASMUN, RCSA, RE, Filze dei proietti 1870, no. P 235.

13 In principle, birth status was the determinant of legitimacy (Vincenzi Amato 1988). However, some parents – but not all – were able to recognise children born out of wedlock as their legitimate offspring after marriage. Thus, the category of legitimate children includes a number of children who had been illegitimate on entering the Annunziata.

14 The fact that the parents were not the scribes of the beautifully penned messages is quite obvious in some *cartule*, where below the formal part additional information, like the names of parents in the vernacular form or the time of entrance, is penned by inexperienced writers.

that the baby "has a mother and father" can be highlighted in order to single out this particular baby**.** The expression "he is [somebody's] own child" (*è figlio proprio*) can be used without naming the parents. Allusions to moral and social status may indicate the worth of the child in the eyes of the personnel.

The use of the first person plural may also be persuasive, and sometimes the writing vacillates between the singular and the plural forms, the latter connoting paternity. The following extract is a case in point: "The mother as soon as possible has the intention of getting her back. A copy of the present [*cartula*] with the same writing, characters, signed with the letters [written] above Antonina M-J is conserved by the mother or, rather, by the parents of the Girl."[15] Another example is: "I give this sign in order to come and get my Daughter when I am in the situation and I am her mother and her Father."[16] The first was probably written by a midwife, for its style and hand appear in two other *cartule*.

It is quite difficult to ascertain, whether the father figured only because of the great expectations of the mother or whether he was actually involved at the time of abandonment and beyond. References to "familial circumstances," eventual legitimation, "the impossibility of recognition" and explicitly to "tentative marriage" suggest that extra-marital liaisons took many forms. Babies might be consigned with a cartula written (and signed) by the father, and yet be later recognised by the mother as her natural child. The following two messages illustrate two variations on this theme. The first *cartula* accompanied Silvia, who entered on her birthday and was recognised within a month by *Signora* Emilia as her natural daughter. The note may have been written by Vincenzo or perhaps Emilia, who, having the status of *signora*, could have been literate. The other baby, Elvira was not reclaimed, and thus the aspirations of the mother – presumably the scribe – were not fulfilled.

> Silvia, daughter of Vincenzo and Emilia born on the 8th of May at 12 a.m. Quartiere Montecalvario – Naples. Madame Director is asked not to take the sign of a medallion [of Madonna Addolorata, or Our Lady of Sorrows] from her neck, for the father has the other half. Black eyes.[17]

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15 ASMUN, RCSA, RE, Filze dei proietti 1870, no. P 1427.
16 ASMUN, RCSA, RE, Filze dei proietti 1870, no. P 735.
17 ASMUN, RCSA, RE, Filze dei proietti 1870, no. P 882.

> I entrust to this grandiose establishment and to the care of many noble and generous hearts my daughter, baptised with the following names, that is, Elvira, Adele, Cristina of Giovanni O. [father's name] and of A. G. Born at 3 a.m. on the 13th of October 1870. May God give her life, since one day, not far away, she will be proud of having the lineage [*casata*] of a well-known and honest gentleman. I plead again, for the care of my Elvira!!! N. B. Only because of lack of time the above-mentioned was registered only at the registry office [i.e., not baptised].[18]

In terms of the argument of this paper, the combination of sources is very illuminating. Following the names makes the ambivalent nature of communication stand out. Furthermore, it is obvious that there was a grey zone between legitimacy and illegitimacy. If different types of document are combined, the legitimacy claimed or alluded to in the *cartule* was not always vertifiable. However, children acknowledged and registered as natural children of one parent only were, in some cases, indeed children "of [both] mother and father." For example, years after the mother's recognition the father might also acknowledge the child. All in all, these examples illustrate that "irregular unions" were not uncommon, although these cases are too few to allow for straightforward generalization. This fact raises important questions concerning the imaginary non-existence of fathers.

SIGNS OF INDIFFERENCE?

Does total anonymity – that is, missing signs – signify actual abandonment, the complete severing of ties? The majority of the children had no sign whatsoever, which could be interpreted as a sign of indifference, considering that the signs did not require any special effort, capacity or resources. Literacy was not necessary, for simply a piece of cloth, a ribbon, an image of a saint, or a page torn from a newspaper could be filed as a sign.

There are two reservations, however. The forename, district or town and date of birth were also communicated verbally, through the wheel, and registered. This may have been common knowledge. Second, and more importantly, only about 60 per cent of the recognised children had been consigned with signs. Moreover, not only were most of the

[18] ASMUN, RCSA, RE, Filze dei proietti 1870, no. P 1840.

reclaimed children illegitimate, but the illegitimate ones were more likely to have been left with signs (cf. Kertzer 1993:113–16). This disparity derives partly from social differences: legitimate parents tended to be poor and illiterate whilst there were several *signori* among the unwed parents. Anonymous abandonment did not necessarily reflect the secrecy of unwed births.

In this context suffused by anonymity, illiteracy, obscurity and shame, reliance on negative evidence is highly problematic. Few messages were eloquent, and it is quite tempting to suppose that the untypical and elaborate ones can shed light on those that were compiled with great technical difficulty by people who were barely literate. To some extent this is plausible, since the recurring patterns manifest both diversity and complexity. A case in point is the significant number of material signs, whose meaning is articulated only in some messages. Above all else, the general tone of the *cartule* is ambivalent and it is this ambivalence that the untypical messages convey. The dilemma of naming arouse from the conflict between the necessity of secrecy and the need to secure potential recognition. By the same token, the child's future and survival were seen as dependent on their suspended social condition, on the one hand, and on their status as children of the "pious Establishment," on the other.

CONCLUSIONS

Only seldom is it possible to combine documents or, in other words, to follow the names. Perhaps the most typical case is that the child would be admitted at the age of one day, without any sign whatsoever, and would subsequently die at the Annunziata. Of the children admitted in 1870, only a third was alive at the end of 1872 (De Crescenzio 1873:232), and not all deaths of the children farmed out had been registered. The traces left behind are very scant indeed, and only tell of abandonment, negligence by the institute, and death.

What I have focused on is varied and enigmatic signs of life in a setting that was aptly characterised by contemporaries as "the massacre of the innocents" or "legal infanticide." The wheel may have been "doubly salvaging" in Naples, by conferring sacred protection as well (Bardet 1991). On the one hand, this protection did not materialise as sufficient funds for the salaries of wet-nurses. Saving the infants' souls and gathering them under the auspices of the Ave Gratia Plena was more essential than saving of their lives. On the other hand, many

children did survive because of their status as children of the Madonna. The prevalence of free wet-nursing as well as *de facto* adoptions were partly based on their anomalous personhood.

Life does not signify merely survival but life as somebody, as a person baptised, named, identified, nurtured, fostered, and given rights and duties by way of belonging. By the same token, the concept of death can be extended to include abandonment, exclusion, loss, cancellation and anonymity. The propinquity of life and death took many forms at the Annunziata. The wheel as an instrument and as an emblem gave physical form to the dialectic between life and death.

Perhaps the gist of signs reflects this dialectic. The physical marking of babies, the amulets or images of saints, halved signs, naming, persuasions and recommendations, the highlighting of parenthood (with or without names), the evocation of the Madonna, the importance of baptism, the concern for accurate registration and identification give expression to fears and hopes. The ways of the Annunziata seem to have been quite well known.

The few cases that are untypical in terms of information given can shed more light on other documents, too (Ginzburg and Poni 1991). At least, they can challenge the prevailing views concerning abandonment. Not every "child of mother and father" was legitimate, but neither was this claim a lie. The unnamed fathers may have been present in many ways and the named ones absent. This is not to deny that most unwed mothers were themselves abandoned by the man who had fathered the child and also by their families. The messages speak of a social world that was much more complex and opaque than simple truth would allow.

There were simple reasons for abandonment, no doubt, like the inability of poor, undernourished women to breast-feed their children. But, in the end, very little is "obvious" or "natural." Breast-milk and names are simple, ordinary facts. However, the transformations of names and identities illustrate the intertwining of physical, social, ideological and metaphysical dimensions of social existence and personhood. The number of casualties was horrifying, but this does not mean that the social world can be reduced to "perishable commodities," interests, and manoeuvres – or to innate instincts and parental emotions, for that matter. Babies might have been abandoned because of parental indifference, but this cannot be verified. Furthermore, not even indifference can be divorced from the complexities of the socio-cultural context.

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